Two Cognitive Obstacles to Preventing Child Abuse: The "Other-Mind" Mistake and the "Family Bubble"

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SUMMARY

Following decades of effective publicity about the issue, Americans are now aware of the horrors of child abuse and have an idea (even an exaggerated idea) of the pervasiveness of all types of maltreatment. Making further headway in engaging the public on the issue will have to involve more than raising the volume on awareness campaigns. Such campaigns can even backfire by intensifying the public's media-fed association between abuse and sensational crimes – which only "sick monsters" could commit and no programs can ever totally eliminate.

To take the public to the next step in engagement, communications will need to address counterproductive patterns of reasoning that hinder better understanding of the issue. One of the most pervasive of these is the "Other-Minds" mistake: Lay people misperceive a child as a little mind which develops through abstract processes like learning, memory and choice; or which does not "develop" at all, and exists from the beginning as something like an adult mind which just needs to be "filled" or "guided." This fallacy effectively obscures any scientific understanding of development of biological systems which guide these and all other aspects of behavior. This fallacy is natural, we suggest, because of a highly evolved (and very useful) human mechanism for interpreting the content of Other-Minds (known to psychologists as the "Other-Minds module").

While the "Other-Minds" module is extremely useful for trying to read the minds of other adults, it also leads to a number of distortions that make child maltreatment more likely to happen, and less likely to be prevented. These distortions include a tendency to believe that an infant has an "agenda" that conflicts with ours; an exaggerated sense of children's ability to "get past" abuse through force of will; a sense that even one year-old children can benefit from punishment for breaking moral rules; and a difficulty understanding the concept of "neglect" except as something like "underinvolvement;" among others.

An additional cognitive obstacle which communications need to address is the "Family Bubble" – the default mode of thinking in which events within the family (including child rearing and child maltreatment) take place in a sphere that is separate and different from the public sphere. This default understanding is stronger than a mere belief that families should be autonomous. It means that even thinking about the interaction between child rearing and public policy is difficult for people, and that communications based on reinforcing the "Village," while appealing, can lead to conflictedness rather than change.

BACKGROUND: AN AWFUL PUZZLE

At first glance, the persistence of child abuse and neglect in American society is an awful puzzle. After all, it is a truism among advocates on many causes that the best way to motivate people is by showing them the harms that children are suffering because of a given situation or policy. No issue could be more closely connected with children's wellbeing than this one. Yet though there are roughly 1 million documented cases of maltreatment every year, and abuse and neglect kill three American children every day, our society has not treated the issue as a high priority. How can this be?

Experts in the field of child maltreatment find themselves conflicted on a central question: Does the problem persist partly because Americans simply don't place a high priority on children's welfare after all? Peggy S. Pearl opens a book chapter with the assertion that, "Child abuse prevention depends on neither a program nor a system of services, but must be founded on a society valuing its children" ("Prevention," *Recognition of Child Abuse for the Mandatory Reporter*, 2002). And Public Agenda has observed (in "Communicating with the Public About Children's Issues," an advisory memo to the Advertising Council) that "despite enormous energy and creativity among those working to raise awareness about the children's issue, it has never achieved the urgency and broad-based support it deserves." On the other hand, Nicholas Research ("A Qualitative Study on Child Abuse Awareness and Concept Development," 2001, for PCA America) concluded that "children rank in the forefront of concern when it comes to social issues. … Therefore, a campaign dealing with abuse has the advantage of addressing something that relates closely to core issues." Do Americans really care enough about children? And if not, are there ways to help them care more?

The question is almost certainly more complicated than simply the degree of Americans' concern – even when it comes to the seemingly irresistible appeal to help reduce the tragedy of abuse and neglect. As part of its ongoing mission to reduce child maltreatment, Prevent Child Abuse America commissioned the FrameWorks Institute to engage in a series of research projects – including the work reported on here – to discover how the very ways Americans think about abuse, neglect and related children's issue might be contributing to the slow progress on the issue, and how that thinking might be shifted in productive directions. This report is another step toward solving the troubling questions about why child maltreatment is allowed to persist at such alarming levels.

RESEARCH METHOD

Subjects

The analysis presented here is based on interviews conducted by Cultural Logic with a diverse group of twenty-two individuals in and around Seattle and Philadelphia. Subjects were interviewed in their homes or workplaces. The sample included thirteen women and nine men, and six people of color. Most subjects were evenly distributed between early 20s and late 50s; three subjects were over 60. Subjects' educational backgrounds were approximately evenly distributed between high-school only, some college, college degree, some graduate study, and graduate degree. The sample also included a mix of liberals, conservatives and independents. Occupations among the sample ranged from blue collar to white collar and professional, including work in both the public and private sectors. Half the subjects were parents, and of these, roughly half currently have children at home.

The Cognitive Approach

Subjects participated in one-on-one, semi-structured 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 doesn't look for statements of opinion, but for patterns of thought that may even be unconscious. It doesn't look for familiarity with issues in the news, but for more well-established, 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 don't 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, *even people who know on some level that children do not possess adult capacities for judgment and moral reasoning may easily slip into a mode of thinking which attributes exactly these qualities to kids*. These hidden, underlying understandings can be very difficult to challenge and displace, and, if they are not accounted for, they can derail communications.

HIGH PUBLIC AWARENESS

Elicitations research confirms findings from previous studies that there is a high level of public awareness of, and concern about, the issue of child maltreatment. If anything, subjects in our sample tend to exaggerate the extent of the problem.

Q: If you were to guess in numbers or percentages, how many kids do you think are maltreated enough so that the authorities could be brought in on it? One in a thousand, one in ten, half?

A: Like neglect-wise or abuse?

Q: A combination of all of them. Whatever.

A: Altogether? I would say 20-30 percent. A good amount, at least from what I've seen.

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Q: If you had to guess, how many kids would you say are abused or neglected, as a percentage of the population?

A: Percentage of the population?

Q: Yeah.

A: Um, 12, 15, 18? Something like that.

They are also aware that abuse and neglect of kids can have lasting effects.

I think the children should be instantly, instantly taken from that situation [i.e. sexual abuse]… I think that child should be given a chance somewhere else. I mean that's just such a permanent, or maybe not permanent, but that's just such a long term healing thing. I mean talk about taking away your confidence and taking away everything, to put a child in that kind of environment.

