Mind and Monolith
Findings from Cognitive Interviews about Government

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INTRODUCTION

Organizations engaged in improving the standing of government in the public mind – including the Council for Excellence in Government, Demos and affiliated groups and funders – are aware of an array of widespread negative impressions that must be overcome. Polls have shown that many Americans believe that the government is bloated and inefficient, corrupt, incompetent, dishonest, and even unnecessary. Not surprisingly, these measured attitudes are correlated with low voter turnout and also with difficulty in attracting the best candidates to careers in government. At the very least, as advertisers might say, government has an "image problem."

The research reported on here was undertaken because the experience of social and cognitive scientists suggests that attitudes like those associated with government typically go much deeper than image. Rather, on many issues, there are fundamental patterns of reasoning and understanding, which, unless surfaced and addressed, continue to drive people's thinking in counterproductive directions, no matter what the latest headline. The goal of the study, then, was to explore the underlying terrain of the public's thinking about government – not their feelings about recent events in the news, but the patterns they return to again and again when thinking about government, and the cognitive tools they reach for when engaged in that thinking. If the American people are to be "brought back to the table" with government, advocates need as rich an understanding as possible of these fundamental obstacles to engagement.

RESEARCH METHOD

The analysis presented here is based on intensive one-on-one interviews conducted by Cultural Logic in the summer of 2004 with a diverse group of twenty individuals in California (Sacramento and the San Francisco Bay Area), Rhode Island, and Vermont[1]. Subjects were recruited through a process of ethnographic networking – researchers began with "seed contacts" in each of the target communities, and developed a pool of subjects from which a diverse range was selected for interviewing.[2] The sample included 10 women and 10 men. Subjects' ages ranged widely – 6 subjects were in their 20s, 6 in their 30s, 3 in their 40s, and 5 were 60 or older. 14 of the subjects were European-American, 3 were African-American and 3 were Hispanic-American. Particular attention was paid to the inclusion of a mix of political orientations in the sample (8 conservatives, 4 independents, and 8 liberals). Educational backgrounds also 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 use, even if they "know better" on some level. While Americans are often able to articulate clearer and more accurate understandings of government than the models described here, these are strong defaults – even for these same individuals – which have the power to derail thinking and discourse on the topic.

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. 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*) can 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-

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[1] The authors thank Brendan Cooney, M.A. and Glenn Etter, Ph.D. for their assistance in conducting this research.

[2] 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, 2nd Edition*. 1995. (pp.97ff).

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, they can derail communications.

FINDINGS: GOVERNMENT AS MIND AND MONOLITH

The Complexity of Government

Government is, to be fair, not an easy thing to grasp. It is vast and multi-faceted, and includes a number of different institutions, some of which are explicitly discussed in high school government classes and others only known to specialists. The range of functions performed by government – from law-making to consensus-building to gathering and dispensing information to making sure that tens of millions of Americans get their checks every month – is almost unimaginably broad and heterogeneous. And this doesn't even take into account the various levels of government, from local to federal, or the fact that ordinary people have no direct experience of most of what experts refer to as "government."

Faced with such a conceptual challenge, it is no surprise that ordinary people use mental shortcuts for making sense of something that would otherwise be cognitively unmanageable. The research reported on here shows that the public inevitably focuses on certain aspects and functions of government to arrive at conceptual models that, while bearing some resemblance to the "expert model," are also quite different from the empirical reality. Some things get left out and others are added in, in a series of cognitive operations that *simplify* the understanding of government and make it accessible and "good to think." More generally, people are open to a wide variety of simplifications of government, all of which have implications for how they judge government.

Common Simplifications

To take one common example, most people seem to understand government by reference to the prototype of the federal government – the clearest and most salient part of government.

Q: When I say government what comes to your mind?

A: The president. The war. The election, all of that.

Q: Let's say one of your kids [aged 8 and 10] asked you, "what's the government? Why do we have to have a government?" What would you tell them?

A: I would just keep it basic, just for a 10 year old. If he asked me "Why do we have a President?" "To run the country" – you know, "he keeps us safe," basic answers I would tell him.

Q: What's the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word government? What's your image of what government is?

A: Budget and taxes and that's basically all…

This means, first, that they tend not to call to mind state or local government, and second, that when they do think about these forms of government, they transfer many of the perceived attributes of federal government to them.

Another common shortcut is to equate government with the democratic system.

