

The Agrarian Myth Revisited
Findings from Cognitive Elicitations

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INTRODUCTION

By many measures, rural life in America is collapsing. Large areas of the country, including much of the heartland, are being drained of population as farmers sell out, businesses close, and young people move elsewhere to find opportunity. People living in these areas often face challenging economic conditions and life situations, and often without the help of government and community services that are available to people elsewhere.

Yet despite the many sad stories taking place in parts of the country that have traditionally been revered for their beauty and the values they represent, Americans as a whole are relatively indifferent. The research reported on here builds on the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's long-term program to improve the lives and prospects of those living in rural parts of the country, by addressing the complex question of why Americans in cities and suburbs are letting the collapse happen, and how the country as a whole can be persuaded to intervene.

Rural issues seem to fall into the category of topics where Americans' default patterns of reasoning prevent them from seeing and engaging with important facts. This report is intended to help advocates better understand those default patterns of reasoning, since without addressing them, advocates are unlikely to make breakthroughs in raising public concern.

RESEARCH METHOD

Subjects

The analysis presented here is based on intensive one-on-one recorded interviews conducted by Cultural Logic with a diverse group of thirty individuals – 10 in Maryland, 10 in Colorado and 10 in Illinois. In each state, roughly a third of the subjects were recruited from urban areas (Baltimore, Denver and Chicago, respectively), roughly a third from outlying rural areas, and roughly a third from nearby suburban areas. This geographic scheme allows a comparison between residents of different types of community, and also ensures that the analysis is not based on the thinking of any one region of the country. Subjects were recruited through a process of ethnographic networking – researchers began with several “seed contacts” in each of the target communities, and developed a pool of subjects from which a diverse range was selected for interviewing.¹

The overall sample included 16 women and 14 men. Subjects' ages were evenly distributed between the youngest of 19 and the oldest in their eighties. Ethnicities included European-American (23) African-American (4), Asian-American (1), and Hispanic (2). A range of political orientations (9 conservatives, 7 independents, 14 liberals) was also included, as were a range of educational backgrounds (high-school only

¹ See discussion of “snowball sampling” as a key technique of ethnographic research in H. Russell Bernard's *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 2nd Edition. 1995. (pp.97ff).

to graduate degree) and occupations. These demographic choices were complemented by focus group characteristics.

Note that there are often interesting complexities in assigning individuals to the urban, suburban, and rural categories. For example, many longtime residents of cities and suburbs have lived in rural areas at some point in their lives, or have spent a great deal of time visiting rural places (especially, family members' farms); and at least two of the thirteen rural residents we spoke with have urban roots. The following illustrative quote comes from a woman who lived for years in San Diego, but now lives in a rural area of Colorado, across the road from a dairy farm.

We're not rural people, because we like living in the country and we like being far away from other people, but we want to have a city not too far away because we want to do all the things that the city offers.

While we talked to several stereotypical "city people," and quite a few individuals who have never lived outside rural areas, there were also many people who crosscut these categories in various ways. The lesson for advocates, given the mobility of American life, is that they can make no simple assumptions about the types of people they are talking to, or talking about.

The Cognitive Approach

Subjects participated in one-on-one, semi-structured recorded interviews ("cognitive elicitations"), conducted according to methods adapted from psychological anthropology. The goal of this methodology is to approximate a natural conversation while also encouraging the subject to reason about a topic from a wide variety of perspectives, including some that are unexpected and deliberately challenging. This type of data-gathering – and the analysis of transcripts, based on techniques of cognitive anthropology and linguistics – yields insights not available from standard interview, polling or focus group techniques. It 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 and long-standing, default reasoning patterns. Some of the clues to these important patterns come from topics that are *omitted*, moments of *inconsistency* where one understanding clashes with another, and the *metaphors* people use to talk about a subject. Furthermore, the method is designed to explore the differences between *rhetorical mode* – in which people define themselves in opposition to other groups and perspectives, and repeat ideas and phrases familiar from public discourse – and *reasonable mode* – in which they reflect their own experiences, think for themselves, and are more open to new information. Put briefly, this analysis focuses on *how* people think rather than *what* they think. (See the Appendix for a fuller discussion of Cultural Logic's cognitive approach.)

Cognitive research works on the premise that unconscious, default understandings of the world (cognitive and cultural *models*) can guide people's understanding of an issue in ways they 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, a person might reflect carefully and appreciate that a poor person in a rural area suffers many kinds of hardships, but might also slip into a default mode of thought in which poor country folk “are happy just living off of nature.” People may *know better on some level*, and yet easily slip into a mistaken view because of a well-established, default understanding of the world. These hidden, underlying understandings can be very difficult to challenge and displace, and, if they are not accounted for, they can derail communications.

KEY FINDINGS

Three perspectives dominate the public’s thinking about rural America. The Rural Utopia model and the Rural Dystopia are highly simplified models which entail a number of distortions in the public’s thinking. The third and least common view – which we term “Rural Systems” – is unique in its ability to allow people to see many of the actual challenges and solutions that face rural America.

- Rural Utopia

An earlier and partial version of the Rural Utopia model was well described by Richard Hofstadter as the Agrarian Myth. The Rural Utopia model assumes that rural people are hard-working, virtuous, simple, and have little money. Although it has the advantage of placing a high value on rural regions and people, it has a number of unproductive entailments for advocates. Because of the dominance of this model, much of this report is devoted to describing its effects on public thinking (see the summary of distorting effects below).

- Rural Dystopia

The Rural Dystopia model is, as its name suggests, in many ways the polar opposite of the Rural Utopia model. It describes a negative and largely unfixable situation, that is believed to be (partly) due to the inherent nature of the rural inhabitants themselves. It is associated with labels such as Deep South, Appalachia, and Indian Reservations.

- Rural Systems

A simple fact ignored by many urban and suburban Americans is that rural areas include small towns and many different kinds of jobs, and interconnections between people in cities and the country. When one shifts to this cognitive perspective, it becomes much easier to understand both causes of, and solutions to, problems that face rural America.

What even fewer of these Americans recognize is that, thanks to the disintegration of the agrarian economy and the family farm, rural life is increasingly about

disconnection, decline and the lack of a reliable economic base. A realistic view of rural America – the Wal-Mart reality – includes the domination of retail and other commercial service jobs, a lack of facilities and services, and increasing division between the locals interested in finding a way out of rural economic traps, and urban refugees buying their way into the rural landscape.

