



Barriers to Public Engagement with Transitional Work:  
Visibility, Worthiness, and Efficacy  
Findings from Cognitive Interviews

**FrameWorks Research Report**

November 2004

## INTRODUCTION

Programs such as Lifetrack's Advancement Plus provide hard-to-employ people with work training and real work experience, often enabling these same people to enter the wider workplace and lead productive, fulfilling lives. Given that transitional work programs like Advancement Plus yield important benefits for individuals, businesses, and communities, they should in principle be easy to "sell" to both the public and policymakers. For example, there is a straightforward economic argument to be made on behalf of transitional work: the programs convert a *drain* on tax dollars into a source of *tax revenue*.

Yet support for such programs is not as widespread and active as it should be in Minnesota (and probably elsewhere), and advocates often encounter resistance as they try to persuade leaders to fund them and provide other necessary resources.

The research reported on here starts from the assumption—borne out on a variety of other social issues—that patterns of reasoning more basic than the issue itself can dampen or interfere with engagement in ways that are largely unconscious. That is, understanding why support is not strong and active requires exploring the public's reasoning on topics closely related to the issue—such as work and welfare—in order to understand the basic values and patterns of reasoning that may be getting in the way.

Viewed in light of this research, Lifetrack and its advocates should feel justifiably proud of their ability to build and sustain this program and to explain its value to a core group of supporters. Expanding that circle beyond those already converted to Lifetrack's vision is the challenge that this research necessarily addresses. Importantly, taking that next step will require a different narrative and set of frames than those used in the past to advance public support for these programs.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The analysis presented here is based on intensive one-on-one interviews conducted by Cultural Logic in the fall of 2004 with a diverse group of nineteen individuals in Minnesota. Subjects were recruited through a process of ethnographic networking—researchers began with “seed contacts” in a set of target communities, and developed a pool of subjects from which a diverse range was selected for interviewing.<sup>1</sup> Because business leaders represent a potentially important audience for communications about transitional work programs, interview subjects included two business executives suggested by the Lifetrack staff. Additionally, the sample included a mix of rural, suburban, and urban Minnesotans, since efforts to expand transitional work programs will need to engage all three of these segments of the State’s population.

Overall, the sample included 9 women and 10 men. Subjects’ ages ranged widely—7 subjects were in their 20s, 3 in their 30s, 4 in their 40s, and 5 were 50 or older. 11 of the subjects were European-American, 3 were African-American, 2 were Hispanic-American, 2 were Asian-American, and 1 was Native-American. Attention was also paid to the mix of political orientations in the sample (6 conservatives, 2 independents, and 11 liberals). Educational backgrounds ranged widely (high-school only to graduate degree) as did occupations.

Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed from a cognitive perspective, meaning that rather than expressions of opinion, the analysis focuses on underlying patterns of reasoning, which are often expressed indirectly via, for example, the omission of certain topics, associations drawn between one topic and another, the metaphors used to talk about an issue, and so forth.

Importantly, the method seeks to identify the default patterns of reasoning people fall into, even if they “know better” on some level. For example, Minnesotans may “know” that many people are unemployed due to a disability, yet easily default to a simplified picture in which people work unless they are “lazy.”

### The Cognitive Approach

Subjects participated in semi-structured, recorded interviews (“cognitive elicitations”), conducted according to methods adapted from psychological anthropology. The goal of this methodology is to approximate a natural conversation while also encouraging the subject to reason about a topic from a wide variety of perspectives, including some that are unexpected and deliberately challenging – as subjects defend their opinions, they “think aloud,” in ways that are often revealing about the assumptions and understandings that underlie the opinions. For this reason, interviews are deliberately designed not to conform to the standard polling or interviewing approach whose question try to avoid apparent bias or to “lead the witness.” The cognitive approach is based on dynamically engaging cultural models, rather than observing them statically.

---

<sup>1</sup> See discussion of “snowball sampling” as a key technique of ethnographic research in H. Russell Bernard’s *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*. 1995. (pp.97ff).

This type of data-gathering—and the analysis of transcripts, based on techniques of cognitive anthropology and linguistics—yields insights not available from standard interview, polling, or focus group techniques. It does not look for statements of opinion, but for patterns of thought that may even be unconscious. It does not look for familiarity with issues in the news, but for more well-established and long-standing default reasoning patterns. Some of the clues to these important patterns come from topics that are *omitted*, moments of *inconsistency* where one understanding clashes with another, and the *metaphors* people use to talk about a subject. Furthermore, the method is designed to explore the differences between *rhetorical mode*—in which people define themselves in opposition to other groups and perspectives, and repeat ideas and phrases familiar from public discourse—and *reasonable mode*—in which they reflect their own experiences, think for themselves, and are more open to new information. Put briefly, this analysis focuses on *how* people think rather than *what* they think. (See the Appendix for a fuller discussion of Cultural Logic’s cognitive approach.)

Cognitive research works on the premise that unconscious, default understandings of the world (cognitive and cultural *models*) guide people’s understanding of an issue in ways they do not even recognize. One of the most important aspects of these default models is that they often lead people to understandings that they might reject at other moments of more careful reflection. For example, average Americans recognize on an intellectual level that America’s fortunes are tied to economic and other developments abroad—yet a habitual conception of America as a world unto itself obscures this understanding, and creates a cognitive “blind-spot.” People who *know better on some level*, still slip easily into a mistaken view because of well-established, default understandings of the world. These hidden, underlying understandings can be very difficult to challenge and displace, and, if they are not accounted for, can derail communications.

Note: Quotes are introduced with the notations “I” for “Interviewer” and “S” for “Subject.”