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I think adults that had that experience as children [i.e. emotional neglect] have a really hard time expecting those things, because I think early relationships are where you learn what relationships are, and if you don't get it then you don't know it, and if you don't know it it's hard to expect it or to get it or to give it, even.

Additionally, as previous research has established, people are well aware of how awful child maltreatment cases can be – in fact, their associations with the term "abuse" are usually dramatic. The media's focus on sensational cases has planted vivid images in people's minds, which form part of their understanding of the issue. A typical case is Dateline NBC's "Saving Richard" program, which discusses the boy's "systematic torture" at the hands of his mother. (See Appendix 1 for further discussion of previous findings confirmed by the elicitations research.)

It is unlikely that additional messages about the seriousness or pervasiveness of child maltreatment will have a significant effect on public engagement, given how high levels of awareness already are. Instead, messages should focus on conveying new understandings of the problem and its solutions. As Richard Krugman has suggested, advocates "need to give the messenger [i.e. news media] the tools to relate a new message" ("The Media and Public Awareness of Child Abuse and Neglect: It's Time for a Change," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 20,4).

In order to make progress, communications will have to address two major cognitive obstacles to understanding and engaging with the issue – lay people's misconceptions about child development, and their difficulty integrating thinking about the family with thinking about the community. These obstacles are discussed in the sections below.

THE "OTHER-MIND" MISTAKE

The Nurturance Instinct

Many lay people express the idea that we have a natural, inborn desire to take care of children, that parental nurturing is a relationship set up by nature and genetics:

> *If natural baby-ness isn't able to elicit a warmth and loving response from a parent, that concerns me. Because I think it's genetic, it's what they're set up to do, is to make sure we keep them safe and give them love, and that's why they're so cute.*

This insight captures an important truth which has been explored by psychologists, biologists and others. There truly is a universal human mechanism which, all things being equal, leads people to protect and nurture children. This inborn mechanism is triggered by many different cues, including visual features such as large eyes and a large head, which we experience as "cute," and can be activated by drawings as well as real babies, puppies, and other young animals. The nurturance mechanism has obvious advantages for the survival of our species, and is accepted as one of the clearer behavioral products of our evolution.

The "Other-Minds Module"

On the other hand, there is a less well-known cognitive mechanism – just as well established from a scientific point of view – *which often works against our nurturant instincts towards children*. This is what is sometimes called the Other-Minds module – an inborn function which leads people to make automatic guesses and calculations about what other people are thinking. Like the "nurturance module," this mechanism is universal, and has also evolved for clear reasons related to our survival – it allows us to relate to other people, to understand who is on our side and who is against us, to grasp that someone else possesses information. This is the cognitive faculty that takes our perception of bodies moving around us and translates it into the understanding that there are other actors in our presence whom we need to deal with.

Like the nurturance module, the Other-Minds module can be activated by things other than people – by images of people, but also by inanimate objects that seem to have minds and intentions of their own. The notion that a stuck jar lid is deliberately frustrating us – a personifying illusion that can be very powerful! – can be understood as a byproduct of the Other-Minds module.

When it comes to the personification of the objects around us, the operation of the Other-Minds mechanism can seem amusing and even poetic, adding vividness and color to our language and our everyday experience. When it comes to interacting with children, though, this mechanism has a number of distorting effects on our thinking which make child abuse and neglect more likely. The two most general of these are that children are often perceived as disembodied little minds – so that the idea of Developmental Damage is missing from people's thinking – and the second is that children can be seen as people with the same fully developed intentionality as adults. Particularly disturbing is the fact that the Other-Minds illusion is closely connected to emotional arousal – when emotional stakes are high it can induce a "fight or flight" response, obviously working in an opposite direction from the nurturance instinct. The more particular implications of these distortions are explored below.

Distorting effects of the Other-Minds Mechanism

Some of the distortions caused by the Other-Minds mechanism are relatively harmless, and others are clearly dangerous. (Note: These patterns of thinking are so common that it can take a bit of effort to recognize them as cognitive distortions and metaphors.)

- Children as Threats/Competitors

  One of the main functions of the Other-Minds module is to help us guess how others are thinking so that we can calculate the most advantageous actions for ourselves. This competitive/adversarial stance can easily be triggered by any situation that frustrates us, from difficulty manipulating an inanimate object (like trying to fold a garden hose which "refuses" to coil neatly) to dealing with a crying baby, who can seem to be "assaulting" us with its "rage" and "condemnation."

In a PSA publicizing Family Source, Parent Helpline of Florida, a mother is depicted yelling at her crying baby, trying to figure out what the baby "wants." The combination of the high emotional stakes in any intimate relationship and the misconstrual of a child's reflexive behaviors as intentional challenges can easily lead to a mode in which an adult is ready to "fight" a child, as though the child were a grown adversary.

In fact, this aspect of child maltreatment suggests a possible concept for a public service announcement: a frustrating child who turns into an adult in the parent's eyes, along with a reminder that this is just an illusion.

- Discipline at an inappropriate age

  Some of the most common misperceptions about child rearing, according to previous studies, involve the extent to which young children can respond to "moral training," such as punishment designed to teach right from wrong, or the withholding of affection to teach self-sufficiency. One study suggests that most people believe that a six-month-old can be spoiled by getting too much attention, and over a third believe spanking is appropriate even for children under the age of 2 (DYG, Inc., "What Grown-Ups Understand About Child Development").

  Thinking like this arises naturally from the Other-Mind mistake, since kids can be seen as either miniature adults, who are bound by moral rules just like the rest of us – or, only somewhat better, as adults-in-training, whose ultimate success depends mainly on moral guidance that starts as early as possible. (Interestingly, grandparents, who are trusted sources of both advice and childcare, are even more prone to mistakes of this kind than young parents themselves – see DYG, Inc.'s report, "What Grown-Ups Understand About Child Development").

  The bottom line for many practices guided by these misconceptions is that *they make children weaker rather than stronger.* This is the kind of message which, if backed up by additional explanation, should open many people's eyes to a developmental perspective.

  Another point to keep in mind is that while Liberals probably share more views than Conservatives with experts and children's advocates on the whole, they are not necessarily on solid ground when they emphasize the importance of reasoning with very young children. Here a conservative male complains about what he perceives as the prevailing "PC" attitude:

  > *They send parents to parenting classes where they're taught to let the kids do whatever the hell they want and don't touch them. Reason it out. Reasoning it out with a child. You're asking a child to reason at 8, 9, 7. Did you have any reasoning ability at those ages? I certainly didn't. But the government thinks that they should, and do.*

Depending on how we interpret "reasoning ability," his point is not entirely off the mark. When deciding whether to reason with children, people should, but don't, have access to understandings about how and when various capacities develop. This kind of understanding would short circuit the rhetorical, anecdotal, yes-no standoff that is the likely result of any debates where clear developmental perspectives are not available.