Q: If you had to list the main things the government does in the United States, why we have a government, what are the main things it does?

A: Well, we're able to vote for a president that we think will do a good job. It doesn't matter, you know, democrat or republican, we get to choose. That's one thing that we have in our government.

Alternatively, for some people, it is more natural to think of the government as like a business:

Q: Do you think it would be better if government operated itself like a business?

A: Don't they already, kind of?

Q: Maybe. So you feel like they do already?

A: Yeah, there's a president, and then there's CEOs, and then there's people under the CEO, and there's people under the president, and then there's even more people under them, and …

The general tendency, then, is for the public to make use of cognitive models that are easy to keep in mind, and that have a powerful explanatory capacity – they lead to inferences, and they can help people make sense of what they hear in the news and in conversation. And because the models that exist make cognitive sense – are easy to access and are satisfying – most people have no particular sense of the limitations of what they do know about government. They don't especially hunger for a better description. On the contrary, they tend to *resist* new stories, discarding information about government that "doesn't fit the frame."

The existing cultural models of government are not to be taken lightly – advocates should not assume they can be easily displaced by more "accurate" models.

The Shape of the Public's Dominant Models of Government

The public's understanding is split into two quite separate windows on government. While at some level people know that there is a general thing called "government," for most practical purposes their understanding is divided into two largely separate pieces, which we will refer to as Government-As-Mind, and Government-As-Monolith. The old analogy of an iceberg effectively captures one aspect of the public's thinking: A small part of government, which corresponds roughly to the country's leadership, is apparent above the surface of conscious awareness. The other, much larger part, corresponding roughly to the large bureaucracy of government, is perceived as a vast and largely undefined mass existing below the surface of awareness – vaguely intuited but not clearly seen.

A central finding of this research is that average Americans, when thinking about government, switch back and forth between these two perspectives. Importantly, people cannot take both of these perspectives at the same time, and instead they "toggle" back and forth between them, depending on context. The result is that government assumes strikingly different aspects in people's minds at different moments in their thinking.

These two ways of understanding government, then, are not only separate, but very unequal. The leadership aspect of government is in much sharper focus, and is much more easily accessed than the bureaucracy aspect. Further, and here the iceberg analogy reaches its limits, the leadership aspect is understood as dynamic, having a function – while the bureaucracy aspect is seen as static and not having (in the default understanding) any clear purpose at all.

The terms "leadership" and "bureaucracy" do not in themselves, however, capture the richness and particularity of the cognitive models held by most Americans, which are only loosely connected with the realities of government leadership and bureaucracy as experts would recognize them. The rest of this report discusses the rich articulations and sometimes unexpected implications of the actual models used by the public.

Government-As-Mind

This model of government is associated with the leadership and decision-making functions of government. Government-as-Mind is personified, but not in the sense of being reduced to the actual individuals who lead government. Instead, a number of functions related to directing the country are seen as activities of a single entity that represents something like the Mind of the country.

Government-As-Monolith

The other model of government consists of a huge and largely undifferentiated monolith. This less visible aspect takes in different parts and functions of government, including its various agencies, bureaucracies, and civil servants. This view of government does not involve personification, but instead reification – a mode of understanding which treats a complex collection of people, structures, and activities as a static and passive single "thing," very different from the sum of its parts, and much more cognitively real.

At some moments the government simply *is* the Mind – the "tip-of-the-iceberg" – and at others it *is* the less distinct, "underwater" Monolith.

In the sections that follow, we discuss each of these models and its implications in detail.

GOVERNMENT-AS-MIND

When people think about government, they are most often aware of functions associated with an active mind at work: intention, decision-making, communication, seeing, etc.

Q: What are the main things you think of that the government does? Why do we have a government, why do we need a government?

A: Just to run the country, keep things moving, make political decisions for our country and the world.

The model of Government-as-Mind is, on some level, a simplified view of elected leaders and their views, priorities, projects, as well as their power, and position of leadership. In fact, the government often seems to people to consist of noone but these elected leaders.

Two aspects of Government-As-Mind, Authority and Vision, are particularly important, and each has its own set of implications:

Authority and Ambivalence

One of the first associations people make with government is its role in establishing rules, laws and order – i.e. literally establishing and enforcing authority.

Q: What are the main things that government does? Why do we have a government?

A: Just to rule and have order, I would say.