Research among urban, suburban, and rural residents demonstrates that the Rural Utopia model is available to most people, and is the default way of thinking for urbans and suburbans. Its darker side, the Rural Dystopia, is available to all three groups but is evoked less often and exerts less effect on most people's thinking. By contrast, rural people are much more likely to also make use of the Rural Systems perspective.

Distorting Effects of the Rural Utopia Model

- Invisible Poverty

The Rural Utopia model filters out images of poverty. People who are aware, on some level, of suffering and deprivation in rural areas, *are likely to default to a mode of thinking in which poverty is not a rural problem.* And rural people themselves, who should know best, are not immune to this default pattern

- Virtuous Poverty

According to the Rural Utopia model, the condition of having very little money is seen as *ennobling* rather than *degrading*. Rural life has always been hard, and is supposed to be hard. When poverty is understood as an ennobling rather than a degrading condition, it is less likely to be addressed.

- Encroachment As the Main Threat

The Rural Utopia model frames rural areas as a resource something like water or gold, which the country has either more or less of – and as spaces defined by clear boundaries. Sprawl is a well-understood threat in this framing because it means an overall reduction of rural spaces, which are gradually eroded from the edges in.

This framing obscures the fact that much of the harm to rural ways of life is about *disrupted systems* – family farms which can no longer turn a profit, towns which no longer have enough customers to support businesses, or workers to run them, etc.

- A Systemless Countryside

The Rural Utopia model filters out many of the causal forces and systems that have impacts on rural life. Thinking about rural America through the Rural Utopia model is *qualitatively different* from thinking about it from the Rural Systems perspective.

Non-rurals have much less access to this causal systems kind of thinking, which is critical for real engagement with the issues.

- “Small-Picture” Simplicity

The Rural Utopia lens emphasizes the simplicity of rural life. The abstractness and complexity of government policy are a poor fit with this kind of thinking. Like oil and water, it is difficult to mix the two, and since people so consistently view rural America through this Simplicity frame, this creates real cognitive obstacles to bringing policies and programs into the picture, and can even lead to *resistance* against outside intervention.

- Rural Self-Sufficiency

The shared understandings of rural self-sufficiency assume a tight-knit and well-functioning culture where no-one is far removed from people who can help in times of need. It obscures the fact that many rural people are not in situations where they can get the help they need from friends and family. They may need services that are not available, or they may simply have no-one in a position to help. An important cognitive effect of these default understandings is to frame “outside help” as unnatural and immoral.

- Rural Lifestyle As a Chosen Life

One of the most direct obstacles to public support for rural policies is the strong sense that people *choose* to live in those areas, and by extension, that they have chosen to put up with hardships that go along with rural life. The notion of rural residence as a life-choice has the effect of minimizing the entire question of rural problems, by bringing up (perhaps unconsciously) a simple imperative in the minds of the public: “If you don’t like being in the country – despite all the good things about it – then go somewhere else.”

RURAL UTOPIA, RURAL DYSTOPIA, RURAL SYSTEMS

The main findings from this research concern an interplay between three key ways of thinking about rural America. Two of these are potent myths, which distort thinking but are easy to fall into (i.e. they are “good to think”). The third perspective is the most accurate, but the hardest for Americans to see.

Rural Utopia

From the perspective of a research method that focuses on analysis of default (and often unconscious) patterns of reasoning, this project is unusual: A version of one of the key cultural models that informs the public’s thinking about rural America has already been well-described. The historian Richard Hofstadter provides a classic and highly influential statement of the “complex of ideas” that make up what he called the Agrarian Myth:

Its hero was the yeoman farmer, its central conception the notion that he is the ideal man and the ideal citizen. Unstinted praise of the special virtues of the farmer and the special values of rural life was coupled with the assertion that agriculture, as a calling uniquely productive and uniquely important to society, had a special right to the concern and protection of government. The yeoman, who owned a small farm and worked it with the aid of his family, was the incarnation of the simple, honest, independent, healthy, happy human being. Because he lived in close communion with beneficent nature, his life was believed to have a wholesomeness and integrity impossible for the depraved populations of cities. His well-being was not merely physical, it was moral; it was not merely personal, it was the central source of civic virtue; it was not merely secular but religious, for God had made the land and called man to cultivate it. Since the yeoman was believed to be both happy and honest, and since he had a secure propertied stake in society in the form of his own land, he was held to be the best and most reliable sort of citizen.²

Hofstadter’s discussion of the Agrarian Myth amounts to a concise description of a cultural theory that permeated American politics and thought until quite recently. While it is no longer the force in American life at large that it once was, previous research commissioned by the Kellogg Foundation indirectly confirms that traces of the Agrarian Myth are still very active in the public’s thinking about rural America.

² Richard Hofstadter. 1955. *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf (pp. 24-25).

The Agrarian Myth vs. the Rural Utopia Model

The research reported on here shows that the public's thinking is dominated by assumptions that both overlap with and differ from the Agrarian Myth in significant ways. To distinguish our analysis of current thinking from Hofstadter's earlier discussion, we will refer to the Rural Utopia model.

- The Rural Utopia model is more implicit. It guides people's thinking in unconscious ways, but is less often evoked for conscious rhetorical purposes than the Agrarian Myth.
- The Rural Utopia model is less intellectually systematic than the Agrarian Myth. Rather than enumeration of a well-established list of the virtues of farm life, the Rural Utopia Model involves a looser sense that life in the countryside promotes physical and moral health.

Q: What do you see as some of the primary differences between the country and the city?

A: I suppose less crime in the country, certainly more space, more room to move around, less congestion. the towns, uh, I think people are more civil / um, in the city there's a lot of, ah, people focused on where / getting where they're going and, and, and, uh, less looking out for things like courtesy and, uh, maybe more of a tendency to cut corners when it comes to things like traffic laws. [suburban IL female]

- The Rural utopia model is more general than the Agrarian Myth. It includes, for example, small ranchers or dairy farmers, who fit the general profile of the Myth, but not the specific (and for Hofstadter, defining) characteristic of cultivating the land.

Because the idea of Rural Utopia dominates the (urban, suburban, and rural) public's thinking about rural America, and because many of its cognitive implications stand in the way of advocates' attempts to frame the issue productively, most of this report is devoted to exploring and detailing the cognitive implications of this cultural model.

Rural Dystopia

Rural Dystopia – a place of poverty, hardship, and hopelessness – is a less dominant but nonetheless recurrent model of rural life. This model is triggered by a number of specific labels, such as Deep South, Appalachian, Indian Reservations, and so forth. It represents the dark frame of the public's thinking about rural America.

