



Six Harmful Patterns in Newspaper Presentations of Race

Prepared for the Frameworks Institute

By

Axel Aubrun, Ph.D., Michele Emanatian, Ph. D. and Joseph Grady, Ph.D.
Cultural Logic, LLC

February 2005

INTRODUCTION

This analysis, funded by the Ford Foundation and building on previous FrameWorks Institute research on how Americans think about race, is an examination of the ways in which the topic of race is presented to readers, directly and indirectly, in the nation's newspapers. A great deal of research by FrameWorks and others has established that the news media has a tremendous impact on how the public thinks about and acts on important issues. To a great extent, the terms of the public debate on any issue are established by the frames that people encounter in the news. But it is important to understand that this effect is more profound than a legitimization of certain perspectives—it can literally make it *harder for people to see or grasp information that does not fit the predominant images they encounter*.

On race in particular, it has been established that the media's emphasis on crime stories (particularly, but not exclusively, in local TV news broadcasts) has a damaging effect on perceptions of African-Americans. This report takes a broader look at how race figures in the news: Beyond the overemphasis on Minority "perps," what is the picture of race that is offered in newspapers, and what are the likely effects of this framing in readers' thinking?

If advocates on race-related issues hope to have an impact on the public's thinking and behavior, they must have a clear picture of how these are being shaped by the news that the public, and opinion-leaders, are consuming.

METHOD

For purposes of this analysis, Cultural Logic reviewed over one hundred articles collected by the Center for Media and Public Affairs during May and June of 2004 from newspapers in various parts of the country, from Miami to Seattle to San Antonio to Washington, DC. The collection of materials was deliberately timed to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling and, as expected, there was a great deal of coverage relating to this landmark event, which provided many opportunities to see how race is framed. As it happened, the news during this period also included a fair amount of coverage of another relevant event: Bill Cosby's speech, commemorating *Brown*, in which he blamed many of African-Americans' subsequent problems on their own failures.

The analysis is not a quantitative look at the frequency of topics, for example, but a qualitative examination of how the topic of race is treated in the materials, and the likely implications for readers' thinking. The analysis looks at such factors as the types of topics that are and aren't mentioned in a given article, the ways in which topics are treated as either related or unrelated, the causal stories conveyed or implied by the articles, the metaphors used to talk about race-related topics, and so forth. The analysis is less about cataloguing what is explicitly said about race than it is about identifying the implicit understandings that are conveyed by the materials. (For more on the cognitive approach, please see Appendix 2.)

Special focus on the thinking of Whites

In this analysis we focus particularly on the likely impacts of the media framing on the thinking

of White readers. These consequences have special significance given the reality that Whites continue to hold most of the power, money, and influence in the country—their thinking can determine outcomes in ways that the thinking of other groups cannot.

Furthermore, since Whites are less directly and less sharply affected by racial disparities and other problems, they are more likely to dismiss or misunderstand racial issues. Overall, then, Whites are, perhaps, more susceptible to the counterproductive impacts of “bad” framing in the news.

On the other hand, Minority individuals themselves are also vulnerable to the various sorts of misunderstanding, cognitive “blindness,” and so forth discussed in the paper. Media coverage also reinforces counterproductive patterns in their own thinking about the subject of race—we know from previous research on other topics that personal experience does not confer immunity against the effects of persistent media framing of a topic (e.g. most Americans easily default to stereotypical views of teenagers, even when they are aware that the teenagers in their own lives “aren’t like that”).

Race as a central vs. secondary topic

In some of the pieces collected for the analysis, race is the explicit focus—e.g., we reviewed a number of op-ed pieces by African-American columnists on racial disparities. In other pieces, such as articles on health or economic issues in a particular city or region, race was mentioned tangentially. Both types of pieces are interesting for this analysis since both can shape reasoning. While op-eds and articles that focus on race are explicitly intended to affect thinking about the topic (either by providing new information or by suggesting new viewpoints), articles in which race comes up “in passing” can also have a massive, cumulative effect on thinking. The effects of pieces like these can even be more insidious, as they help establish “default” ways of viewing race.

Exceptions to counterproductive patterns

Unfortunately but not unexpectedly, much of the report is devoted to counterproductive patterns in the coverage of race-related issues—i.e. ways in which the coverage is likely to create counterproductive understandings in the minds of readers. In order to make the report as useful as possible, however, we have also included discussions of exceptional articles and op-eds that avoid these traps. These positive examples can help guide advocates (and responsible journalists) towards ways of providing more constructive framing.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

This analysis is informed by a substantial body of previous research, much of which was commissioned by the FrameWorks Institute, on how Americans think about race and racism. The previous research includes Cultural Logic’s own in-depth interviews with a diverse group of forty Americans around the country (“Thinking About Race,” August 2004) as well as focus groups conducted by Public Knowledge, and media effects testing conducted by UCLA’s Center for Communications and Community. Other past FrameWorks research not focused on race has also touched on the topic significantly, including work on health insurance access, adolescent development, and so forth.

It is worth mentioning a few key findings from this previous research, since they play a role in the analysis presented here:

- Discussions of race tend toward the “rhetorical”—positions are often oppositional.
Race is often conceived and talked about as an issue where the interests of various groups are in conflict: “In order for me to get more of what I deserve, you need to accept less,” “This group is stopping that group from achieving all it could,” etc.
- Overall, people prefer not to talk about race.
In both one-on-one interviews and especially in focus groups, people are inclined to avoid the subject when they can, for the obvious reason that it is a sensitive topic.
- Default narratives of race are so powerful that they affect what people see, hear, understand, and remember.
For example, experiments conducted by Frank Gilliam and Shanto Iyengar have demonstrated that when people see a television news report about an ATM robbery, they remember seeing images of an African-American suspect even when the actual image was of a White person or when there was no image presented at all. The “Black Suspect” script is so strongly established in their minds that it fills in the gaps in their actual experience.
- The term “racism” is generally understood as personal racism.
When people hear the term, it is most likely to evoke an image that focuses on one person’s attitudes and actions towards another—as opposed to any larger sense of how opportunities are structured in society, for example.
- “Structural racism” is, for the most part, cognitively invisible to Whites.
For a variety of reasons having to do with both psychological comfort and very general default patterns of reasoning, it is difficult for Whites to see the ways in which Minorities suffer from types of discrimination that do not fit the prototype image of personal racism.

- Race tends to be a “binary” category—on some level, the world is divided into Whites and Others (prototypically understood as Black).