## **DEFAULT SCENARIOS OF WORK, WORKERS, AND UNEMPLOYMENT**

The Minnesotans we spoke with do not readily understand whom transitional work programs serve, or even what such programs do. When they are reasoning in terms of basic cultural models—most of which are largely unconscious—members of the public simply fail to consider the “hard-to-employ” population helped by programs like Advancement Plus. This group is simply not on their radar screen. In this section we explore the basic cultural models that define typical, “default” notions of work and workers, and which create a kind of “cognitive blindness,” preventing the public from thinking easily and naturally about a variety of real people and work-related situations.

### **Default Understandings of Work and Workers**

Minnesotans, like other Americans, tend to think about work in terms of a set of typical stories, images, and scenarios. Such stories guide reasoning about work and workers. While they vary widely in their particulars, these stories tend to share certain basic elements.

On a largely unconscious level, the central character in typical work scenarios is an able-bodied, able-minded person—in short, a competent, functional adult. The normal worker enters the workforce ready to be trained, ready to learn, with no specific physical or mental problems.

Jobs themselves are normally understood in a way that fits the abilities of the prototypical worker. Together, the understandings of prototypical job and worker are two pieces that fit together, like the proverbial horse and carriage.

Over the course of his life (the prototypical worker being male), the average worker has a set of prototypical experiences related to work. He goes to school in order to prepare for life as a worker. He applies for jobs. He goes through interviews and otherwise competes for jobs. Over the course of his career, he must make a variety of decisions. For example, he may stay in the same job and try to advance up the ladder. Or he may leave his present company for a better offer. He eventually may retire, hopefully with a nice retirement package earned from a lifetime of labor.

In the standard narrative, companies (i.e. employers) have a central influence on the worker’s career. Following an application process, employers make decisions about whether to hire the individual worker. They evaluate his performance. They give him raises, rewarding him for good work. Or they may fire him, either as punishment for poor performance or out of economic necessity. These two parties—the worker and the company, are the two “players” in the prototypical work-life scenario. Their joint decisions determine the course of the prototypical worker’s work life.

### **Default Unemployment Scenarios**

The average worker probably does not work uninterruptedly his entire life. There are a set of “normal” reasons for this. He may, for example, be laid off or fired. Or he may be looking for work after completing his education. The average worker may even *choose*

not to work for a while. He may decide to go back to school. Or he may take time off to prepare for a career change. When pictured as a woman, the average worker might leave work to have a baby or raise her family.

When unemployed, the typical worker may not be able to find a job for some time. Again, there is a set of normal reasons for this. It might be early in his career. The economy might be bad. He might lack connections that could help him.

*I: Do you think in general it's hard for people to find jobs?*

*S: Yeah, I would think if you don't know someone; I think a lot of jobs are if you know someone or can get a reference from somebody... Yeah, I think it can be especially hard. And I didn't really have many sources of information. I used the Internet mostly. (Hispanic-American, female, urban)*

The worker might be underqualified, or overqualified, in terms of education and experience. With a particular company, he may have a bad job interview. He may not be a good fit for the particular job being offered. Or he may just have a bad attitude and not make a good impression on bosses and potential bosses. In short, the default models of work include a variety of typical, default reasons for unemployment which people readily volunteer, many of which have to do with the fit between the worker and work.

*I: Is it hard for certain kinds of people to get or keep a job?*

*S: I would imagine there are some. I don't know any, but I would imagine that they just don't have the skills or they think they are overqualified for something, or whatever. [European-American female, suburban]*

*I: Do you think there are people who want to work but are unemployed? When you picture somebody unemployed, what do you picture?*

*S: Well, it depends on what the circumstances are basically. I know a lot of them have problems getting a job, let's say you have done something. Especially in a small town, no one will hire you. Let's say if you have any kind of reputation at all. They will give it to you if they have some job for a few days or whatever that they can't get anyone to do, here it is. Other than that, it is hard to get a job. [European-American male, rural]*

## OBSCURING EFFECTS OF THE DEFAULT SCENARIOS

The prototypical understandings of work and workers described in the previous section are so familiar that it is hard to notice them. Together they form something like a lens through which we look at the world, transparent to users, yet powerful in its ability to magnify and constrain what we perceive and understand. The work-and-workers prototype has a strong ability to exclude other kinds of thinking, and other kinds of information that are both directly relevant to advocates' goals.

When presented with it directly, people are often able to understand information that doesn't fit their default models. But in ordinary conversation and most other situations, they easily default back to the terms of their preconceived notions about workers and work. The elicitation research revealed that a number of significant real-world factors tend to fall outside of the Minnesota public's normal thinking.

### **“Hard to Employ” and Hard to Think About**

When reasoning is guided by the cultural models described, it is quite easy to overlook those who are not “average workers.” They are cognitively “invisible.” For example, those who are not completely able-bodied and able-minded are simply *not considered* by most of the public, at least when they think intuitively about work and workers.

In fact, virtually all of the people served by transitional work programs—including those with physical or mental disabilities, victims of abuse or trauma, recent immigrants, people with a criminal record, etc.—failed to occur spontaneously to most of the Minnesota interview subjects. These people are not “typical” workers, or even typical unemployed workers, and are therefore quite literally outside the thoughts of most Minnesotans, and probably most Americans.

### ***A difficult category***

This problem is more fundamental than advocates may currently appreciate. For example, Lifetrack often describes its clients as “hard-to-employ.” Unfortunately, this category label is not likely to be effective, because it is not a natural category in lay people's thoughts. One reason “hard-to-employ” is not a natural category is because this population itself is so heterogeneous—it is made up of a collection of other, very well established categories such as immigrants, the disabled, single mothers, the chronically ill, those with no work experience, and those with a criminal record.