I've done some traveling in the South and there the real poverty is devastating. I mean people living in shacks I've driven past that looks like if

*you sneezed it would fall down. Not quite as bad a place as like India, but...
[urban CO male]*

Q: Are you familiar with any areas around here that are more rural, less developed?

A: Yeah, down around Knawha County.

Q: What's it like there?

A: I think it's more poverty-stricken. ... I think the people still live kind of 50 years ago, 100 year ago, some of them. ...

Q: What do you think they could do to help improve the areas of West Virginia that are kind of poverty stricken? Do you think there's anything that could be done to help that kind of area?

A: I don't know if they could bring a business into that area and do any good or not. I'm not really sure. I mean, I know some of the people ain't very well educated. I'm not sure they could bring a business in there and survive.

Q: Do the people in that area want to improve things?

No. I'd say not. ... They grew up that way. They know nothing else. Some of them are just kind of backwoods, you know, and they like that. [rural MD male]

I mean I think about Appalachia and what that might be, but I just think again, I think it's just people trying to survive in their own little spot and if they can go out and get a little/make a little money they do and if they can't, I don't know what they do. [rural MD female]

While most or all Americans are familiar with the Rural Dystopia Model, and easily able to shift into that mode of thinking, elicitation research suggests that it is by no means the default perception. Rather, it is a stereotype familiar from the media and other public discourse and easily evoked by the right kinds of jokes, images or country songs:

*Becky was a beauty from south Alabama
Her daddy had a heart like a nine-pound hammer
Think he even did a little time in the slammer
What was I thinkin'
She snuck out one night and met me by the front gate
Her daddy came out wavin' that twelve gauge
We tore out the drive as he peppered my tailgate
What was I thinkin'...
When a mountain of a man with a "born to kill" tattoo
Tried to cut in, I knocked out his front tooth
We ran outside hood-slidin' like bo duke
What was I thinkin'*

Dierks Bentley, Capitol Records, 2003

While the Rural Dystopia Model is not the default pattern of reasoning for most Americans, this stereotype has a number of negative entailments once it is evoked, some obvious and some more subtle. Just as the Rural Utopia model reinforces the all-American-ness of rural America, the Rural Dystopia model tends to emphasize the “Otherness” of rural areas. This countryside is populated by Blacks, Appalachian Whites, Indians, and so forth.

One implication of seeing rural Americans as “Other” is that many or most of the problems of Rural Dystopia are the fault of its inhabitants, who are easily (and often unconsciously) assumed to be shiftless, inbred, trashy, drunk, and so forth.

In addition, because of its association with various kinds of minorities and because of its stark contrast to the American ideal, a kind of exceptionalism attaches to Rural Dystopia. Rural Dystopias are bounded and limited places, not (like the rural America of the Agrarian Myth) representative of America as a whole. The ultimate “logical” consequence of this reasoning is to think of these people and places as “throwaways.”

Rural Systems

Thanks to the disintegration of the agrarian economy and the family farm, rural life is increasingly about disconnection, decline and the lack of a reliable economic base. Less than 2% of Americans now work on farms, and the largest employer in many rural areas is Wal-Mart. A realistic view of rural America includes the domination of retail and other commercial service jobs, a lack of facilities and services, and increasing division between the locals interested in finding a way out of rural economic traps, and urban refugees buying their way into the rural landscape.

This picture, which fits neither the Rural Utopian model nor stereotypes of backcountry hayseeds, is the weakest of the three models in the minds of many Americans – not

because they have never heard facts or seen evidence of its reality, but because their thoughts are often (mis)guided by more familiar and better-developed schemas.

Differences among Rural, Suburban, and Urban residents

The biggest difference between the thinking of rural residents on the one hand, and urban or suburban on the other, is that rural residents were more likely to have a better sense of the economic and material facts of rural life.

Q: How do most people earn a living in the country?

A: Some are retired, some farm, some dairy, some live in the country and drive to town and work in town. I think your majority of people around here live in the country and drive to town, whether it's HP and Windsor, Loveland, Greeley, Fort Collins – to me, that would be the majority of the people that live in the country. [rural CO female]

A: I think the people who live on the farm generally have another job. If you win the lottery it might keep you in farming a few more years. ... A little, small farmer, I wouldn't want to be one. Our legacy is very good, because we're now growing houses on our farms.

Q: You're growing houses?

A: Growing them. There is no more farming. You can't farm in the city, and can you imagine trying to get your trucks out on Timberline road, trying to farm that? It's really tough.

Q: So when you say growing houses, you're talking about developing.

A: Yes, you bet. ... I get really uptight at people who say we've got to keep the farms in farming. How are you going to do it?! You've got to make a living. And we were lucky because our land is development land. The guy who lives out further, what chance has he got to leave anything to his children? [rural CO female]

By contrast, suburbans and urbans, who are in general far more similar to each other than to rurals, often had trouble providing an accurate picture of the realities of rural life.

Q: What are economic conditions like in rural parts of the country?

A: I don't know. I really don't know. I never really looked into it or ever cared to.

Q: No idea? No preconceived notion, no sense of...

A: Mm, not really, no. [urban IL male]

These findings make common sense, given the enormous differences in experience between urbans and suburbans on the one hand, and rurals on the other – people learn about the world partly from direct experience, and the more experience they have of rural America, the more awareness they tend to have of its real problems. This tidy explanation of where beliefs come from is somewhat undercut, however, by the fact that even rural residents make heavy use of the Rural Utopia model.

Q: When you think about rural America what's the first thing that comes to mind?

A: Farms and open countryside with crops, animals. That's it. [rural CO female]

That is, rural residents often “toggle” between two views (economic reality and Rural Utopia) that are in some ways incompatible. The difference is that nonrurals have much less access to an accurate model which they could toggle to. Their thinking is even more dominated by the positive and negative myths, particularly the Rural Utopia model.

Roots and Reinforcement of the Rural Utopia Model

The Rural Utopia model has deep roots in American history. Although Hofstadter focuses on elite culture, including the writings of luminaries such as Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin, Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur, and others, it is clear that an American does not need to have an above-average education to be inculcated with some version of this model. Consider the books and songs that children grow up with, from “Old MacDonald had a farm,” and “Mary had a little lamb,” to *Charlotte's Web*, and the “Brer Rabbit” stories. The number of early childhood songs and stories with rural themes is quite disproportionate to the actual settings in which most American children grow up. (This reflects both the relatively recent demographic shift away from a rural setting, and the strong tendency of “children’s culture” to conservatism.) It is fair to say that an American can hardly grow up without repeated exposure to the Rural Utopia model.