Just as significantly, the prototypical Others are African-Americans, and race is often thought of in terms of Black experience specifically, and relations between Whites and Blacks.

STRATEGIC SUMMARY

A number of commentators have pointed out that local news coverage is a particularly poor (sensationalized, distorted, and oversimplified) source of information on many topics (e.g. Shanto Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible?*, University of Chicago Press, 1991). Print media, on the other hand, are sometimes assumed to be a more helpful guide to understanding the world and the times we live in. The general wisdom that opinion leaders are more likely to read the paper and be influenced by it reflects this more respectful stance towards print journalism.

The analysis presented in this report makes clear that counterproductive patterns are well represented in print journalism, summarized here.

Note: Harm is often caused by well-meaning writers.

Importantly, the counterproductive patterns we discuss are often found in pieces written by journalists who may be very sympathetic to the perspectives held by experts and advocates. In this case, the negative cognitive consequences are not intended, but are no less harmful for being inadvertent.

Separate Fates: The great majority of the pieces treat the fates of Minorities and Whites as discrete and disconnected.

In various indirect but powerful ways, minorities are portrayed as distinct from and unconnected to Whites, as the “Other,” a characterization which encourages readers to compartmentalize Minorities by failing to make clear the connections—economic, educational, environmental, etc.—shared by all Americans. One implication of the overemphasis on racial labels is that it becomes easy for Whites to dismiss Minority concerns as unconnected to their own.

The stories focus almost overwhelmingly on problems and disparities.

The “problems orientation” of Minority coverage, i.e. the relentless focus on dysfunction (crime, unemployment, poverty, etc.), distances Whites from Minority concerns and negatively impacts Minorities themselves. Even positive articles, especially about African-Americans, focus on hardships overcome.

“Little picture” understanding of problems: The presentation of problems in Minority communities promotes diminished understandings of the larger (causal) picture.

Some of the kinds of problems faced by minorities are commonly discussed in the press, and other kinds are not. Importantly, the types that are discussed offer little causal explanation and little historical context – in short, little help in understanding how the problems come about. Instead they create a vivid, *descriptive* sense of diminished lives – which therefore become the result of personal failure in the minds of readers, rather than the result of racial injustice or discrimination, for example.

The materials focus predominantly on the (especially problematic) experience of African-Americans.

Collectively, the materials promote the impression that race in America is “about” African-Americans (and their relations to Whites) as opposed to any other racial or ethnic group. African-Americans are the prototype racial Minority. Even when articles discuss other Minorities (Latinos, for example), the tendency towards a stark “binary” opposition between Whites on the one hand and Minorities on the other, persists.

Oppositional framing tends to reinforce the rhetorical nature of this issue.

The already contentious nature of the topic of race is reinforced by its presentation in the print media, which very often depicts one side (Minorities) trying to win its due from another (Whites), one generation (older) condemning the attitudes and behaviors of another (younger), and so forth. While a rhetorical stance is often justifiable on moral grounds, its consequences on the thinking of the public should be considered: Previous research has shown that rhetorical language tends to lead people into a cognitive stance in which they cannot absorb new information; in “rhetorical mode” they rely on old positions and are likely to reject attempts to reframe an issue.

Stereotypes are often reinforced by headlines, photo captions and layout.

Even when writers themselves are careful about how they handle race and related issues, damage is often done by others at the newspaper, including headline writers: “Young Killer’s Progress Rewarded.” A headline which reinforces racial stereotypes can undo any good done in the text of a piece. Damage can also be done through the juxtaposition of photos and stories, as when a story about a shooting, which does not mention race, is placed next to a “Wanted” list, all of Black men.

* * * * *

Taken together, these patterns constitute a most challenging terrain for communicators on race to negotiate. Some of the patterns are ones that a sympathetic writer might feel are *appropriate* for moving the national conversation forward on race – e.g., journalists certainly would not want to be accused of ignoring the problems faced by minority communities. Yet the nearly exclusive focus on problems and dysfunction creates a set of expectations that is off-putting and distancing. The paper explores a number of such contradictions and traps.

OBSERVATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

1. **Separate Fates: The great majority of the pieces treat the fates of Minorities and Whites as discrete and disconnected.**

In most of the materials, Minority individuals and communities are described as though their life trajectories were distinct from those of other American lives. When articles discuss the current educational conditions among African-Americans, for example, or the health conditions among Hispanics (and it is easy to imagine many other examples), they typically treat these groups as though their fates were unconnected to the fates of others in the country.

Sometime the separateness is described in fairly explicit terms:

“African-American teens, who often live farther from retail outlets, have unemployment rates double those of Whites.” (“Jobless Summer,” *Detroit Free Press*, 5/28/04, 10A)

In other cases, the separateness is implicit, as suggested by this reference to a particular kind of school, singled out by a candidate, presumably for its separateness:

“Kerry read . . . to kindergartners at the largely Hispanic, low-income school before discussing his education plan.” (“Kerry Assails Bush on Education,” *Wash Post*, 5/5/04 A7)

Even sympathetic articles about trouble in those communities usually obscure the connections that link all Americans together, regardless of race.

Damaging effects on understanding and motivation

One consequence of this type of framing is the reinforcement of a kind of “cognitive blindness”: As American readers are fed a steady diet of this “Separate Fates” framing, it becomes more and more natural to think of other racial/ethnic groups as somehow separate from one’s own, as though we weren’t all causally interconnected by common health and economic concerns, environmental issues, etc., but rather exist in separate causal universes. The connections, and the fact that, as Americans, the Minority individuals in question are affected by most of the same things that affect European-Americans, becomes harder to see.

A second very important effect is that it becomes easy (for Whites) to compartmentalize issues that relate to Minority groups. No matter how well meaning, it is inevitably easy for people to be less motivated about issues that are less directly connected to themselves.

What exceptions look like

Some exceptional articles do link the fates of Minorities and Whites. For example, a story in the *Seattle Times* discusses how the whole nation is hurt by our failure to address injuries due to racism: “. . . this country has some injuries we haven’t fully treated yet and we are all hurt because of it” (“The Same Old Story of Unequal Education,” *Seattle Times*, p. M1, 5/2/04).

Another article implies (correctly, if in a rather negative light) that there are costs to all Americans if immigrants are in poor health: “If immigrants decline to seek treatment in health

care facilities for fear of deportation, serious health problems could go untreated and unreported, impacting everyone's health" ("House Kills Bill Aimed at Ill Immigrants in ER," *San Antonio Express-News*, p. 13, 5/19/04).