- Discipline as "Tit for Tat"

  Related to the previous point is the notion that discipline sometimes slips from a process of "instilling values," to a process of moral accounting, of the sort that we practice with other adults. This conservative woman begins by talking about instilling values, but quickly shifts to an accounting frame:

  > *I really feel like we need to instill more values, and consequences, and respect. More respect. We have gotten too lenient. When I rode the bus in middle school, if we did something wrong, we were either kicked off, or we had to write the rules before we could get back on.*

  While the practice of moral accounting is laudable, it should not be confused with development. The stance she takes could apply as easily to adult criminals as to developing children.

- The "Get Over It" Syndrome

  If people are operating in a mode that excludes the idea of Developmental Damage, they are more likely to feel that a person can change his or behavior simply by an act of will or by learning that a given behavior is wrong. For example, they may feel that a child who grew up in an abusive environment can "learn" by example that abuse is the wrong way to treat people. The following comment comes from a highly educated and sympathetic male subject:

  > *I think that as we grow up and we go into school and do the things we want to do, <u>we watch what other people do, we learn from what other people do</u> and I think that I'm positive just because … there are children who grow up being victims of abuse who are not abusers.*

  While there is certainly some truth to this optimistic, mind-over-matter attitude, it also downplays the lasting effects of developmental damage, and exaggerates the extent to which our intellects and will power can help us overcome dysfunction, if we just choose to put something behind us and learn a better way. Unless people have a concrete understanding of the (objective) mechanisms of Developmental Damage, they are likely to be susceptible to this kind of anecdotal thinking.

> *CHICAGO, IL – Dave Pelzer grew up in a typical suburb, on a colorful middle-class street, with a life straight out of a horror movie. Pelzer…grew up with a mother who decided, when Pelzer was 4, that he was evil – and relegated him to the garage. From then on, until he was rescued at age 12, he was a non-person to his family. He was, as his best-selling book recounts, a child called "it"… "I believe in honesty, dignity and honor," says Pelzer. "I'm a Jimmy Olsen kind of guy. What's your problem, get over it and help your fellow man out."*

The recent film "Antwone Fisher" should also be cited as an example of someone using free will and intentionality to overcome severe abuse. While such stories are real and inspiring, they also undercut an important message about the lasting Developmental Damage caused by maltreatment.

- The Cycle of Abuse

  While elicitations research confirmed the public's awareness that abuse in one generation leads to abuse in the next, it also showed that people have a distorted model of the cycle – they can't really be said to *understand* it. They nearly always think of it in terms of conscious learning (an abstract mental process) rather than understanding it in terms of Developmental Damage:

> *I think basically people do whatever was done to them. I mean there's very little change per generation. I feel like people … don't necessarily make a dramatic change during their lifetime. They may try, and they may succeed to a larger degree than somebody else, but I mean basically I think we teach the way we were taught, and whenever we don't know what to do we fall back on what was done to us.*

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Q: [The cycle of abuse] seems kind of paradoxical in a way, because you'd think that a kid who has been abused has a better idea than anybody how awful it is.

A: You would think so.

Q: And that they'd never, ever want to inflict that on somebody else.

A: But if that's all they know, if that's the only life they know, how would they know there's any difference, if no one ever told them or showed them along the way in life?

This focus on "teaching," "knowing what to do," etc. illustrates the fallacy that treats human behavior as purely the product of abstract qualities like knowledge, choice and intention, while ignoring the very real, objective constraints placed on us by the *physical* state of our cognitive apparatus.

While it is of course a good thing that the cycle is recognized at all, it is also likely that people with a stronger sense of the Developmental Damage caused by maltreatment would have a reinforced sense of how hard and how important it is to break the cycle.

- Sexual Abuse

  The illusion that a child is capable of sexual attitudes similar to those of an adult is one of the more extreme and destructive forms of the Other-Mind mistake. Perpetrators of sexual abuse often explain (and even continue to believe) that *the child seduced them*. The cognitive systems that control emotional and sexual behavior are obviously not well developed in young children (even if children may have more sexual curiosity and initiative than Western society is comfortable granting them). Prevent Child Abuse Georgia's PSA, "Other Woman" is based on this theme, as its title reflects – the father in the scenario at first seems to be defending his flirtation with another woman ("I didn't mean anything by it"), who turns out to be his prepubescent daughter.

  This extreme illusion, which requires a person to ignore so much obvious evidence, is thankfully much more rare than the general "Other-Mind" Mistake. This may be part of why, from the point of view of most lay people, *sexual abuse is in an entirely separate category from other kinds of maltreatment*. While emotional and physical abuse and neglect are all understood as matters of degree, sexual abuse is seen as a distinct kind of behavior that springs from a particular sickness:

  Q: Sexual abuse I would say most of the time has got to be a sickness in the individual who's the molester.

  Q: So that's not the kind [of maltreatment] where anybody is capable of that under the right circumstance?

  A: I wouldn't think so.

- Neglect as Underinvolvement

  If people don't understand the nature of development, especially early childhood development, they are less likely to appreciate the significance of mental neglect – cases where children are receiving too little stimulation and interaction to develop in a healthy way. When thinking along the lines of the Other-Mind mistake, they can even feel that kids need very little in the way of stimulation and interaction before they are old enough to speak – and "learn," "remember," etc., and that talking to them at that early stage won't do anyone any good since they are not yet ready to learn. If children are not yet mental creatures, it follows that

keeping them fed, warm and safe is enough. (Numerous previous studies have confirmed that people underestimate the importance of stimulation and interaction in daycare settings, for example.)

Prevent Child Abuse America's "Working Hypotheses" document states that, "when the public thinks about the issue of child abuse and neglect, it thinks primarily of the most extreme cases, such as those cases resulting in the death of a child or a dramatic incident of neglect that generates local or national news coverage." While this statement is true as applied to "abuse," elicitations research – and a review of previous studies of public understandings – shows that the situation is more complicated with respect to "neglect."

One of the most striking findings from the elicitations was that *when lay people hear the term "neglect," they very often think of what could be called uninvolved parents* – parents who don't spend enough time providing appropriate guidance, teaching values, attending school events and so forth – though extreme cases of physical and mental neglect also come to mind at times.