It is difficult for people to think about an authority function without personifying authority – commonly, if unconsciously, as a metaphorical parent.[3] The other half of this metaphorical equation is that citizens themselves implicitly take on the role of children. The passivity in the public's discourse about the government is sometimes reminiscent of children talking about adults.

Q: What does the government do to run the country?

A: Well, they give you money towards the school departments, they give you money towards the town... Or they make decisions for us. Important decisions that we can't make for ourselves. Big, you know big subjects, so to speak. Because that's really what they do. They take all of the big stuff so we don't have to do it, and hopefully make the right decisions.

The further implication of this passive stance is that people often default to a view in which government authority is disconnected from the will of the public.

At the same time, it is clear that people do not entirely accept this relationship, and in fact often actively challenge the authority of government in their own minds.

[3] See G. Lakoff's *Moral Politics* (1996) for an extended analysis of the significance of this analogy between political and familial relationships.

I think some things, they have no right to make their judgment on, I think it's not their business and there should not be laws about that.

That is to say, there is a strong *ambivalence* towards authority – well documented in various cultures – which applies powerfully to Americans' thinking about government. While people may sometimes express appreciation for strong leadership, they are also clearly resentful and intimidated at other moments, chafing under the perceived domination of government.

This finding goes against the grain of much conventional wisdom concerning attitudes towards government, in that it applies to both Conservatives and Liberals. That is to say, Liberals are often (unexpectedly) suspicious of government's motives, competence, etc.

Q: How would you feel about government providing health insurance to all Americans?

A: NO. Absolutely not and they don't know/ I mean we have huge bureaucracy created by governments. I am NOT supportive of the government taking over health care. At all.

And at the same time, Conservatives regularly express an (unexpected) appreciation for the role of government.

Q: Do you trust the government?

A: I do.

Q: And the fact that the government coddles inmates doesn't break down your faith in the government?

A: No, no. I trust the government. I think if we didn't have a strong government we wouldn't be here.

The research suggests that this ambivalence to government represents one of the chief challenges to communicators, and must be acknowledged rather than ignored by advocates. While it is probably too fundamental to be overcome, some strategies are more likely than others to mitigate it. (See Recommendations below.)

The "Vision" Function of Government

Nested within the authority function of (federal) government is its role in providing a point of view on the world from our country's perspective. Enemies of the nation, such as Iraq (and, on a different level, France), are enemies largely because the government sees them that way and makes that vision clear to the public. The plans and projects promoted by government also entail a vision of what the country (or state, etc.) must do, and of what the future should look like. More than a "bully pulpit," the vision function of government amounts to the perceived ability to turn the spotlight of collective attention on some aspect of our world.

Q: And if you had to sum up very briefly the best and worst things about our government in short answers what would those be?

A: So the best thing about our government is, I think, working towards the common good, not just domestically but internationally.

Implications of the Government-As-Mind Model

- People appreciate the necessity of government.

  Importantly, both the Vision and Authority functions of government are seen, on some level, as irreplaceable functions – essential ingredients in the functioning of society that cannot be provided in any other way. As a result, even though informants often express dissatisfaction with their government, they also recognize its value.

  Q: Just off the top of your head, what's the first thing that comes into your mind when you hear the word government?

  A: People who control/people who have made laws for Americans to have a guideline to follow, rather than the 1800s when there were some cities who didn't have laws, they just did whatever they did. Vigilantes, basically. This way we at least have laws that we can control the murderers, the robbers.

- The public often adopts a *spectator* stance with respect to the activities of government.

  While the public may accept and even appreciate government's function in providing a vision of the world, this function does not imply engagement on the part of citizens. Instead, the public can adopt a passive stance, in which it follows along with what the government has pointed to.

  When I think of government I think of the White House, I think of the president, I think of senators, I think of people in this big huge room voting on stuff, passing stuff, raising taxes, lowering taxes, taking this away, giving this.

- The role of politics and partisanship may be exaggerated.

  Partisanship and rhetorical conflict are real aspects of government, but when thinking in terms of Government-as-Mind, it is easy for average Americans to exaggerate the role these play in government as a whole. At times, government seems to be reduced in people's thinking to nothing but these kinds of dynamics.

  It almost doesn't matter sometimes who the president is because he has so much to go through in order to get things done and it's almost like the Republicans and the Democrats, they're the ones that are always at each other, and are so much into winning against each other that they forget about what's most important.

  What is missing from this view is the fact that many government functions are relatively unaffected by events at the political level most of the time.

- "Government" is often interpreted as the current administration.