But these articles are exceptional.

Patterns in the coverage that indirectly support the Separate Fates model

□ Minority Leaders and Progress

A number of pieces, including op-eds by Minority writers, argue that the African-American community (and perhaps other Minority groups) need to move forward and need leaders to get them there. While this message may be motivating on one level, it also entails a cost: it indirectly reinforces the understanding that these groups constitute *separate* populations.

"What we need are new conceptual paradigms to move Black people forward" (Miami Herald p.27 5/26/04).

"Even the Black church, which gets used by Democrats as cover and by Bush to bypass traditional civil-rights leaders, has less influence than ever. Having mostly left its activist past behind. Today's Black church is rarely heard on issues that matter" (*Miami Herald* p.27 5/26/04).

"[The Million Man March's] success in drawing the Black community together and creating—for a while, at least—a sense of purpose and cohesion, signaled that the civil-rights movement as my mother's generation knew it, was officially dead and gone (*Miami Herald* p.17 6/7/04).

"... the moribund state of the 'protest wing of the civil-rights movement'" ("Wanted: Leaders to Help Folks Get Out of Poverty," *Miami Herald*, p. 17, 6/7/04).

- The concept of race (and ethnicity) is oversimplified.

Racial identity in the press is presented as a simple and unquestioned fact about individuals, who are simply tagged as “African-American,” “Hispanic,” “White,” etc. Each person belongs to a particular race (we found only one use of the term “mixed race” in the sample—a fact especially surprising given the inclusion of papers from Miami, with its large numbers of immigrants from the Caribbean and Latin America), and various consequences flow from this straightforward racial identity. Though history, biology, and cross-cultural comparison teach us that race is a socially constructed category—whose boundaries and significance are shifting and to an extent artificial — the media treats race as a clear and incontrovertible trait, akin to biological gender. (Of course, there are occasional exceptions to the articles that treat race as a given: prominent among these is the fact that Indian “blood” is still an issue for Indians — see “Unhealthy Situation,” *San Antonio Express-News*, p. 1, 5/15/04.)

This thoroughly racialized feature of our society (by no means a human universal) is also played out in the nearly automatic racial categorization of persons in news stories covering a broad range of topics having to do with social inequity. The practice is so common that we hardly notice or question it—it is helpful to imagine, instead, how striking it would be if news stories routinely mentioned their subjects’ annual incomes.

- Monolithic groups

The simplistic categorization in the news encourages us to feel as though people who fall into different racial (and ethnic) categories are inherently and fundamentally different. If a person is identified as “Black” or “Hispanic” — or “White” — we are licensed to make a particular set of assumptions and form a clear picture in our minds, just as we do when we hear the word “tree” or “car.”

Another type of counterproductive categorization in the news is the slippage between the biological notion of *race* and the idea of *ethnicity*, which focuses on culture when more carefully defined. For instance, Hispanics are treated as a racial group in some articles, but an ethnic group in, “Mexicans Finding Rich Life in Miami,” (*Miami Herald*, p. A1, 5/5/04).

Even within a single article, there can be a seamless switching back and forth (“A New Approach to School Equality,” *L.A. Times*, p. 2, 5/15/04). Even Blacks, as the prototypical “race,” are sometimes treated as an ethnic category (“Nomination Faces Key Vote,” *Miami Herald*, p. 3, 5/18/04). In “Black 4th-Graders Here Lead U.S. on Reading Test,” (*Seattle Times*, p. 1, 5/13/04) everybody’s ethnic.

Whether such slippage or inconsistency is due to confusion or editorial discomfort with the category labeling, is impossible to say, but the effects are the same in any case: Readers are discouraged from thinking clearly about what categories like race and ethnicity mean and where they come from, and are further encouraged to see differences between groups — whether they are manifested in facial features, accent, or cuisine—as fundamental and defining.

It is common for groups to be treated as though they all think alike—think of the use of terms like “the Latin American community,” or “the Hispanic population,” and statements such as “they [i.e. Hispanics] have ... a larger sense of loyalty”). This type of portrayal reinforces the

idea of a self-contained population distinct from and unconnected to the rest of America.

“[H]aving data collectors who know the language and *the culture* has helped in getting people to open up more” [emphasis added]. [This despite the fact that the collectors were from Colombia and Ecuador, while the interviewees were from Mexico and El Salvador.] (“Survey Accruing Data on Health of Latinos,” *Washington Post*, p. 7, 5/23/04)

Once again, a message that is accurate and valuable on one level is counterproductive at another.

In some cases, of course, diversity within a racial or ethnic population is recognized—and this (usually acknowledged) diversity can even be a focus of the story, as it is in an article about Swinomish young people battling Native American stereotypes in Washington State (“Through a Native Lens,” *Seattle Times*, p. 1, 5/23/04). One essay draws a distinction between the Black underclass and the Black poor. The underclass, as distinct from low-income Blacks generally, has “stagnated, morally and economically,” wants only to survive, feels powerless, and is driven by instant gratification. The author distances herself and the rest of the Black community from the underclass (“Underclass and Poor Aren’t Synonymous,” *San Antonio Express-News*, p. 7, 6/4/04).

Another interesting type of story, about the telecom industry’s marketing to Latinos, includes more than cursory discussion of differences within that “community”: “there are linguistic differences within the Hispanic market,” “the Hispanic population is now large enough and diverse enough that it’s important to pay attention to nuances within the community.” These observations are credited to experts in multicultural marketing, who “recognize the Latino market as a varied one with broad differences.” They claim they have to pay attention to cultural “nuance” in order to “get into the market” (“¡Hola!” *Washington Post*, p. 1, 6/6/04). It is interesting to note that this is not the only issue where the “practical” motivations of businesspeople lead to insights that often elude people with other perspectives (including ones more based on sympathy or justice).

To cite a less edifying example, Boeing successfully defended itself against a discrimination lawsuit during the time that the materials were collected partly by arguing that there was no common pattern in pay or promotion across the different groups which had all been categorized as “Asian” in the class-action complaint. (Even if Afghans earn less and are less likely to be promoted, the same is not true for Chinese or Korean employees — see “Boeing Wins Ethnic-bias Case,” *Seattle Times*, p. E1, 6/3/04.) In short, the company won its case by attacking the plaintiffs’ category of “Asians” — regardless of its motives, Boeing was correct in pointing out that the category is an oversimplification or even a fiction, as such monolithic categories often are.

