Health Communication for Sustainable Systems-Wide Changes to Reduce the Prevalence of Obesity

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Conflict of Interest Statement

- I have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

What Do We Mean By Health Communication?

Health communication is an interdisciplinary approach to the theory, research, & practice of (a) understanding when and how communication shapes population health, and and (b) developing effective communication to promote population health.

Health communication occurs at multiple levels:

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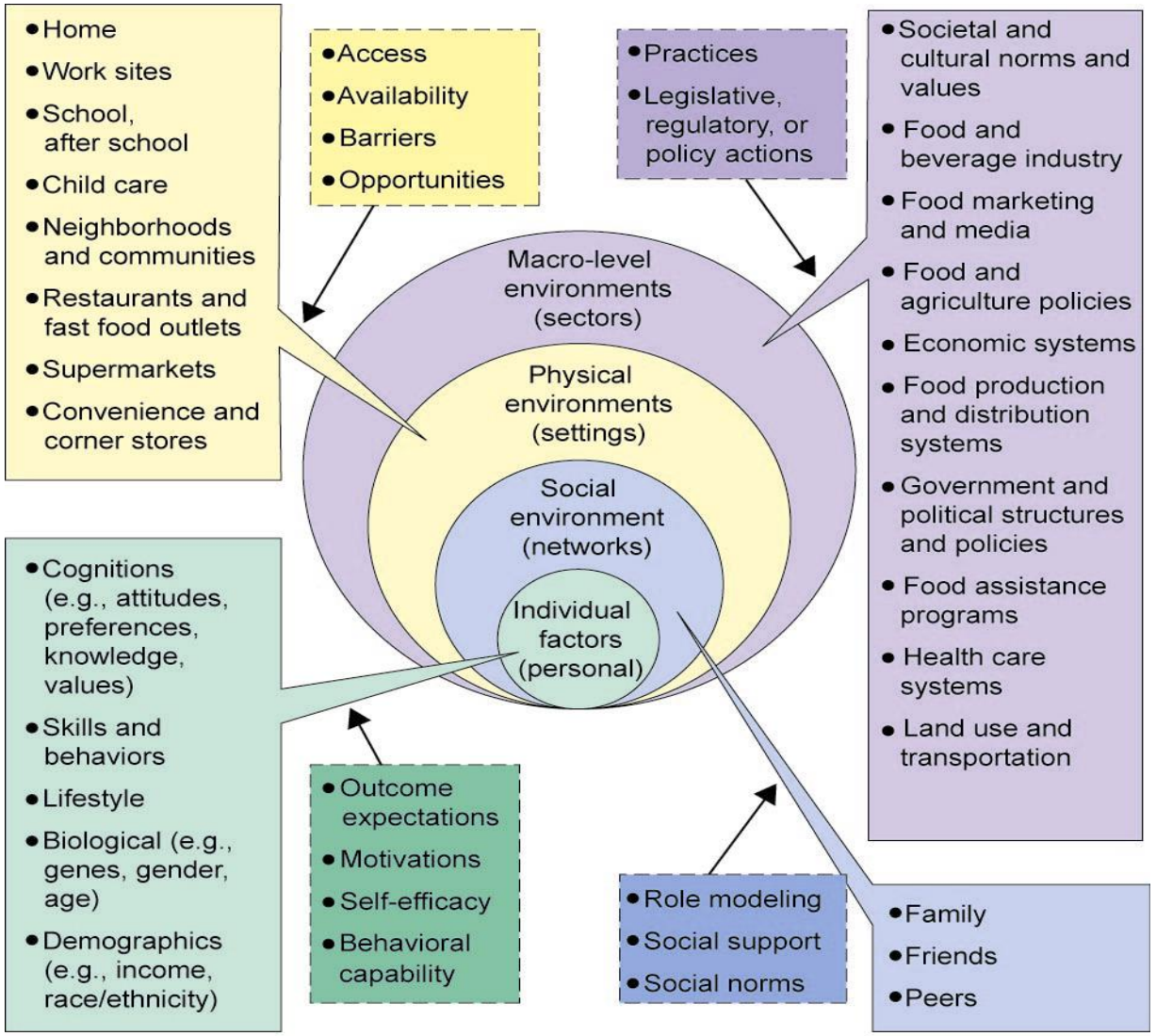
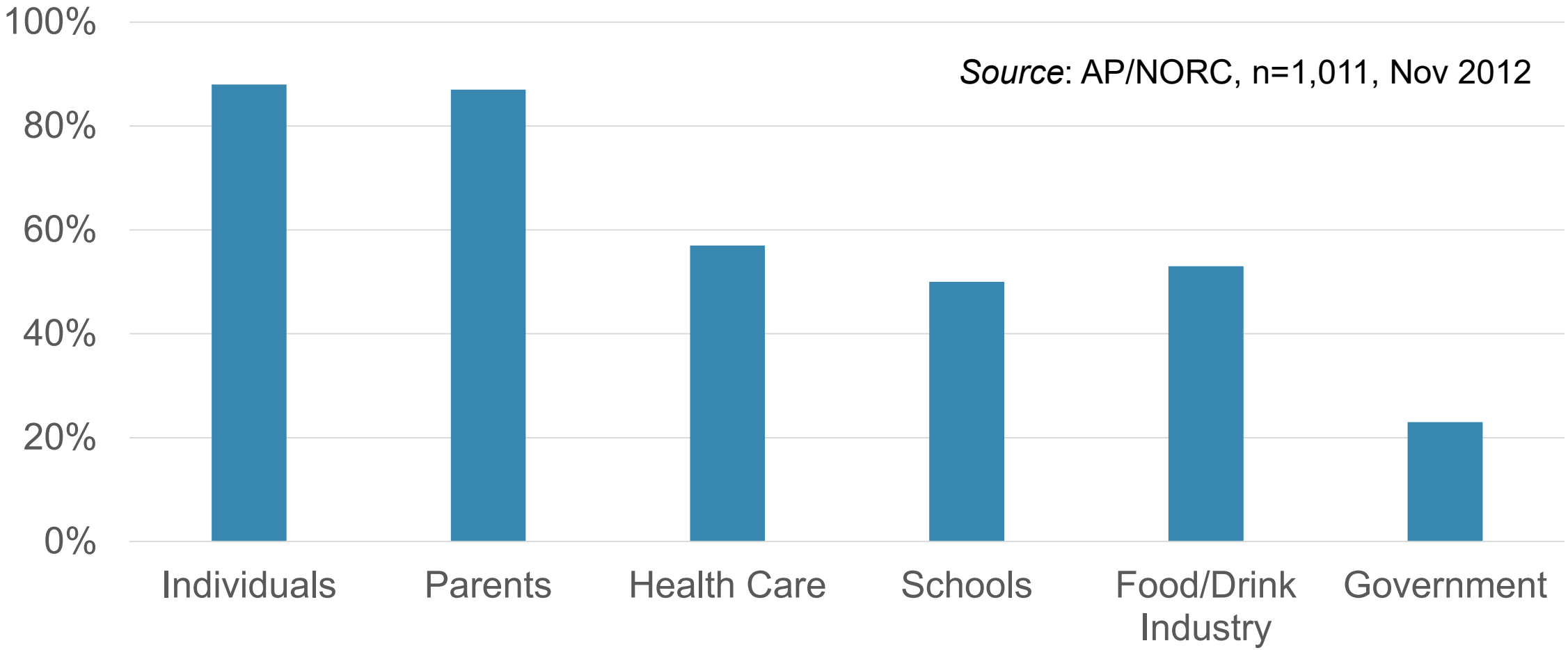
Health Communication Occurs at Each Level of the Ecological Model of Obesity



