

**American Understandings of the
United States' Role in the World:
Findings from Cognitive Interviews**

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Part I. Strategic Overview

The Problem

Americans are often depicted in the media as isolationists unconcerned with the fate of the rest of the world and uninterested in international cooperation; recent public opinion research has established that this image is a gross distortion.¹ Most Americans support international organizations like NATO and the UN, believe that the United States should have a role in international affairs, and are in favor of aid that helps people in other countries lead better lives.

And yet, the United States has a poor record of engaging in cooperative international efforts, and continues to give far less foreign aid, as a percentage of its budget, than most other developed nations. One way of explaining this apparent contradiction between attitudes and actions has been to suggest that Americans' support for international engagement is "broad but shallow." That is, while Americans tend to believe in a general sense that it is a good idea to work with other countries, their feelings on the subject are not strong enough to motivate action (including voting). The key strategic question therefore becomes, "How can we motivate people more strongly?"

A New Model: International Relations as Interpersonal Relationships

This study, based on the combined perspectives of cultural anthropology and cognitive linguistics, proposes a new way of thinking about American attitudes toward international relations. In-depth interviews reveal that average Americans understand the somewhat abstract and unfamiliar domain of international relations in terms of the extremely familiar cultural domain of interpersonal relationships. *The average person has no cultural model for international relations, other than those that are borrowed from the interpersonal domain.* Americans treat countries as persons, and understand international engagement by reference to their experiences with parents, children, and neighbors.² A number of important consequences follow from the details of these framings. One of these is that feelings about international involvement are often strong but conflicted, rather than weak or shallow. The strategic question that emerges from this analysis is, "How can we help Americans resolve their discomfort with particular kinds of international relationships?"

The Importance of American Individualism

Our research suggests that the American experience of parents, children, and neighbors is heavily colored by the basic value of self-reliance, or individualism. Individualism has weakened social bonds in general, fundamentally reshaping models of both neighbor and family in American culture.

Thus, in current American culture, the neighbor model refers mainly to casual and episodic interactions, or to unwanted ties and intrusions: "Good fences make good neighbors" (Robert Frost). Most of the time, Americans tend to feel and act as though they have no neighbors. An important exception is that Americans like to feel they can trust their neighbors in times of crisis. In effect there are two understandings at work: The good neighbor is invisible day-to-day but on the scene when urgently needed.

Individualism is a powerful force in the American family as well. In many cultures around the world, understandings of parenting are strongly tied to the notion of "investment" (you invest in your kids, and they return the favor later). By comparison, Americans are much more likely to operate on a "self-reliance" model, in which the goal is to reduce and eliminate interdependence between parents and children, by teaching kids to be self-reliant.

Some Consequences of the Model

These characteristically American cultural models of social relations help explain and predict a variety of patterns in thinking about international engagement. Among these are the following:

- Emotional and social factors are more central to Americans' thinking on international relations than financial or other practical considerations.
- American reluctance to engage internationally results as much from inner conflicts as from indifference.
- Thinking about international cooperation and mutual interdependence does not come naturally for most Americans, because there are no salient interpersonal analogies for this kind of relationship. It is much more natural for Americans to think about one-way dependence or complete independence. (It has been pointed out "the United States knows how to be the team captain, and it knows how to sit on the bench, but it's not very good at being a team player."³)

- Americans are eager to help in times of crisis, but reluctant to get involved in long-term relationships of international interdependency (paralleling current attitudes towards neighborliness). This important distinction has already had significant policy implications.
- Americans make extensive use of the parenting model in reasoning about international relations. This has the negative effect of making it more difficult for Americans to treat other countries as equal partners. It has the positive effect of making it easy for Americans to see that autonomy is the goal of developing countries.
- There is less of a difference between conservatives and liberals in their view of international relations than in other areas of public life. This reflects the fact that the values of individualism and self-reliance are important elements of American interpersonal relationships in general, regardless of political persuasion.
- Contrary to the image of the United States abroad, average Americans are basically uncomfortable with interfering in the affairs of other countries, “sticking their noses into other people’s business.”
- The false but stubborn American belief that the United States spends far more money on foreign aid than any other country reflects the tendency — based on the model of the invisible neighbor, and heightened since the end of the Cold War — to see the United States as alone in the world.

