A FrameWorks Institute eZine
Vivid Examples: What They Mean and Why You Should Be Careful Using Them

Everyone is familiar with the concept of examples. We commonly use them to demonstrate or epitomize a broader idea we are trying to convey. The process of exemplification is generally defined as "to show or illustrate something by being a typical or model example of it". Social issues advocates are keenly aware of exemplification. They are frequently asked to provide examples to illustrate or explain why they favor particular programs and policies. These requests are often made by journalists.[i] And every journalism school teaches that stories should be told through people and events. The more vivid the cases, the better the story, editors argue; thus advocates are asked to introduce journalists to "real people". In other words, people who are directly affected by the programs and policies. These people, it is believed, represent the broader phenomena in question.

Public relations experts commonly advise advocates to communicate their messages through vivid case studies. This is readily apparent in the communications materials FrameWorks regularly reviews for advocacy organizations. Pull-outs and sidebars are devoted to the heroic struggles of individual clients who have triumphed in the face of great odds. The accompanying pictures routinely depict the hopeful faces of the downtrodden and neglected. So, what's the problem? Communications strategies have relied on this method for years, advocates tell us. The problem is that the research science on the practice is not only decidedly mixed but fraught with significant caveats, complications, and conceits. If it works at all, it probably doesn't work the way advocates think it does nor to the end goal that they assume.

The goal of this eZine is to provide a layman's review of the research literature with an eye toward understanding the use of exemplification in systems reform advocacy. In other words, I start from the premise that rural advocacy work seeks to fundamentally alter public structures. Put differently, the goal is not to reform individual-level behavior (e.g., change what farmers do) but rather to re-engineer the systems and mechanisms that impede progress on rural reforms (e.g., policies, programs, implementation). In what follows, I lay out the rationale for using vivid examples, examine the research literature, suggest several ways in which the literature presents problems for advocacy work, and end with a discussion of the implications for rural reform advocacy.

<u>Why use vivid cases?</u>
It is commonly believed that people use vivid cases because they are more likely to produce arousal, grab attention, and provide memorable images (Zillman and Brosius, 2000). So, for example, people are much more likely to remember a story about a family farmer being evicted from his land than they are to recall a story focusing on trends in farm foreclosures. In other words, the narrative makes people more likely to think about, remember and use it in inferential judgments about the issue (Taylor and Thompson, 1982). The intuitive rationale for the influence of exemplars is best understood in light of what we know about how people process information. The basic idea is that people rely on mental shortcuts to make sense of their world (Tversky and Kahneman, 1981). Because vivid examples stick out in people's minds, they are thought to be more readily accessible, thus more available to use for information processing (Nisbett and Ross, 1980). To the contrary, "pallid" information is thought to be more general and abstract, thus less interesting, making it less salient for inferential judgments. In other words, vivid examples cause people to remember the case in point and are more likely to evoke emotional responses.

In one classic study, for instance, the authors found that witnesses who presented detailed accounts of crime-related events were perceived as more credible by jurors even when the testimony was totally irrelevant to the case (Bell and Loftus, 1985). In another study, researchers found that when given free reign to choose among a range of stories, people focused on the articles with the most threatening images and read them for longer periods of time (Knobloch, Hastall, Zillman and Collison, 2003). While there is empirical support for the notion that vivid examples heighten issue salience and arouse emotion, the research literature is decidedly more mixed (and complicated) when it comes to exactly how people use vivid examples to make a variety of judgments.

<u>Caveats, Complications, and Conceits</u>
Read carefully, the research literature points to three important ways in which exemplification as an advocacy tool can produce counter-productive consequences:

1. "Not all examples are good examples" -distortion effects
2. "Can't see the forest for the trees" – episodic framing
3. The "Cosby Effect" – invigorating global stereotypes

1. Not all examples are good examples: Distortion Effects

Perhaps the best known scholar in the field is Dolf Zillman (for a review see Zillman and Brosius, 2000). In a remarkable series of studies, Zillman and his colleagues examined the impact of exemplification on people's inferences about the real world. One of the core findings of Zillman's work is that vivid examples have a tendency to overshadow and distort base-rate information. In other words, people make errors in estimating the real world incidence of an occurrence or social phenomena. In one seminal experimental study, his data showed that the more extreme the exemplar was depicted to be (in this case a series of stories about car-jackings that varied in the vividness of the case), the

more distorted people's estimates of the incidence of car-jacking in their community became (i.e., base-rate data).