It is true that these people are linked by the fact that they are hard to employ, and it would be ideal if this were an established “type” in American thought. But, unfortunately, “hard-to-employ” is not yet part of an everyday American, or Minnesotan, cultural model. When lay people hear or think of the category “hard-to-employ,” they do not employ the same understandings as experienced Lifetrack advocates. Because the category means little to them, they resort to default images of the typical worker.

### ***Filling the vacuum with damaging models***

The consequences of such default reasoning are damaging. One of these, noted above, is that the public ignores the label altogether, and defaults to the old categories: the “hard-to-employ” are more easily understood as lazy, as having a bad attitude, etc.—in short, they easily become typical *bad* workers. Another counterproductive but natural category is the “Down and Out”—people who are conceived of as *incapable* of doing anything productive because they are so badly damaged in some sense (and who, in the public’s estimation, might or might not deserve help—see the following discussion of Moral responses).

### **No Role for Government**

As discussed above, the default work/worker model used by many Americans involves exactly two active parties. Employers and employees are the major “players” over the course of an average worker’s work life. This two-part relationship is simple to understand and is the basis of many people’s experience in the workplace. (It also resonates with other simple, two-part relationships in American culture – friend and enemy, gift giver and receiver, etc.)

However, this model of the workplace completely leaves out Government as a player. For this reason, the idea of government working to help train and sponsor entry into the workforce doesn’t occur spontaneously to most members of the public. This type of cognitive blindness is an additional obstacle to public support and understanding of programs like Advancement Plus.

*I: Our society’s government, do they owe us the chance to work? Is it their duty to provide us a chance to work?*

*S: No.*

*I: Why not?*

*S: I think it’s your own ability/you know, you need to have a chance yourself. Nobody owes you anything. You have to go get it yourself.*  
[European-American male, urban]

### **“Single Barrier” Thinking**

When the population served by Advancement Plus was explained to interviewees, most expressed a general sort of support for the program. However, interviewees also expressed the various kinds of confusion suggested above, and showed a strong tendency to conceptualize served people into *single* types. Interviewees might focus on working mothers, or the physically disabled, or ex-convicts, or those with learning disabilities. Much more difficult, and much less intuitive, was the challenge of recognizing people suffering from multiple barriers, people who fit into multiple categories. This type of person, facing multiple barriers, rarely if ever occurred to interview subjects.

This “pigeonholing” principle is, of course, a natural tendency. It is partly an effect of the more general cognitive tendency to classify objects (or people, or virtually anything) into the single easiest category. This default pattern of thinking makes it much harder to fully grasp the reality of those suffering from multiple barriers.

In fact, misunderstanding is compounded in this case. Given the absence of a readily accessible “hard-to-employ” category, it is already hard for many Americans to get a handle on the clients in transitional work programs. And given the tendency of people to look for the simplest single category, interview subjects suffered from a double difficulty in grasping the concept—there is no natural category for the served population as a whole, and there is no natural category for the many participants who suffer from multiple barriers, and who therefore belong to multiple categories at the same time.

### **Missing the Larger Economic Picture**

A number of interview subjects mentioned the role of “the economy” when discussing unemployment, and they were sometimes able to comment fairly specifically on an economic phenomenon that caused people to lose jobs.

*Well of course, outsourcing with jobs is terrible. It is absolutely terrible and senseless. What I think happened unfortunately in a lot of areas is that their pay raises were too great and they were paying way too much money. All of a sudden, they decided they could not do it anymore, so let's go to Japan or whatever other country and pay pennies on the dollar for labor. [European-American female, rural]*

More often, they made general references to a “good” or “bad” economy, as a factor in making jobs easier or harder to come by.

*I am just thinking about my college friends who graduated with me in June and a number of them are still unemployed. They have the education, they have the degrees, but they cannot find jobs right now because the economy is bad. So the companies are looking more to hire more experienced people whom they don't need to train. [Asian-American female, urban]*

Most typically, though, for reasons previously discussed, interview subjects tended to keep the conversation on the familiar ground of the prototypical worker—an *individual* with a certain set of qualifications. It is cognitively easier to focus on the worker than on the larger economic picture.

## A COGNITIVE CATCH-22: WORK AND THE MORAL PERSON

Perhaps the most insidious barrier to the public's enthusiastic support of program's like LifeTrack's Advancement Plus is a basic American cultural model that closely associates and conflates Working with full moral Personhood. According to this model, work in some sense *confers* personhood and moral existence. Moral individuals choose to work, and are also rendered moral by the work they do. In this cultural model, there is a kind of "virtuous circle" in which working is morally beneficial, and being a fully moral person makes one more likely to work.

### The American Work Ethic

Americans of all political persuasions place a high value on work, and regularly extol the virtues of hard work. A variety of forces contribute to this cultural value, but one uncontroversial factor is the so-called Protestant Work Ethic, which played an important role in shaping American culture since its beginnings. According to the ethic, Americans should be hard workers, laboring for long hours at their job or calling. But the work ethic is not just a prescription for action. It is also a moral system, one that typically includes a number of moral notions:

- It is a moral obligation to work. A good person is one who works.
- Work gives a person a sense of self-worth and self-esteem. Work, in a sense, defines a person.
- Work provides a person with self-discipline and personal character. Work strengthens moral fiber.
- As a worker, a person is a full, moral member of society, a contributing member of the community.