Some Strategic Implications

When thinking about international relations, ordinary Americans are not driven by calculations of self-interest of the kind described by “rational choice” theories. Rather, their thinking is shaped by emotionally loaded models of interpersonal relations. If the goal is to communicate effectively with Americans as a whole, deeply held cultural models must be taken into account.

Here are a few examples of how the model can shape strategy for the Initiative.

- The neighbor model predicts that Americans should respond strongly to appeals for help following natural disasters — i.e., when no open-ended social relationship is implied. Such appeals have consistently been successful (despite the problem of compassion fatigue in other contexts), and should continue to be effective.

- Messages that try to frame chronic problems, such as poverty or ethnic strife, as one-shot crises are likely to provoke negative reactions. Because they are very sensitive to the possibility of developing long-term dependencies, Americans will reject this mismatch. It is possible that some “compassion fatigue” is due to this effect.
- If used carefully, the theme of parenting for autonomy is an appropriate and effective way of promoting aid to developing nations.
- Messages based on the idea that Americans are not generous enough in helping suffering people around the world are unlikely to be successful. Americans are likely to be put off by the suggestion that they are essentially ungenerous — first, because they do give willingly during perceived crises; and second, because this suggestion offers them no way to resolve their discomfort with interdependence.

The interpersonal models outlined in the report will be useful for both generating and testing further strategic possibilities.

Organization of Remaining Sections

Part II of the report introduces the methodology of cognitive analysis. Part III describes in further detail the overarching model that informs American thinking on international relations. Part IV provides brief descriptions of some other beliefs and values that contribute significantly to shaping American attitudes towards international involvement.

Part II: The Cognitive Analysis Approach

Method: We conducted in-depth one-on-one interviews with 15 Americans from different age groups, ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and political persuasions. This is an approach that yields qualitative rather than quantitative data. In this sense, the method is comparable to focus groups and other techniques widely used to study public opinion. Unlike these methods, which elicit particular opinions, cognitive analysis focuses on the more basic cultural models (i.e., understandings and beliefs) that motivate the opinions. The interview method thus provides an in-depth view of strong, recurrent patterns in thinking — a set of values and beliefs that underlie a distinctive American view of international relations.

Frames: Researchers who study cognition and culture have established that people understand all concepts in terms of related networks of ideas, also known as frames. For example, the concept of a “father” is not understood in isolation, but in connection with understandings of mothers, children, families, responsibility, and so forth. The frames a person is using to understand a concept become apparent, sometimes indirectly, based on the language and reasoning the person uses in connection with the concept. Seeming contradictions in the way a person discusses a topic can be particularly interesting, because they may reveal conflicting frames at work. People are usually unaware of the frames they are using.

The essence of reframing an issue is to establish new connections between it and other basic understandings. Often this must be done very subtly or even implicitly, or it leads to a sense of obvious clash with better-established understandings.

Metaphors: People use metaphors to frame abstract and difficult ideas — such as the role of the United States in the world — in terms of situations and objects that are more concrete and familiar. This is a universal finding of cognitive linguistics. The abstract concept of justice, for example, is often thought of in more physical terms as balancing objects by weight.

Part III. International Relations As Interpersonal Relationships

The single most prominent finding from the interviews is how regularly people think about relations between the United States and other countries as though they were one-on-one personal relationships.

Why should people use this sort of metaphoric framing? Because international relations is a complex, unfamiliar subject, far removed from daily experience. As cognitive linguists such as George Lakoff have pointed out, people tend to understand abstract, unfamiliar, and complicated domains by metaphorical reference to simple, familiar, and concrete domains.

Managing the Conflict Between Engagement and Autonomy

What makes the topic of international relations especially challenging is that it entails a difficult psychological conflict: the choice between autonomy and engagement (Should we go in? Should we stay out?), a problem that makes us reach for any tools we can find. Anthropological research demonstrates that our experience with social relations provides a rich domain of familiar cases that can be mapped onto other conceptual domains. The domain of interpersonal relationships maps very easily onto the domain of international relations, in part because interactions with parents, children, and neighbors provide us with most of our experience of the psychological conflict between engagement and autonomy, and our skills for managing it.