Story M, et al. 2008.
Annu. Rev. Public Health. 29:253–72

How Has Health Communication Shaped Public Understanding of Obesity?

Americans' Views on Who is Responsible for Addressing Obesity in the US, 2012



These Views are Shaped By Many Forces

- Political groups who trumpet the virtues of individual responsibility, deregulation, and limited government to maintain power structures
- Food/drink industry who emphasize personal choice and the virtues of self-regulation without oversight
- Health care industry who highlight medical definitions, health care costs, and clinical treatments for the problem
- Entertainment industry who sells false images of the “ideal” body
- Structural racism embedded in discourse and policies that create obesogenic environments in communities of color through economic oppression, zoning laws, neighborhood segregation, etc.

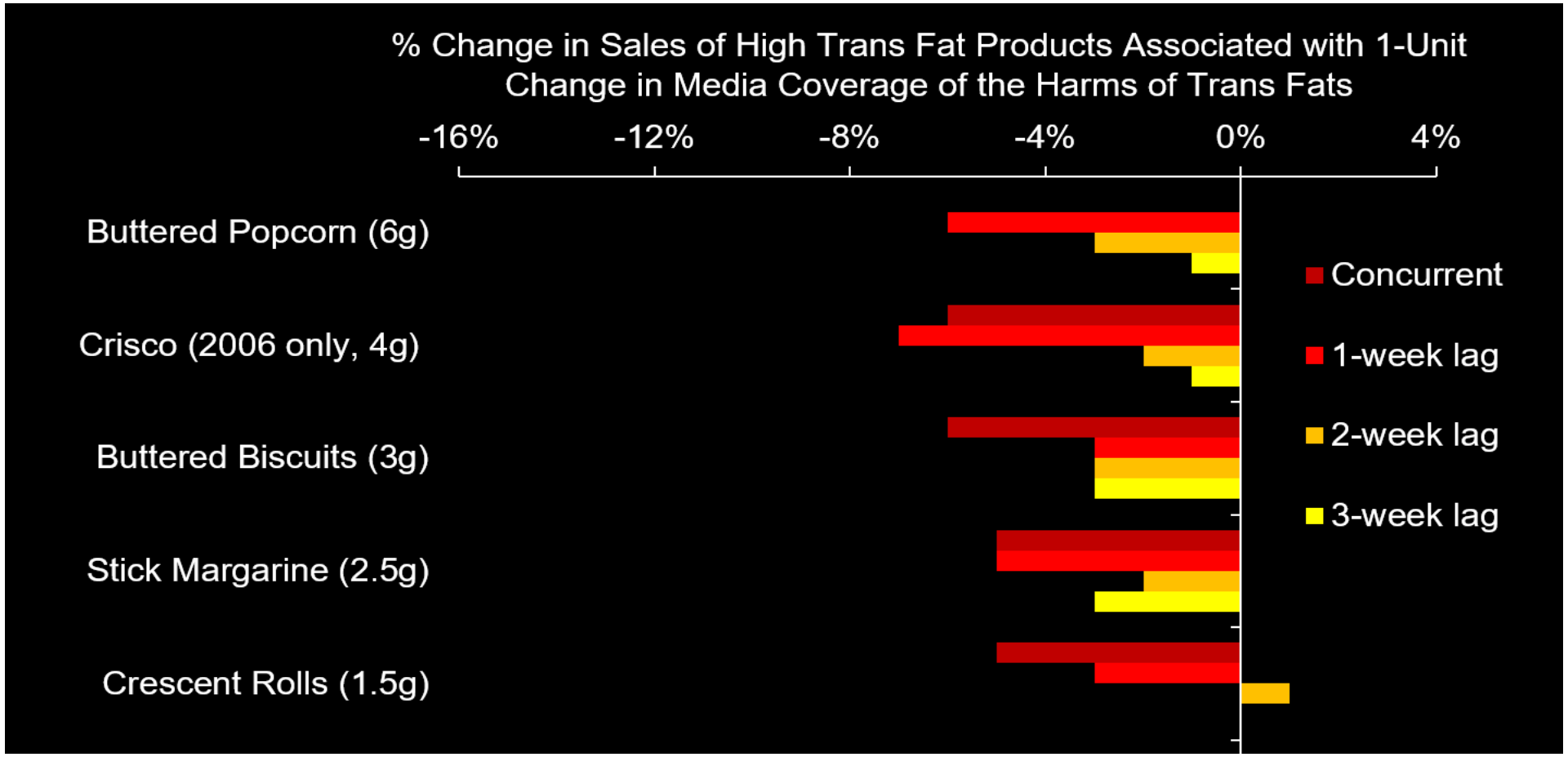
In Turn, These Efforts Have Contributed To:

- Widespread recognition that obesity is a problem to address, but…

- High levels of blame and stigma for people with obesity
- Substantial opposition to systems-wide, evidence-based public policies designed to reduce the prevalence of obesity
- Widespread belief that individual-level interventions to improve diet and promote exercise are an important solution to the problem

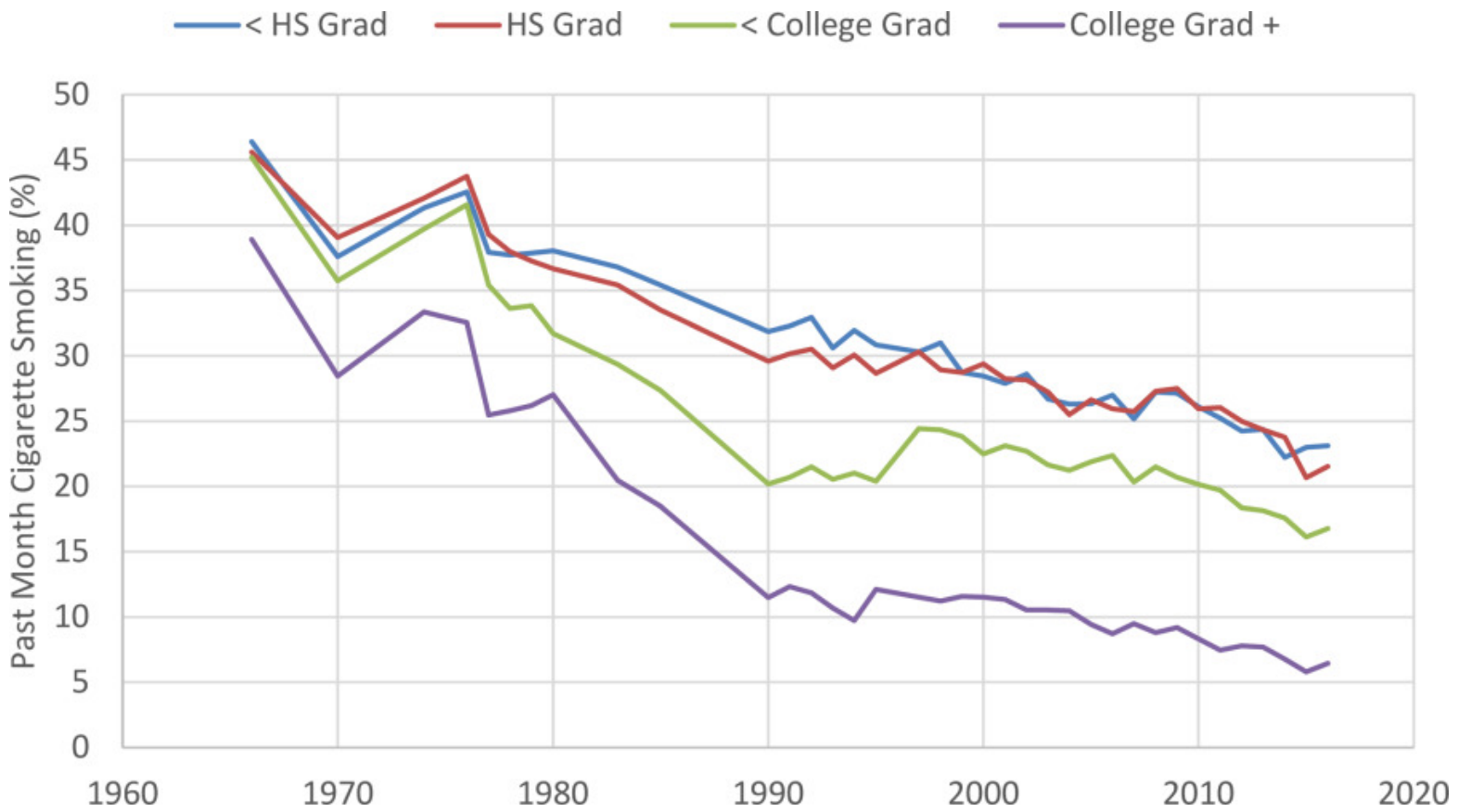
What Do We Know about the Effects of Communication Interventions to Promote Individual-Level Behaviors like Diet and Exercise?

