



Implications of the Consumer Frame for Food and Fitness
Cognitive Analysis of Media Depictions

A FrameWorks Research Report

January 2007

INTRODUCTION

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

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

METHOD

Researchers assembled and analyzed a rich sample of texts and images drawn from newspapers and magazines, representing both their reportage and their advertising. We reviewed over 70 health-related articles (including features, editorials and scientific reporting) that were published in national, regional and local newspapers from January to December 2006. We also drew over 30 articles and 50 advertisements from 15 nationally circulated magazine publications including *Time*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Seventeen*, *Southern Living*, *Jet*, *Men's Health*, *GQ* and others.

Although the research was designed to include a thorough sampling, this analysis is not a quantitative look at the number of various types of articles published, but a qualitative examination of how topics related to food and fitness are treated in the materials, and the likely implications for readers' thinking. As such, it is meant to be a complement to the content analysis provided to FrameWorks on this topic by the Center for Media and Public Affairs. Our analysis looks at such factors as the types of topics that are and are not mentioned in a given text, the ways in which topics are treated as either related or unrelated, the causal stories conveyed or implied by the articles and advertisements, the metaphors used to talk about health-related topics, and so forth. The analysis is less about cataloguing what is explicitly said than it is about identifying the implicit understandings that are conveyed by the materials. The analysis also focuses on the relationship between the stories told in newspapers and magazines and the stories people already have in their heads, as established by open-ended interviews with individuals (elicitations) and ethnographic research.

Much of the report is devoted to harmful patterns in the coverage of health issues—i.e. ways in which the coverage is likely to maintain counterproductive understandings in the minds of readers, or to encourage a continuing “cognitive blindness” to some important aspects of health, especially how larger environments affect health and how the state of public health impacts us all. However, we also discuss pieces that avoid these traps, since

these positive examples can help guide advocates (and responsible journalists) to identify ways of providing more constructive framing.

(For more on the cognitive approach, see the Appendix.)

The articles surveyed in this round of research included discussions of a wide variety of issues, which a traditional content analysis might organize into various topics and subtopics as follows:

- Benefits of exercise
 - combating obesity
 - looking good
 - preventing aging
 - resistance to disease
 - strength, endurance, flexibility, agility, etc.
 - etc.

Other headings (without subtopics) covered in our sample include:

- Women's appearance and body image
- Motivational stories
- How-to guides
- Benefits of healthy food
- Obesity
- The "business" of organic food
- Etc.

Traditional content analyses usefully tabulate and quantify these categories, helping us understand the dominance of particular themes in news media. The purpose of the cognitive analysis, by contrast, is to identify the implicit conceptual frames that underlie the articles, cross-cutting many of the explicit topic categories and labels. The central finding from this research is that, hidden beneath the apparently wide variety of topics covered within the general categories of "food" and "fitness," a fairly narrow set of conceptual frames can be found that guide the public conversation. These are, for the most part, closely connected to what we have called a "consumer" frame.

Exceptions to counterproductive patterns

Unfortunately, but not unexpectedly, much of the report is devoted to counterproductive

patterns in the coverage of food and fitness —i.e. ways in which the coverage is likely to create counterproductive understandings in the minds of readers. In order to make the report as useful as possible, however, we have also included discussions of exceptional articles and op-eds that avoid these traps.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

This analysis is informed by a substantial body of previous research conducted by the FrameWorks Institute on how Americans think about food and fitness. The previous research includes in-depth interviews with a diverse group of Americans in California, Colorado and Illinois,¹ as well as focus groups conducted for the project. Other past FrameWorks research not focused on health and fitness has also touched on the topic significantly, including work on health insurance access, adolescent development, and so forth.

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

- Thinking about the issue of fitness transcends geography.

One of the key findings from the research is that there are important patterns shared between California, Chicago and Colorado – locations that would seem to be as far apart with respect to fitness as they are geographically.

- Thinking is typically somewhat contradictory.

For instance, people often attribute Americans' lack of fitness to two nearly opposite problems:

People are too busy and hardworking to focus on fitness.

People are too lazy to focus on fitness.

Or,

Americans are unconcerned with fitness (look at how overweight we are).

Americans put a strong emphasis on fitness (look at the constant messages from the media).

- Fitness is seen as a Hobby.