In addition, a number of factors encourage the elaboration and consolidation of the Rural Utopia model in the minds of folks who do not grow up in the countryside.

- Intermittent exposure to rural areas

Many if not most of the urban and suburban people we spoke with have connections to rural areas, through family and friends, and have spent time in rural settings. We might expect that direct experience with rural places (as opposed to romanticized stories) would give them insights into the Wal-Mart Reality of country living. In fact, however, the experience of spending time on their grandparents’ farm, for example, seems to be much more effective at reinforcing the Rural Utopia model.

These visitors are in a sense a kind of tourist whose experience is guided and shaped by preexisting expectations, and who are drawn toward the picturesque and vivid, rather than the complex and more abstract big picture. For example, they may get that things on the farm are tough, if their relatives happen to have it tough, but they don't really understand rural economy or know what people do for a living other than farm.

- Selective exposure to rural areas

The pattern of reinforcing the Rural Utopia model continues with non-rural people who “move to the country.” One of the key criteria of buyers of “penturban” homes (in undeveloped areas beyond the suburbs) is their conformity to the Rural Utopia prototype. Some parts of the country (usually outside major metropolitan areas and often in the West – places like Denver or San Diego) are simply more visually and otherwise attractive. Developers do their part in selecting parcels of land that are visually pleasing, and promoting and ensuring the “best of both worlds” experience to their urban and suburban buyers.

Taking into account that these areas tend to be the fastest-growing parts of the country, the result is a large and growing population of non-rurals who are exposed to a picturesque facsimile of the countryside – a circumstance that reinforces the Rural Utopia model rather than any real sense of the reality of rural life.

- Nostalgia and rhetoric among rural dwellers

As pointed out above, it is not simply non-rurals who are subject to the Rural Utopia model. In the case of rural residents, the elicitations reveal two related tendencies that each reinforce the Rural Utopia model among rurals as well

- When people recall their own and their parents' and grandparents' lives in a rural setting, they tend to dwell on the aspects of the story that conform best to something like the Rural Utopia model.

Q: What appeals to you about being out in the country, just having your family garden?

A: Fresh air, I like space. I'm very nature person, so I like looking at the animals and just the whole environment. So, then I guess there's like a certain amount of privacy that you don't get in the city at all. In the county, the air is fresher and the sky is clearer. [urban MD female, discussing visits to her grandparents' farm]

The harsh realities are softened and incorporated, “Waltons”-like, into the story. That is, the very fact of turning even their own experience into a narrative makes that lived experience more subject to the influence of a strong and well-understood schema – the Rural Utopia story.

- At the same time, when rural people talk to outsiders (such as visiting interviewers) about rural life, they often speak in terms of the Rural Utopia. In part, this is probably because of their expectations about the expectations of outsiders – the story is easier and more interesting to tell. And in part, it is probably because the Rural Utopia model, like the Agrarian Myth, confers on them a special moral status.

The hard part of it was – and I guess one thing to be proud of is – Sandy Acres was a 2 horse farm. And I made a living out of it. And, well, nothing fancy but we live good. We grow a lot of our own things. In fact it was just yesterday we were eating our meal, 4 of the things that we had on the table grew out of our garden this year. [rural MD male]

The research makes clear that that the Rural Utopia model is reinforced through multiple channels, and that even those people who, on the face of it, should be largely immune from the Rural Utopia model are, in fact, deeply invested in it.

DISTORTING EFFECTS OF THE RURAL UTOPIA MODEL

Invisible Poverty

One of the effects of the Rural Utopia model is to filter out images of poverty – as a recent report sponsored by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (*A Rural Road: Exploring Economic Opportunity, Social Networks, Services and Supports that Affect Rural Families*, produced for the Rural Great Plains Collaborative Project) reports, the facts about rural poverty are “contrary to popular belief” (p. 15). Importantly, cognitive analysis shows that this finding is not simply about Americans being unaware of poor people in rural areas – average Americans often *do* know something about struggling farmers, for example, as a report funded by the Kellogg Foundation (*Perceptions of Rural America*, produced by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research) points out. The more insidious problem is that the same people who are aware, on some level, of suffering and deprivation in rural areas, *are likely to default to a mode of thinking in which poverty is not a rural problem*. And rural people themselves, who should know best, are not immune to this default pattern:

Q: Do you think there’s a lot of poverty in rural parts of America?

A: I don’t think so. I don’t think so, because again, you’re not just buying a house, you’re buying land, and that takes some money, so... [rural IL woman]

Q: Is there a lot of poverty in rural parts of America?

A: ...I don’t believe there’s as much poverty as political machines would like us to think there is. [rural IL woman]

Rural people may even be aware that there are poor people in their area, and yet resist the idea that there is poverty:

Q: So when you think about poverty in America, would you associate that more with cities or with the country?

A: I think the cities. I think I hear more about it in the cities, the large cities. Although I take stuff to the mission down here [in a small Colorado town] and I know there’s plenty of poor people down there ... I mean the inner city, that’s where, to me, I think you have more poverty. [rural CO woman]

There are good cognitive reasons why people might be aware of rural poverty on one level, and yet default to an understanding that excludes that poverty. For many Americans the word “poverty” is strongly associated with prototypical scenarios that don’t exist in rural America – homelessness, slums, and the dense inner city.

[Children in the country] wouldn't see a lot of bad things. Like I guess we have poverty in inner cities, like homeless people, things like that—I wouldn't want them to see that, or violence, wouldn't want them to see violence. [urban CO woman]

As *A Rural Road* correctly asserts, poor “rural communities have often been ignored because they defy commonly held beliefs about poverty” (p. 15). And conversely, the miserable and toxic images associated with the word “poverty” are not a good fit with understandings of rural life. In this way the word “poverty” does not feel like an appropriate way to express the condition of rural people without much money.

Well, I'd a lot rather be poor in the country than I would in the city. I think / I feel very, very sorry for people that have very bad incomes and live in the city. I really don't know what / you know, I don't know how they manage. Whereas in the country, you can just go outside and smell the grass and / I really / I don't / I really don't have much feeling of how they cope with it. I feel terribly sorry for them and I think it's very sad. [rural CO woman]

Q: Do you think there tends to be more poverty in rural parts of the country or more in the cities?

A: I think more in the cities, like out here [in suburban Colorado], I don't really see many homeless people, but like in the city, there's tons of them.

Q: Okay. But in rural areas you figure people probably aren't so poor?