Interviewees tended to emphasize particular elements of the American work ethic. For example, several mentioned the link between work and self-esteem, one's sense of worth as an individual:

*I guess in my experience, I haven't really met/I've never met anyone who didn't want to be an adult to start a job and be responsible for themselves. [European-American male, urban]*

*Well, I think most important is for the individuals and the employees, they have a much better self-worth if they are out working and contributing to society and to their companies and making their own money. I just think it is going to make them feel better about themselves. [European-American male, urban]*

*[When you are not working you have] you know, lack of interest, lack of enthusiasm, you don't want to take care of your house anymore, you don't want to take care of your kids anymore, because you are so depressed yourself, because your self-esteem is so low and stuff.*  
[Asian-American male, urban]

*I just think everybody should work. I think it's healthy. I think it's a healthy environment. I think it's healthy for you to keep busy, keep moving.* [European-American female, suburban]

Unfortunately, from the point of view of advocates, the *virtuous* circle between work and morality risks becoming a *vicious* circle, in which not working diminishes moral personhood, and those who don't work are morally defective and thus less deserving of outside help.

When the problem of unemployment is associated with people who are not really full moral persons, it becomes much harder to solve for two main reasons. First, unemployed people are seen as less than deserving, because they are not making the right choices, or otherwise acting like moral adults. Second, and even more basically, the unemployed are seen as essentially different from the rest of us, needing to be “changed from the inside” rather than—as advocates see it—helped to overcome “external barriers.”

Note: There are of course important exceptions to this vicious circle, categories of people who might be called the “deserving unemployed.” These categories include retirees, children, housewives, and the disabled—none of whom we usually think of as “unemployed” at all. It also includes people facing special circumstance, such as a factory closure. One of the important issues facing advocate communications—and which we consider in the analysis that follows—is the relationship between the “hard-to-employ” and “deserving unemployed.”

### **Distorting Effects of the Model**

The model that associates Work with Moral Personhood has a number of distorting effects on Minnesotans' thinking about unemployment in general, and about the unemployed who fall in the “hard-to-employ” category in particular. A number of patterns of thinking that follow from the model tend to undermine support for programs such as Advancement Plus.

#### ***Barriers (to employment) are moral tests.***

According to this model, external adversity is linked to (inner) moral character: the only way to measure and perhaps strengthen your moral fiber is by having it *tested* by adversity.

One consequence of this model is that references to barriers often evoke a cognitive shift to thinking about moral character.

- I: [Should there be programs to help employ people who are having difficulty due to] Inability to speak English?*
- S: I just feel if you're here, you should speak...*
- I: So you should learn on your own?*
- S: Exactly. And there's programs out there that ... You have to want to do that, I think. [European-American female, suburban]*
- S: Well, I don't think there are barriers. If someone shows up—to me what a lot of employers are looking for is what we call the three A's. It is the attitude, attendance, and it is the ability. If you have the attitude that you want to learn, you show up and your attendance is good, they will work with you on the ability part, I think that gets back to the training and everything we have talked about. So, I don't think there are a ton of barriers going on in the state of Minnesota. If someone shows up with a good attitude and they are going to be at work every day, there is going to be opportunity for them. [European-American Male, urban]*

One implication of the idea that moral character is measured and strengthened by external adversity is a tendency for reference to outside aid in overcoming barriers to elicit a Free Choice frame.

- I: [Should there be programs to help employ people who are having difficulty due to] Chemical dependence?*
- S: That probably sounds really bad, but I'm just thinking, I know it's an addiction, it's a disease, but I think a lot of that is also self-inflicted.*
- I: Is it because it was their choice to do that or is it they could beat that on their own or something else?*
- S: I guess I'm just confused on that one because, like I said, I know it's a dependency; I know it's a physical thing. But when you start drinking or doing drugs, that's starts as a personal choice. [European-American female, suburban]*

***Morally diminished people make poor choices, like choosing not to work.***

Based on this default pattern of reasoning, the main cause of unemployment is poor choices (a moral issue), and the solution must also be moral (better morality). In effect,

people are unemployed because they made poor choices, and we are not responsible for them. In other words, there is little comprehension of those suffering from “barriers” to employment. The default model blocks consideration of such barriers, and chronic unemployment is most naturally conceived as a *choice* or *personality flaw*.

*I: Can you think of what kind of people might have a hard time finding a job or keeping a job?*

*S: Real lazy I guess. Disrespectful. [African-American male, urban]*

*I: Any other reasons you can think why somebody who wanted to work but can't find or keep a job?*

*S: Some reasons why people don't work but want to?*

*I: Yes.*

*S: I guess some people have not as good of a work ethic and it carries over and they don't understand everything that's required of being a good worker. If they haven't had much experience, they don't really understand what they need to do to maintain the job. Sometimes people just have personal circumstances that prevent them from having a job. People may move very often. Their spouses don't want them to work—that's more of an older issue, but still, in some places, that happens. [Hispanic-American female, urban]*

### ***The unemployed are almost like a different kind of person.***

The problem of unemployment affects individuals who are, in a cognitive sense, fundamentally *other*. They are not just in a different situation, but are thought of as basically different from “ordinary” working people. (This is a common cognitive problem, sometimes referred to as “essentialization” – a temporary, even accidental situation is misperceived as an essential characteristic.) At a cognitive level it can be difficult to picture the unemployed as workers—the two mental pictures are incompatible.

At the same time, it can be hard to imagine programs premised on the idea of *moving* the unemployed from that state to a normal employed state. In schematic terms, it doesn't feel like the solution to the problem is *moving* people as much as it is *transforming* them into regular (working) folks—a daunting task at best, and one that is hard to accept as a realistic, practical (or affordable) goal.

*I don't think [a program] can change people. I mean, you can change them up to a point, but if someone was unreliable, then they'll probably always be unreliable. [European-American male, urban]*

*I think if you're a bad worker because you're lazy or you just want to get by...unless you can motivate them in some way to put forth the effort, they probably can't learn to be a better worker. [Hispanic-American female, urban]*

***“Big picture” explanations are not part of this moral model.***

During the course of the interviews, a number of people did refer to factors that go beyond the moral explanations for unemployment. To some degree, the willingness to consider the big picture is characteristic of Liberals, but it is also the case that many individuals can “toggle” back and forth between the two types of thinking.