Q: Do you think neglect is a serious problem?

A: That's the word. Neglect. That's a good word, yeah.

Q: Do you think there's a lot of that?

A: I think there is. The kids are on their own too much. They get a car when they're 16, or they're dropped off at the mall at 7:00 at night and they're picked up at 11.

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Q: One of the other areas how kids get treated is neglect. There again, it seems like it could be tough to draw a line.

A: It's very hard. The kids are the ones in the difficult position. They need that guidance, they need that hand. And if they're not getting it in their own house, they're going to go get it somewhere else.

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Probably in somebody's definition, everybody's been neglectful of their children.

This finding confirms Triad Research Group's observation that, "Participants tended to define 'neglect' as 'not caring,' 'not paying attention,' and/or 'not having an investment in your child'" ("San Diego Residents' Perception of

Services for Children at Risk of Abuse and Neglect," August 2000, for Public Children Services Association of Ohio, on behalf of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency).

Underinvolvement is a very different kind of problem from mental neglect, but unless people have a strong developmental perspective, it is natural for them to interpret "neglect" in terms of concepts and values that are familiar to them.

- Mental Abuse

  While the causes of mental abuse are complex (relating to everything from economic hardship to substance abuse to an adult's emotional history), the Other-Mind mistake is certainly a contributing factor. If parents feel as though they are yelling, screaming and cursing at a person with similar mental qualities to their own, they are more likely to be unrestrained.

  Furthermore, even when people do recognize that mental abuse is wrong, a Cognitive perspective may underestimate the seriousness of the damage that is done, and make the "Get Over It" perspective more likely. DYG, Inc.'s study, "What Grown-Ups Understand About Child Development" reports that many people believe that a six-month old "has no long-term memory and therefore will not suffer any long-term effects from witnessing violence." This belief can easily be chalked up to the Other-Mind Mistake.

  Advocate materials vary in the degree to which they helpfully convey the sense of Developmental Damage. The "Watch What You Say" spots prepared by Prevent Child Abuse Georgia present a strong message that verbal abuse hurts children in a lasting way. But they also reinforce the Other-Mind mistake because they present the harm in terms of the negative messages that kids "believe" – rather than in terms of Developmental Damage caused by this kind of betrayal. A different PSA ("Mirror") depicts a child who becomes more and more upset as we hear a series of insults and other nasty remarks from his mother; the announcer's statement that "the words you use today can scar a child for life" is more compatible with a Developmental Damage perspective (though it is almost certainly interpreted by parents as damage of a more abstract kind). The "X-Ray" spot goes one step further towards communicating a Developmental Damage perspective, because it presents images of physical damage (broken bones) while asking parents to call "before you have a negative impact on your child." But not even this ad goes so far as to mention the developmental harm – i.e. harm done to developing emotional and cognitive systems in the brain – when parents are abusive. A general distortion of the "Other-Minds" fallacy is to neglect the fact that children's mind/brains are not *given*, but *develop*.

Summary: When the Other-Minds mistake leads people to perceive children as intentional and adult-like, they are much less likely to be restrained, and much more likely to treat children inappropriately in a variety of ways. When it leads people to think of children's development mainly in terms of abstract processes like learning,

reason and choice, it minimizes the appreciation of Developmental Damage, and the lasting effects of maltreatment.

RISK FACTORS AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR THE "OTHER-MIND" MISTAKE

While we are always inclined to see others in terms of their abstract qualities of mind, personality and so forth, there are situations which make it especially likely that we will misinterpret kids as intentional actors, and there are also some ways of mitigating the problem.

Risk Factors

- Stress

  One of the main functions of the Other-Minds module is to help us make strategic calculations about how best to survive. One consequence is that we are especially likely to attribute intention to things when we are under stress. Consider that we are more likely to personify an inanimate object that is giving us trouble, than we are to personify the same object when it is working as it is supposed to. Given the inevitable stress associated with raising a child, there are bound to be many moments when we mistakenly attribute intentions to the child – and this illusion can be strong *even for people who certainly know better on some level.*

  When children cry loudly, they are especially likely to seem like they are deliberately making demands – even infants only days or hours old. Under the stressful conditions of listening to a baby's scream, it is logical that the Other-Minds module is activated and we try to read the baby's mind (the activity that the mechanism is really all about), and try to figure out what she *wants*. This way of thinking can lead to some frightening consequences, as discussed above.

- The Family Bubble

  In current American culture, people tend to perceive the family as something like a free-standing world, into which the broader community should not and does not intrude. This is stronger than a simple value or belief, and is closer to a cognitive "filter" – families are understood as a separate domain, and it is hard to even think of family matters and public matters in connection with each other. (See extensive discussion of the Family Bubble model below.)

  One of the consequences of this default cultural pattern is that the nuclear family spends a great deal more time together, and isolated from other generations, than in traditional societies. This intense proximity (even in households where both parents and children are busy with outside activities) can lead to a tendency to interact with children as though they were like adults. This tendency is commonly noted with respect to only children, but is also true for other children.

- Individualism

  Americans' powerful emphasis on self-reliance and independence means that we often *want* our children to develop adult-like minds as quickly as possible (again, even if on another level we want to enjoy the natural parent-child intimacy). This cultural value makes it even more likely that we will ignore the truth of children's developmental status, and fall into the Other-Minds mistake.

Protective Factors

- Understanding of Development

  Clearly, one of the most direct ways of avoiding the fallacies discussed above is to give members of the public clearer ideas about children's development. More specifically, it will be helpful to convey messages about What Works, as opposed to What's Right. Of course, it would never be appropriate (or possible) to *displace* the moral dimension of child rearing, but even when a parent's goal is to teach kindness, self-reliance or confidence, there are ways that are objectively known to be either more or less effective.

  In particular, messages that incorporate information about the brain, and about the important role of give-and-take between a child and the people and things around him, have the potential to get people's attention and shift their thinking about children and development. (See Cultural Logic's report for the FrameWorks Institute and the Mailman Foundation, "Simplifying Early Childhood Development: Findings from Cognitive Analysis and Phone Interviews." The continuation of this work, commissioned by the National Scientific Panel on the Developing Child, is currently under way.)