Americans, like other people, try to understand international engagement by reference to their experience with parents, children, and neighbors. It is as though the world were a village; our simple understandings of how to relate to our immediate social group are the tools we most often reach for when trying to reason about relationships on a much larger scale. To reverse René Dubos's dictum, Americans think locally and act globally.

Speaking more generally, our analysis suggests the limitations of rational choice theories of human behavior. For example, one important conclusion that comes out of this research is that *money is not the main issue*. The emotional and social costs of international involvement are at least as important to people as the amount of money spent. (As other research has shown, most Americans have no real understanding of how much or how little they are spending on foreign aid.) What really matter to most people most of the time are the prospect of emotional entanglement and the tricky negotiation of conflicting values that are involved in thinking about foreign engagements. The analysis suggests the importance of providing Americans with tools for managing the conflict between engagement and autonomy in constructive ways.

“Global Village” or “Our Town”?

Given the American emphasis on individualism, the village model, though inescapable, is not always a positive factor in Americans’ thinking about international relations. As Bostrom⁴ points out, the core American values of freedom, individuality, opportunity, independence, and responsibility act as a powerful prism through which Americans see the world. The model of the American loner has an impact on every relationship in American life, and in particular on the relationships between neighbors and between parents and children. It has resulted in three peculiarly American cultural models of the most basic social relations: the Invisible Neighbor model, the Helpful Neighbor model, and the Autonomous Child model. Together these constitute the conceptual engine that drives American (non-expert) thinking about international relations.

The Invisible Neighbor Model

The metaphoric framing of countries as neighbors would seem to provide an ideal model for international engagement. The metaphor is often mentioned in official discourse and the media. The predominant American understanding of neighbors, however, de-emphasizes interpersonal contact and engagement, and thus provides a particularly unhelpful frame for thinking about cooperation. According to this relatively recent but pervasive model, neighbors see each other rarely and depend on each other minimally. The relationship is typically reduced to casual greetings and occasional self-limiting activities. Respect for privacy is paramount, and actions that threaten privacy (e.g., telling others' kids what to do) are seen as intrusive and inappropriate. This diminished cultural model of the neighbor is of limited use in helping Americans resolve the conflicts between autonomy and engagement that arise in the international arena.

When neighbors were mentioned in the interviews, it was typically in the context of either help following a natural disaster (limited engagement), or wanting to respect the autonomy of other countries (unwanted intrusions).

But there is that Star Trek thing where you want to leave them alone to do their own destiny, so you're sort of, what do you do?

We're way too nosy.

An application of the model:

- Americans tend to overstate how much we spend, to understate how much other countries participate, and generally to feel that the US shoulders too much of the burden for international affairs.

This is because the invisible neighbor model minimizes the existence of neighbors, in this case other countries. Just as neighbors are seen as distant and somewhat unreal, other developed countries are seen as smaller and less present than they actually are. The invisible neighbor model leads to a view in which the US is seen as the only significant country. (This view has probably taken hold more strongly since the end of the Cold War, now that there is no large enemy demanding our acknowledgment.) While Americans would like to share the burden, they are hindered by their difficulty in recognizing the existence of other countries.

The Helpful Neighbor Model

The important exception to the notion that "the best neighbors are invisible neighbors" is the case of genuine emergencies, when neighbors are expected to overcome their reluctance to stick their noses in other people's business, and help out. Importantly, emergencies are understood to be self-limiting kinds of engagement with one's neighbors.

The helpful neighbor model lends itself well to international engagement that is self-limiting and takes the form of an emergency. Natural catastrophes provide a means of overcoming the cultural tendency to avoid intruding in other people's business, while many other causes of suffering, civil wars for example, do not.

Q: What would be an example of going in with actual hands on assistance?

A: The earthquakes in Turkey, going in there. Our local county fire and rescue sent people over to help find survivors when Mexico had an earthquake. When Mexico had an earthquake we try to help find survivors. In Tokyo during the collapse.

