A FrameWorks Institute eZine
Child Poverty

This eZine, the fifth in the series for Kids Count, takes up an important policy issue - child poverty - and examines it through the lens of communications research. Here, we ask and answer three critical questions:

> What do adults think about child poverty, and how do they think about it?

> How does this understanding advantage certain policy solutions and disadvantage others?

> What can be done to reframe public understanding in such a way that it supports the policy solutions that child poverty experts tell us are most effective?

Together, the answers to these questions constitute a situation analysis, a kind of quick sketch of what advocates confront as they take this issue into public discourse.

This eZine draws from three sources: (1) public opinion research analyzed by Margaret Bostrom in past FrameWorks projects, (2) the scholarly work of George Lakoff on metaphorical reasoning and its impact on political attitudes, and (3) the work of Shanto Iyengar and his colleagues at UCLA on the effect of media presentations of poverty on political attitudes.

In general, this eZine assesses the opinion climate in which issues of child poverty are likely to be heard and discussed, from the perspective of strategic frame analysis. Starting from the maxim that "if the facts don't fit the frame, the facts will be rejected, not the frame," what else can strategic frame analysis as a method help us understand about how to weigh in on this issue with the public? A word of caution to policy experts: this is about public perceptions and how they help or hurt your policy prescriptions; it is not about the validity of those perceptions. The child poverty issue affords advocates a good opportunity to test what you've learned about communicating social issues from the other eZines and to see if your instincts and your methods of analysis lead you in the right directions!

WHAT AND HOW DO AMERICANS THINK ABOUT CHILD POVERTY?

When adults think about poverty in general, they tend to think of it as the product of a deficit in character rather than as the product of social forces. They personalize poverty and, in this sense, they over-estimate free will and under-estimate social constraints. As a result, there are a number of frames that come to mind when people think about poverty. While some people are seen as "choosing" poverty (lazy people on welfare), a related model is that poverty is like alcoholism and some people are simply predisposed (not entirely their own fault) or weak (they should be stronger). But there is also unanimity of opinion on several points. "Individuals are solely responsible for their situation and their salvation," concludes Meg Bostrom from a series of focus groups conducted in 1999. "Part of the American psyche is that any child can grow up to be President - there are no limitations on anyone. Ultimately, a message will not be successful if it collides with this core value." Here are the voices of focus group informants:

"I'm the grandson of a share cropper. I look back at my great grandfather and his father is on a farm and everybody trying to improve down that chain. My father never finished sixth grade but he put all of his kids through school. He worked two jobs (to put) all of his kids through school."
"I don't get into what the government should do or what school should do or what the teacher should do. It is your kid. It is your problem You fix it and then tell everybody how you did it and maybe you'll get 10 million more people to do that."

"You have to teach the individual to be responsible for themselves, and if they have kids, they need to be responsible for themselves first and take care of the kids."

"Some don't even try to save themselves. We had the CETA program,...They didn't even attend classes to get the learning to try to help themselves."

"The working poor should try to save whatever they can so they can get up and out of the predicament that they're in."

These colorful explanations of how poverty works are confirmed by survey research as the dominant view. Americans "reject a systemic cause for poverty, agreeing that "most people who don't get ahead shouldn't blame the system, they have only themselves to blame" (71% agree, 36% strongly in a national survey).
Finally, Bostrom points out, "people hold conflicting views about government's role in eliminating poverty. They are divided between believing 'the government in Washington should do everything possible to improve the standard of living of all Americans' (51%) and believing 'this is not the government's responsibility, each person should take care of themselves' (46%)."
If we think of this definition of poverty carefully, following what we know about cultural

models, we begin to see that the solutions proposed by advocates - more money, more systemic reforms, more neighborhood supports, etc. - do not address this frame for the problem. These public policies are not "solutions" Americans can connect to problems in personal values. To inoculate weak characters against poverty, according to this reasoning, you must teach habits and routines that help them value work, practicing self-discipline and delayed gratification through savings.

When poverty is discussed in the context of children and family, it is further complicated by Americans' notion of the exclusive role of parents and the weak role of community in raising children. By weak, we mean that most people have a hard time thinking of anything that communities could or should be doing to help parents. If the child has a problem, it is the parents' job to fix the problem. Anyone else - neighbor, counselor, government - can easily overstep their bounds and be viewed as a "buttinsky." So powerful is this idea that FrameWorks researchers see "the bad parent" as the "default frame," an element of the frame that "fills in the blanks" even when the parent is invisible. If we take this information into account, we see that solutions that address "family" quickly get mired in discussions of a logical sequence: how to fix the parent in order to fix the child.