*I think there are a whole set of benign reasons why people wouldn't work ...it kind of depends also on what you mean by working. Because I think there's obviously that huge group of people who traditionally weren't considered part of the work force, who would be mothers who are at home taking care of children or performing work. So I would consider them working, but then there are other people who are not working because they're in school or they're physically unable to work sometimes and then there's the people who are not working because of the dysfunctionality of the economy, which is just a systemic thing. [European-American male, urban]*

*S: I was in the paint room and we did the fancy painting, the little detailed patterning on the [fishing lures] and the market just fell. So many people lost their jobs, fishing was out of the question for them. I mean, they were worried about putting food on the table, not enjoyable things like fishing.*

*I: There just wasn't a market for it?*

*S: Right. Unfortunately, there is not a lot of employment in this area, we are very small, very rural. Waitressing is probably the biggest industry right now. We still have four places that make fishing tackle in Iowa but all four of them have cut back drastically. [European-American female, rural, explaining that she lost her job because of an economic downturn]*

Nevertheless, the folk model that links Work and Moral Personhood provides a clear and cognitively satisfying explanation of the issue of unemployment and employment. The fact that it excludes most of what is actually relevant to understanding and solving the problem of unemployment doesn't necessarily make it less satisfying to people. So while people are often capable of seeing the “bigger picture,” it is often more natural for them to remain comfortably within the “little picture.”

***Education is mental/moral preparation for work.***

One of the consequences of seeing the unemployed as morally wanting is to think that the solution has to do with “fixing” these individuals, rather than with “moving” them over barriers. This is a solution that can be clearly understood, even if it is not necessarily the most realistic or appropriate one. Essentially, if the problem is moral, then the solution must be moral as well.

The general cultural model that covers the improvement of individuals is Education. This is a solution that centers on the individual and his fitness for employment, as opposed to the jobs and/or economy and their fitness for workers. (Note that the logic of these models helps explain the effectiveness of the Conservative position that Education is the “solution” to jobs moving overseas.)

*Well, I think there are a lot of people, I think there are a great number of people who don't have the appropriate education to get whatever jobs there are. ...This is kind of like second hand information that I'm feeding back to you but I think that there are problems in the educational system that don't prepare people well. [European-American male, urban]*

*I: Say someone who's on welfare doesn't want to work, why are they like that?*

*S: Probably cause that's all they grew up with, and their parents are probably on welfare, and it's just a circle.*

*I: How could... What could change your mind?*

*S: I think they have to be educated, you know just brought in and trained. Somebody higher up would have to take them under their wing and try to teach them a skill, or show them that it is a good feeling to work. Make money on your own. You're out of the system. [European-American female, suburban]*

*Instead of just having someone at home on Assistance their whole lives and those folks not really adding much to the community, just kind of being a leech – and I think from their own mental standpoint, they have very, very low self-worth, self-esteem – so that way we could use [transitional work programs] as a training ground, to get them into a position to help out in a privately run organization. [European-American male, urban]*

***Disabilities are legitimate reasons for not working; “mental disabilities” are excuses.***

Mental disabilities in general are very hard to understand for most lay people, including the Minnesotans we spoke with. One reason is of course that they are often invisible from the outside, and hard to diagnose. Another reason is that the cognitive frame Mental Disability competes directly with the much better-established frame Moral Deficiency for the dominant understanding of a given individual's situation. The two frames provide alternative interpretations of the same reality, and Moral Deficiency is usually the more compelling frame.

As a result, problems like depression, attention deficit disorder, or even dyslexia are easily misunderstood as barriers that can be overcome through force of will, and, even worse, as excuses that are used by the unemployed or their advocates.

*This mental illness, I mean, they could probably get a job for minimum wage, but I don't think they're going to go anywhere. But they can definitely get a job...if you're not happy where you are, then go move somewhere. You know? For \$50 get on a Greyhound, go move or do whatever you need to do that makes you happy, but don't blame other things for your problems. [European-American male, urban]*

*I don't see depression as a disability, I just don't. Because if you get up in the morning and you can't convince yourself to go out and work, that you need to eat, that's a real problem. I mean is it my problem because you can't convince yourself? Not really. [Asian-American male, urban]*

*I: There are people who just can't concentrate and focus very well...can you picture a person like that?*

*S: Mm-hmm.*

*I: How would you tend to view that?*

*S: Without going into medical stuff, okay, I would tend to see, I'm a true, true believer that if you set your mind to it, you can actually do whatever you want to do. You can cure dyslexia, right? I mean if you work at it, you can cure dyslexia. I mean I have a friend who's dyslexic.*

*I: Oh yeah?*

*S: Yeah, I mean he worked hard at it and he can read stuff, he just needs to work a little harder. [Asian-American male, urban]*

*I: What about a learning disability? Is that term meaningful to you?*

*S: Not really to me.*

*I: You mean you don't know what it means or just that it is not a handicap to have a job?*

*S: I don't think it is a handicap.*

*I: Really, how come? I mean someone with dyslexia or something?*

*S: Well because apparently I have ADD. I did not get diagnosed with it until two months before I graduated from college. I did fine throughout college and I am working now. I chose not to take any medication because I have done fine so far. [Asian-American female, urban]*

## REFRAMING TRANSITIONAL WORK

The research reported here identifies a major cognitive obstacle that stands in the way of greater public acceptance of transitional work programs. Simply put, people's thinking about work and unemployment provides a tidy and cognitively satisfying set of assumptions and inferences that does not naturally lead them to think about programs like Advancement Plus. Unfortunately, people's default understandings of work, workers and moral personhood are sufficiently rich, self-consistent and emotionally powerful to fully occupy their thinking on this topic.