  An important caveat is that messages about the brain are easily misinterpreted as messages about the intellect rather than the child's total character. Even a pollster hired by child advocates to research public understandings uses "brain" practically as a synonym for intellect: "Participants display some awareness of brain development in the early years of childhood. For the most part, however, they consider emotional security, physical health, and nutrition to be the *primary* needs of infants and very young children; brain and intellectual development are perceived as secondary" (Memo from Peter D. Hart Research Associates to I Am Your Child Foundation, April 2001). *Messages that incorporate information about the brain must be carefully framed in order to affirm that they are about emotion, character and values*, and not just about a child's intellect.

- Calm

  As stress is a risk factor for triggering the Other-Minds module in a way that is destructive to relations with children, a state of calm is more compatible with a nurturant mode, and a more accurate perception of children's state of maturity.

FAMILY BUBBLE VS. VILLAGE: A COGNITIVE CONFLICT THAT UNDERMINES THE MOTIVATION TO PREVENT CHILD ABUSE

> *There are three kinds of abusers. There are the inadequate parents, who simply don't know how to parent. There are people who are crazy, and we really can't discuss rehabilitation for those people; for them it's a matter of whether the psychiatric disorder they suffer can be controlled. And finally, we have people who are evil – or whatever you want to call them – people who do what they want to do because it gratifies them in some way. These people are beyond rehabilitation.*
>
> Andrew Vachs, Attorney/Consultant on child welfare issues

Besides warning the public about the gravity of the problem of child maltreatment, advocate materials and appeals in the media repeatedly call on the public to get involved in the prevention of the problem, by intervening directly or at least reporting acts of child abuse. The idea that "a child is defenseless, you are not" – that responsible adults everywhere are a kind of safety net for children – is pervasive in what the public hears about child abuse.

In this section, we discuss this general message which is both highly *compelling* (and thus tempting for advocates and the media), and also likely to have a somewhat *disempowering* effect on the public. Cognitive analysis suggests that the message implicitly appeals to the public in our "responsible villager" role – our sense that we belong, or should belong, to a close-knit community of people who are aware of each other and work towards common goals. (I.e. the kind of social group that all humans evolved in, and which was essential to their survival – this is the sense of "village" evoked by Hilary Clinton's book, and borrowed from an African proverb.) But in current American society, this role is hamstrung by the competing value of an inviolable "Family Bubble." The result is a kind of paralysis on the part of well-meaning bystanders.

Why is the tendency to appeal to the Village so compelling?

A Village is an effective tool for controlling child abuse – appeals to the Village makes practical sense.

It is clear that village conditions work strongly to reduce many categories of child abuse. Anthropological evidence suggests that in traditional village settings *neglect* of all kinds, *sexual abuse* of children, *maltreatment of infants* by their mothers, and *chronic physical abuse*, all occur at significantly lower rates than in more modern human communities. (The Village condition is not a panacea, of course. Episodic

and unpredictable violence against children – typically stemming from loss of control, even leading to death – still lead to occasional tragedies.)

The idea of the Village is deeply rooted.

An evolutionary psychological perspective suggests that as a species we are designed to bring up children using both the Family setting and a set of circumstances which can be summarized as the Village context. The "Family plus Village" formula is in this view a basic human adaption, comparable to breastfeeding. Because a Village condition has until recently been a human universal, the idea of the Village is deeply rooted.

The Conflict Between the Village and the Family Bubble

The Village concept seems like an antidote to child abuse, in a variety of different ways, but it tends repeatedly to come up against the competing idea of the "Family Bubble." The result is often a kind of cognitive paralysis – the literal or figurative bystander wants to do the right thing, but the right thing turns out to violate the value of the "Family Bubble." Consider the following aspects of the Village:

- Shared Community Standards: Knowing Child Abuse When We See It

  One basic feature of a Village setting is that there tends to be a fair amount of agreement about what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable behavior. As a result, the responsible villager is ready to pass judgement in his or her own mind about others' behavior. This eventually allows a person to take action against the offender.

  In the modern setting, however, the situation is often more complicated, since a kind of moral relativism prevails: Some people are much stricter with their children than others. Some believe in corporal punishment while others don't. Some spend more time with their children, or keep a closer eye on their strollers than others do.

  The result can be uncertainty about our own judgment that an event or situation is abusive, and about whether others would agree.

  In this quote from the elicitations research, a conservative woman at first resists the possibility that there can be a shared definition of abuse, but then catches herself and acknowledges that there are some standards everyone should agree on:

  Q: Do you think it's possible to tell another family what is or isn't appropriate for discipline?

  A: No, I don't think anybody should tell them that. No legislature/ uh, well yeah I guess you have to at some point.

One attempt to resolve the question of *what* constitutes maltreatment is to focus instead on *who* is committing a given act. Child abuse and neglect are what certain kinds of people do, and we can recognize them by certain markers, such as socio-economic status or race. News stories about maltreatment often highlight things that have little to do with the maltreatment itself, but that serve as signs that the perpetrators are the kinds of people who would commit such a crime: If you can't keep your yard clean, you're likely to be the kind of person who beats his kids. Alternatively, the coverage of Michael Jackson dangling his baby over a balcony extends to commentary about the way he dresses his children and other markers of his deviance.

- Trusting Others

The Village condition presupposes that most adults that children encounter are fundamentally decent. This assumption (when true) is very helpful because it allows children to be supervised by a much wider group of individuals than the nuclear family. In contemporary America, this assumption is constantly undermined, especially by media coverage which highlights deviance, and by a constant flow of appalling statistics and events.

> News story*: Friends and neighbors of the Keintz family reacted with astonishment upon learning that Keintz was charged in the baby's death. He had been watching the girl and her 11-month-old sister when the infant was injured. One friend remembered seeing Keintz around her baby, and recalled a gentle man who took to children easily. "A lot of us thought, 'Boy, his wife is really getting a great guy.'"*

Several studies have shown that news stories about children tend to focus on violence and crime (e.g. "The Local Television News Media's Picture of Children," Children Now, 2001; "Coverage in Context: How Thoroughly the News Media report Five Key Children's Issues," Kunkel, Smith, Suding, Biely for Casey Journalism Center on Children and Families, U. of MD., February 2002).

To take an example, "Many Sexually Abused, Study Says" is the headline of an article that reports that in Massachusetts one in five women say they were sexually abused as children. In this media environment, it is easy to internalize the message that many, many of us are depraved.