A: Or they go to the city. I don't know. Like they might be struggling, but I mean they're not like to the verge of poverty, I guess. [suburban CO woman]

One insightful person makes the observation himself that the word “poverty” evokes urban images in his mind, even though he knows better:

Is there poverty? Yes, there's poverty in rural areas. Do we think in terms of that when we think of the word poverty? No, I don't think so. You know, our minds just gravitate directly into an urban setting. And maybe it's, uh, more visible there, but, but, yes, there's poverty in rural areas as well. [suburban IL man]

Furthermore, rural people without much money may not be as obviously different from their neighbors as are the urban poor – if one’s understanding of rural life is that everyone is working hard to get by, then everyone has good years and bad years, and chronic poverty simply doesn’t seem like much of a problem.

In addition, because the Agrarian Myth assumes country folks to both own land and to work very hard, the twin associations with poverty of being dispossessed and lazy do not apply.

In short, even when people know something about rural poverty, it is often harder to think about and focus on than urban poverty. And when poverty isn't seen, it clearly is less likely to be addressed. *It is important to recognize that, for all these reasons, simply presenting more facts about rural poverty is not likely to eliminate these effects of the Rural Utopia model.*

Virtuous Poverty

As Hofstadter has pointed out, the Agrarian Myth was, from the beginning, partly a rhetorical tool for making rural people accept their low economic status.³ By the reasoning of the Agrarian Myth, there was no shame in living a simple life with little money and few possessions. On the contrary, the farmer's lack of money (and supposed lack of interest in money), like a monk's, was both a sign of and aid to the farmer's virtue. In the twenty-first century, this fundamental equation between virtue and the material simplicity of rural life is still alive and well:

*I would probably think poor people in the city are lazy where poor people in the rural aren't. Because in the city they're on welfare and going to soup kitchens and stuff where in rural they don't have that available to them.
[urban MD woman]*

People without much money in rural areas are often thought of as happier than poor people in the city.

I think a lot of those[rural] people might be happier with less, and just living off of nature. [urban IL woman]

Understandings of rural morality can lead to an even stronger conclusion. While country people might have very low incomes, expectations about rural life mean that they simply *aren't* poor. Since country people are willing and able to get by on very little (unlike coddled city people), their poverty doesn't count.

³ For a recent example of rhetorical and political uses of the Agrarian Myth, see Kelsey's discussion of how OSHA opponents have used the agrarian myth to "emotionally sway" legislators to vote for farm exemptions to workplace safety regulations (T.W. Kelsey, "The agrarian myth and policy responses to farm safety," *American Journal of Public Health*, 1994).

Q: Do you think there's a lot of poor people in the country, rural areas now?

A: No, not a whole lot.

Q: Do you think there are more poor people in the city?

A: I think so. And one reason is that in the country you learn to live with what you had ... Most of them are used to growing your own things, or they'd go out and work for probably half of what the city boy thinks he has to have. That's just the way they grew up. You learn to live on a small amount. [rural MD man]

When viewed through the “Rural Utopia model,” the condition of having very little money is not seen as the same sort of toxic and soul-damaging state as urban poverty – and is not necessarily even seen as a problem to be solved. Rural life has always been hard, and is supposed to be hard. When poverty is understood as an ennobling rather than a degrading condition, it is less likely to be addressed.

A Systemless Countryside

The Rural Utopia model filters out many of the causal forces and systems that have impacts on rural life. As noted above, this is not simply a matter of non-rural residents having less knowledge about rural life – which would not be at all surprising. More importantly, their thinking is *qualitatively different* to the degree that it is more likely to be processed solely through the Rural Utopia model. By contrast, when rural people think about conditions (such as economic conditions) in rural areas, they are often able to move beyond the Rural Utopia model and to think in terms of some clear causal scenarios. Non-rurals have much less access to this kind of thinking, which is critical for real engagement with the issues.

For example, this rural resident points out that when city people move to the country, the resulting rise in prices and property taxes places strong pressures on the locals who are used to an economy at a lower level – a type of causal story which non-rural residents do not have access to.

Q: What are some problems in rural life?

A: Well, probably the economic situation now, especially for older people. With their incomes, as compared to what's going on now, the tax situation, how the assessments are so much higher, ... people whose incomes haven't changed, that's a real problem for them. [rural MD woman]

Other causal stories involve the rising costs that make it harder for farmers to turn a profit:

Q: Do you have a sense of what's causing [farmers] to go out of business?

A: Well, and you know we complain about it, the price of a gallon of gas for the car that drives down the road, and farmers' expenses are just astronomical. You know, their herbicides and their pesticides, and then their machinery is out of sight, ...and look at milk. Milk last month was \$10.50 a hundred, our middle son told us, and he's a dairy farmer south of Kersey. So that's \$10.50 per hundred pounds [ten gallons]. And we were getting \$10.50 for a milk forty years ago in New York. [rural CO woman]

Rural residents also understand that large corporate farms enjoy economies of scale which lead to lower prices and make it nearly impossible for family farms to compete and remain viable. Non-rurals are likely to see this pattern not in terms of the economic factors that make farmers *want* or *need* to sell out to larger companies, but in terms of the corporations buying the farms against the small farmer's will – basically “stealing” the farms, or reducing the space available for small farmers.

...big companies taking over the little guy....They buy their land and then it squeezes out the little guy and they can't make a living [suburban, Riverside-San Bernadino resident] Cited in Perceptions of Rural America.

Big business, because now a lot of big business are buying out a lot of your smaller farmers and they are basically choking out the small family farms [rural Jackson resident] Cited in Perceptions of Rural America.

As Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research points out, “While respondents clearly recognize that many family farmers are poor and losing their farms, most non-rural respondents have difficulty explaining the underlying causes of the problems” (*Perceptions of Rural America*, p. 10)

On a broader scale, non-rural Americans are less likely to understand rural life in terms of interlocking economic systems involving both farms and towns. Here is a typical non-rural perspective on what rural people do for a living:

Q: How do people in rural areas make a living?

A: Beats the heck out of me. If they don't farm, I have no idea. [urban IL man]

By contrast, rural residents often mention small towns and the other jobs besides farming needed in rural areas.

I think one of the problems in rural areas is that there aren't enough white collar jobs. I'm speaking for this particular area. It's a very blue collar town, and I would like to see this town, anyway, develop some white collar jobs, some high-tech jobs. [rural IL woman]

Q: Do you think of most people as being farmers in rural parts of rural areas?

A: Not necessarily. I don't know why. I have a college friend that lived in Waffordsburg, PA which is a very, very tiny, and there aren't really that many farms there. I'm not sure what the people do – they might run the local hardware store or just be Mr. Fix-it man you know. Mr. Handyman-around-town sort of thing. [rural MD woman]

Q: How do people earn a living in the country?