From one perspective, fitness can be dismissed as something like a hobby that interests only a particular subgroup of the population.

¹ “Fitness as a Personal Ideal: Findings from cognitive elicitations in Colorado and Chicago,” FrameWorks Institute, November 2006 and “Health Individualism: Findings from cognitive elicitations among Californians,” FrameWorks Institute, August 2006.

- Health Individualism is a Dominant Model.

According to this model, it is an individual's *personal responsibility* to make healthy or unhealthy choices, and the impacts affect the *individual*. Within this mental picture of how the world works, both the external causes of health and the broader implications of people's health disappear from the picture.

- The Causes of Health are Individual.

From the Health Individualism perspective, health is determined almost entirely by individual choices and behaviors.

From the Health Individualism perspective, the reasons for different health patterns among different ethnic groups, for example, boils down to differences in knowledge and culture.

- The Implications of Health are Individual.

When thinking is guided by the Health Individualism perspective – i.e. most of the time – people understand health as a personal matter and see health outcomes as a matter primarily of concern to individuals and their loved ones.

- Alternative models about the Causes and Implications of Health exist in the shadow of the dominant model.

Among these weaker understandings are the following:

- Modern life is unhealthy.
- Stress hurts your health.
- Toxins around us can make us sick.
- There are strong commercial forces leading to bad health.
- Mental Health is influenced by our environment or surroundings.
- Poverty leads to bad health.
- Violence in the environment is a health risk.

STRATEGIC SUMMARY

The research conducted in this round of research strongly supports the previously-established finding that the media environment promotes a consumer perspective; i.e., one which sees the world from the point of view of the individual buyer and user of products. A key implication of the consumer frame is that it excludes what we have referred to as a “systems” view of the world, one in which larger or “big picture” causes have specific effects. One implication of leaving out such a big picture perspective is this tends to blind people to many of the types of solutions that should be central to the public discourse on an issue such as a food and fitness.

Identifying the tendency of media depictions of food and fitness to make extensive use of a consumer frame is the starting point of the analysis offered here, which explores a number of implications and manifestations of the consumer frame:

Health Individualism

According to this model, it is an individual’s *personal responsibility* to make healthy or unhealthy choices, and the impacts affect the *individual*. Within this mental picture of how the world works, both the external causes of health and the broader implications of people’s health disappear from the picture. The analysis of media depictions of food and fitness found ample evidence of the prevalence of the Health Individualism frame across many if not most of the articles we surveyed. Overwhelmingly in this sample, health is considered to be a personal matter. It’s up to *you* to be healthy, and if you’re not, *you* may suffer the consequences.

Mentalism

Much of the discourse represented by the media we surveyed holds fast to what we call a “mentalist perspective.” Within this perspective, mental/psychological factors operate in a causal universe that is removed in important ways from the practical and material considerations that concern food and fitness advocates and experts. The mentalist perspective strongly implies that *knowledge* and the *right attitude* are the key ingredients to making the choices necessary to being healthy. The contrast with the expert perspective is clear: for experts, the situations addressed usually involve big picture (e.g., economic) factors such as being able to afford a personal health ‘coach,’ or environmental factors such as not having a good place to run anywhere near your home or workplace.

Fitness as Appearance

The expert and advocate understanding of “fitness” is closely related to understandings of “health.” Research with ordinary Americans suggests that fitness is understood in terms of personal/physical appearance or beauty as well as health. This round of research suggests that print media takes this tendency to the extreme, however, and tends to make appearance central to most discussions or

depictions of fitness. The tendency is, unsurprisingly, most pronounced in the case of advertising, which is on the one hand able to portray beauty visually and thus directly, and on the other hand most immediately concerned with creating associations between handsome/beautiful models and particular products or brands. Print stories, by contrast, often take an “insider” perspective, offering advice on reaching your goal of becoming more attractive. In cognitive terms, the communications achieves a similar effect – to reframe fitness as appearance.