> *Do I think [sexual abuse] goes on? Sure. Do I think it goes on any more now than it did in 1900? No. I would say that for the 20 years of government interference, I would say comparing kids from 1900 and the year 2000 in America's society, I would say the percentages of abuse to a child has not increased since 1900. Or 1800, for that matter.*

The implication of this quote is that sexual abuse is a part of human nature. One simple adaptation to the loss of the village is to teach kids not to trust strangers. In a society where it is easy for adults to be alone with children, it becomes important for children to learn how to defend themselves (in cases where this is at all possible). The "You're In Charge" PSA's from Prevent Child Abuse North Carolina convey the message to kids that they have choices, and shouldn't automatically be obedient and acquiescent to adults who do things that make them uncomfortable.

At the same time, however, treating everyone as a potential suspect conflicts with the possibility of creating a Village-like setting, and itself makes people feel uncomfortable. Consider the ambivalence inherent in the following news story:

> *As spring arrives, so do baseball games, soccer matches, scout campouts for kids – and criminal background checks for many parents…More drastic steps – such as lifetime supervision for sex offenders – are necessary, some experts say…Also, critics question whether disclosure of long-ago arrests for non-sexual offenses unfairly damages reputations and excludes worthy volunteers.*

The effect (and perhaps the intent) of the story is to elicit a sense of conflict in the reader, one that undermines the message that we should act more like responsible villagers.

- Social Control

  While there might not be formal authority in a traditional Village setting, there is always a good deal of informal social control. Deviant behavior is likely to lead very quickly to sanctions by the group in the form of shaming, physical intervention, shunning and so forth.

  In the contemporary setting, as depicted by the media and as experienced by our informants, there is an uncomfortable lack of social control, crudely and ineffectively compensated by formal authority structures (police, courts, social services, etc.).

  > *TRENTON, NJ – New Jersey's child welfare officials have lost track of 110 children in cases of suspected abuse, with caseworkers checking their files in the wake of the brutal child abuse death of 7-year old Faheem Williams, whose decomposed body was found in a plastic garbage bin.*
  >
  > *INDIANAPOLIS, IN – It's their mandate: Save the children from abuse and neglect. But even after Child Protection Services responds to reports of child mistreatment, Indiana children are dying – at a rate that has nearly doubled in the past five years.*

> *"Almost every child who is placed in foster care is on some sort of psychotropic medication, usually Ritalin and Prozac," says Pia Menon, formerly of the Office of the Public Guardian in Cook County… "They were on drugs because it is systematically convenient. The children were easier to manage, and generally drugs were given as a substitute for nurturing."*

Dateline NBC's "Saving Richard" episode – a typical if longer than average example of media coverage of the issue – focused on the question, "When it comes to child abuse, does the punishment fit the crime?" and expressed shock that the child's parents had received "no jail, just psychological counseling and parenting classes" from a lenient court, following an earlier episode of abuse.

The result is a dilemma in which the bystander to child abuse is constantly informed by the media about the ineffectiveness of government institutions, and at the same time realizes (and is often reminded) of his own powerlessness as a "responsible villager."

This aspect of the absent Village is effectively illustrated by the following newspaper column that recounts the columnist's experience of witnessing a mother verbally abusing her child:

> *Now what to do with this curbside, open-air child abuser? There's no guidance counselor out here on the street. No protocol. No institution to guide my action. If I say something to this woman, is there a reasonable expectation she'll change her behavior? … Her slurs on the little girl become increasingly unprintable. This woman is forcing the moment to its crisis. Do I dare? No, I don't. I walk on past like a guilty thing, leaving the mother to her business. Just around the corner on Irving Street there's a man waiting for the Metrobus. He's also been watching and listening to the mother. He and I make eye contact for a quick moment. Surely it's a look of disgust that he and I exchange. Disgust for whom? The mother? Ourselves? The frayed fabric of our community? A combination of all these, perhaps.*

Even when advice is offered about ways of getting involved (i.e. recreating the village), the inherent difficulty is implied.

> *Bystanders observing a parent on the verge of physical abuse should be ready to intervene – with a sympathetic comment rather than a rebuke, experts say. They advise friends and neighbors to report any serious suspicions of abuse, even without firm proof. (Newspaper column)*
>
> *****
>
> *If you notice that the child's parents seem stressed, you might offer to watch their child for an afternoon or weekend or run errands for them. You can also mention parenting strategies that work for you during stressful times. Serious signs of abuse, which include frequent and unexplained bruises or injuries,*

should be reported to police or to child protective services even in you feel you lack substantial evidence. (parenting magazine)

On the one hand, the bystander is advised to befriend a troubled parent, and on the other hand to be ready to turn in that parent. Though the policy makes sense, the juxtaposition of a recommendation to "build parent's trust when possible" followed by the recommendation to "betray parent's trust when necessary" puts the bystander in an uncomfortable position, one that does not necessarily encourage involvement.

- Highly permeable Family Bubble

  One characteristic of the Village setting is that a child typically has access to more than one household of relatives, and might normally spend time in more than one. This has clear implications for child abuse at several levels: Parents who feel overwhelmed can be easily relieved of the burden of parenting; children who are unhappy at home and who are old enough to be mobile can "vote with their feet;" relatives can cajole parents into letting a child stay with them for a while. As a result, serious neglect is all but precluded, and cruelty is less likely to dominate a child's life.

  Among the consequence of the "Family Bubble," by contrast, are the fact that children are less likely to leave a bad home situation, and that families are more likely to feel scarred and betrayed when they lose custody of children to social services. That is to say, there is an inherent opposition between the Family Bubble and the outside world, which greatly amplifies the psychological and moral conflict over custody – and bystanders' sense of which action is right and appropriate.

  A number of symptoms of this conflict are regularly reported on by the media, and our informants were strongly aware of the zero-sum game nature of the relationship between Family Bubble and State.

  "This issue of family preservation versus child protection has been with us since Colonial times," says Cathy Barbelle of the Child Welfare League of America. "Teddy Roosevelt gave us a policy, but the problem of how we address and deal with child abuse remains unresolved." The tension between the two groups has prevented child welfare from accomplishing the important goals first set in 1909. The opposing views also have created a contradiction between policy and practice. "The policy has been one of family support, but the practice has been one of child protection through family disruption," says Golden.

  To take a different angle on the same issue of the Family Bubble, consider that one of the protective features of the Village condition is the transparency of the

Family Bubble. As Native American informants report, the lack of privacy in traditional villages made child sexual abuse all but impossible. (This changed once villagers were placed in Western-style houses equipped with individual bedrooms.) The point of this observation is confirmed by a recent report commissioned by Prevent Child Abuse America. "What tends to impede action is the very fact that child abuse occurs within the family and is therefore easily concealed …" "A Qualitative Study on Child Abuse Awareness and Concept Development" (Nicholas Research, 2001).