  Government-as-Mind, the default model of government, is strongly associated with current, elected leaders. A subject who expresses satisfaction with the government is very likely referring to the perceived performance of the Bush Administration.

Q: Does any specific example of being embarrassed by the government spring to mind?

A: Well, George Bush and the way he states most everything. He's not a good public speaker. So even though I'm a Republican, I'm embarrassed by his being a buffoon.

- Government is perceived as distant.

  In reality, government and government workers are all around us, and encountered regularly in our daily lives. But since neither of the dominant models of government features interactions at this level, government is instead perceived as an absent figure.

Q: If you were going to try to describe your relationship with the government, how would you describe that?

A: Non-existent.

- The government is typically not recognized as "us."

  In the Government-as-Mind model, the "mental" activities of government are not necessarily felt to connect with the thinking of citizens. The government's actions are regularly attributed to "it" or "they," with no sense that citizens have agentive powers themselves.

Q: Do you see the government as our government, is it like, by us or for us, or does it seem like something that's separate from us?

A: I think it's separate from us.

- The government can feel tyrannical.

  People are often conscious of government's Authority role without being aware of a connection between government and the public's (or their own individual) set of beliefs and priorities. In the following exchange, the interviewee speaks as though government made decisions independently of the will of the people.

Q: If you could change anything about our government, what would you change?

A: Well, I mean I would change some of the decisions they made about abortion and trying to redefine marriage. Those are the big issues right now that I think about.

- The Consensus function of government is largely invisible.

  Even when people have the sense that government shares their values and priorities, they do not necessarily see that government is partly about creating consensus out of many conflicting views. The personification of government as a single entity means that the internal dynamics of leadership are often invisible, except for a caricatured sense of bickering.

REIFIED GOVERNMENT AS A STATIC MONOLITH

While the personified image of Government-as-Mind is a salient and often emotionally charged figure in people's minds, the reified image of Government-as-Monolith, a vast and undefined bureaucracy, has just the opposite qualities. People are relatively unaware of what the government does, outside of the "mental" functions associated with elected leadership. From this perspective, the government is bureaucratic and gray: the image of many, many people pushing paper around doing "who knows what" merges into the image of a static monolith not connected with any particular sense of mission or function. While people are aware on some level of the various managerial and infrastructure functions of these vast portions of government outside of elected leadership, it is hard for them to hold this information in mind, and the monolithic image easily ends up dominating their thoughts.

Implications of the Government-As-Monolith model

- Most of what government is and does is nearly invisible.

  This point, one of the central findings of the research, is worth reiterating here as a distorting effect of the public's models of government. People find it hard to call to mind most of the functions of government, such as those associated with transportation, housing, regulation of industries, the postal service, and so forth. People are occasionally aware of these managerial aspect of government's role, of course, and this role seems to be somewhat more strongly associated with local government.

  Q: What about a local city government, what would be the most useful thing they would do, or some of the most useful things?

  A: Um, probably working with / making schools and just helping people get educated and basically have an overall better life that would just run smoother and work together.

- The civil service is nearly invisible.

  This woman, for example, has trouble understanding that the interviewer is referring to the civil service, since the default view of Government-as-Mind (connected with elected leadership) is so strong. She is asked a question about civil service work, but responds in terms of elected leaders.

  Q: In your mind, what sort of a person would go get a government job?

  A: I think just people that are very driven and motivated and committed to, you know, working for the people.

  Q: Does it seem like a good job, or like one you would want for your family or kids?

  A: I would think that it's fulfilling, sure. Especially when you take action on something, or <u>you have a particular stand on some issue</u> where you see progress, you see just the benefit of your hard work in the end coming through.

  Postal workers, DMV employees, and all the other millions of people in government jobs not associated with personified Government-as-Mind, are often perceived to work *for* the government, rather than being *part of* it.

  My mother-in-law works for the [automobile] registry for the state … so <u>I guess she kind of works for the government in some way</u>.

- People often vastly underestimate the size of government.

  When people lose sight of every part of government aside from elected leadership, government is reduced to the relative handful of elected leaders.

  Q: How many people just off of the top of your head are in the government?

  A: All over? You mean with the President you mean? How many people are in it?

  Q: Yeah, I mean in this country, the federal government.

  A: I don't know. Hundreds. It seems like they're more or less against each other as opposed to getting the job done.

- The essential distinction between the public and private sectors is obscured.

