

A FrameWorks Institute eZine
Clarifying Rural Issues Using A Simplifying Model

This eZine is designed to help rural advocates and local groups make effective use of the simplifying models research conducted by Cultural Logic for the FrameWorks Institute, with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation by providing concrete examples of how the simplifying model (“Patchwork Effect”) can be deployed. We begin with a review of *why* the model is helpful, and follow with hands-on examples.

Purpose of the simplifying model

The aim of the simplifying model is to provide a *conceptual focus* that is more productive than the ones people usually default to – including the ones that advocates often choose to evoke. The public’s conclusions about rural issues follow from particular default conceptions of rural America – e.g. as a place where life is so simple that people don’t have the same basic needs as people in “metro” America do. The goal of the simplifying model is to introduce a new, user-friendly conceptual picture that guides reasoning in more constructive ways.

A complementary communications approach

It is important to remember that that the simplifying model was developed as part of a broader communications strategy which includes other framing elements – from values to social math. For instance, the survey research included in FrameWorks’ “Talking Rural Issues” project demonstrated that both Fairness (e.g. fair distribution of resources) and Interdependence (between rural and metro America) are powerful values cues for promoting understanding and support of rural issues. The model complements and reinforces these other aspects of effective framing and is most helpful when used in combination with them.

Understanding the model

One of the clear findings that emerges from this body of research is that it is often counterproductive to emphasize the “rural difference.” Americans’ default conceptions of rural parts of the country (whether or not they “know better”) often frame rural places as fundamentally different and disconnected from the metro parts of the country. Advocates

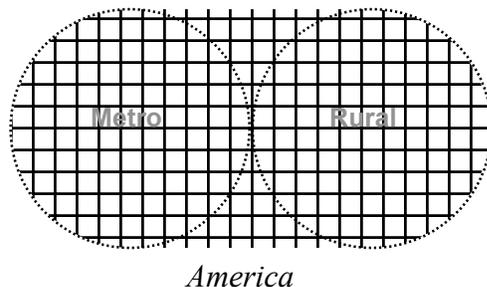
often end up emphasizing this sense of difference and disconnection – through the kinds of bucolic images they choose, through evocations of rural areas as the storehouse of traditional American (agrarian) values, and in any number of other ways. While framing like this can appeal to positive sentiments on behalf of rural areas, the FrameWorks research demonstrates that it makes it harder, not easier, for people to engage with the kinds of systemic change advocates would like to promote.

For this reason, the simplifying model that emerged from our TalkBack research focused, in a certain sense, on backgrounding the differences between rural and metro America. The core idea of the Patchwork Effect simplifying model is as follows:

The unequal distribution of the basic systems and services *all Americans depend on* is making some (rural) regions of the US significantly less livable, and less economically viable.

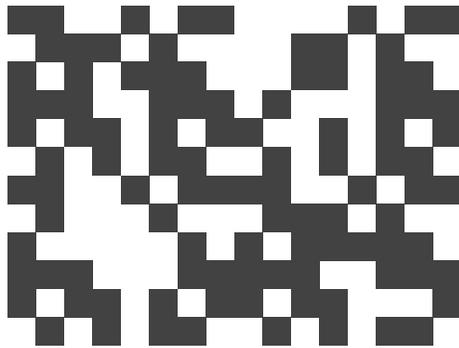
(Note that this idea can serve as one of the conceptual anchors in communications about rural issues even though it is never likely to be repeated verbatim.)

One way to understand the effect of the model is to see the idea of systems we’re all used to as an “overlay” that takes emphasis off of the distinctions and separations between metro and rural that so often get in the way of productive thinking.



Particular language/image

The research established that the term “Patchwork Effect” is an effective way of conveying this idea of unequal/spotty distribution of basic systems. People remember and use this language, which offers a vivid picture that helps people grasp the idea of unequal distribution as well as potential unity.



(Advocates should note that the research gave no indication that the term conjures associations with rural quilting. For average Americans hearing the phrase in context, the intended meanings successfully block out other kinds of associations with the term.)

Many other ways of expressing the same point were considered, and several were included in testing, but Patchwork proved the most effective.