Effects Tend to Be Small and Short-Lived



Source: Niederdeppe et al. *Am J Prev Med*. 2009;*36*(5):395-401.

They Tend to Widen, Not Reduce, Inequity



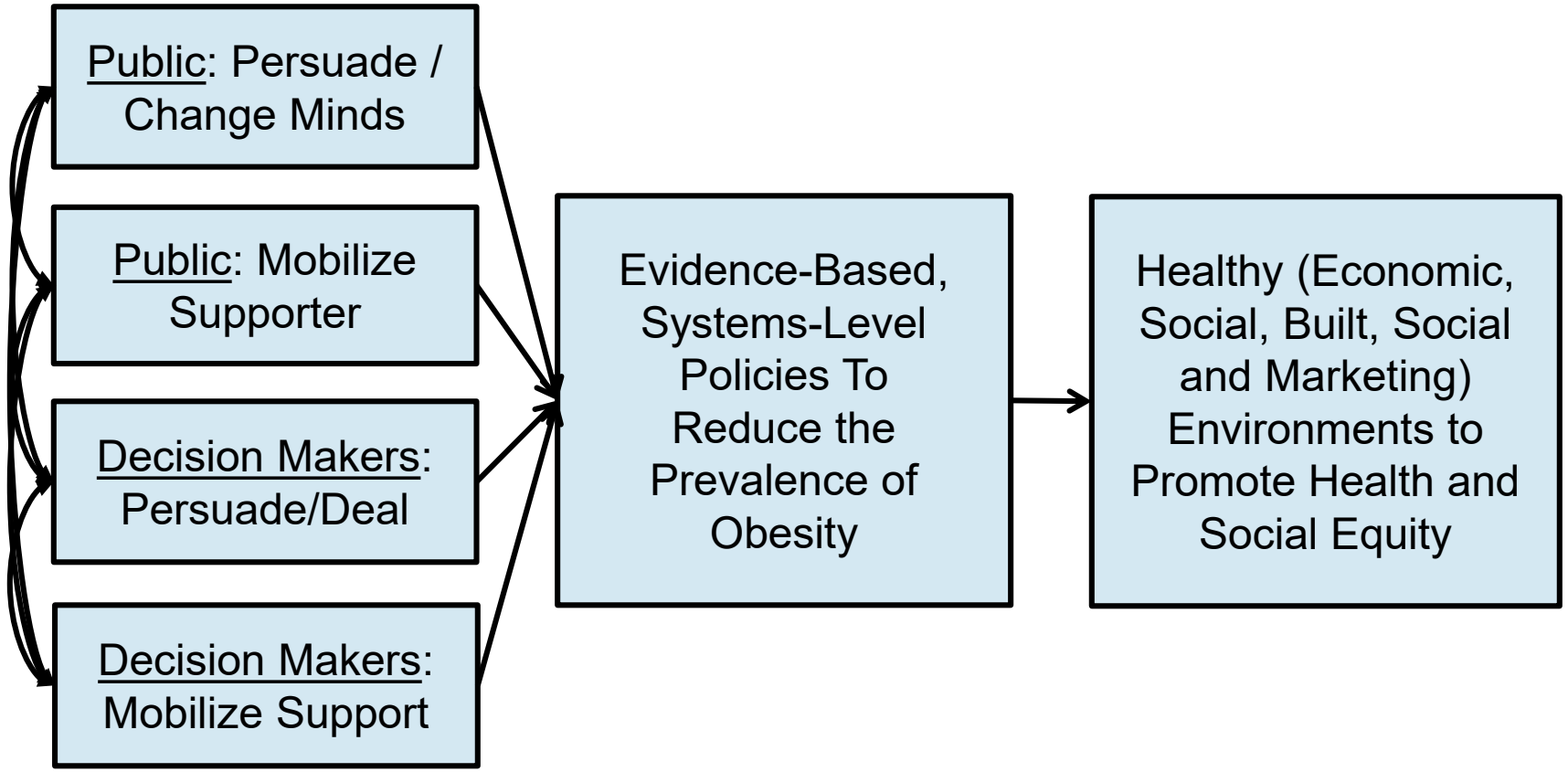
Source: Drope et al. *CA: A Cancer Journal for Clinicians*. 2018;68(2):106-115.