  Given the public's hazy and monolithic understanding of much of government, the public nature and mission of many of its branches are not clearly perceived. The extent to which Government-as-Mind is seen as acting in the interest of society certainly varies considerably, but Government-as-Monolith hardly even benefits from that much benefit of the doubt, and is often seen as not much different from private industry, except as measured in details, on a case-by-case basis.

  Q: If you had to choose, would you trust the phone company more or the post office more? Private company and government.

  A: You could go either way with that, but I think the post office does a good job … but phone companies, sometimes I wonder if they add minutes on your cell phone, that you haven't used, actually.

- Civil service is only seen from the employee perspective.

  Because people do not associate the government Monolith with a function or mission, the civil service, when people can think about it at all, is mostly understood in terms of salaries and benefits, not the actual jobs people are doing, or how workers are playing useful roles. In this exchange, the interviewer tries, unsuccessfully, to elicit a sense that government jobs involve a mission:

  Q: A person who would go work for the government, what kind of things would they like, or why would they work there? Would it just be the benefits and retirement, or are there other things?

  A: It would be location, it would be the hours, it would be the flexibility, it would be the comp time, meaning that they might be able to work nine hours a day and take a Friday off or a Monday off every other week

- Waste, bloat and inefficiency in government are exaggerated.

  Since people typically cannot associate Monolithic government (i.e. most of government) with a function or mission, it is natural for people to feel that government is bigger than it needs to be – from a cognitive perspective, there are simply too many stick figures sitting in offices getting paid to push paper. Furthermore, these hordes of unnecessary people standing around naturally make it hard to get anything done:

Some people have a vision for [what needs doing] and they want to help and do their best, but you have so many other people to get through, how can you possibly make things happen? Now that I'm talking, I sound like things can't happen for the country, because there's so many steps and so many people that you have to get through. I just doesn't seem possible.

A related effect is that people are often open to *privatization* of government functions. The idea of private companies doing the work may even make these functions seem more real and important. The activities of business are much more cognitively real and visible than the actions of most government.

Q: Say something like prisons. I think there are some prisons that are run by a business now; so are prisons something that only the government can do right, or could businesses do it right?

A: I think businesses can do it right, and I think that, quite honestly, either could do it right. All you have to do is hire the people that need to keep the inmates in. I don't know, it's kind of like a big huge day care for inmates.

- People are confused and ignorant about where tax money goes.

  There are certainly many reasons why people don't have a good understanding of government expenditures, but one of these is the cognitive blindness regarding what most of government does. The first of these exchanges is with a math professor who is more knowledgeable than many about government:

Q: Do you have a good sense of where your tax dollars go, like if you had to list the top five things?

A: Um…education, hmm…defense,…transportation? Things like roads and stuff… Five, huh? … Medical stuff, Medicare or whatever.

Q: One more?

A: One more. Housing. I don't know about that, but I'll put that one down since I can only think of…

Q: If you had to guess the top five things they spend money on, just off the top of your head.

A: Streets to get fixed, their salaries, probably health care, and subsidized programs, welfare, education…

Conclusion: The Paradoxical Qualities of Government

Since government has two incompatible aspects, people attribute very conflicting qualities to it at different moments, depending on which view they are taking:

- It is on the one hand very rhetorically charged, and on the other very boring.
- It is huge and bloated, yet consists of "hundreds" of people.
- People desire the "services" of government (i.e. they want personified government to attend to their needs), yet they are dissatisfied about taxes, since they do not understand the actual funding needs of most of government.

"Toggling" between these two incompatible understandings is a symptom of the public's difficulty in understanding the nature of government – and probably also *contributes* to that difficulty, as part of a vicious cognitive circle.

RECOMMENDATIONS

At least three clear directions emerge from the research which may help lay people arrive at more productive understandings of government.

1. Promoting a Sense of Government as "Us" Rather Than "Them"

The research shows that the public typically refers to government as something like "other," rather than "self." While at other moments people also express an understanding that government is in fact "ours," the first impulse is indicative – to borrow a medical analogy – of something like an *auto-immune disease*: Government that is supposed to be "of the people" is experienced as a foreign, invasive presence.

At its simplest, this direction could be pursued by replacing the word "government" as often as possible with the word "we." The government, at whatever level, is the vehicle by which "*we"* make decisions about everything from whether to go to war to what the speed limit should be on our highways. "*We* recently put in new streetlights." And so forth.