Little picture context

Taken as a whole, the print depictions of food and fitness we surveyed tend to reinforce the illusion of a limited, personalized environment – a cognitive “life box,” that corresponds to one’s immediate surroundings and choices. This “life box” amounts to a set of habits of thought that, taken together, create effects analogous to the way a person would think if s/he had real walls around him/her, creating a small, insulated space, that limits action, thinking, and perception. The “life box” itself is basically *invisible* to consumers – people in this situation are not consciously aware of how their thinking is being limited. But they do experience it in some very particular ways. It makes the world around them – a world of products, habits, small choices – feel like a natural, unquestioned set of “givens,” with no causal history.

Small Science

A surprising proportion of the articles and advertisements provide extensive technical information. Usually clearly and concisely expressed, often as “news you can use,” these pieces offer simple causal explanations about a wide variety of issues relating to food and fitness. At the same time, however, the information that is shared tends to be narrow, and to present a limited view of the issue, often amounting to lists or tips that help the consumer make choices. These “small science” explanations provide the reader with a sense of a deeper understanding that is satisfying, but that often risks taking the place of the sorts of bigger picture understandings that advocates would like the public to adopt. Furthermore this can interfere with advocate messages for the simple reason that the public *already* feels overwhelmed with too much information.

The Exceptions that Prove the Rule: Print Coverage of the Bigger Picture

Although the qualitative survey conducted in this round of research revealed patterns of coverage that are mostly counterproductive, a number of articles seemed designed to provide the sort of bigger picture understanding that advocates would find helpful. Among these were articles on: the role of the physical environment (and the policies that shape it), the role of the food industry, the connection between health and a better food system, and a more holistic view of exercise.

Taken together, these patterns constitute a most challenging terrain for communicators on

food and fitness to negotiate.

IMPLICATIONS OF A CONSUMER FRAME

The research conducted in this round of research strongly supports the previously-established finding that the media environment promotes a consumer perspective. A consumer frame sees the world from the point of view of the individual buyer and user of products. As pointed out in previous reports, the consumer frame is greatly reinforced not just by the connection between the media and advertisers, whose interest it is to treat readers/viewers as buyers, but also by an American ideology of personal responsibility. One important characteristic of the consumer frame is that it excludes what we have referred to as a “systems” view of the world. One implication of this omission is that it restricts the types of solutions that are likely to seem sensible to people and, therefore, gain traction within the public discourse on the issue of food and fitness.

The research reported on here confirms a long-standing view about the interconnectedness of “reporting” and “advertising.” From a cognitive perspective, the overlap between the two categories of communications is very large indeed. That is, the difference is not a matter of the cognitive frames but rather more superficial differences of voice or messenger: Paid advertising approaches the reader more explicitly from the point of view of products or brands, while editorial commentary often takes a stance that is from the point of view, or “on the side” of the consumer – often sounding like an older, wiser sibling or impartial third-party. Magazines, in particular, blur the boundaries; many ads adopt a journalistic style complete with quoted experts and references to the latest studies, while many feature articles discard all pretense of objectivity and endorse the products of the advertisers whose money ultimately supports the publication.

In the end, however, whether editorial or advertisement, the content reinforces the idea that our health depends upon the kinds of products and services we purchase and use. Whether the communications has the “buy more” stance of the ads, or the “news you can use” positioning of editorial content, the message is that our health depends on everything from the kind of cereal we buy, the equipment we own, the pills we take, the way we recreate or how we organize our work and family life.

Thus, for example, advertisements for products like the Power Glove Personal Fitness Assistant claim that it “can keep you healthy,” as it enables you to “balance aerobic activities with caloric intake for improved overall health” (“Put Fitness at Your Fingertips,” *Market Wire*, April 2006). It is not just exercise, but every other purchasing decision, that derives health implications.

Maybe you’d pay 25 cents more for an organic apple. But would you shell out an extra \$500 for an organic couch? Few people realize that chemicals used in manufacturing furniture can cause allergies or make them ill, says Richard Jackson, former director of the National Center for Environmental Health for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“Home décor goes green,” *Psychology Today*, July-August 2006

Dr. Lee's TeaForHealth Organic Green Tea inabottle is the First Bottled Green Tea to Meet the National Cancer Institute's Standard Required for Anti-cancer Benefits.

TeaForHealth® today presented its new anti-cancer green tea product, based on the de facto standard recommended by the National Cancer Institute (NCI) for effectiveness against cancer. The new 710EGCG™ organic green tea "inabottle™" product, in four ready-to-drink flavors, were made available for tasting at the 52nd Summer Fancy Food Show®.