FAMILY VALUES AND THE MODELS AND METAPHORS OF POVERTY

In his book *Moral Politics*, George Lakoff argues that the divisions between political conservatives and liberals result from fundamental differences in worldview rooted in their different beliefs about idealized family life. And, thinking metaphorically as most people do to make sense of abstractions, people see the nation as a family and derive their notions of appropriate political responses from these analogies. One the one hand, we think of our founding "fathers" and, on the other hand, we worry about the "nanny state." Big brother is a bad role for government, etc. Once you become aware of this system, you will see it everywhere. Now let's look at how the system undergirds both liberal and conservative world views, by pulling a series of important passages from Lakoff's work: Liberals "see the federal government as a strong nurturant parent, responsible for making sure that the basic needs of its citizens are met: food, shelter, education, health care, and opportunities for self-development. A government that lets many of its citizens go hungry, homeless, uneducated, or sick while the majority of its citizens have more, often much more, than these basic needs met is an immoral irresponsible government...Social programs are also seen by liberals as ways for the government to simultaneously help people and strengthen itself. From this perspective, social programs are conceptualized metaphorically as investments - investments in presently unproductive citizens...to make them productive citizens...The measure of a social program is whether it produces a return on the investment. The question is not whether to have social programs, but rather which ones work well."

"Liberals also conceptualize social programs as investments in communities....If this is

done wisely, there can be a multiplier effect and the result can be a net creation of wealth for the society as a whole....Liberals also see many social programs as functioning to promote fairness...For historical, social or health reasons, which are not faults of their own, such people have been prevented from being able to compete fairly in pursuit of their self-interest...For liberals, it is the job of the government to maintain fairness, in the service of both moral self-interest and self-development."

To conservatives, however, "social programs amount to coddling people - spoiling them. Instead of having to learn to fend for themselves, people can depend on the public dole. This makes them morally weak, removing the need for self-discipline and will-power. Such moral weakness is a form of immorality."

"The myth of America as the Land of Opportunity reinforces this. If anyone, no matter how poor, can discipline himself to climb the ladder of opportunity, then those that don't do so have only themselves to blame. The Ladder of Opportunity metaphor...implies that the ladder is there, that everyone has access to it, and that the only thing involved in becoming successful and being able to take care of oneself is putting out the energy to climb it."

"There is a world of difference, from the conservative perspective, between having government help a victim of a natural disaster (who does not have himself to blame for his misfortune) and having government help someone who is merely poor (who in this land of opportunity, has only himself to blame for his poverty."

Finally, this worldview "assumes that it is human nature to be motivated by rewards and deterred by punishments. If people were not rewarded for being self-disciplined and punished for being slothful, there would be no self-discipline and society would break down. Therefore, any social or political system in which people get things they don't earn, or are rewarded for lack of self-discipline or for immoral behavior, is simply an immoral system."

Here's a simple chart, extrapolated from *Moral Politics*, to help make these two perspectives clearer:

MORAL POLITICS AT A GLANCE

STRICT FATHER	NURTURANT PARENT
Promotes self-discipline, responsibility and self-reliance	Promotes empathetic behavior and fairness
Upholds the morality of reward and punishment	Promotes fulfillment in life
Prevents interference with pursuit of self-interest by self-disciplined people	Protects those who cannot protect themselves
Protects moral people from external evil	Helps those who cannot help selves
Gives priority to upholding moral order	Gives priority to nurturing and strengthening oneself in order to nurture oneself and others

To begin to apply this perspective to poverty policy, see if you can rationalize the appeal of the "Just Say No" campaign to conservatives concerned about rising drug use among teens. Why did it make sense? How did the solution "fit" the problem? If you said that it showed moral strength in a situation that was "about" self-discipline, you're on the right track to understanding how the Strict Father system works.

Then take a look at your morning paper and see if you can find a poverty frame - and ask yourself what solutions are being advantaged and disadvantaged by the way the issue is defined. For example, a page one story on "Wealthy Nations Propose Doubling Poor's Debt Relief," the Sunday, September 17 New York Times yielded this:

"This year, (financial leaders in rich nations) plan to endorse an array of new antipoverty programs, allocating funds to fight AIDS and spread education... The focus on poverty is possible, in part, because the world has rarely enjoyed better economic health. Like gamblers on credit, they (the indebted nations) end up with a hangover of high interest rates."

In the economic health metaphor, poverty is a disease and education is its cure. We see this in the quotation, as we see the idea that poverty is a self-caused immoral condition - like getting drunk or gambling. Lakoff argues that poverty is seen as both a form of immorality and disease - a kind of 'moral disease.' The political solutions for conservatives are not about debt relief (another disease term), but about moral strength through self-discipline. Is this solution likely to make sense to conservatives?

Of course, the world is not easily divided between conservatives and liberals, strict father practitioners and nurturant parents. These are perspectives that we all use from time to time to make sense of the world. As Cultural Logic scholars have suggested, we "toggle" back and forth between competing mindsets, based on the cues provided us and the strength of our internal models. The problem for those who would favor a nurturant parent policy agenda is, as Lakoff argues, that the language of nurturance is far less developed than that of authority in American culture. So even those who may feel uncomfortable endorsing a policy that seems at variance with the basic values have trouble articulating an alternative.