□ Middle class Minority neighborhoods

The Separate Fates model is reinforced by the many references to the idea of neighborhoods that are intentionally segregated by Minorities themselves. These sorts of stories bring a powerful messenger to the story of separate fates — *Minorities with the capacity to make*

their own choices.

“... like many Mexican professionals these days, the family chose to resettle in what they perceive as the most appealing U.S. region for Latin Americans—Miami-Dade.”

“The quality of life here is so much greater than in Mexico or Los Angeles. Miami is smaller, has less traffic, but what I love the most is the freedom to go out into the street with my sons without fearing that we’re going to be kidnapped or robbed or that my children’s health is going to suffer.”

“... Miami, a city seen more and more as a place where upper- and middle-class Latin Americans find *ambiente* among their well-heeled Hispanic peers.” (*Miami Herald* p. A1 5/5/04)

2. The stories focus almost overwhelmingly on problems and disparities.

The newspaper material we reviewed could not be accused of ignoring the difficulties faced by Minorities. In fact, most of the materials are directly or indirectly about problems in Minority households and communities—relating to health, education, finances, vulnerability to crime, jobs, etc.

Higher diabetic rates, inadequate health insurance and a rapidly growing population of older Hispanics will result in a much higher incidence of Alzheimer's disease among the nation's Hispanics, according to a compilation of studies released Tuesday by the Alzheimer's Association. (*Miami Herald* p. 9A 5/19/04)

Miami's Jackson was the busiest of the four [health care] sites. All serve predominantly poor, uninsured Minority populations, though Jackson serves more Minorities and uninsured than average. The doctors found that about one-quarter of the ER patients had successive high blood pressure readings during their visit. (*Miami Herald* p. 1 5/25/04)

"Minority kids, and Black kids in particular, are not on the information highway as much as other kids are," said Cynthia Curry, a local consultant and one of the women who developed the new site. (*Miami Herald* p.2 6/1/04)

The preponderance of articles on crime in "Minority neighborhoods" reinforces a view that Minority neighborhoods are bad places. Note that it's news (i.e. mentioned explicitly) if a Minority neighborhood is "respectable" (i.e. low crime).

The bodies were found in two first-floor bedrooms at the Semester Parkway Apartments, in the respectable Fallstaff neighborhood. (*Miami Herald* p.3 5/29/04)

It is also noteworthy that articles about social problems routinely include statistics about race¹: "Hispanics represents the ethnic group with the highest teen birth rate, followed by African Americans, then Anglos" ("Teen Pregnancy Still a Vexing Problem in Bexar County," *San Antonio Express-News*, p. 9E, 5/1/04). In fact, their absence is striking, as in ("Project Worth Testing Students," *San Antonio Express-News*, p. 5, 5/6/04), an article about teen pregnancy which does not mention racial/ethnic breakdowns, and which was only collected because the accompanying photo shows two Hispanic girls.

Sometimes there is a kind of slippage between "Minority groups" and "neediness," encouraging the reader to treat both as nearly the same thing. In one case for example, the writer—apparently unconsciously—shifts from speaking of disadvantaged African-American and Latino kids to poor kids and Special Ed kids. This might be sloppiness, but it also reflects a culturally natural kind of thinking ("Teachers Surveyed Back Riordan Plan," *L.A. Times*, p. 6, 5/7/04; see also "A New Approach to School Equality," *L.A. Times*, p. 2, 5/15/04).

¹ Of course, articles that make no mention of race would not have been included in the sample, but the observation should be uncontroversial since this general pattern of reporting is one we all recognize.

Very few positive stories

Among the materials collected, there are almost no generally positive stories about African-Americans. Those that have a seemingly positive aspect are typically about *individuals* who have bounced back from adversity or redeemed themselves from a life of crime:

“Abraham has shown remarkable progress in recent months as he works toward his high school equivalency diploma and is taking more responsibility for his actions.” (“Young Killer’s Progress Rewarded,” *Detroit Free Press*, p. 1, 6/16/04).

“‘We were in that kind of environment,’ he said. ‘There were always drug deals going down, wild parties and lots of drinking. But my mom made sure that we said no to drugs, to peer pressure, to doing dangerous things.’” (“Against All Odds,” *The Times-Picayune*, p. 1, 5/17/04)

Even in an unusual, positive article about a job search bus going to neighborhoods in D.C., there is a problems orientation; such an article wouldn’t *have* to mention drug dealers, crime rates, “problem areas,” etc. “The bus is dispatched to the city’s ‘hot spots,’ 14 problem areas identified by the Williams administration as being most in need of employment assistance because of high poverty and crime rates” (*Washington Post*, p.10, 5/13/04).

Note that this pattern is especially true for African-Americans. For other Minorities, there are sometimes articles featuring individuals who are extraordinary in some way *not* having to do with pulling themselves out of the mire. For instance, “‘Searching for Asian America” (*Seattle Times*, p. F2, 5/5/04, 194) discusses “ordinary Asian Americans doing extraordinary things.” Other examples include “‘Little Guys Work Under the Radar” (*San Antonio Express-News*, P. 2G, 5/9/04), “‘Taguba Has Filipinos Lauding the Rise of Their Native Son,” (*Washington Post*, p. 17, 5/17/07); and an article about Asian-American pop singers, (“‘A Loser’s Success and a Winner’s Failure Raise Cultural Questions,” *Detroit Free Press*, P. 1H, 5/7/04). Some articles discuss something noteworthy and positive about a particular group, e.g. Latino business owners: “‘The Burgeoning Market Exerts its Force,” (*Washington Post*, p. 1, 6/7/04). These are exactly the kinds of articles not found about Blacks.

Distorting Effects

While stories about disparities and problems can be both accurate and important, their collective effects can also be damaging. Besides the fact that it is simply misleading, an exaggerated image of Minority individuals living in communities that are poor, unhealthy, and unsafe has a number of distorting effects on perception and motivation:

Distancing Whites from Minorities

To the extent that Minorities are “all about” problems, and that the defining characteristics of Minority communities are the ways in which life there is harsher than it is elsewhere, it

becomes more difficult for Whites, and especially middle-class Whites, to identify with the people and places in the stories. When we cannot identify with the people we are reading or hearing about, there is an automatic distancing effect which makes it relatively easy to tune out because the story (the likes of which we have seen so many times before) does not concern us or people like us. Racial differences themselves are distancing enough from a cognitive point of view—since they suggest a fundamental difference between “us” and “them”—and the fact that Minorities would seem to lead such different and deprived lives exaggerates this distance further.