What Do We Know about the Effects of Communication Interventions to Promote Systems-Level Changes to Reduce the Prevalence of Obesity?

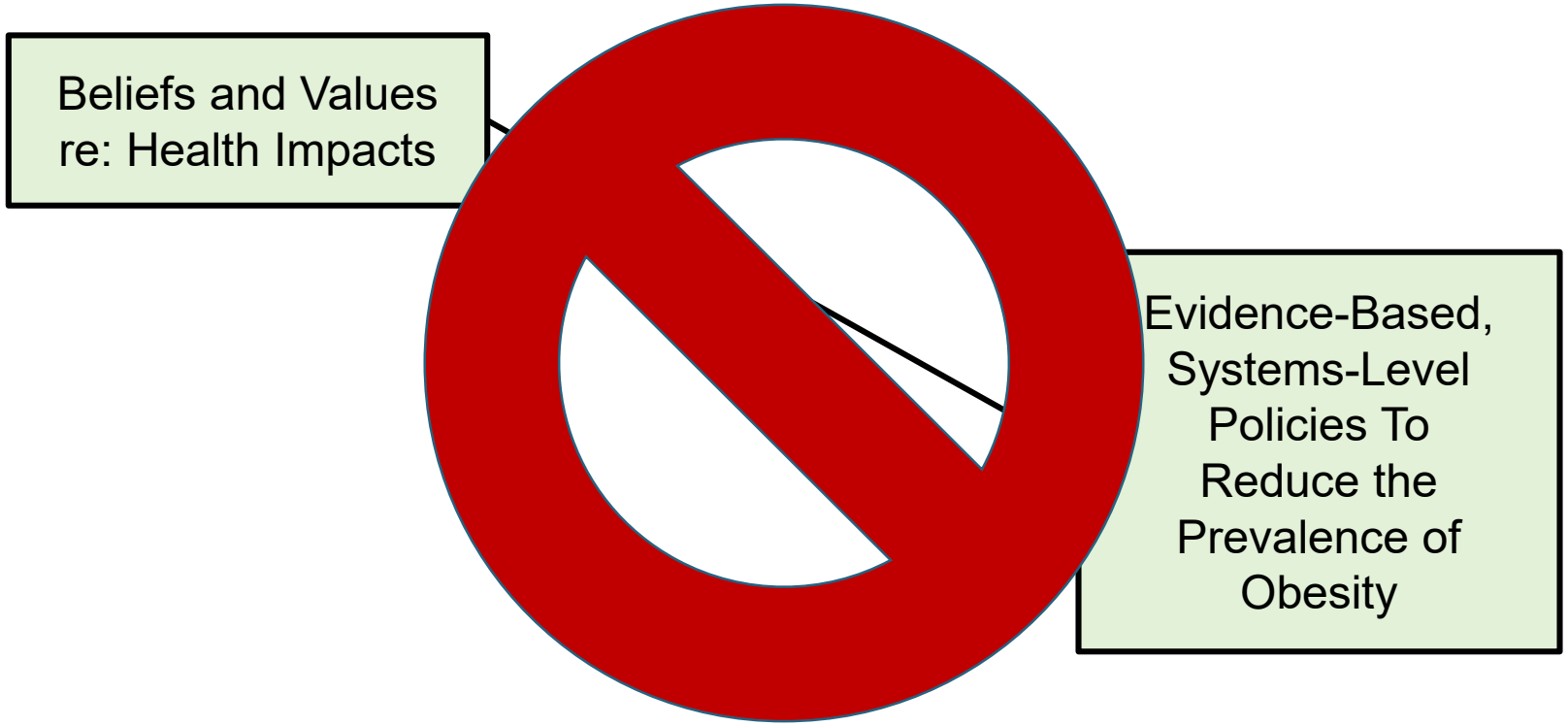
Strategic Communication Can Increase Public Support for Evidence-Based Policies

- These include support for:
  - A penny-per-ounce tax on sugar sweetened drinks
  - Community-level strategies to reduce the number of food deserts
  - Restrictions on food and drink marketing to children
- And in other health domains:
  - Mandatory distribution of Narcan/Naloxone to first responders
  - Clean indoor air laws to reduce secondhand smoke exposure

Effective Strategies Recognize That Audiences are Not Monolithic



Effective Strategies Start with the Policy Solution, Not the Health Problem



An Example of Starting with the Problem, Medicalizing the Issue, and Failing to Account for the Larger Messaging Environment