A: Well, obviously there's the farmers, but in this day and age you have to be a pretty good farmer to earn a decent living. A pretty big farmer. And in most rural communities they do make up the majority of the population, the general population of an area. But certainly small towns need shopkeepers and teachers and bankers and small business owners. [rural IL woman]

While this subject makes the standard assumption that most rural residents are farmers, she is also able to see beyond that assumption. To the extent that rural life seems to lack causal forces and systems, it is difficult for people to think in terms of changes that might be made, or policies that might be warranted.

Encroachment as the Main Threat

The Rural Utopia model frames rural areas as a resource -- something like water or gold, which the country has either more or less of – and as spaces defined by clear boundaries. Sprawl is a well-understood threat in this framing because it means an overall reduction of rural spaces, which are gradually eroded from the edges in.

Places when I was younger that I would see now have these developments of homes and things like that. I saw Highlands Ranch just become so huge, and different places, too. Anywhere that they can build like some kind of [place for people to live], they build it, and I kind of think it's inevitable, but I think it's kind of unfair for people who wanted to live in the rural areas. They haven't chosen to live in cities, so it's kind of coming towards them and there's not anything they can really do about it. [suburban CO woman]

While it is true that the total square mileage of rural areas is declining, this framing obscures the fact that much of the harm to rural ways of life is about *disrupted systems* – family farms which can no longer turn a profit, towns which no longer have enough customers to support businesses or workers to run them, etc. The qualities of a bucolic landscape– beauty, open space, quiet – belong both to the whole area and to any given piece of it, such as a single farm or pasture. The economy of a rural area, on the other hand, is a system that depends on many interlocking factors, both within and extending beyond the rural area itself.

Average Americans' emphasis on sprawl as a threat to rural areas (an emphasis which is both reflected and reinforced by news coverage of rural issues⁴) blocks out thinking about the forces that diminish the lives of people *still living in rural areas*.

“Small-Picture” Simplicity

Over the course of lengthy conversations about rural life and rural problems, very few people mention anything about how government or government policies might help. Part of the reason is certainly that the problems of rural America are underappreciated, and part of the reason may be that the problems that are understood (such as sprawl) seem inevitable. There is also another compelling cognitive explanation for Americans' lack of interest in how rural America might be helped: The *simplicity* of rural life, as seen through the Rural Utopia lens, is in itself an obstacle to people thinking about how policies can help improve rural conditions.

I'm thinking in a rural neighborhood, life is much simpler... [It's not about] the latest color of eyeshadow that came out, which is what a city need is, or, in suburbia it's that wine that you need for dinner. I mean, not that not that people in rural neighborhoods are light-years behind anybody else, I mean, but there's probably a smaller selection, so their needs are probably more basic... I'm not saying that as a put-down, I think that's something people need to revert back to. I'm all for it. You know? Eliminate all the 20 different products of one thing, you know, we don't need it. [suburban IL woman]

Q: What do you picture when you picture going out into the countryside in parts of Maryland?

A: To be honest with you, getting away from it all. And that's just a part of the picture. Getting away from the hassle, the hustle and the bustle. [suburban MD man]

A: They probably also don't have the desires of doing the whole foods, the specialty stores. They just do plainer and simpler stuff.

Q: Are there trade-offs that make it worth it for them to not have the variety and all these upbeat things you've been talking about?

A: Yeah, you have less choices, so you're not as stressed out about it. [urban IL woman]

The abstractness and complexity of government policy are a poor fit with this kind of thinking. Like oil and water, it is difficult to mix the two, and since people so consistently

⁴ See CMPA's review of TV news stories on rural topics.

view rural America through this Simplicity frame, this creates real cognitive obstacles to bringing policies and programs into the picture.

In fact, the value placed on the simplicity of rural life may even lead to *resistance* to the idea of policies to help rural areas. The simplicity isn't merely a feature of rural life – it is a *treasured* feature, one that people are most drawn to and most afraid of losing as rural areas are encroached upon. In this context, it is natural for people to feel that they don't want to “spoil” their image of rural America by introducing the complexities of governmental (or nongovernmental) intervention.

Rural Self-Sufficiency

There is an interesting mix of attitudes about how and whether rural people depend on each other (noted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, and discussed under the heading “Communal Individual”). On one hand, rural people are noted for their self-sufficiency.

Q: What are some of the biggest differences between / just the first thing that comes to mind as far as city and country? The most obvious differences.

A: Well, people live farther apart. I think in general I would say probably country people are more independent, and you know, independent-minded, don't like to be around other people that much, self-sufficient. [rural CO woman]

Q: Do you think that/would you say that rural parts of the country need help these days?

A: Well, you do in a certain sense, but not anymore than the city. I don't think we really need as much help as the city, because they learn to live more on what they have. [rural MD man]

On the other hand, rural people are often viewed as enjoying stronger connections with each other than people in cities and suburbs do.

I find my relatives desiring to go into town and for sure go to church and to see people so they still need that contact and they also need that help and they gravitate towards their buddy at the hardware store and at the food and grain place. My grandmother for years was the pastry and pie chef at a local diner and she'd have the same customers come in every morning because they would want to sort of catch up on the weather, what are they doing with their crops, with this bug or that bug, so you know I think they do need each other. [urban MD woman]

These apparently contradictory views are reconciled in a particular code of rural ethos that both rurals and non-rurals implicitly understand:

- “Do whatever you can do for yourself.”
- “When things are rough for you, sacrifice and make do with less.”
- “When truly necessary, help your friends, family, and neighbors.”

An essential aspect of this code is that *strangers* are not part of the scenario. People in rural areas are not interested in “outside help,” and even regard it with suspicion.

Q: Do you feel like the rural areas need help?

A: Um, I guess it depends on what you mean by help and how the approach, how the helping party would approach that. Because people who live in rural areas may feel very threatened or you know, “what are these people about?” [rural MD woman]

The shared understandings of rural self-sufficiency assume a tight-knit and well-functioning culture where no-one is far removed from people who can help in times of need. It obscures the fact that many rural people are not in situations where they can get the help they need from friends and family. They may need services that are not available, or they may simply have no-one in a position to help. This is certainly the case for many rural people today – and probably always was – but the prevailing understandings of rural life, including the Rural Utopia model, leave these scenarios out of the picture.