The literature is replete with studies showing the distorting effects of exemplars. In one study (Hamill et. al., 1980), found that people based judgments about the humanness of the average prison guard on the basis of a taped interview with one guard, even though the guard was depicted as atypical. Similarly, the standard news story about intimate partner violence distorts the nature of the crime by depicting only the most violent cases (homicide), exaggerating the base rate by a magnitude of over 250. The public, as a result, overestimates the actual incidence, leading to misperception and the unwillingness to address the much more frequent dynamics of intimate partner violence (Berkeley Media Studies Group, 2004). And finally, there is a plethora of studies showing that crime news exemplars at odds with base-rate data (e.g., decreasing crime rates) increase people's willingness to endorse harsh and punitive crime policies (see also Dixon, 2006). My colleague Shanto Iyengar and I, for instance, conducted a series of experimental studies which demonstrated that episodic violent crime stories featuring minority perpetrators were more memorable and led people to support the death penalty and three strikes legislation. The upshot, of course, is that these news exemplars are significant distortions of base-rate crime data (Gilliam et al., 1996; Gilliam and Iyengar, 2000; Gilliam and Iyengar, 2005).

More germane to rural issues, Gibson (1997) found that people who had little or no knowledge of the economics of family farms were significantly influenced by the presence of vivid exemplars in news reports. The author reports:

> "As expected, respondents presented with news magazine reports about the plight of family farmers containing personal testimony reported a different perception of the issue than those presented with indirect testimony or no testimony. In conditions where poor farmers were directly quoted and rich farmers quoted only in paraphrase, respondents produced higher estimates of the number of family farmers who struggle financially and those who face bankruptcy. Likewise, these same respondents produced lower estimates of the number of farmers who make a profit and those who become wealthy. In the conditions in which rich farmers were given a direct voice and the poor farmers' testimony was presented in paraphrased form, the opposite occurred: respondents estimated that fewer farmers face financial hardships and that a higher percentage succeed at their farming business." (p. 1)

What is clear from this study is that the choice of exemplars to illustrate public perceptions of farm economics has a significant effect on how people assess real-world conditions. So, for instance, if the goal were to increase support for family farm subsidies, one might pay a great deal of attention to how the issue is portrayed in the media. If wealthy farmers were given more voice, it is clear (at least on the basis of this study) that people would underestimate the tenuous position of family farms. On the other hand, communications featuring poor farmers would appear to be related to greater awareness of the plight of the family farmer.

The takeaway point here is that a good example must be representative of a whole class of objects. To the extent that it is not, distortion sets in and judgment is flawed. After all, exemplification is selective. We choose among the many labels that may apply to a

given sample. If we are not careful, the examples may actually be distortions of reality thus invoking unintended inferences. The end result is that the public may be sent off in a wholly unanticipated and corrosive direction.

While some of this problem can be addressed through the careful selection of exemplars by advocate, there are also problems that would appear to be endemic to certain issues. For example, cases that illustrate child abuse would logically be more salient than those that illustrate child neglect: the child who is locked in the closet by a parent is a more salient example than the child who is left alone day after day without adult supervision. Yet, incidences of neglect far outweigh those for abuse. Thus, the process of exemplification would likely distort public assessments of the nature of this social problem. In fact, FrameWorks research for Prevent Child Abuse America found just such an effect: Americans were far more likely to over-estimate the incidences of abuse and to under-estimate the incidences of neglect.

2. "Can't see the forest for the trees" – the significance of episodic framing

In their pioneering book <u>News That Matters</u>, Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder performed a novel set of experimental media effects tests to determine the impact of vivid and pallid news presentations on the public's perceptions of national issues. In this book, they introduced the concepts of episodic and thematic news frames. Episodic frames focus on discrete events happening to specific people at particular place and times. Thematic presentations focus on trends, context, and broader societal forces. Episodic frames are typically vivid while thematic frames are generally pallid. In their most important experiment, viewers presented with dull, thematic stories utilizing statistical information about unemployment were more likely to rate joblessness as a national problem than were people who saw a news report depicting the impact of unemployment on the plight of a single family. They concluded that: "Viewers may get so caught up in one family's troubles that they fail to make the connection back to the national condition. Overwhelmed by concrete details, they miss the general point" (p.42).

Vivid examples may indeed call attention and heighten issue salience, but at what price? By extension, the more vivid the examples, the more likely they are to draw the audience into the details of the case. Let's apply this logic to the Gibson and Zillman farming study. While exposure to the "poor farmer" example may indeed lead people to believe the family farm is under siege, the audience response, following Iyengar and Kinder, may well be to write a check to help that particular farmer. In other words, people would not have any greater understanding of the systemic causes of farm failures.