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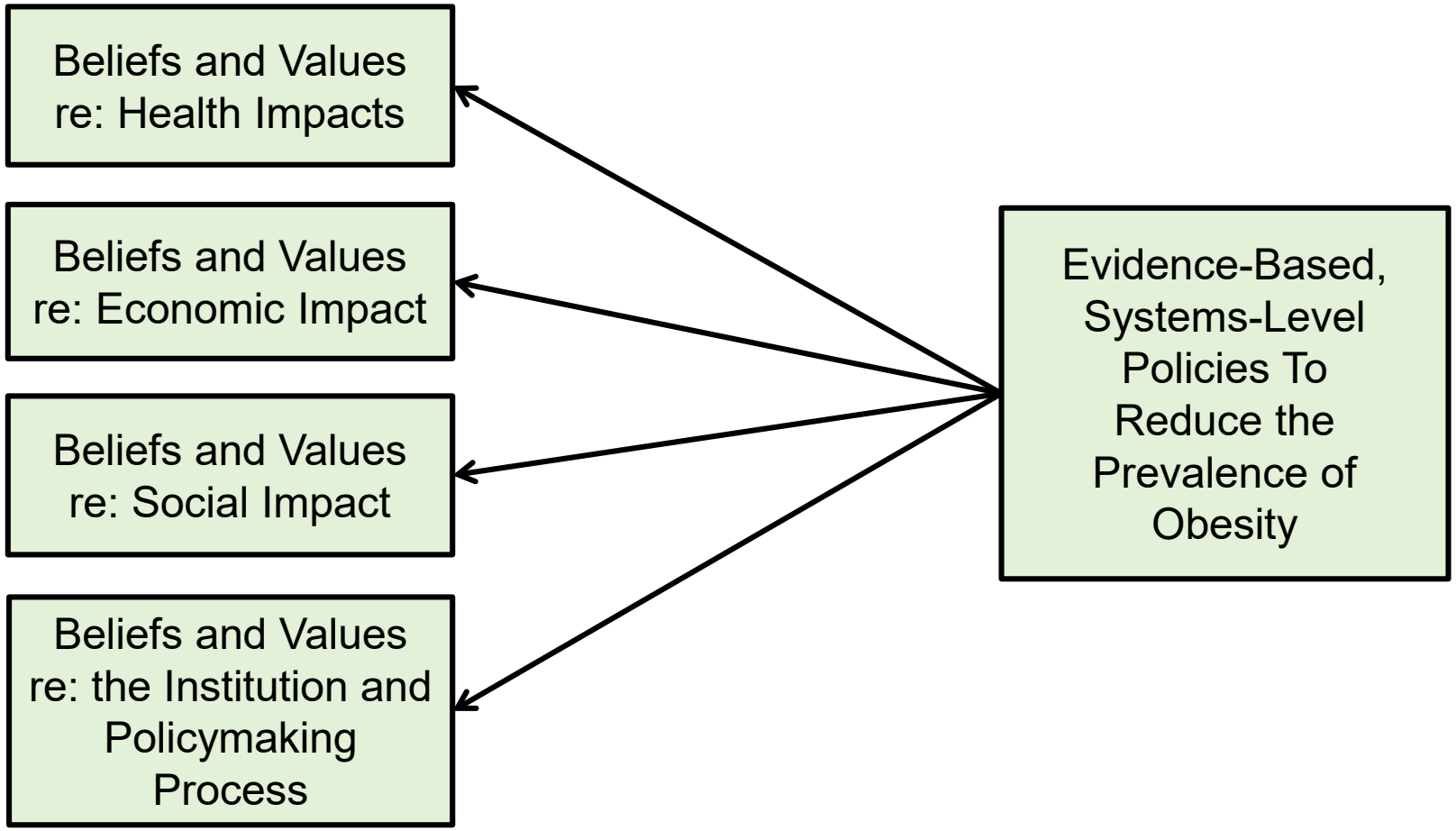
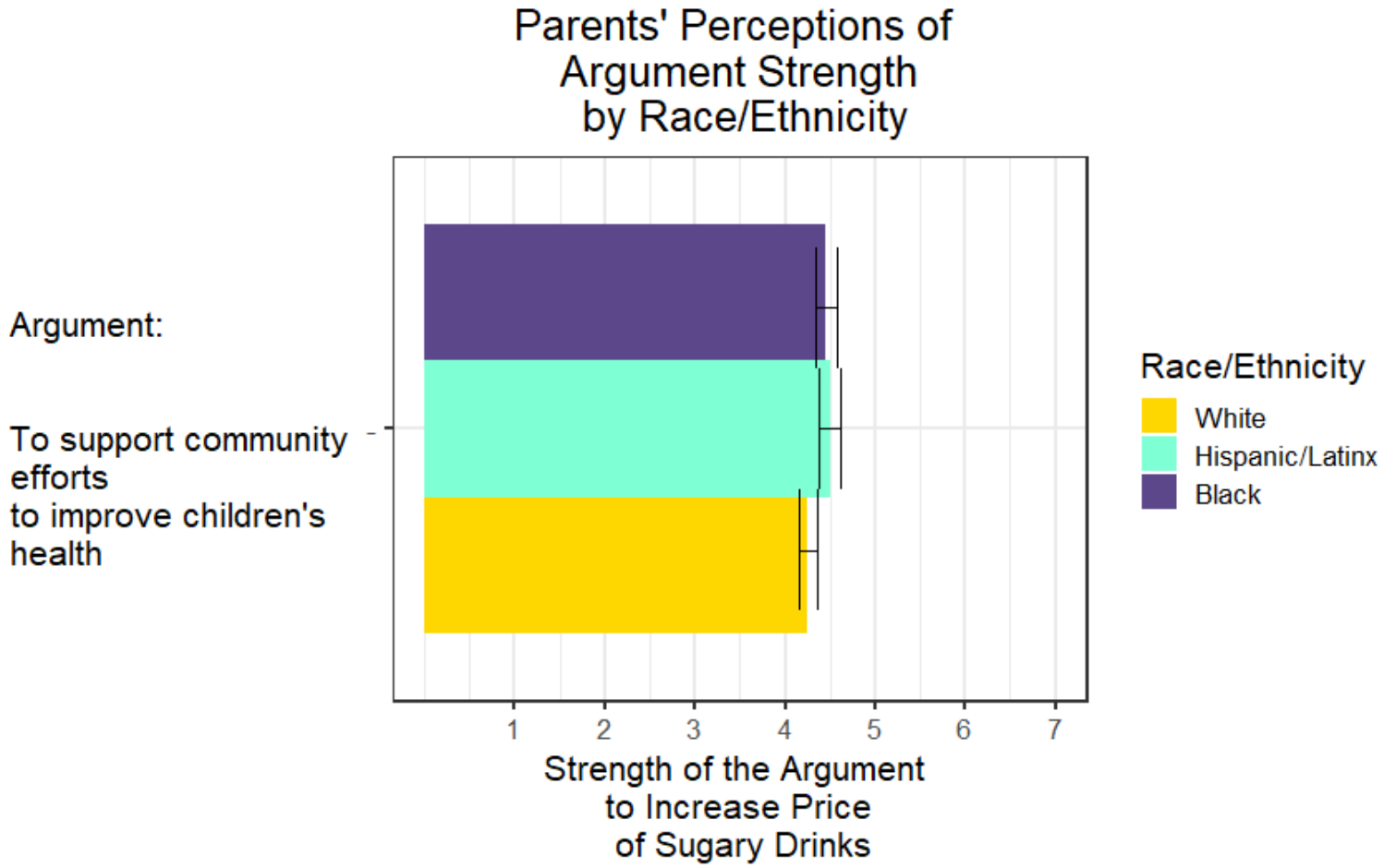