At the same time, it is also clear that when transitional work programs are brought to people's attention, most of them are supportive:

*I: What do you think of the welfare system?*

*S: As I know it I don't think it's very good. Cause there's a lot of people on it that shouldn't be.*

(later)

*I: What do you think of the programs that train people who are on welfare to find a job or get a job?*

*S: I think that's good. Anything to help people work.*

*I: You said you're generally in favor of providing training and work skills. Are there any groups you would be against that training for?*

*S: I can't really think of any. [European-American female, suburban]*

*S: I would say the job training is 100 times better . . .*

*I: You have a job and you need training.*

*S: Right.*

*I: What is it that makes it 100 times better?*

*S: Because you're in the environment you want to work in. And it's not all text material, you're not reading it, you're not hearing about it, it's actual, real experience. [European-American male, urban]*

On the surface, this support suggests an easy and obvious communications strategy—advocates simply need to bring their transition to work programs to the attention of the public through awareness-raising campaigns. Unfortunately, such a strategy is unlikely to succeed by itself without careful framing of the issue. There are two basic concerns.

In the first place, the idea of Welfare-to-Work programs typically evokes the image of a low-cost and low-effort solution to what is, in fact, a very complex and costly issue. Proverbs such as “teach a man to fish...” suggest the idea of a small investment for

overcoming a single and low barrier to work. In general, this kind of support is passive rather than active. Worse, once confronted with the difficult reality of moving people to work—including the kinds of real investment required—people are likely to become disillusioned.

Secondly, the default interpretation of these programs tends to emphasize the moral dimension of the problem. It is easy for people to think about Welfare-to-Work as a kind of “Tough Love” in which we need to “light a fire” under those few folks who are unwilling to work. Underlying many of these patterns of thinking is a parenting model in which the chronically unemployed are “unfinished adults”—i.e., moral adolescents—who need to be “pushed out of the nest” for their own, and everyone else’s, good. This of course, both reinforces the inaccurate conflation of work with moral existence, and obscures the bigger picture.

*I: So what are some of the reasons why people who want to work don't? Don't have a job?*

*S: Um, scared. Don't want to experience new things, they don't know what is going to happen; the uncertainty of not knowing what's out there. And how to get it.*

*I: Just scared to start looking for a job? What else?*

*S: Um, maybe they're lazy, maybe they've had it easy their whole life and they don't know what to do. You know? A lot of people have lived off their parents their whole life and they've always been provided by and they think they should have instant gratification on their first job which it takes a while. [European-American male, urban]*

The alternative is to provide a deeper and more realistic picture that includes honest descriptions of barriers to work. In this section we provide several suggestions—some of them of a speculative nature—to help Lifetrack “reframe” its programs to the public to garner more active support and deeper understanding of its goals. We offer these ideas as suggested directions for future FrameWorks research.

Some of these suggestions aim to activate alternative cultural models that are naturally supportive of programs like Advancement Plus. Other suggestions aim to turn the models discussed in the sections above “on their head”—reframing the issues slightly so that *these cultural models come to support, rather than oppose*, transitional work programs.

### **Increased Clarity about the Program**

Our first suggestion is a call for greater clarity. As noted, many Americans suffer from a cognitive blindness when it comes to the “hard-to-employ.” The public has a hard time grasping what population Advancement Plus serves or, for that matter, what the program does.

Given this difficulty, Lifetrack needs to be especially clear about its goals, objectives, programs, and clientele.

One obstacle to such clarity is the phrase “transitional work,” which is not particularly clear or effective. People do not know what the program is when they hear the phrase “transitional work.” Also, people’s associations with the word “transition” are not necessarily positive. The word has associations of uncertainty (as in “it’s a transitional time—we’re not sure what will happen,”), instability, and impermanence—in short, weakness. “Transitional work” doesn’t necessarily sound like the kind of program people would want to support, just from the phrase alone.

In addition, the term “barriers” is somewhat problematic and probably deserves further testing. While the word conveys a vivid, concrete sense of the difficulties, it risks conveying a sense of obstacles that are difficult or nearly impossible to overcome.

Finally, various government acronyms (TANF, MFIP) mean nothing to the average Minnesotan who has not received government assistance. They are likely to come across as confusing and bureaucratic.

### **Economic Logic**

When people are convinced that the programs save money in the long run (and will ultimately save them tax dollars), they are more likely to support them.

Most Americans, when prompted to think about economic effects, realize the advantage of having more people working. Unfortunately, people do not always spontaneously make this connection when thinking of the programs in the abstract. The message that these programs make economic sense, that they save everyone money, should be a goal of communications, in part because it is a message that is likely to resonate with political conservatives, a group normally inclined to oppose government social programs.

### ***Supporting, rather than subverting, competition.***

If properly communicated, economic logic can reframe welfare-to-work programs as positive *using the same thinking used to oppose* the programs. For example, part of the hidden logic used to oppose transitional work programs comes from an emphasis on competition. Competition is seen as healthy. The free market, with strong companies and hard-working employees competing with each other, is very often seen as proper and moral. Government programs, interfering with this competition, are therefore considered wrong and immoral.

But if transitional work programs help out the economy, they can be seen as good competitive strategies. They make Minnesota and America stronger. They give us a competitive advantage, because we are putting everyone to work. This framing also evokes another positive cultural model, which relates to “using/tapping all your resources.”