My colleague Susan Bales describes a news story she worked on several years ago with the Texas Children's Hospital to dramatize the plight of families who were "too wealthy to qualify for Medicaid," and thus often driven to the brink of bankruptcy by hospital bills. Working with the hospital, Bales found what all agreed was the perfect exemplar: a working family in which one child had jumped off a bed and been paralyzed from the

neck down. "It was Christmas," Bales recalls, "and we told the story of this family that was about to lose their home. We thought we were telling a policy story, a story about the system that needed to be changed. Instead, we soon learned otherwise." Checks poured into the hospital, she recalls. But, when the TV station aired follow-up stories that described other situations and made the connection to Medicaid's insufficiencies, the story turned ugly. Viewers wrote in that they only wanted their checks to go to the exemplary family, not others that they didn't "know." Bales concluded that the use of exemplars was distracting, forcing advocates to "credential" each case – a highly inefficient and ineffectual way to build the case for policy change.

Following this research, those who wield exemplars in service to public issues need to be careful that they are not achieving memorability at the expense of public policy.

3. The "Cosby Effect" – activating global stereotypes

The Cosby Show was one of the great cultural phenomena of the 1980s. The show, of course, depicted Bill Cosby as a successful doctor with a lawyer for a wife and well-educated children living in a charming New York City brownstone. The image of the successful family ran counter to common television depictions of African Americans. Moreover, the appeal of the show ran counter to the predictions of network programmers, as it achieved broad appeal across mainstream demographic groups. This in turn led to much speculation that the show was instrumental in improving race relations in the United States. In their book Enlightened Racism, Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis set out to find out exactly what impact the Cosby Show had on Americans' racial thinking.

What they found surprised a lot of people. The conventional wisdom was that the vivid and positive case of the Huxtables would lead to more positive evaluations of African Americans. What their data showed was the exact opposite. As the authors note: "…white Americans love the Huxtables and are happy to invite them in to their living rooms, but still look at the vast number of black Americans as mired in a set of problems of their own making" (p. 15). They interpreted their findings to mean that depictions of successful blacks speak to a belief that America is the land of opportunity; thus, racial inequality is the result of the failure of most African Americans to adhere to the value of rugged individualism.

Social psychologists refer to this as the power of global stereotypes. That is, the more common perception is that black Americans do not live up to the core tenets of the American creed; and seeing blacks who have "made it" only serves to activate the more generalized view that most blacks could make it if they only tried harder.

I have found support for this dynamic in my own work. A few years back, I conducted a study called the "Hero Deputy" experiments (Gilliam, 1999). I designed television news treatments that varied the role of an African American male. Some study participants saw news treatments where he was depicted as a "hero deputy" who foils a violent crime. Other participants saw the very same man in the role of violent perpetrator. After viewing the stories, people were asked to recall the role the man played and give their

racial attitudes and crime policy preferences. Like Lewis and Jhally, I found that exposure to the hero deputy actually increased racial animus and heightened support for punitive crime policy. Exposure to the exemplar of the hero deputy appeared to have activated the negative global stereotype about blacks – the deputy would not rise to heroism if more blacks followed the law!

The lesson of the Cosby effect is that advocates must be extremely careful not to activate a more global and negative stereotype when utilizing exemplars. In this vein, stories of heroic struggle by family farmers may produce the unintended effect of invigorating common (dominant) notions of rural "utopia". In other words, it can't be as bad as it seems: certainly nothing that good-old-fashioned-hard-work-common-to-farm-folks can't solve. Put differently, you can't get to systemic reforms from here.

In all, the literature on exemplification cautions advocates against the non-selective and knee-jerk use of vivid case studies. While it is true that they may arouse emotions and in some cases heighten issue awareness, it is more likely the case that they will distort base-rate data, call too much attention to narrow episodes and activate stereotypes that are counter-productive. It is not that one can never use exemplars; it is just that one has to be strategic in their use.

One way to think about this is to ask a series of questions before you invest in exemplification as a public strategy:

- Is the kind of exemplar I would choose, or the press would be drawn to, likely to result in a distortion of my broader policy goals?
- Is the exemplar likely to narrow the discussion away from themes and systems to individual characteristics of particular people or to set up a charity response?
- Is the exemplar connected in any way to global stereotypes associated with the issue, and thus likely to backfire?

And, finally, rural strategists should consider whether the time and energy they are investing in the exemplar is really worth it:

- Is there a more thematic, more systems-oriented story that could become more vivid if you applied such framing techniques as social math and metaphor to your description?
- By pulling back from the narrow portrait that defines the exemplar, can you tell a more ecological story that connects the dots for people between problems and solutions?

***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.

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[i] In perhaps the most comprehensive study of exemplification in the news media Zillman and Brosius estimate that 93% of the print stories and 53% of the television stories contained explicit examples.