Different Messages May or May Not Resonate Among Different Social Groups



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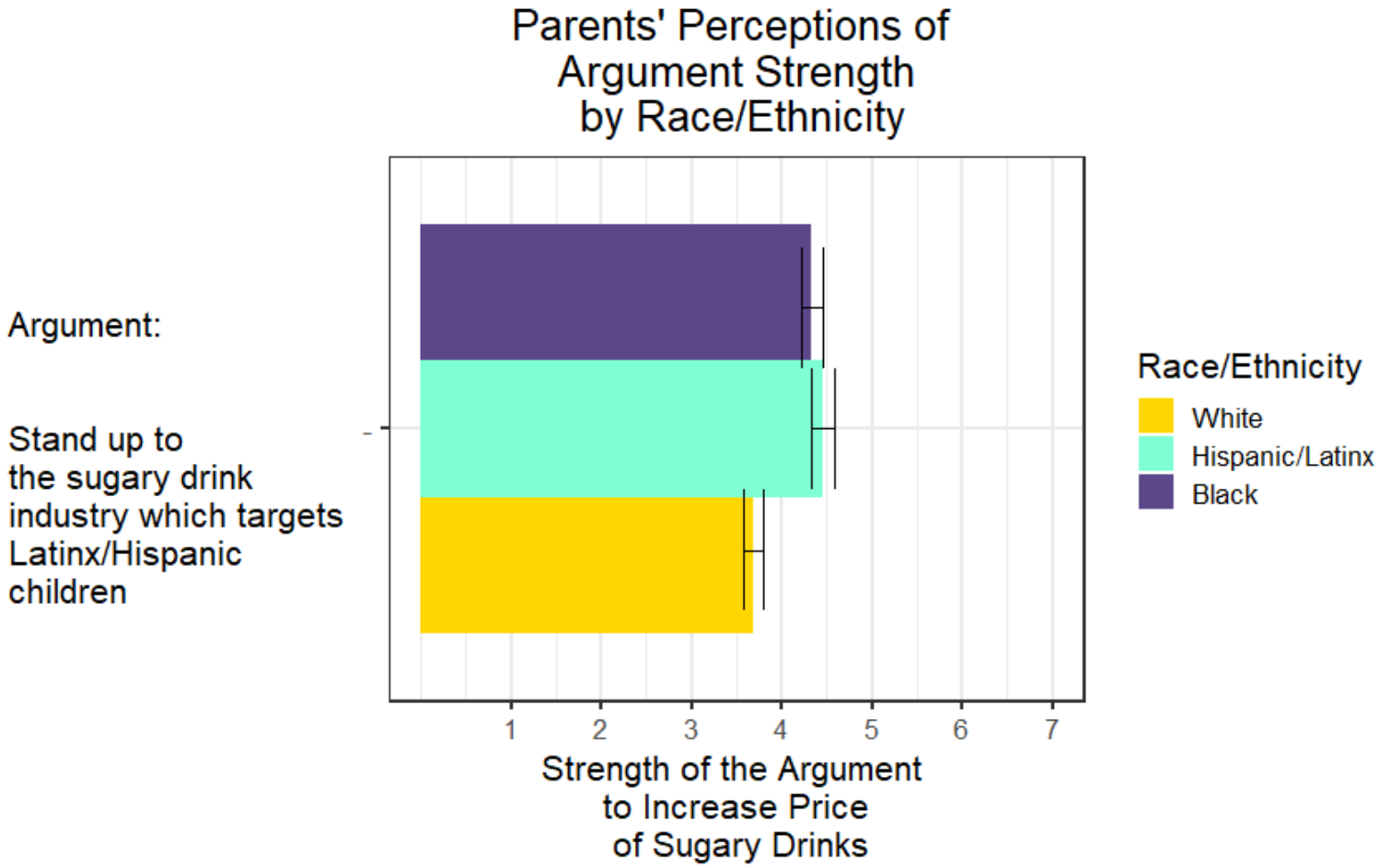