*I: Which do you think would cost society more, paying money to train people so that they could work, or having those people stay unemployed?*

*S: Which costs more? Oh I think, having them stay unemployed. Then they just keep getting. [European-American female, suburban]*

*I: What about training people to do jobs? Is that expensive? Very expensive?*

*S: I don't have any real sense of how much that would cost. I would guess it was somewhat expensive, but in the long run, it would probably be the least expensive of the options. [Hispanic-American female, urban]*

*I: Which would cost more?*

*S: To stay unemployed, because they're always going to be unemployed. That's a set future there, you're not going to work and we're going to pay you. But if they work and we train them, then they're going to have the skills and they're probably going to have a job where that means that the government is going to get more money. You've got to spend money to make money. [European-American male, urban]*

*I would think it would be cheaper to train somebody to do something than to just keep giving them everything. [European-American female, suburban]*

Interviewees, though generally convinced that the programs would save everyone money, also wanted some assurance that the programs were effective, were themselves “working.” Many, in particular, expressed a need for evaluation of the programs. Such proven “results” would add greatly to the sense of efficacy.

*S: I think I wouldn't support it as much if there wasn't some kind of system of accountability to know that the money wouldn't be wasted...or that the people are just going to do this for a limited time because they have to in order to get some other financial benefit and then stop. I mean it would also be nice to have some sort of study or proven results that it was working.*

*I: What would convince you that it was working?*

*S: That people who went through the training program were able to hold down jobs for, you know, a certain length of time and that it was*

*giving them the skills that it claimed to be giving them. [Hispanic-American female, urban]*

*I: Would you be in favor of some tax money going to programs like that?*

*S: No I wouldn't mind, if it helps, sure. I mean obviously you need to see the results. But, yeah, if it helps. [European-American male, urban]*

### **Big Picture Thinking**

While interview subjects generally supported the idea of transitional work programs, they didn't necessarily support them for all the right reasons. An important reframe would emphasize the *systemic* effects of the programs. The basic idea is a simple one: *These programs help everyone. When everyone is working, everyone benefits.* The goal would be to get the public to think about the “big picture.”

This reframe would move the image of the program away from a simple act of charity (which has limited effects on society as a whole, and depending on your political views, perhaps a negative effect on those it tries to help) into a dynamic program with “ripple effects” that affect the entire system.

More than the economic effects reframe, this one could help convey a variety of social effects: improvements in quality of life, increased well-being, a happier and more prosperous nation, etc. Many interviewees themselves brought up such social effects when asked to conceive the positive effects of welfare to work programs.

*In reality, you could see hopefully a decrease in homelessness, hopefully a decrease in repeat offenders of crimes. So maybe the program itself would not be completely self-funded but when you look at the broad picture, it might pay for itself and then some. And then, I think you would have a lot more people out there who would feel better about themselves and, as a result, would be contributors to society instead of outcasts. [European-American male, urban]*

*I: How would the community be better off?*

*S: When you are assisting them in that way, you are making the neighborhood safer, in which case, the streets are safer which in turn drives up the property value because it is a better community. In that way, the community benefits. The other people who are living there are happy and it is a safer place to live. [Asian-American female, urban]*

*All the reasons that I listed before, it creates a better community and the citizens are a lot happier, the quality of life goes up and, in turn, the*

*property value goes up, the city budget would go up if more people were working because there is more money being put into taxes, things like that. [Asian-American female, urban]*

*I think it's a good thing because if everybody works, it gives everybody a sense of purpose. Something to do with their lives. Um, beyond that though, it contributes to a greater economy, it contributes to a greater well-being of everybody else. If everybody is contributing in their own way, doing some sort of work. [Hispanic-American male, urban]*

Big picture thinking would also help people understand the negative systemic effects of chronic unemployment. Again, some interviewees were already able to use this logic.

*Well, economically they're (a) not paying taxes and (b) at least a portion of them are on some form of government assistance, so you have the worst of both worlds. They are absorbing money and not putting anything back. So you don't have the money to give them because they're not paying the taxes. So, yes it hurts society and then on a different plane it hurts society because you have a lot of unsatisfied, unhappy[people] where it frequently leads to angry people, so you have social unrest and you have social issues. You have resentment from the haves for the have-nots taking the money. You have the resentment from the have-nots because the haves have it and it seems like it's so easy for them, so yes. You can look at countries that have high unemployment. They typically have social issues that are strong and frequently unpleasant. [European-American male, suburban]*

### **The “New Work Ethic”**

Work is almost always a positive in American thought, partly due to the traditional Protestant work ethic. But as a number of scholars have pointed out, this work ethic is changing, which is to say that a “new” work ethic is gradually replacing the older Protestant work ethic.

Put briefly, many Americans now expect more from work. They do not want to work only for personal advancement (moral or material). Instead, on their job they want to be part of a team, be involved in a greater cause, experience personal growth, and, perhaps above all, feel that they are contributing to a larger community. Many of the exchanges cited earlier in connection with the moral value of work also express its positive psychological effects.

The notion of contributing or giving back to the community was a strong theme of the interviews. When asked if people should work, interviewees quite often rephrased the question in terms of contribution:

*I think yes, it is our duty to work, like do something to contribute not only to our own survival but to the betterment of everyone around us. As for our duty to have a job...I don't think so, so much. [Hispanic-American male, urban]*

*I think it's a person's duty to contribute in some manner. That may not involve paid occupation. If you have inherited 12 million dollars from great aunt Emma, I wouldn't consider it unrealistic if you were just a really nice person and you tried to make the lives of the people around you more pleasant and by that I don't mean give them money; so, no, it's not essential that every single human work, but contributing in some manner to the world around you is, I think, something everyone should do. [European-American male, suburban]*

People also used this notion of “contribution” when speaking of non-workers—either as a way to motivate them to work, or as a way to understand the need for more workers.