The obvious recommendation is to increase the transparency of the home environment, for instance through home visitation programs. This approach, of course, directly conflicts with the deeply rooted understanding of the Family Bubble as a private and protected space. The response from conservatives has been consistent. Consider the opening salvo of a column by Phyllis Schlafly:

> *Are the American people willing to allow government agents to come into their homes to "advise" them about how to care for their babies? What if the announced purpose of these home visits is to look for child abuse under the assumption that all parents are suspects.*

Elicitations subjects also routinely interpreted the idea of a home visit as an inspection.

Q: It turns out that one of the most effective ways of reducing this problem is through home visits to at-risk families. You send somebody from the Department of Human Services and send them to the house, they talk to the parents, have a conversation, maybe more than once. What do you think about that kind of program?

A: It's all in the follow up. The success of those programs would depend on the resources that the investigating party *has to make changes if they deem they're necessary.*

*****

Q: So in terms of reducing this problem, one of the things that people have tried is home visits to families where there seems like there is a risk of abuse or mistreatment. What do you think about that?

A: … It's a good idea but I don't think it will work. I mean because / Announced, I don't think is a good idea. Like if it is announced. Like "okay, we are going to be there on Tuesday at 4 in the afternoon." …

Q: So that is not a good idea?

A: That is not a good idea at all. Because then they are just going to fix things up, you know? And just put on a show for you.

The same conflict plays out at the level of policy:

> *CHICAGO, IL – The McHenry County Board may reconsider whether to accept a $102,000 state child-abuse prevention grant, barely one month after rejecting the grant because of concerns over privacy rights and government intrusions into family life.*

So even while observing the political process at second-hand, bystanders face an uncomfortable dilemma involving the Family Bubble: child protection or sanctity and preservation of the family.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROMOTING THE VILLAGE

Advocates and policymakers who want to take advantage of some of the protective aspects of a stronger, village-like community are a bit like nutritionists who have to design a diet for astronauts in space through careful analysis of nutritional requirements. Just as they can't simply recommend the "Mediterranean diet," advocates cannot simply recommend a "Village lifestyle." Instead, we must carefully identify and implement the most protective aspects of the Village, keeping in mind the tendency for Village-related ideas to conflict with the deeply rooted "Family Bubble."

With this in mind, the above analysis reinforces the value of several approaches currently being pursued by advocates, and suggests a couple of cautionary notes:

- Creating a sense of Village

  Much of the coverage of child abuse implies the loss or absence of the Village, which strips the audience of a source of motivation for involvement. Some coverage, however, does depict various aspects of the Village, not in explicit terms, of course.

  The creation of childcare "safe environment" programs, or "safe places," for example, recreates a significant aspect of the Village – a protective lack of privacy more like a village square than a bedroom. It is not a return to the Village, but a recreation of one significant protective aspect of the Village.

  Alternatively, the simple act of recognition by the community can have positive effects. Children are rendered valuable by being recognized as members of the Village, and one home visitation program is described as follows:

  > *The program, in effect, will say to such families, "here we have a new life and a new beginning," England said.*

Associating a home visitation program with a welcoming ritual invokes the Village's ability to affirm the value of both child and parents.

- Continuing to establish community standards

  Advocates have done an excellent job of working to establishing widely-accepted standards of what constitutes appropriate behavior in disciplining children. Polls show that attitudes toward spanking are shifting, and research including elicitations suggest that even many conservatives are coming around – people are ambivalent about spanking even when they do not come out and condemn it.

  At the same time, it is important to avoid getting too far ahead of the curve and suggesting, for example, that the idea of "punishment" is itself inappropriate, and should be abandoned.

- Avoiding recommendations that are difficult to follow or not matched to the problem

  Many of the examples discussed in this section refer to the motivational paralysis that people can feel when put in the position of a "failed" villager. Some public service announcements in particular, leave out any indication of a practical solution – to a truly horrifying depiction of a loathsome crime. The idea behind the ads is presumably to shock and galvanize the public into action. The effect, however, is too often to simply promote a kind of "learned helplessness" in the viewer.

  Sometimes the problem is a disconnect between the problem and the solution – a horrifying crime and the recommendation that we access a website for further information. This tendency can occur in coverage of policy discussions as well. Here is an example of a more helpful framing of the problem and its solution:

  > *CHICAGO, IL – Parents Care and Share of Illinois is starting a chapter this week in Elgin for parents and caregivers of children who need to let off a little steam. "When your kids are misbehaving and you think you're the only one who's having that problem, you feel pretty awful about it," said Susie Kline, regional director of the child abuse prevention program….The Parents Care program…aims to support caregivers of children of all ages who fear stress is affecting their caregiving.*

  In this example, the problem (stress) is proportional to its solution (letting off steam).

- Avoid forcing a choice between Village and "Family Bubble"

  When confronted directly with the opposition between family and outside forces, many people tend to support the family and exclude Village thinking. They may

even reject the whole idea that connections to the broader community are valuable:

Q: Do think that when people are more isolated that they're more likely to be abusive? Do you think that could be a factor?

A: What do you mean...

Q: Like a family that has very few connections, or a mother, a father, that has very few connections to other people, do you think that makes them any more likely to be abusive?

A: No, I don't think so. Maybe if they don't have a lot of things going on the outside, maybe they're spending more time with their children, they're more aware what their child's doing. Sometimes I think it's the people who have these, you know, country club action, out here, out there, doing this, going here, and the children are left alone a lot, I think that's the problem.

A number of longer articles in the "soft" news category do a fine job of framing the social support idea, using metaphors of connection and avoiding the psychological conflict between family and community or State:

> *"It's like there's an invisible string from their heart to mine," says one family support worker. "When they tug on the string, I'm there."*

This quote illustrates a blurring of the boundary between family and Village – the support worker frames herself almost as part of the household's extended family.