An important cognitive effect of these default understandings is to frame “outside help” as unnatural and immoral. Again, even non-rural Americans are likely to feel that this kind of help spoils what is pure and treasured about rural life. The image of farmers “coddled” by governmental subsidies and paid not to grow their crops, for instance, is one that many Americans find particularly distasteful. *The consequence for advocates is that most Americans are disinclined to pollute rural America with intervention by impersonal bureaucracies.*

Rural Lifestyle as a Chosen Life

One of the most direct obstacles to public support for rural policies is the strong sense that people *choose* to live in those areas, and by extension, that they have chosen to put up with hardships that go along with rural life.

There’s a lot of people that just prefer small town living. They don’t want to deal with a large city, they don’t want the anonymity, they want to know their neighbors, they want to have that feeling of community that in an urban

setting is harder and harder to get. So a lot of them put up with the economic conditions for the sake of having the feelings of community. [urban CO man]

Q: What are some of the good things about [rural life] you'd like to see preserved?

A: I like to see the farms, or ranches, like for the horses and all the animals. That's their way of making a living, farmers, you know. Don't want to cut them out. Everyone should always have their own way of living, however they want to do it. [urban IL man]

*I don't think farmers are being exploited, because it's a choice. They've chosen to do that as where their passion is or how they want to live.
[suburban IL man]*

Rural people themselves enjoy the advantages of living in the country, and are subject to a number of prejudices about non-rural living.

Q: Would you ever want to live in the suburbs or in the city?

A: I prefer living in the country. When my husband had a heart attack I had to get him off the farm because he's a perfectionist and I knew nobody would suit him to see how they were running things, so we moved to town. Um...[the country] is certainly the best place to live. [rural CO woman]

In other words, there is both a perception and to some extent a reality – shared by rurals and non-rurals – that folks who live in rural areas do so out of *choice*.

This model is reinforced by the understanding that rural life carries with it a strong moral dimension – defined by hard-work, self-sufficiency, faith and family for example. Viewed through the Rural Utopia lens, rural living involves a moral identity at least as much as a means of supporting oneself.

It is also reinforced by the (perhaps exaggerated) appreciation of mobility in American life, including the obvious fact that many non-rurals who can afford to do so deliberately *choose* to live in rural settings, and by the fact that many rurals *choose* to move to the city.

In reality, of course, people often live in rural areas because of ties to family rather than because of values or out of a preference for a style of living⁵ – or they may simply lack

⁵ See “A Rural Road: Exploring Economic Opportunity, Social Networks, Services and Supports that Affect Rural Families,” produced for the Rural Great Plains Collaborative Project with funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

the means to move to another area, or may lack knowledge that would make a move seem feasible.

The notion of rural residence as a life-choice has the effect of minimizing the entire question of rural problems, by bringing up (perhaps unconsciously) a simple rhetorical question in the mind of the public: “If you don’t like being in the country – despite all the good things about it – then why don’t you go somewhere else?”

CONCLUSION: A NEW RURAL AMERICA

Americans care about rural America, and are hopeful that it can be preserved. On the other hand, they have very little real understanding of the current state of rural areas, of how people in rural areas currently live, or of the forces that are affecting rural life.

Many of the problematic perceptions of rural America relate to one simple error. The Rural Utopia model frames rural life as life in a Village – an idealized tight-knit and self-sufficient community. When Americans think about Village life they think about rural areas, and when they think about rural areas they think about the Village.

(Urban/suburban life, on the other hand, is often stereotyped as the alienated opposite of life in the Village.) This deeply entrenched pattern of reasoning makes it hard for people to recognize the serious rural problems that advocates are interested in solving – for instance the fact that disconnection and isolation are so widespread. Even the Rural Dystopia – a dark variant on Village life – often assumes a community that is tightly interconnected even if in unhealthy ways.

Nor do Americans have a vision of what “saving” rural areas would look like, other than museum-like preservation of chosen locations, or the impractical idea of restoring whole counties and states to a nineteenth century pastoral ideal. Without a clear, coherent and compelling vision that can compete with the powerful Rural Utopia and Rural Dystopia models, advocates are unlikely to get through to average Americans and engage them in a new way.

Understanding What’s Going Wrong

One of the ways in which advocates can help is to give Americans causal stories that explain help them understand the current plight of rural America:

- As the business practices of huge corporate farms (as well as globalized competition) have led to lower and lower agricultural commodity prices, family farms have become unable to compete and stay solvent.
- As the United States continues to lose manufacturing jobs, and factories continue to close, more and more people in small towns are left out of work.
- As people leave rural areas in search of economic opportunity, businesses fail for lack of customers and workers, and infrastructure becomes dysfunctional – and individuals become more isolated in the increasingly underpopulated landscape.
- As residents of cities and suburbs spill out into the countryside, they drive up prices and property taxes, leaving people with lower, rural incomes unable to afford the things they count on – up to and including shelter.
- Etc.

A Vision of How Things Could Go Right

Another way advocates can help is to present user-friendly visions of what some call the “New Rural America.” The Center for Rural Affairs (Walthill, NE) makes a compelling case that promoting new small enterprises in small towns is an effective way to rebuild local communities and economies. The image of new and successful small businesses on Main Street, which revitalize the town square, should also be an effective way of conveying to the public how one economic step can lead to additional positive consequences – and should help promote understandings of rural areas as systems of social and economic relationships, rather than as mere picturesque farmscapes.

As Belden Russonello & Stewart concluded from previous research on this issue,

There is a minority that believes the inexorable tide of history is dictating the extinction of rural communities as we know them, so we should not try to swim against these oncoming currents. The answer to these skeptics lies not in rhetoric but in stronger rural communities. (Equal Opportunity and Economic Prosperity: Communicating Rural Matters, August 2003)

Of course, to make the greatest headway in creating “stronger rural communities,” public support is required first, which means a chicken-and-egg problem. One way out of the conundrum is to provide the public with a compelling and informative *vision* of what stronger rural communities would look like in a contemporary context. Setting out such a vision entails providing simple explanations and visual descriptions, that both appeal to deep moral values and allow the public to understand the pragmatic requirements and sense of the vision.

Discussions of infrastructure improvements both suggest a positive vision of what change could look like, and reinforce a sense of systems and connections in rural America. Improved transportation, internet access, and access to education and medical care all make rural life better by strengthening connections among people and institutions.

Not Evoking the Myths

A difficult but important challenge for advocates is to avoid evoking the myths of rural utopia or dystopia. While Americans’ positive feelings about rural areas can be a powerful source of energy to tap into, advocates drawing on these associations can also be burned. By themselves, the mere words “rural,” “country” and “countryside” have the power to evoke images that stand between the public and a more realistic understanding of rural issues. Of course it is not desirable or possible to avoid these words, but advocates need to take care to create images that can compete with the unproductive associations the words are likely to conjure. Discussions of the new rural America can avoid the stereotype traps. And in some contexts advocates may also do themselves a favor by referring, instead, to “small communities with no good medical facilities,” “areas where wages are especially low,” “counties where people don’t have good access to public services like transportation and libraries” and so forth.