2. Promoting Consensus as a Central Function of Government

The elicitations suggest that while Americans are aware of the consensus-building function of Government, this is not an understanding that guides much of their thinking about Government. In fact, it is remarkable how much thinking they can do on the topic without getting to the consensus-building function.

There may be different ways in which the Consensus function can be highlighted by advocates:

- The meaningful practice of government could be integrated into the educational curriculum. The Work of Citizenship Project, for example, brings direct experience to bear in helping participants reframe government as a "civic instrument" useful in the attainment of *practical* and *everyday* goals. Key to this approach is that it goes beyond both the "model government" practice exemplified by school student government bodies, and the "service model" of doing good works.
- Advocates might also give serious attention to exploring new ways of *explaining* the Consensus function that resonate with members of the public, and engage them on the issue. These would have to be vivid and concrete, and would need to connect with both the practical need for consensus building and the fundamental American values at stake. Given the public's susceptibility to simplified understandings of what government is and does, this approach would provide a useful avenue in itself, and a valuable complement to other approaches.

3. Emphasizing Reform

One of the strongest findings of the elicitations research is the *ambivalence* that people of all political stripes feel towards government. On the one hand they are dissatisfied with many aspects of government; on the other hand, they are keenly aware of the essential service(s) provided by government. From a cognitive perspective, given people's strong and irreducible ambivalence to government, it is more promising to reinforce their own instincts that a "balance" needs to be found – and to frame and appropriate the term "balance" where necessary – than to simply suggest that government is doing "a better job than they think."

Reform, in this sense, should not be limited to a vision of providing better "service" – e.g., by treating citizens as customers who want simpler forms and shorter lines – but might be about, for example, emphasizing the various *checks and balances* that exist within government, and between government and the people, by focusing on increasing the *transparency* of government. To the extent that people take a reforming stance towards government, they should also feel more comfortable with the exercise of that authority, over which they now feel a renewed sense of control.

I think the government should go back to the basics, you know. Anyone in a profession always has to go back and take classes. Doctors don't just get their degree and be a doctor, they always go back and take classes to retrain themselves in certain areas.

Q: Do you think we should have a smaller government?

A: I think it might be time to revamp the whole thing.

4. Raising Awareness of Government's *Autonomic* Functions

The dimness, fuzziness, and even invisibility of vast areas of government create tremendous distortions in people's perceptions, as described above. This problem cannot be countered by publishing long lists of government activities or accomplishments, nor by asking people to (re)take Civics 101. Instead, effective messages might be aimed at depicting the ways in which government has a hidden but essential role in maintaining the fabric of day-to-day life, or might focus on reminding people of why and how government structures are established in the first place – "If you were setting up a new community, what are the first five things *you* would do?"

More effective ways of explaining the currently invisible functions of government could also promote a better appreciation of those functions. As one possible reframing direction, the functions that people often are not aware of resemble the *autonomic* functions of a body in certain respects: Breathing, circulation, digestion, etc. do not involve our conscious attention, but are absolutely essential to every part of the organism. If the "autonomic" functions of government weaken or fail, so does society as a whole. This direction would emphasize one of the meanings associated with the notion of "management," more commonly associated with local than federal government:

Q: What do people do who work in the city government?

A: I guess they make sure everything's running smoothly on the school department and the stuff like that. Everything's/everybody's getting paid. The money's being distributed in the right places. That sort of thing.

Q: So, it's like management?

A: Right.

Q: Imagine we're going to build a new city, and you're partly in charge of planning all the things the government would do there. What would be your priorities, what would you try to set up?

A: Schools, police units, housing,

Any or all of these approaches might help average Americans engage with government rather than resenting, resisting, or, perhaps even worse, ignoring it.

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).

About the Author

Cultural Logic, directed by anthropologist Axel Aubrun and linguist Joseph Grady, is an applied cognitive and social science research group that helps organizations frame their messages for maximum effect. Working with a network of experts and partner organizations including the FrameWorks Institute, Cultural Logic focuses on research relating to public interest issues. Topics have included global warming, violence reduction in communities, conserving the Chesapeake Bay, global interdependence, gender equity in schools, and toxins in the domestic environment. Axel Aubrun, Ph.D. is a psychological anthropologist whose research and publications take an interdisciplinary approach to problems of communication and motivation. Joseph Grady, Ph.D. is a linguist whose research and publications focus on the relationship between metaphor and other aspects of thought and communication.