Just as computers have a "default" that will come into play when no preference is expressed, so our minds have "default" images and models that will literally fill in the blanks for us when no specific contextual information is supplied. When no explanation comes to mind to make sense of new poverty figures, for example - why is it up/down/static, and what does this mean? - the mind will "default" to what it knows about poverty. Until advocates of nurturance are able to paint robust models of poverty that are empathetic and effective, they are unlikely to be able to displace the clear

attraction of the old rules of reward and punishment that strict father morality provides.

MEDIA EFFECTS ON ATTITUDES TOWARD POVERTY

Where do people get these default notions? How are they fed and nurtured in the human mind? After all, most Americans do not have daily contact with poor people. The answer is that their images and models are mediated, supplied by intermediaries, not direct experience.

"To identify the frames in which television news embeds the issue of poverty," Shanto Iyengar reprised an earlier analysis of 191 poverty-related news reports. Using an experimental method that allows scholars to empirically compare the impact of specific news reports on political attitudes, Iyengar and his colleagues exposed viewers to poverty reporting that featured either societal frames or individual victim frames. After exposure to a newscast in which only one story addressed poverty, the informants were asked "In your opinion, what are the most important causes of poverty?" and "If you were asked to prescribe ways to reduce poverty, what would you suggest?"

The societal frames - which Iyengar also calls "thematic" - featured "information bearing on national trends (e.g., the poverty rate, the number of states experiencing significant increases in hunger, changes in the government's definition of poverty, etc.) or matters of public policy (the Reagan administration's proposals to curtail various social welfare programs, allegations of fraud in welfare programs, etc.) These are essentially...stories in which the object of the coverage is abstract and impersonal."

"In the individual-victim frame, by contrast, poverty is covered in terms of personal experience; the viewer is provided a particular instance of an individual or family living under economic duress." This type of coverage, which Iyengar has termed "episodic" is the dominant form of news coverage for most social issues. In fact, in a recent review of more than 10,000 stories of foreign affairs on five local television stations, a report for the FrameWorks Institute found episodic stories were 97% of the coverage. As Iyengar concludes, "poverty is clearly an individual-level rather than a societal phenomenon."

The problem with the over-representation of this kind of coverage is that episodic coverage tends to reinforce notions of individual responsibility. "When poverty was described in societal terms, individuals assigned responsibility to societal factors - failed government programs, the political climate, economic conditions, and so on. Conversely, when news coverage of poverty dwelled on particular instances of poor people, individuals were more apt to hold the poor causally responsible."

Iyengar also found that "race appears to be a meaningful contextual cue when Americans

think about poverty....When the poor person was white, causal and treatment responsibility for poverty were predominantly societal; when the poor person was black, causal and treatment responsibility were more individual." Iyengar discounts the easy explanation that the informants were "anti-black"; rather, he suggests, "the observed racial differences fluctuated with the particular victim (suggesting) that race more effectively evoked stored knowledge concerning responsibility for poverty..."

Iyengar concludes that "the national debate over social welfare policy has traditionally been formulated in terms of specific beneficiary groups such as children, women, minorities, or the disabled. The results reported here suggest that framing welfare programs in terms of particular beneficiary groups will weaken rather than strengthen public support for welfare."

Here is a simple diagram of the way that media frames advantage and disadvantage certain types of political interpretations:

MEDIA EFFECTS AT A GLANCE

EPISODIC	THEMATIC
About Individuals	About Issues
Events-oriented	Trends-oriented
Psychological	Political/Environmental
Defines issues as private	Defines Issues as public
Appeal to Consumers	Appeal to Citizens
Better Information is solution	Better Policies
Treatment Responsibility	Causal Responsibility
(Fix the Person)	(Fix the Condition)

REFRAMING PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF POVERTY

If we knew the answer to this proposition, we would be shouting it from the rooftops, not writing this eZine. But there are real lessons that emerge from these three bodies of work. Here are some suggestions that make sense to this communications practitioner:

> When you have the option, do not state your issue as being "about poverty." So strongly connected is this issue to notions of individual responsibility and moral weakness that reframing the subject matter is the first challenge of reframing. For example, state your issue as being about education, work, education for work, expanding opportunities for work, the economy, etc.

Any of these topics affords fewer negative stereotypes and better entrenched "defaults" than poverty.

Try to connect the issue you address to something that is innately systemic, as opposed to personal or psychological. For example, the economy can be seen as a machine that needs to be adjusted (by government) to make it work for everyone.

Don't use vivid case examples to illustrate the "deserving poor." As Iyengar demonstrates, they will simply underscore the personal nature of poverty. These exceptional cases become the exception that proves the rule: if they did it, why can't every poor person?