□ Overwhelming, intractable problems

If the lives of Minority individuals and communities seem perpetually to be characterized by trouble and want, White readers can easily reach the point of feeling that those conditions are permanent and unchanging, and that no efforts to “help” can actually have real and lasting effects. The “compassion fatigue” phenomenon, which has been discussed in reference to foreign aid (see Susan Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue*, Routledge, 1999) is just as relevant for perpetually troubled American communities.

□ Relentless scrutiny

Taken together, the material seems to be holding a magnifying glass up to the African-American community in order to unearth every problem and dysfunction. It is hard to imagine an article like “Some Blacks Find Nuggets of Truth in Cosby’s Speech” (*Washington Post*, B5, 5/26/04)—in which various members and representatives of the “Black community” speculate about the degree of their own responsibility for their own collective troubles—but about Whites. In short, the coverage creates the impression that is acceptable, and even natural, to scour Minority (and especially African-American) communities for signs of weakness and failure.

□ Effects on the thinking of Minorities themselves

Minorities themselves are not immune to the distorting effects of the news media’s consistent picture of dysfunction. Research on issue after issue has shown that personal experience does not negate the effects of distortions in public discourse (including media). For instance, parents of teenagers typically “toggle” between the (media-reinforced) stereotype of troublesome teens and their own, much more nuanced image of what young people are like. The understandings reinforced in the media make it hard for anyone, including Minorities themselves, to see the positive aspects of Minority communities, and the things they have in common with all other American communities (positive or negative).

3. Little Picture Understanding of Problems: The presentation of problems in Minority communities works against deeper understanding of the situations.

A review of the collected materials reveals no shortage of discussions of problems in Minority communities. But despite an overall emphasis on problems faced by Minorities—in areas such as health, economics, violence, and education—there is very little discussion of some of the other very significant problems in Minority communities, such as high incarceration rates, the resulting absence of men in African-American communities, police brutality, and discrimination in employment and housing. There are many articles that discuss Hispanic immigration, but very few that address violence at the border, or economic exploitation of immigrants. The table below summarizes some of the kinds of problems which are and are not commonly mentioned in newspapers.

When we examine the nature of the kinds of problems that are mentioned vs. those that aren't, some enlightening patterns emerge:

Types of problems	Features of the problems
<p><i>Typically mentioned:</i></p> <p>Poverty</p> <p>Crime</p> <p>Sickness</p> <p>Lower educational attainment</p> <p>Deprivation on various levels</p>	<p>Aspects of the individual lives of Minorities (and their families)</p> <p>Symptoms</p> <p>Things Minorities themselves do</p> <p>A vivid picture of dysfunctional life/community</p>
<p><i>Less frequently mentioned:</i></p> <p>High incarceration rates</p> <p>Absence of Black men in communities</p> <p>Police brutality</p> <p>Employment and housing discrimination</p> <p>Class</p>	<p>Things Whites “do to” Minorities</p> <p>Causes</p> <p>Structural features of life/community</p> <p>(Not vivid parts of the picture of dysfunctional life/community)</p>

Put briefly, the kinds of problems in Minority communities that *are* typically covered create an image of dysfunctional individuals, families and neighborhoods without offering any sense of how they got to be that way, what conditions continue to promote the problems, what the broader implications for the country might be, and where solutions might come from (other than waiting for the people in question to lift themselves out of their troubles). It can even be easy, given this blinkered framing, to feel that the conditions being described are simply natural “givens” — natural facts that we don't even think about changing.

Vivid pictures of troubled lives

The descriptions in the coverage tend to create and reinforce concrete images of people and families who are doing poorly and people who are “behaving badly.” While the focus on tangible, day-to-day problems such as sickness and poverty may help give readers a more vivid picture of disparities, this vividness actually works against bigger-picture understanding which would include more about causes, contexts, and solutions.

Symptoms rather than causes

The problems faced by Minorities that are presented in the articles and other pieces can be thought of as symptoms as opposed to their root causes. Usually, problems are simply *described* and there is a marked lack of deep causal explanations or even explorations. Most articles take no position on the complex questions about causes of disparities between the lives of Whites and other Americans.

As an example, the fact that African-American families are more likely to live in poverty than European-American families is a fact, but in effect it is a symptom which cannot be addressed directly. Just as importantly, it cannot be fully understood as stated—it is easily seen (on a default, unconscious level) as a natural and permanent fact about African-Americans.

For example, one very descriptive (and statistics-heavy) account about disaffected youth (“More Young Adults ‘Disconnected,’” *Washington Post*, p. A4, 6/4/04) offers a grim picture of child poverty, including its racial dimensions, but does not explore the reasons for this situation.

Historical “flatness”

To put it mildly, history is not one of the main frames through which racial issues are seen. Even given the *Brown* anniversary context, a true historical perspective is very weak. In stories organized around *Brown*, there is very little sense of a causal flow of events from then to now. Rather, there is simply a comparison between what was hoped for then and the current realities of still-segregated schools, Black kids’ relative lack of access to the Internet, etc. The *Brown* decision and period also functions as a kind of mythic, ancestral past which we respect—but usually no historical lessons are drawn regarding how the decision came about or how and why the context has changed since then. In “Landmark Race Ruling Remembered After 50 Years” (*Miami Herald*, B1, 5/3/04), for example, activists from the Civil Rights Movement are quoted but then essentially dismissed in the rest of the article.

One piece even argues explicitly that we should not base decisions (about our educational system) on history: “The school system should make decisions based on solid information about student achievement, not on history, convenience or political expediency” (58, “How to Grow a Smart School System,” *Washington Post*, p. B8, 6/6/04).

Latinos, too, are usually presented in an ahistorical context—which is especially surprising in papers like the *LA Times* and *Miami Herald* which serve so many Latino readers.