Advantages of using the model

As an organizing idea, the Patchwork Effect concept has a number of advantages that play out in exchanges with average people:

- ⌚ It helps people focus on solutions related to policy and collective action (rather than just individual initiative).
- ⌚ It makes it self-evident that positive change is possible.
- ⌚ It leads people away from the idea that people have “chosen the rural life” (i.e. they just don’t think of it or bring it up) – one of the toughest obstacles to engaging support for rural policies. After all, we’re talking about things that *all* American communities need.
- ⌚ It helps people focus on rural areas in particular, rather than drifting to discussion of how many parts of the country, including urban areas, have it tough in one way or another.

In short, conversations that take the Patchwork Effect as one of the conceptual starting points are more likely to be productive.

Importantly, the model is also very compatible with the values of Fairness and Interdependence identified in FrameWorks’ survey research. (It is *unfair* that basic systems have been developed in some areas but not others, and the consequences are not confined to rural America.). The model aligns itself with these cues and helps make them more concrete.

A sample paragraph

In the setting of any particular communication, the model will be stated, elaborated and illustrated in a way that suits the context and the communicator's style. Here is an example of a paragraph that was effective in the (unusually demanding) context of TalkBack testing:

Most economists are now worried about what they call the Patchwork Effect. This is a problem that is forcing families and businesses to abandon small towns and rural regions that should be vital parts of the economy. In rural areas, the network of basic services that our prosperity and quality of life depend on has never been developed – from transportation services to health care services, banking services, communication services, and so on. The Patchwork Effect is forcing people to leave towns and large areas that should be vital parts of the economy

There are several points to note about this particular explanation of the idea:

- ⌚ The introductory sentence refers to economists as a way of signaling that the paragraph is about *practical, big-picture perspectives*. (This proved helpful in the context of TalkBack testing, where subjects are offered no prior context to help them understand the ideas they are about to hear, nor their significance.)
- ⌚ The new term is introduced early, in a way that signals there is a new and important idea to pay attention to.
- ⌚ The paragraph quickly mentions a *causal dynamic* that affects businesses and families. The stakes are presented in very concrete terms.
- ⌚ The next sentence explains the key concept of unequal distribution of basic services.
- ⌚ The examples of basic services are chosen for *breadth, for their practical nature, for ease of understanding, and for universality* – the central point is that these are the kinds of things we *all* depend on.
- ⌚ The final sentence reinforces the idea that all Americans have a stake in this problem.

Communicators using the model will find their own ways of achieving these important goals.

Using the Model

In discussions of any number of particular issues, the Patchwork Effect idea can serve as an *organizing principle* that helps people focus productively on real rural problems and solutions. In order to serve this function, the model should be:

- ⌚ Introduced very early, rather than as an afterthought
- ⌚ Returned to more than once, as an idea that is central to understanding rural issues
- ⌚ Connected with other topics in the communication.

Example #1:

Advocates can never *control* what appears in the press, but their perspectives and framings often influence coverage. So it is important to think about how coverage could be more productive if it included the simplifying model.

The following Associated Press article appeared in the on-line version of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (July 10, 2006) as “Appalachia sees more diabetes.” In this case, the idea of spotty distribution of basic systems could be extremely helpful in leading readers toward an engaged and problem-solving stance. As the article is currently framed, however, readers are likely to blame high diabetes rates on the impoverished and ignorant residents who don’t know enough to eat right.

Poverty levels among people living in parts of Appalachian Ohio may be one reason why they have higher rates of diabetes than the rest of the state, researchers said . . . "We know that, for example, people who have a lower socio-economic status tend to eat less-healthy diets," said Frank Schwartz, director of the Appalachian Rural Health Institute Diabetes Center. "They tend to eat high-density foods, so they get high amounts of fat. They just don't have the background in nutrition, so they don't make proper choices." Researchers in December contacted a total of 2,350 households in Jackson, Meigs, Morgan, Perry, Ross, Washington and Scioto counties. Nearly one-quarter of those with diabetes were not taking insulin or other medication to treat it, the study said. . . . The region ... struggles with poverty, job losses, access to education and isolation in a rugged, sparsely populated terrain.

The Patchwork Effect idea would help the writer take the blame off of (easily stereotyped) individuals and groups, and minimize (rather than maximize) the sense that these people live in a world entirely unrelated to “our own.” The article would be more constructive if, from the beginning, it framed the issue in terms of the unequal distribution and development of basic systems -- from medical care to physical infrastructure to educational systems to economic development programs. Diabetes, in this view, is one illustration of a broader problem. People in the region are suffering because they don’t have access to the basic services that “we” in metro America rely on

to ensure a reasonable quality of life.