Don't leave the audience to decide what the numbers mean or they will "default" to negative stereotypes. If the data shows that poverty is up, down of flat, you will need to tell people why and what it means. You are better off to lead with the interpretation and then fill in the numbers than vice versa.

Show a diversity of race, gender and region in those affected; otherwise, as Iyengar points out in his research, the "default" will be to Black adult single mothers for whom the public at large has the hardest time making a connection to societal conceptions of responsibility.

When dealing with child poverty, understand that the public will first want to know about the parents and why they are not taking responsibility for the child; you must figure out ways to demonstrate community responsibility for children in your reframe.

Do all that you can to stress values of nurturance, empathy, and adult responsibility (broadly construed) for children and for their healthy development. Using the nation as family metaphor, put the responsibility squarely on government and community institutions to do a better job of preparing all children to take their part in our communities.

Do all that you can to show the influence of environments on individuals; make the link between the places and people that influence a child and that child's healthy development. Among those we know that many adults find appealing are business leaders, mentors, seniors, volunteer leaders, athletic coaches, teachers and pediatricians. These people can take the pulse of the society that is in the wings and exhort adults to engage.

Use "unlikely allies" to attest to the importance of social investments. You can't take on "responsibility" directly. If you provide case examples of "the worthy poor," you will lose the argument. But you can deflect it by using those people deemed unquestioningly worthy to attest to the importance of anti-poverty policies. Using seniors is a case in point, especially retirees. Business people are

hard working and therefore unlikely to favor those who aren't.

And finally, understand the frame you are being handed and the reframe you want to substitute. If you are being handed a "moral disease" or "strict father" frame, think carefully about ways to reposition it into a "systems aren't working fairly for all" or a "nurturant parent" frame. Know how to move away from those words most likely to cue up negative stereotypes and move toward those that invite a reconsideration of the problems that prevent families and children from participating fully in the American dream.

Here's a simple chart that suggests some ways to think about the task at hand:

CHANGING THE FRAME

FRAME FROM	FRAME TO
Poverty	Economics
Individuals	Places, conditions, systems
Moral health/disease	A healthy economy
Fixing people	Fixing things so people can benefit
Punishing laziness	Rewarding/incentivizing work
Getting people to work	Getting work to pay people
Some have more/less	Works for everyone
Making people equal	Making opportunities equal
Causes	Solutions
Failures of people and policies	Successes of policies and people

Finally, let's consider what import the research discussed above has for the three cornerstones of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's message: family strengthening, systems reform and making connections.

Without further contextualization or set-up, family strengthening is likely to be viewed by many as a prescription for parents to work harder and save more. Using Lakoff's research, strength derives from hardship, not supports, in many people's view. So you are unlikely to see this term automatically trigger an understanding of broader social policies. At the same time, such policies as Individual Development Accounts and Earned Income Tax Credits are likely to be viewed with favor, since they reward work and encourage savings. The challenge will be to connect these policies as solutions to the problem of family strengthening; best done with sufficient explanation of how these programs help families maximize their own and their children's opportunities and get ahead.

Systems reform is also likely to be met as a policy non sequitur, unless the problem is redefined away from poverty and to problems with the economy. If the problem can be restated so as to be about an economy that needs monitoring and periodic adjusting so it

maximizes opportunities for everyone, then systems reform will seem appropriate.

Finally, as long as people see America as the land of "triumphant individuals," to borrow Robert Reich's term, the importance of connections is unlikely to be fully considered. The problem with models, as Lakoff points out, is that they raise certain aspects of an issue to prominence as they conceal others. The many advantages that affluent Americans have in connecting to influence and to resources is hidden by the myth of individual success. However, people do recognize that "it's not what you know, but who you know," and that - at least in the business world - the right "start-up" makes all the difference. Connecting people to opportunities, people and places that can help them achieve should be carefully explained. It is important, however, not to state the disconnect in such a way that it raises the idea of distracting people from work; making a case for phone access may, in fact, be harder than making it for computers, in an era where the one is seen as purely social and the other as a critical tool to careers.

For more information on the three sources that inform this eZine, see: (1) Margaret Bostrom, "Children as a Political Issue: A Review of Current Public Opinion" and "How People Talk About Children's Issues: A Focus Group Report" in Bales, ed., *Effective Language for Communicating Children's Issues*, Coalition for America's Children with the Benton Foundation, 1999, online in the public opinion reference room at www.connectforkids.org); (2) George Lakoff, *Moral Politics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996; and Shanto Iyengar, "Framing Responsibility for Political Issues: The Case of Poverty" in Iyengar and Reeves, ed., *Do The Media Govern?*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997.

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

Please follow standard APA rules for citation, with FrameWorks Institute as publisher. FrameWorks Institute. (2001). *Child Poverty*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.