“Shallow” causation

When articles do make an effort to address causes, the discussions typically only take one, (easily-labeled) step back in the causal story—e.g., African-Americans with high blood pressure visit emergency rooms repeatedly because they lack health insurance (“ER Doctors Urged to Treat Hypertension,” *Miami Herald*, p. 1, 5/25/04):

“Moody, 53, an unemployed laborer, is part of a growing wave of uninsured people repeatedly using overcrowded emergency rooms as costly replacements for primary-care doctors ...” (“ER Doctors Urged to Treat Hypertension,” *Miami Herald*, p. 1, 5/25/04)

The reference to the “growing wave of uninsured people” offers no help in understanding why there are so many uninsured (of all races) in this situation, and the remainder of the article makes it easy for readers to conclude that these poor Black men are in trouble because of their own personal failings. Left out of the discussion are the many middle-class Whites, for instance, who lack health coverage even when they are employed. Readers are left with a picture of unfortunate individual African-Americans who don’t have insurance and end up suffering, dying, and costing the medical system money as a result. Readers can fill in their own interpretations of why the patients are in this situation, and previous research makes it clear that Personal Responsibility and personal failure will be the winning explanations.

The same article also mentions that doctors often don’t schedule follow-up visits for this group of patients, but doesn’t say why; in fact, the doctor who did the study doesn’t even suggest we need to know why. The article mentions narrow solutions that fit with the narrow framing of the problem: changes in medical policy at the hospital in question, or possibly the distribution of free medications: “establishing a blood pressure clinic just for regular check-ups, or dispensing free blood pressure medicine to the uninsured. ... [the doctor] hasn’t identified funding for either idea right now....”

Responsibility placed on individuals

Another effect of descriptive, Small Picture framing is that it makes it easy to blame (consciously or unconsciously) those living in the conditions and apparently unable to pull themselves up, since no causes for their troubles are apparent.

An article mentioned earlier about disaffected young people (“More Young Adults ‘Disconnected,’” *Washington Post*, p. A4, 6/4/04) ends on the upbeat note that kids just need a can-do attitude—once again ignoring root causes and the difficulty of overcoming them through individual effort.

It is not surprising, then, that a number of the pieces explicitly place responsibility on individuals for their own situations — e.g. they hold parents responsible for the quality of education that their kids obtain.

“[Minority parents] need to get over what they think the system owes them and focus on what they owe their children. ... While it was fine to talk about rights, [I told them that] they had to accept their responsibilities, too. That includes disciplining their children and

demanding excellence, forming a united front with educators.” (“Giving Latino Kids an Edge at School,” *San Antonio Express-News*, p. 3, 6/6/04, op-ed by Latino columnist).

“ . . .it’s (NCLB) main shortcoming . . . is that it overlooks what I believe the problem to be: Many children aren’t doing as well as they should because they get less help than they should from home. Shouldn’t we spend at least part of our resources and energy helping those parents learn how to do their jobs better?” (*Washington Post*, p. A21, 5/3/04)

Racism, discrimination, and structural White privilege almost never mentioned

As though racism and entrenched barriers to Minority advancement were things of the past, these problems barely surface in news accounts of issues related to race (as opposed to op-eds on the subject). An article about “needy” school districts suing for funding reports that “these ‘educational adequacy’ complaints have largely replaced desegregation lawsuits as the focus of legal efforts to ensure equality of opportunity between different social and ethnic groups” (“Poor Schools Sue for Funding,” *Washington Post*, p. A13, 6/7/04). This mention of desegregation is the closest the article comes to mentioning disadvantages faced by Minorities. The article does not discuss racial injustice—in any terms—even though it is implicitly clear that discrimination of some kind is the topic.

Presumably because they are less charged topics, race is often recast in terms of wealth and poverty. The struggle for equality, in turn, is recast as a struggle for “adequacy” or “sufficient funding,” or against “inequity” (“Remembering a Segregated Childhood,” *Washington Post*, p. 19, 5/17/04). In these formulations, there is no agent, no-one responsible, and in fact no cause whatsoever alluded to. If reporters are reluctant to mention the barriers facing Minority individuals—whether out of “delicacy,” uncertainty about the real nature of the problem, or for whatever other reasons—the public’s natural tendency towards “cognitive blindness” on this issue is consistently reinforced.

What exceptions look like

Of course there are exceptional pieces that do discuss context and causation, history, and the very real conditions that still make it harder for non-Whites to succeed in American society.

- One article on jobs for young people, for example, points out that increases in legitimate opportunity would keep many out of “the underground economy” (i.e. drug dealing — see “Jobless Summer,” *Detroit Free Press*, p. 10A, 5/28/04).
- Carlos Munoz, an academic, lays out some of the Latino legal history pre-dating *Brown* (“Latinos Paved Way for Historic Case,” *Miami Herald*, p. 21, 5/17/04); see also “Culture’s Impact on Laws Examined” (*San Antonio Express-News*, B5, 5/10/04).
- Many columns written by African-Americans offer a much broader context than do typical news stories—e.g. one opinion piece compares the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers with the abuse of American Black men by police, describing cases of police brutality and racial profiling, and decrying America’s inadequate educational, legal, and prison systems (“Un-American? Look at Tragedies Black Men Suffer,” *Detroit Free Press*, p. 9,

5/17/04).

- A David Chappell essay in the *New York Times*, marking the fiftieth anniversary of Brown vs Board of Education, takes a big-picture look at the history, rationales, and pros and cons of affirmative action, and carefully considers alternative means to eliminate inequality between Black and White Americans (“If Affirmative Action Fails . . . What Then?” *New York Times*, p. 7, 5/8/04).
- A *Seattle Times* article argues that certain kinds of inequities—including stricter sentencing—are at least partly responsible for the much higher unemployment numbers among Blacks (“Study Finds Rate of Jail Time High for Young Blacks,” p. 1, 5/22/04).
- An article in the *Washington Post* examines the experiences of African-American students attending private schools in the DC area, from the difficulties of those first admitted in the desegregated mid-fifties, to those of students today, including the shift from overt, institutional racism to more subtle forms of discrimination (“Private Schools’ Shift Was Slow, Painful for First Enrolled Blacks,” *Washington Post*, P. 1, 5/17/04).
- Another *Seattle Times* article (“Striving for an Equal Chance,” p. 1, 5/17/04) reports on specific efforts and accomplishments of Seattle schools in tightening the “achievement gap,” indicating that social inequities, like poverty and racism, (factors outside schools) are the cause of the “gap.”
- “Victory Casts Shadow Where Equality Battle Began” (*New York Times*, p. A21, 5/12/04) takes a look at Topeka, Kansas since Brown, examining the costs and benefits of the ruling and the current struggles faced by educators, including increasing Minority and immigrant populations, gangs, and dwindling funding.