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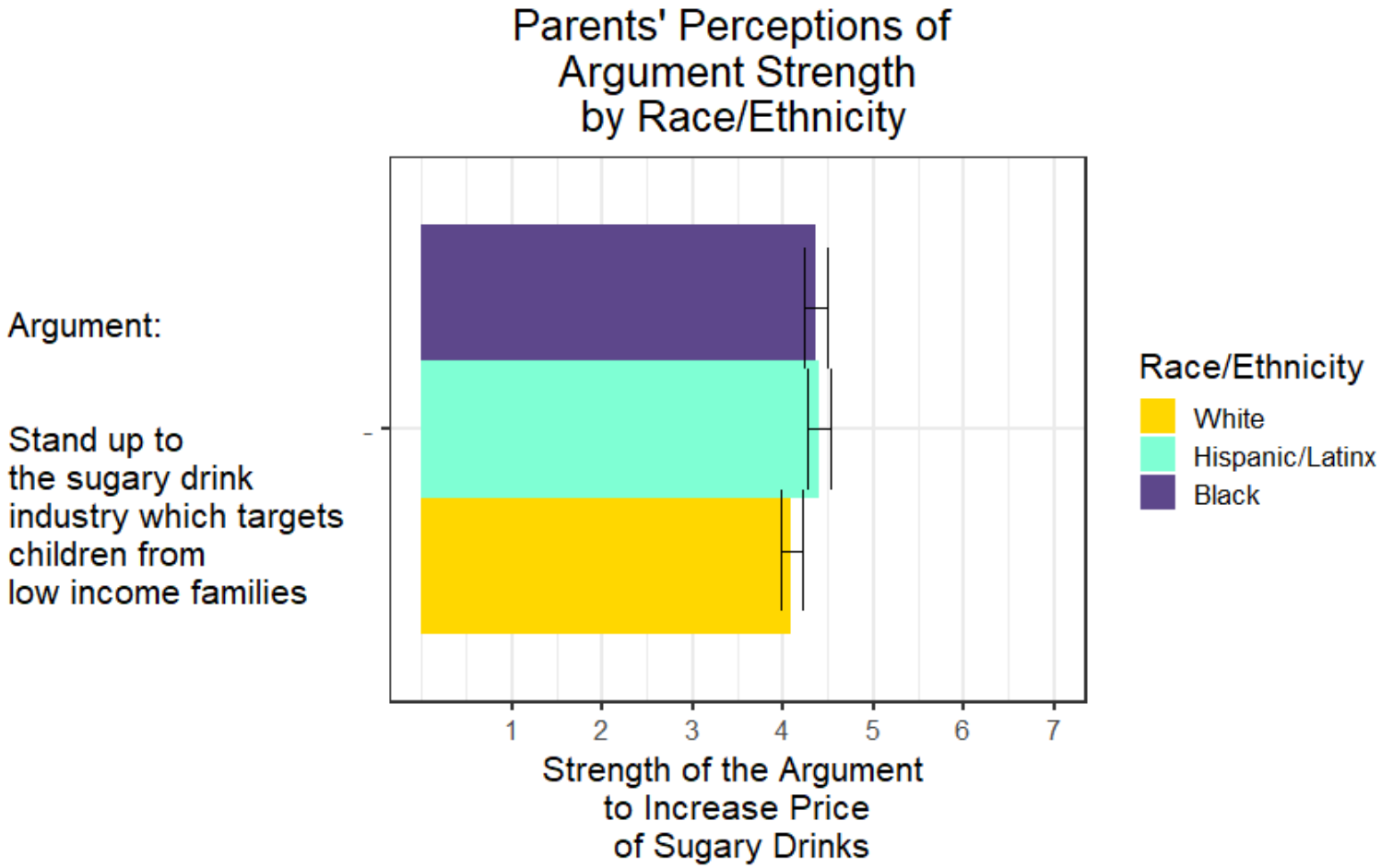

Well-Crafted Stories of Lived Experience Can Reduce Stigma and Encourage Systems-Level Thinking about Obesity

1. Emphasize social factors / causes, but acknowledge there are personal choices too

2. Scale up
   - "XXX is not alone – others face this problem"
   - Maps / images / data conveying the scope of the problem

3. Clearly demonstrate how a policy helps a character / community

Thank You!

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