It would also be helpful to complement the idea of individual suffering with a message about the broader implications of the problem. An example of more constructive framing might be:

Researchers have found that diabetes rates remain high in Appalachia, a large region that continues to remain less healthy, prosperous and viable because of the patchwork distribution of basic services that other communities rely on for quality of life – from medical care to health education to communication technology.

Example 2:

A publication from the Economic Research Service of the USDA offers more unfortunate framing, and places the focus on the characteristics of the rural poor, rather than the situations they find themselves in. The article (“Understanding Rural America: County Types: Persistent Poverty Counties”) dwells at length on the types of people that one finds in these counties, emphasizing for example that there are high rates of female-led households and unemployed people. In addition:

Poverty counties have disproportionate numbers of people with characteristics that make them prone to economic disadvantage. On average, these counties have large numbers of people without a high school education – putting them at risk of being unprepared to participate in the economy – and people living in female-headed households. These counties also have higher than nonmetro average proportions of Blacks and Hispanics – groups that historically have had trouble gaining access to economic opportunities . . . Nearly 80 percent of the nonmetro poor are, in fact, White . . . however, Blacks and Hispanics do make up a disproportionate share of the poor in poverty counties and in nonmetro counties as a whole.

At the conclusion of the article, the authors do attempt to put the grim statistics into context and offer both explanations and potential solutions:

Hand in hand with that poverty is often a lack of basic necessities such as health care, good nutrition, education, and essential public services. These needs are different from, but related to economic development needs. Improvements in these basic necessities are essential if people in these counties are to be healthy, educated, productive workers. Likewise, higher incomes from better paying jobs can enable people to obtain these basic services. Resolution of long-term poverty, therefore, requires that both types of needs be addressed.

Though bringing this paragraph to the forefront would certainly make the article more constructive, even more helpful would be the introduction of a clear organizing principle – at or near the top of the piece – to help readers avoid falling into the usual cognitive traps. Defaulting to ideas about Personal Responsibility – and to stereotypes about Appalachia – is so easy that a new conceptual “hook” like the Patchwork Effect idea can be a very valuable way of leading people in new, and more constructive directions.

A reconceptualized explanatory paragraph might look something like this:

Underlying small-town poverty is an uneven patchwork of all of those basic systems that American counties rely on for their prosperity. Health care, education, economic development support, and other essential public services are all vital support systems that communities rely on, and it is these very systems that are missing. Spotty development of those basic systems is reducing the viability of whole regions, while extending them out to these regions may be an essential step towards creating healthier and more prosperous communities ...

Example 3:

Our third example is one in which the use of the simplifying model would add strength to a frame that is struggling to avoid defaulting. On its homepage (www.8055.org), the 80-55 Coalition for Rural America makes several references that effectively convey Interconnectedness between rural and metro parts of America.

All Americans need good jobs so they can pay their bills, raise their kids, and plan for the future.

We need an economic plan that works for the whole country, ...

References to “all Americans” and “an economic plan that works for the whole country” imply shared fates between rural and non-rural parts of the country and are consistent with the FrameWorks research – a good start.

Unfortunately, research has shown that without careful and consistent framing, people’s strong default sense of division is difficult to overcome. And in fact other language on the same page, including references to rural areas “falling behind,” call to mind a race that rural people are losing – a framing that emphasizes that rural people are different from and even in competition with “the rest of us.” So the frame is compromised to some extent.

But rural people keep falling further behind their urban and suburban counterparts. You might not see that on the nightly news, but it is happening just the same.

The Patchwork Effect idea would help make the idea of an “economic plan that works for the whole country” more concrete. The problem is not only about fairness to rural people and regions (which can be an effective message in itself), but also about making smart decisions in the common US project of building a prosperous society. Making sure that all areas are viable – i.e. livable and therefore economically productive – is an important part of that project, and a patchwork of basic services is no way to assure livability and viability in all the regions that could be productive. By using the model, and using it early, in this communication, rural advocates might focus attention on systems to improve the situation, and less on the (dystopian) characteristics of rural people that might lead others to believe that their plight goes with the territory.

Similar arguments might be made in support of rural broadband, rural medical care, and many other systemic changes. We hope the discussions and examples in this eZine help communicators imagine many other ways in which the Patchwork Effect model offers a new, more concrete and constructive way of talking about the situation of rural America, and about the issues of particular interest to them.

This FrameWorks eZine was supported by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation to inform the work of rural policy advocates.

About FrameWorks Institute: The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute’s work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

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