Children as a Touchstone

We agree with previous recommendations (e.g. from Belden Russonello & Stewart) that it will be useful for advocates to keep children in listeners' minds during discussions of where rural America is and where it should be headed – first, because children may be less susceptible to being caricatured as country folk who fit the Rural Utopia image. And second, because children did not *choose* to live in rural areas, and deserve all the same opportunities wherever they may live.

Adding Value to Past Recommendations

This research holds important lessons for the evolving strategies that have emerged from previous research. In particular, it suggests a variety of patterns of reasoning that are likely to be triggered by frames currently being considered by advocates.

- With respect to talking about rural areas as places of innovation, emphasizing rural ingenuity, this frame is likely to provoke warmth and appreciation but not to educate people about the problems or solutions associated with rural life. The image of a farmer tinkering cleverly with his equipment is very consistent with the Rural Utopia model and if anything obscures the real conditions in rural America and the changes that are needed. It's hard to see how people will understand innovation – in the rural context – in any other way.
- With respect to talking about rural areas as places of history and culture, the findings suggest that most Americans already view rural America in this way, with counterproductive consequences. Reinforcing the association between rural areas and traditional (or antiquated) ways of life is likely to trigger the Rural Utopia model, and if anything, to imply that the “modern” systems that have crept into rural areas are out of place.
- With respect to talking about rural areas as places of diversity, emphasizing the uniqueness of regional crafts for example, the risk is that people will mainly respond to the quaintness of rustic culture. This type of positive but sentimental response does nothing to help people in cities and suburbs identify with the problems of people in rural areas, or to understand the systems and forces that shape rural life.
- With respect to framing rural America as an untapped source of economic strength – emphasizing the potential for entrepreneurs and small businesses to thrive in small communities – this direction could prove very promising. It can achieve the most by helping to clarify the role of small businesses as actors in driving the economic system of a rural community.

APPENDIX: THE COGNITIVE APPROACH

This appendix discusses the assumptions and principles that form the basis for the “cognitive approach” taken by Cultural Logic.

Frames

Researchers who study cognition and culture have established that people understand all concepts in terms of related networks of ideas, also known as *frames*. For example, the concept of a “father” is not understood in isolation, but in connection with understandings of mothers, children, families, biology, responsibility, and so forth. People are usually unaware of the frames they are using, and the frames themselves are usually expressed indirectly. They are revealed most clearly in the language and reasoning a person uses in connection with a concept. Seeming contradictions in the way a person discusses a topic can be particularly enlightening, because they may reveal conflicting frames at work. It should be noted as well that “frame” is a general term — used somewhat differently in different disciplines — to refer to more specific concepts such as *cognitive model*, *cultural model*, and *cultural theory*, discussed below.

Cultural models vs. cultural theories

A cultural theory is a set of explicit propositions that describe the nature of some general phenomenon (*The Development of Cognitive Anthropology*, D'Andrade 1995). Cultural theories are typically the most apparent and immediately coherent structures of knowledge — the ones that are volunteered by focus group participants for example, and the ones that lend themselves to direct description and summary by the analyst. Cultural theories are closely related to public discourse and, because they are explicit understandings, to rhetorical positions adopted for purposes of argument.

A cultural model, by contrast, consists of a set of largely implicit assumptions that allows a person to reason about and solve a problem. A cultural model specifies relationships between a given concept and others — specific domains (e.g., School) are typically connected to broader cultural assumptions (e.g., understandings about Achievement or Growth). Cultural models are associated with private understanding and individual reasoning.

A classic example of the difference between cultural models and cultural theories is provided by Strauss's study of blue-collar workers in Rhode Island (1992). Her informants clearly understood, and explicitly articulated to the interviewer, the American model of self-made Success. In some cases, they even claimed that this style of success was important to them. Close analysis of discourse, however, revealed that these men were actually basing their behavior on an implicit model of a Breadwinner, which is more strongly related to ideals of husband and father than to wealth and status.

Cultural models, while less explicit and more challenging to identify than cultural theories, typically have more directive force — i.e., they are more relevant to understanding what people actually do.

Cognitive Analysis

An important assumption of this view of human motivation is that a variety of cultural models typically compete for expression in a given defined situation. Putting it simply, people often have conflicts about basic issues. For example, many Americans believe that a woman should work outside the home; a contradictory assumption, held by many of these same people, is that women should stay in the home and nurture children. Though contradictions such as this one often find partial resolution (e.g., through the contemporary American notion of the "Supermom"), typically such deeply held beliefs are compartmentalized; i.e., only one will be invoked in a given context.

Cognitive analysis first identifies the relevant deeply held models to which a given subject such as "School" is connected (literally or through metaphor). Second, it attempts to map the fault lines that predict which of the models will be expressed as action in a given situation, often triggered by particular cues. Third, it suggests a picture of the dynamic relationship between public messages, cultural models, and individual action around a given topic.

Metaphors

It is a universal finding of cognitive linguistics that people use metaphors to think, speak and reason about the world, even on topics as familiar as "weather" — i.e., some of the cultural models used to reason about any given topic are metaphoric models. For example, teenagers are sometimes metaphorically understood as unfinished objects, materials that haven't been formed into their final shape. The metaphors people use to think and talk about teenagers contribute to guiding adults' behavior towards adolescents, including whether and how they choose to nurture, ignore, discipline, or otherwise engage with adolescents.

Subjects and sample size

Because a culture is defined by a set of broadly shared understandings and assumptions, studying cultural models is analogous to studying the structure of a natural language. One does not need a large group of speakers to determine the basics of a language's grammar and syntax — a few speakers will typically suffice. Similarly, working with only a relative few subjects, one can identify the commonly held belief system typical of those subjects' culture. In-depth work with a relatively small group of informants has been the norm in cognitive anthropology, allowing researchers to work more closely with subjects than is possible using large-scale methodologies. Findings from cognitive interviews may subsequently be expanded upon and refined through quantitative methods, which may establish, for example, how strongly particular models are held in different segments of the population. Where the cognitive approach identifies the nature of the models, carefully devised quantitative research, using fixed-form surveys for example, can establish the distribution of the models (see Kempton et al 1995).

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, and analysis of media and other public discourse.

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.