4. The materials focus predominantly on the (especially problematic) experience of African-Americans.

Collectively, the materials promote the impression that race in America is “about” African-Americans (and their relations to Whites) as opposed to any other racial or ethnic group. While other ethnic groups are certainly discussed in the news, African-Americans are the prototype Minority, and the newspaper coverage reinforces this default way of understanding the topic of race. David Chappell’s *New York Times* piece on affirmative, for instance, focuses exclusively on the “gaps between Black and White Americans,” and notes that “[o]pposition to affirmative action [has] persisted, partly because racists resented Black success” action (“If Affirmative Action Fails ... What Then?,” 5/8/04, Metro p. 7). Individuals singled out for discussion and in accompanying photos often reinforce the Black prototype even when other Minorities are mentioned in a piece (e.g. “Progress Made in City’s Schools, But More to Go,” *Washington Post*, p. 1, 5/13/04).

Note that this pattern is not simply an effect of the inclusion of a number of Brown decision articles. Even in articles that don’t mention that event, discussion often defaults to African-Americans. And many racial or ethnic Minority groups in the U.S. are essentially never included in the term “Minority,” even when there is a record of discrimination or even violence against them – including Jews, Arabs & other Middle Eastern peoples, various subcategories of Asian American.

Binary/Comparative framing is ubiquitous

Overall, the default framing in many articles is binary. Often the situation of Blacks and Hispanics is compared to that of Whites (and sometimes Asian-Americans) – as in “A New Approach to School Equality” (*L.A. Times*, p. 2, 5/15/04), and “Striving for an Equal Chance,” (*Seattle Times*, p. 1, 5/17/04), where the issue is school equity – i.e. between Whites/Asians and Blacks/Hispanics. Note also that the term “underachievement” is usually shorthand for the relative achievement of Blacks or other Minorities with respect to Whites.

Heightened rhetorical charge

To the extent that the prototypical understanding of race centers on African-Americans, the issue is especially charged, for obvious reasons relating to slavery and American history more generally. Furthermore, the binary framing that is so common in the coverage makes it even easier for readers to think in oppositional, rhetorical terms – focusing on “winners” and “losers,” “haves” and “have nots,” “us” and “them,” etc. – rather than on a more collective view.

5. Oppositional framing tends to reinforce the rhetorical nature of this issue.

The already rhetorical nature of the topic of race is reinforced by its presentation in the print media, which very often depicts one side (Minorities) trying to win its due from another (Whites), one generation (older) condemning the attitudes and behaviors of another (younger), and so forth. The metaphor of the "battle" for justice is common:

Though most of the nation does not know about Sylvia, it was her case that struck the first blow against segregation. (*Miami Herald* p. 21 5/17/04)

Given the very real nature of the injustices perpetuated by racism, it is tempting to conclude that accentuating the rhetoric is entirely appropriate. In some cases, certainly. However, the consequences of doing so on the public's thinking (e.g., ability to see and understand the structural nature of racism) should not be forgotten: Previous research conducted by FrameWorks has established that once people begin to think rhetorically about an issue, they stop learning or seeing anything new.

Even pieces which offer very positive perspectives can reinforce this oppositional and rhetorical tendency. As an example, an article concerning the Latino education lawsuits which paved the way for *Brown v. Board* (*Miami Herald* p. 21 5/17/04) focuses on fairness and effective solutions. It explains a causal story of (legal) change.

. . . the Mendez case set the legal precedent that enabled the Brown attorneys to win their arguments before the Supreme Court.

The article also makes it clear that real changes in thinking are possible and have happened.

The Mendez case also deeply influenced the thinking of the California governor at the time, Earl Warren. By 1954 when the Brown case appeared before the high court, Warren had become the chief justice. (*Miami Herald* p. 21 5/17/04)

But even this article is set in the framework of two sides, an argument, a battle. The effect is to reinforce the charged, zero-sum framing of this issue: One group's gains are the other group's losses.

6. Stereotypes are often reinforced by headlines, photo captions and layout.

Even when writers themselves are careful about how they handle race and related issues, damage is often done by others at the newspaper, including headline writers: “Young Killer’s Progress Rewarded” (*Detroit Free Press*, p. 1 6/16/04). A headline which reinforces racial stereotypes can undo any good done in the text of a piece.

Likewise, a photo caption like “She’s considering returning to tribal lands so she can get free health care” (“Unhealthy Situation,” *San Antonio Express-News*, p. 1, 5/15/04) strongly reinforces common erroneous beliefs about handouts to Native Americans. Even though the article does eventually contextualize this statement, the damage is done.

Damage can also be done through the juxtaposition of photos and stories, as when a story about a shooting, which does not mention race, is placed next to a “Wanted” list, all of Black men (“Teen Suspect Surrenders in Fatal Gert Town Shooting,” *The Times-Picayune*, p. B8, 5/19/04).

Headlines can also do harm simply by reinforcing the overall negative framing of Minority issues, a natural consequence of the tendency towards simplification and vividness (e.g., “Colon cancer deadlier for Blacks”, *Detroit Free Press*, p. 15F, 6/1/04).

Note that as with other patterns discussed in the report, the effects of this one are real for the Minorities themselves, as well as for Whites.

While advocates have no control over this aspect of news production, they can try to work against it by offering alternative picture ideas, and so on.

CONCLUSION

Even well-meaning journalists may hurt the cause of progress without meaning to or realizing they are doing so. The patterns described in this paper are not the products of malice, nor are they traps that only careless or indifferent journalists fall into. Instead, they represent a cognitive and cultural minefield through which it is challenging to find a constructive path, even for careful news writers, and for the experts and advocates they call on as sources:

- Many articles that mention race focus on policy solutions being considered, such as increases in school spending— that is, they offer a "big picture" view of the changes that are needed. Yet tendencies in the rest of the presentation make it harder for readers to see *why* policies would be justified, except as charity for suffering individuals.
- It would be irresponsible not to inform readers of the special problems facing Minority individuals and communities, yet the constant stream of reports on these problems creates problems of other kinds.
- The automatic tagging of individuals' race reinforces a false understanding of race as a fundamental determiner of identity, yet not mentioning race would obscure very real and important patterns in American life outcomes.
- Vivid, personal accounts of Minorities' lived experience can reinforce little-picture understanding and obscure larger context – yet if these individual voices are not heard, reports can sound condescending, as though these people needed outside experts, advocates or policymakers to do their speaking for them.
- It is clear that gross disparities often reflect injustices that deserve to be publicized. At the same time, once people are thinking in “rhetorical mode” they are less likely to be open to new information and practical solutions.