An application of the model:

- Americans, like citizens of other donor nations, tend to suffer from what has been called compassion fatigue.⁵

Our model predicts striking differences in the occurrence of compassion fatigue. It suggests that compassion fatigue will occur much earlier in the case of open-ended engagement than in the case of natural catastrophes.

The Autonomous Child Model

One surprising fact emerging from the interviews is that people are much more likely to reason about international interdependence in terms of parent-child relationships than neighbor relationships, which on the face of it provides a much better analogy for the relations between countries. The explanation for this finding is that the parent-child model is at once more salient than the neighbor model in the minds of most Americans, and also defines a more substantive and long-term relationship than the neighbor model.

I mean we try to be nice, and there are times when you should put your foot down and say that's the way it is. Deal with it. ... I mean it's like parents.

Although the importance of the parent-child model hinders Americans' ability in general to think of international relations as relationships between equals, the model does have a positive influence on some types of international relationships: American models of parenting emphasize the desirability of teaching children self-reliance and autonomy.⁶ (This represents a basic difference from the model of a child as an "investment," which is much more common throughout the world.) As a result, the American model of parenting suggests that the goal of our interactions with developing countries is fostering autonomy and independence. This is a striking contrast to the investment model of parenting, which applied to the international domain, suggests something closer to a colonization model.

An application of the model:

- Images of children are widely used in the media to stand in for almost any issue considered to be both unsettling and irresolvable.⁷

Aside from the fact that images of children elicit nurturant responses in adults, these images are also a natural fit with our cultural model of other countries as children. These images reframe a (culturally) inappropriate involvement with a neighbor as a (culturally) more appropriate involvement with a dependent child.

Exceptions to the model:

African-Americans and the parent-child model. Interestingly, African-American subjects never framed relations between the United States and other countries as parent-child relations, though most other subjects used this model fairly often. This seems to be because African-Americans are more likely to see the American people themselves as having pressing problems requiring attention from the government (which is like a parent in this model). One interpretation of this finding is that African-Americans are reluctant to shift the attention of the Federal Government away from domestic problems and onto those of third-world countries.

It's awful ... because we have here in the city, in the District of Columbia, where we need foreign aid, and the lives of some of our own children who go to bed hungry, who don't have decent housing, medical care. So some of that foreign aid can be spent right here in this country. As opposed to sending millions and billions of dollars overseas.

The United Nations Is A Parent. The United Nations is sometimes seen as a kind of super-parent among the family of nations.

Part IV. Other Beliefs And Values Relevant To International Relations

Some of the models discussed in this section are already very familiar, but it is useful to see them explicitly laid out as fundamental building blocks that structure people's thinking on international issues. Many of them can be either positive or negative; framing an issue in the right way, by linking it to the appropriate value, can turn a liability into an asset.

There are certain cultural models all Americans tend to share. These models are part of the American "national character." The interviews also uncovered some interesting and important differences, however, between the understandings and values of people from different backgrounds.

Compassion/Altruism. Support for foreign aid is most often expressed as a visceral, personal reaction — a sense of compassion for suffering individuals — more than an abstract moral obligation. The upside of this model is that Americans strongly believe that we should do what we can to intervene in natural disasters. The downside is that the model loses force when a situation is viewed as chronic and intractable.

People are really suffering, alright? I mean healthwise, foodwise, there's just nothing there because they're not getting any kind of income basically.

I think with all of our faults and shortcomings Americans are a compassionate people.

That's my own personal opinion. It's got nothing to do with governments or anything else, or even religion. That's why we're here. It is to do what we can to make it easier for all of us.

Note: People expressed moral positions often (i.e., about what's "right," things that we "should" do, and so forth), but there were almost no mentions of a religious basis for people's thinking.

Noblesse Oblige: Those who have more should share with those who have less. Almost all Americans agree that wealth brings responsibility. Even those most likely to see the United States as having pressing problems of its own (typically, African-Americans) refer to this theme in at least some situations.

We should be there to help. Because we have the wherewithal to do it.

Those who have should give to those who don't.

It's like people with lots of money I think should give it...I mean we do have some obligation about being at the top of the food chain I think.

Self-Interest: We Should Keep Our Own Best Interest In Mind. This can be an argument against foreign aid for people who believe the United States does not have any resources to spare. Often, though, it leads to support for foreign aid when people perceive causal connections between how people in other countries are faring and our own welfare. In other words, giving foreign aid helps the United States.