Or in another piece,

> *Parents who have never lifted a finger against their children – but who fit the profile of those who might – are getting loving, intensive care and friendship that could stop abuse before it happens.*

One way to defuse the conflict between family and community is to emphasize the advantages of visitation for the parents as individuals:

> *CHICAGO, IL – In Rich and Bloom Townships, teen mothers are learning that having a baby doesn't have to mean abandoning all of their dreams.*

CONCLUSION: SIMPLE CAUSAL MESSAGES

On most if not all issues, members of the public respond strongly to clear, simple causal stories. When people understand how carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases accumulate in the atmosphere and act as a blanket trapping heat, they are more likely to support policies to reduce carbon emissions. When they understand that modern fishing nets can scrape the bottom of the ocean, they realize that preservation of ocean ecosystems requires urgent action.

Simple causal stories are relatively lacking in discussions of the child maltreatment issue. This is partly because the causes of the problem are complex and varied, but also because advocates have relied on the power of tragic stories and statistics to move public opinion. These tactics have been effective, but may now have reached the limits of their ability, in themselves, to change people's thinking. If they are reinforced by explanations that help people understand the problem and its solutions more clearly, communications stand a chance of having a much greater impact.

Two chief cognitive obstacles currently stand in the way of greater public engagement: people's lack of a Developmental (as opposed to an Other-Mind) perspective, and the Family Bubble model. On each of these issues there are some simple causal stories that advocates can develop and emphasize. On the one hand, advocates can communicate, for example, that a child who has suffered the stress of severe abuse has a brain that is measurably smaller and less developed in some areas than another child's (Developmental Damage); that stress triggers a reaction in adults that makes children's actions look more intentional than they are; that withholding affection stunts certain aspects of development, producing babies who are less able to deal with stress – i.e. weaker and less self-reliant – than those who are showered with affection*;* that a baby who is talked to very frequently (far from being "spoiled" by the attention), is stimulated to develop preverbal behaviors ("cooing") faster, and likely to be happier when left alone because she has a more highly developed tool for entertaining herself. These developmental explanations can reduce the confusing and polarizing emphasis on parents' competence, and help defuse rhetorical, values-based arguments. They can also help people gain a clearer, more objective picture of what counts as abuse/neglect – definitions which are sorely needed, as previous research has pointed out.

There are also simple causal stories about families and "the village" that can be emphasized more in advocates' communications – such as the (unnatural) burdens placed on individual parents and families by the mobility in our society. These causal scenarios do not need to challenge the Family Bubble directly – which would probably be futile – but can help people see more clearly some particular reasons and methods for bridging between children and the broader community. Concrete examples of practices and institutions that do this bridging can also help shift people's thinking – for example, a description of a community parenting center, where (normal, competent) parents can came to get helpful advice and support could help open people's eyes to the value of restoring community connections.

Values-based messages about helping children will always be appropriate and motivating, but they can be powerfully supplemented by these objective explanations

that help people form a clearer picture of how and why children are suffering, and how adults can help.

APPENDIX 1: CONFIRMING PREVIOUS FINDINGS ABOUT PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF CHILD MALTREATMENT

A great many previous studies have explored public understandings relating to child abuse. Data gathered in the course of the elicitations research confirmed many of the findings from this work. While our focus in the report is on aspects of the issue that have received less attention – and some areas of disagreement with previous analyses – it is worth noting the areas where elicitations findings reinforce current hypotheses in the field about what the public thinks.

- The term "abuse" commonly evokes extreme and sensational images.
- People are aware that maltreatment is widespread.
- Child abuse seems to spring from universal and unchanging aspects of human nature:
- It is hard for people to agree on what counts as child abuse.
- When people do grapple with the definition of child abuse, their thoughts consistently gravitate to a particular set of factors.

  These factors are summarized, for example, in Nicholas Research's "Qualitative Study on Child Abuse Awareness and Concept Development" (2001, for PCAA):

  > "[M]ost [focus group participants] believe abuse occurs when discipline is out of control, when it is administered with anger, when, if it is physical discipline, visible signs result and when, if it is verbal discipline, words go beyond reprimand and reasonable to hurtful and demeaning so that here too the outcome, even if not visible, is long-lasting."

- For the most part, people feel powerless to do much about preventing child abuse; they do not readily perceive solutions.
- People understand that an abused child is more likely to ultimately become an abuser.
- People are very reluctant to remove a child from a family.
- People agree that most parents could use much more help and information.
- African-Americans tend to believe in, and be proud of, "traditional" child rearing methods, which usually means stricter discipline, and a greater emphasis on fear of punishment.

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.

Cognitive interviews

Because cultural models tend to be organized into distinct and recognizable patterns, they lend themselves to qualitative investigation. The cognitive interview format is designed to approximate a "natural conversation" (Quinn 1982). In an interview situation people are often most comfortable providing cultural theories (explicit and familiar explanations which are known to have general currency); the semi-structured interview puts them in a situation which encourages them instead to do their own reasoning about the issues we are interested in, i.e., to use the relevant cultural models.

Skilled interviewing shifts the informant away from a "performing" mode and toward a "training" mode. The natural give and take of a conversation puts informants in a position of teaching the interviewer how to think about a given issue. The analyst's job is to identify cultural assumptions, first in the interview setting by responding to and subtly challenging or asking for clarification of intuited premises, and second in the analysis of transcriptions by making these assumptions explicit.

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).

THE AUTHORS

Cultural Logic, founded 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 impact. Working with a network of experts and partner organizations including the FrameWorks Institute and the Rockridge Institute, we focus primarily on research relating to public interest issues.

Cultural Logic investigates the shared understandings – *cultural models* – that underlie opinion and behavior, applying the latest findings from the cognitive and social sciences to generate analyses of how people think and talk about specific cultural domains – such as teenagers, global warming or health insurance. Research techniques include cognitive interviews, rapid ethnographic assessments, "TalkBack" testing of language and framing, analysis of media and other public discourse, and preflighting messages for communications campaigns.

Cultural Logic's research has been presented at the Aspen Institute's Wye River Conference Center, the White House Conference on Teenagers, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund's Pocantico Conference Center, the Benton Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the W. T. Grant Foundation, among other forums.

Axel Aubrun, Ph.D., cofounder of Cultural Logic, is a psychological anthropologist whose research and publications take an interdisciplinary approach to problems of communication and motivation. Aubrun has been a lecturer in cultural anthropology at the University of California, and manager of public relations for an advertising firm in San Diego.

Joseph Grady, Ph.D., cofounder of Cultural Logic, is a linguist whose academic research and publications focus on the relationship between metaphor and other aspects of thought and communication. Grady has taught linguistics at Georgetown University and the University of Maryland, and also spent a number of years as a consultant helping to analyze and develop brand names.