More than most topics, race presents special challenges to journalists and other communicators. The public’s counterproductive ideas about race are powerful and easily evoked, and ways of framing the issue that seem productive at one level too often cut against the goals of advocates in other ways. At the same time, careful attention to some basic principles can make a tremendous difference in the impact on an audience's thinking. A number of principles have the potential for making stories more productive:

- Drawing connections wherever possible between the life conditions of people in different groups
- Being less accepting of simple racial categorizations
- Finding ways of introducing causal and historical explanations into stories, writing stories (and selecting images) that convey positive aspects of Minority experience (other than overcoming hardship)
- Offering structural and contextual views of the barriers to advancement still faced by Minorities

While these recommendations are certainly not easy fixes, it is clear that Race is a topic for which, due to a troubled cultural and cognitive context, the motto "do no harm" is not enough.

APPENDIX 1: PERSPECTIVES OFFERED BY MINORITY COLUMNISTS

It is clear that Minority columnists offer a different and often richer perspective on Race issues. Writing produced by Minority writers often has a distinctive tone, one that is, for example, sometimes confessional or chastising. It uses particular language, sometimes including code phrases. It tends both to “tell it like it is,” and to provide richer structural and/or historical analysis of the issues that offers several dimensions that are simply not apparent in other pieces:

□ Providing a historical perspective

Many articles (including op/ed pieces) in the period we sampled were willing to provide a larger context within which to understand *Brown*:

“Our schools did not worsen after Brown. The sad truth is they were never very good because they have always been under-supported.” (*The Times-Picayune*, p. 5, 5/17/04)

“The question of how and whether to accept Black people as full citizens has been with America since the beginning. It could have been dealt with during the Constitutional Convention, but the architects of our democracy were worried they might drive off the undemocratic Southern states if slavery were made an issue. The country could have dealt with it after the Civil War. But Reconstruction was cut short by Southern White resistance and Northern desire to get on with business. America has passed on many opportunities to heal this long-standing wound” (*The Seattle Times*, p. M1, 5/2/04)

This sort of perspective forces readers to break out of the usual historical flatness, and opens them to the possibility of new causal explanations and thinking.

□ Providing causal explanations

Some pieces offer specific mechanisms to let us see how things might have come to be the way they are. One piece, examining education and the legacy of *Brown* argues that “Brown was the catalyst for tremendous progress, but fears of Southern White backlash prevented a full commitment to the principles embraced in the words of the ruling.” (*The Seattle Times*, p. M1, 5/2/04) Or, discussing Cosby’s remarks, op/ed decries Americans’ unwillingness to discuss race, to examine complex causes for problems, to recognize social dynamics *and* personal responsibility, “Cosby Was Right to Say What He Thinks — We All Should” (*Seattle Times*, P. 1, 5/27/04). From a cognitive perspective, access to causal explanations for the way things are allows the reader to keep from slipping back into default – and unproductive – modes of thinking.

□ Calling racism by its name

Despite the apparent ubiquity of the term “racism,” previous research by Cultural Logic and others has shown that Whites often tend to repress the (uncomfortable) idea of racism, to box it in as it were, so that it is not an active part of thinking. The columns by African-American writers bring our collective attention back to the idea of racism (as opposed to the problem of

racism). Another piece that provides a response to Cosby, suggests an answer to the question of why Blacks and Whites can't talk about race honestly: "Black folk tend to emphasize racism ... Whites ... are often loath to concede that racism remains the great ball and chain of African-American life for fear the admission will besmirch their benign self-image or be used to make them feel guilty. So they tend to emphasize dysfunction instead." (*Miami Herald*, p. 2, 5/24/04) See also "Cosby Was Right to Say What He Thinks — We All Should" (*Seattle Times*, P. 1, 5/27/04). This sort of analysis encourages everyone to recognize that we need to think actively about what racism means – something that Whites don't often do.

At the same time, stories by Minority writers tend to suffer from a number of the problems described in this report, and others that come – paradoxically – from their privileged position commenting on the issue.

□ Reinforcing the Personal Responsibility frame

Many of the materials by African-Americans endorse Cosby's assessment that problems in the African-American community are caused by the "knuckleheads" themselves. While certainly part of the story, this view is also certain to trigger the (very easily triggered) "Cultural Inferiority" view – i.e. that *all* problems in the African-American community are *entirely* their own fault. "Blacks have lost something in the intervening years that helped prior generations right those wrongs: a strong emphasis on family, community, education, "discipline, hard work and sacrifice." (*Miami Herald* p.17 6/7/04) "Whether Cosby should have used the upscale D.C. event to share his observations about the state of Black America may be open to question. That what he said needed saying, however, is not at issue. (*Miami Herald* p. 29 5/27/04) Some of Cosby's message certainly appeals to racist Whites who are inclined to blame Blacks for all the problems they are facing.

Importantly, this view also reflects and tends to reinforce Little-Picture, Individual-Level thinking. Cosby's message is likely to appeal to "successful" African-Americans in part because they see their own success as proof that individual effort can lift anyone to success in American society. They are strongly motivated to share an individualist ethos.

□ Blaming African-American anti-intellectualism

Some of the materials written by and for African-Americans discuss anti-intellectualism in the African-American community: "When I was growing up in a Black suburb in the '80s, getting straight A's was considered "straight W"—meaning "White." It still is. But if anti-intellectualism is all-American, it's especially destructive in Black communities." ("Wanted: Leaders to Help Folks Get Out of Poverty," *Miami Herald*, p. 17, 6/7/04)

An op/ed offering a Black perspective on segregation in education notes that academic success was, and is, viewed by many Black kids as 'White' - so who wants it? (See also "Garfield Senior Says Teachers Should Expect as Much From Black Students as They Do From White Students," *Seattle Times*, p. 18, 5/9/04)

While this type of discussion provides a potentially useful glimpse into Black cultural perspective, it also reinforces a negative stereotype.

□ Labeling dysfunction

African-American writers are not afraid to discuss familiar categories of dysfunction within Black culture, even using colloquial names – e.g. “baby mama drama.” One effect of this process is to reinforce the idea that the African-American community doesn’t live to the same standards as the White community – even though for all we know there may be just as many Whites involved in baby mama drama. The process of “branding” dysfunctions, of establishing a kind of ownership, is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it focuses the attention on a problem that could be dealt with. On the other hand, it creates a powerful and potentially exclusive association in the minds of the public between African-Americans and the type of human failing in question.

APPENDIX 2: 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.