I think national interest ought to be a prime concern, broadly defined.

I don't think the demarcation is that clear between what's right and what's in our interest. I think that at some point they join.

Efficacy: Don't Do It Unless It Works. This is a key consideration for any foreign policy view held by Americans (as Celinda Lake has reported). This seems obvious to Americans, but may not be what you would find in interviews with people from other countries — e.g., individuals from some cultures may be more inclined to choose actions based on religious principles rather than practical consequences. This value represents a significant opportunity because even Americans who are least disposed to support foreign aid respond positively to situations where it is clear that an aid program has worked.

Obviously [Costa Rica] is a success story of foreign aid. And ... I would hope that that would be the end result of other projects that we had.

[We should continue to give foreign aid] if it works.

The View That The United States Is The Only Significant Actor On The World Stage — that “nobody else does anything” — is both counterproductive and hard to work against. It is counterproductive when it makes Americans feel weary of always (as they see it) being the ones called upon to solve the world's problems. It is so deeply entrenched that even after being presented with facts about the actual role America plays (e.g., that it gives less total development aid than Denmark), people are usually unable to assimilate the information, and quickly revert to the model that tells them that no other countries are contributing much. Our evidence shows that this solipsistic view is related to the strong attenuation of the neighbor model in American culture.

There's nobody around that can do that, can come in and help somebody who can't help themselves. And we're really the only country that can do that now, that are in that position.

... United Nations peacekeeping troops — it seems like it's comprised of United States troops, all right? So I'm not sure if that's fair.

Self-Sufficiency. Americans (more than people from other cultures) feel that it is very important to be self-reliant. The negative side of this model is obvious — all else being equal it means that people in other countries should look out for themselves, and, conversely, that we should not expect cooperation from those countries. The model also represents a significant opportunity, though, because when people perceive that an aid program truly leads to greater self-sufficiency they are extremely supportive.

You give a man a fish he'll eat for a day. If you teach him to fish he'll eat all his life. So that's what has to be done — you have to teach them how, show them how, give them the wherewithal to do it themselves. You can't do it all. You can't do it all.

If you help somebody to help themselves then they can do it on their own. And that's important. I mean self respect. Not to be standing with your hand out. You don't like yourself.

Note: This model is closely tied to the American model of parenting. Most Americans feel that the main goal of parenting is to teach children how to become self-reliant. They easily extend this understanding to the main purpose of foreign aid.

Autonomy. This value, closely related to self-sufficiency, has to do with other countries being in charge of their own affairs. The United States should not meddle, or “stick its nose in where it's not wanted.” The upside here is that it means greater support for cooperation as opposed to unilateral action. The downside is that it operates against engagement overall.

It's none of our business. As a world and a planet it is our business. But too often I think we lead that role. And I think that we have the United Nations for a reason.

We're getting into people's business when we shouldn't be.

Face: It's Important To Be Well Thought Of. Americans fairly often refer to how our actions will seem, how they will be responded to in the community of nations; e.g., if we are not seen as giving enough aid, or paying our dues to the

United Nations, it makes us “look bad.” They also think in terms of the “face” of other nations; for example, a government that is not able to ensure the welfare of its people loses face.

I think [the U.S. failure to reduce emissions] looks really bad.

I think their government might feel like they're ... looked at as incapable... I mean that's what I would think, if I would say, "well geez, if England is over here giving us everything, what's Clinton doing?"

[Small-scale projects involving helping individuals] certainly would be better PR for us. People would know that more than, you know, who built the dam.

The Value of Friendship. Americans believe that it is important to maintain positive ties to other countries. Like individuals in small groups, Americans are concerned whether those around us can be trusted or will turn their backs on us.

We really need to have friends internationally around the world.

Fairness. This basic American principle comes up in a variety of ways. For instance, some people feel that it's unfair for the United States to contribute disproportionately to U.N. peacekeeping missions.

... United Nations peacekeeping troops — it seems like it's comprised of United States troops, all right? So I'm not sure if that's fair.