*I mean I guess you could make them feel a part of the greater community. Like if someone was cleaning up highways or wherever, you could sort of emphasize the importance of the job and it's necessary, and sort of making them feel like what they're doing is significant and they ...you know, even a small change, like environmental issues. You know, push something along those lines...see a bigger picture. [Hispanic-American female, urban]*

The reframe here would emphasize “contribution” and “community” along with work. The idea of helping non-workers join the community, join America's team of workers should be explored, as should the idea of helping everyone contribute. The result might be more intuitive support of the programs, as they will fit in with and reinforce current notions of proper, good, healthy work.

## CONCLUSION

The findings reported on in this report suggest a way of understanding—and moving beyond—the “easy but shallow” support for programs such as a Lifetrack’s Advancement Plus. On the one hand, the public supports the idea of moving people to work. On the other hand, it has a poor grasp of what is truly involved in this transition. A lack of appreciation for the real challenges involved means that people quickly—and frustratingly—default to patterns of reasoning that rely on the Personal Responsibility frame. This amounts to support “in principle” but not “in fact” for these programs.

Based on this research, Cultural Logic recommends that further research focus on ways of deepening and broadening the public’s understanding of both the challenges and rewards of programs such as Lifetrack’s Advancement Plus. It is not enough to raise awareness for these programs; if it is truly to support them, the public must understand them.

***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](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of FrameWorks Institute.

Please follow standard APA rules for citation, with FrameWorks Institute as publisher. Aubrun, A., & Grady, J.E. (2004). *Barriers to Public Engagement with Transitional Work: Visibility, Worthiness, and Efficacy Findings from Cognitive Interviews*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

## APPENDIX: THE COGNITIVE APPROACH

This appendix discusses the assumptions and principles that form the basis for the “cognitive approach” taken by Cultural Logic.

### 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, biology, responsibility, and so forth. People are usually unaware of the frames they are using, and the frames themselves are usually expressed indirectly. They are revealed most clearly in the language and reasoning a person uses in connection with a concept. Seeming contradictions in the way a person discusses a topic can be particularly enlightening, because they may reveal conflicting frames at work. It should be noted as well that “frame” is a general term—used somewhat differently in different disciplines—to refer to more specific concepts such as *cognitive model*, *cultural model*, and *cultural theory*, discussed below.

### Cultural Models vs. Cultural Theories

A cultural theory is a set of explicit propositions that describe the nature of some general phenomenon (*The Development of Cognitive Anthropology*, D’Andrade 1995). Cultural theories are typically the most apparent and immediately coherent structures of knowledge—the ones that are volunteered by focus group participants for example, and the ones that lend themselves to direct description and summary by the analyst. Cultural theories are closely related to public discourse and, because they are explicit understandings, to rhetorical positions adopted for purposes of argument.

A cultural model, by contrast, consists of a set of largely implicit assumptions that allows a person to reason about and solve a problem. A cultural model specifies relationships between a given concept and others—specific domains (e.g., School) are typically connected to broader cultural assumptions (e.g., understandings about Achievement or Growth). Cultural models are associated with private understanding and individual reasoning.

A classic example of the difference between cultural models and cultural theories is provided by Strauss’s study of blue-collar workers in Rhode Island (1992). Her informants clearly understood, and explicitly articulated to the interviewer, the American model of self-made Success. In some cases, they even claimed that this style of success was important to them. Close analysis of discourse, however, revealed that these men were actually basing their behavior on an implicit model of a Breadwinner, which is more strongly related to ideals of husband and father than to wealth and status.

Cultural models, while less explicit and more challenging to identify than cultural theories, typically have more directive force—i.e., they are more relevant to understanding what people actually do.

## **Cognitive Analysis**

An important assumption of this view of human motivation is that a variety of cultural models typically compete for expression in a given defined situation. Putting it simply, people often have conflicts about basic issues. For example, many Americans believe that a woman should work outside the home; a contradictory assumption, held by many of these same people, is that women should stay in the home and nurture children. Though contradictions such as this one often find partial resolution (e.g., through the contemporary American notion of the “Supermom”), typically such deeply held beliefs are compartmentalized; i.e., only one will be invoked in a given context.

Cognitive analysis first identifies the relevant, deeply held models to which a given subject such as “School” is connected (literally or through metaphor). Second, it attempts to map the fault lines that predict which of the models will be expressed as action in a given situation, often triggered by particular cues. Third, it suggests a picture of the dynamic relationship between public messages, cultural models, and individual action around a given topic.

## ***Metaphors***

It is a universal finding of cognitive linguistics that people use metaphors to think, speak, and reason about the world, even on topics as familiar as “weather”—i.e., some of the cultural models used to reason about any given topic are metaphoric models. For example, teenagers are sometimes metaphorically understood as unfinished objects, materials that haven't been formed into their final shape. The metaphors people use to think and talk about teenagers contribute to guiding adults' behavior towards adolescents, including whether and how they choose to nurture, ignore, discipline, or otherwise engage with adolescents.

## ***Subjects and Sample Size***

Because a culture is defined by a set of broadly shared understandings and assumptions, studying cultural models is analogous to studying the structure of a natural language. One does not need a large group of speakers to determine the basics of a language's grammar and syntax—a few speakers will typically suffice. Similarly, working with only a relative few subjects, one can identify the commonly held belief system typical of those subjects' culture. In-depth work with a relatively small group of informants has been the norm in cognitive anthropology, allowing researchers to work more closely with subjects than is possible using large-scale methodologies. Findings from cognitive interviews may subsequently be expanded upon and refined through quantitative methods, which may establish, for example, how strongly particular models are held in different segments of the population. Where the cognitive approach identifies the nature of the models, carefully devised quantitative research, using fixed-form surveys for example, can establish the distribution of the models (see Kempton et al 1995).