I think that we should allot a portion of what we're going to give — it should be a set amount, and I think if we're going to give aid to a country this country should get this amount of money and this country should get — everybody should get 10 percent or whatever.

Competition. Some Americans (particularly men, and particularly African-Americans) see many of our interactions with foreign countries as maneuvers for status or dominance. There are winners and losers in these encounters.

At some point you just have to say, you know, you can't just have it your way all the time, the little foreign countries.

That goes back to influence, having people recognize and respect your sense of authority.

Take Care of Your Own. Following the model of the self-sufficient family, Americans often feel it is most important to care for your own people before worrying about how others are doing. Women in particular use the metaphor that nurturance is a limited resource, expressed for example as the idea that the United States should not "spread itself too thin."

First what I think is that we should always take care of home. Make sure that home is strong.

The United States Has Severe Problems Requiring Massive Investment of Resources. This is an idea expressed by a number of subjects. In particular, it was strongly expressed by all of the African-American subjects. In combination with the "Take care of your own" value, it results in the belief that American resources should be spent on helping suffering Americans rather than on helping foreigners.

I think we get in over our head too much — with other people's problems, and we have a lot of problems here.

I think about, you know, like, poverty in other countries and I think that we have lots of homeless people here that need a lot that can't get and I think sometimes we give too much to other countries.

Note: The symbolic value of foreign and domestic aid. This model did not lead any of our subjects to conclude that the United States should spend no money on foreign aid. All of our subjects understood that the problems of many struggling countries deserve immediate attention. The problem is the perception that the United States does not care sufficiently about its own. This is often linked with the idea of a family; "we're *in* the family and should get first dibs on love."

Know-How: Americans Know How To Get Things Done. This means that nearly everyone supports the idea that Americans should serve as teachers, to show people in other countries how to solve problems, how to better their lives.

[The United States should] teach them about birth control and teach them about better managing their health.

Hands-On Help Is Better Than Sending Money. Both liberals and conservatives agreed on this point, although their reasoning was different.

Conservatives expressed the belief that sending money with no strings attached is asking for waste and corruption. Liberals expressed the belief that nurturance is most beneficial when expressed as personal contact rather than as impersonal gift-giving.

[We should help] not with money but with actual hands-on assistance.

You send in people, you send in doctors, you send in people to help rebuild.

Government (in particular, the U.S. government) Is Inefficient. This is a strong belief among conservatives, not surprisingly. It means that foreign aid money, like most other government programs, is felt to be very wasteful.

Note: Defining "Federal Government." Conservative respondents tended to have a distorted and circular understanding about what constitutes the Federal Government. The Peace Corps, for example, which all of our informants felt positive about, was sometimes described as a private foundation. The rule seems to be: If it works, it cannot be part of the Federal Government.

Foreign Governments Are Corrupt, Have Values Very Different From Us. Our informants regularly tended to exaggerate the differences between foreigners and Americans. This tendency carried over to their views of foreign governments.

The Authors

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¹ Steven Kull and I.M. Destler, *Misreading the Public: The Myth of a New Isolationism* (Brookings Institution Press, 1999); Margaret Bostrom, "Public Attitudes toward Foreign Affairs" (sponsored by the Benton Foundation and the FrameWorks Institute, 1999).

² This finding confirms hypotheses presented by cognitive linguist George Lakoff in his study of metaphorical value systems (*Moral Politics: What Conservatives Know that Liberals Don't*, Basic Books, 1996).

³ Comment by Jessica Matthews, President of the Carnegie Endowment, quoted in Laurie Ann Mazur and Susan E. Sechler, "Global Interdependence and the Need for Social Stewardship" (Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Global Interdependence Initiative, 1997).

⁴ Margaret Bostrom, "Public Attitudes toward Foreign Affairs" (sponsored by the Benton Foundation and the FrameWorks Institute, 1999).

⁵ Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War, and Death*. (New York: Routledge, 1999)

⁶ Lakoff (*Moral Politics*, 1996) has argued that there are two distinct American styles — Strict Father and Nurturant Parent —but the features we refer to are by and large shared by both of these models.

⁷ Susan Moeller, "Innocence Abroad: Images of Children in the American Media" (Paper prepared for the Global Interdependence Initiative, 1999).