“TeaForHealth presents the only anti-cancer strength green tea with FDA health claim at the summer fancy food show,” *Business Wire*, July 9, 2006

It is worth noting that part of the explanation for the cognitive overlap between editorial and advertising is that the consumer frame is flexible and generative – it can be extended to guide understanding of aspects of the world that are not in any literal sense “for sale.” In fact, many public interest issues are often depicted, often by advocates themselves, as “products” to be promoted, for example through social marketing.

Identifying the tendency of media depictions of food and fitness to make extensive use of a consumer frame is the starting point of the analysis offered here, which explores a number of implications and manifestations of the consumer frame:

Health Individualism

Individual interviews (“elicitations”) conducted for this project with California subjects established the dominance of a powerful and widespread cognitive model which we called Health Individualism. According to this model, it is an individual’s *personal responsibility* to make healthy or unhealthy choices, and the impacts are largely confined to the *individual*. Within this mental picture of how the world works, both the external causes of health and the broader implications of people’s health disappear from the picture.

The analysis of media depictions of food and fitness found ample evidence of the prevalence of the Health Individualism frame across many if not most of the articles surveyed. Overwhelmingly in this sample, health is considered to be a personal matter. It’s up to *you* to be healthy, and if you’re not, *you* (and only you) may suffer the consequences.

As scientists uncover more insights on how aging occurs and the causes linked to its seemingly inevitable symptoms, we face the unique opportunity of determining how fast it happens to us. Combating the aging process isn’t left to those with crowded birthday cakes. The earlier we begin preparing for those quickly approaching years, the better we can minimize their impact on us. All it takes is some common sense and a few life-changing choices.

“Fountain of youth,” *Vibrant Life*, January-February, 2006

The article goes on to say that if you want to “nurture and protect the only body you’ll

ever have”, you need to “choose to exercise”, “choose to eat less”, “choose natural hormone help”, “choose antioxidant-rich foods” and “choose healthy skin care.”

Becoming healthier involves learning, and then exercising, the will to make lifestyle changes. If you don’t keep yourself – or make yourself – healthy, then a variety of bad things may befall you, from getting a preventable disease, like diabetes, to having a negative self-image, to actually showing your age.

My 5’9” frame tipped the scales at 321 pounds, easily qualifying me as obese – a designation that advanced my biological age of 26 by 2 decades, according to a UCLA study. More disturbing, a blood test showed that I was on the verge of diabetes, despite having no obvious symptoms (other than a bulging belly). For the first time, being fat felt irresponsible.

“Lose 30 pounds in 3 months,” *Men’s Health*, November 2006

Thus, not only are the *causes* of health individualized, but the *results* of ill-health are almost entirely individualized. Even in an article about influenza, the rather obvious idea that there could be a collective, public health benefit from flu prevention is entirely left out. The reasons for taking steps against the flu are solely about the individuals directly affected:

“It’s very important because it causes so much devastation,” Bryant Stephens says. “It causes missed school days, missed work days, and it’s something that can be prevented with the influenza vaccine.”

“What you can do to protect yourself from the flu,” *Jet Magazine*, October 13, 2006

Some articles take individualism to the point of narcissism.

For example, an article entitled “The 6 keys to body confidence,” advises “celebrating you”, “affirm[ing]” your “uniqueness”, and transforming yourself into “a woman who loves being the center of attention.” However, even in this article purporting to help women *like* who they are, the message comes through that it is nevertheless up to you to improve yourself:

"I love to flaunt my confidence in my body, and I feel especially great when women half my age ask for advice on how I stay in shape," says Dori King, 57, from Chicago. King points out that while some women over 40 may hesitate to go sleeveless, she isn't afraid to bare her arms. "I started doing push-ups a long time ago because I decided that I did not want my grandma's fleshy arms," she says. "I exercise and eat healthy meals to stay trim. My confidence comes from being happy with who I am."

“The 6 keys to body confidence,” *Essence*, January 2006

(Note that these pieces purporting to help the reader withstand the pressure to conform to

the prevailing female body standards just reinforce that pressure and those standards. The Essence article even ends with a list of celebrities categorized according to body type (“most bangin’ body”, “crazy curves”, etc.).

Sometimes an article that relies on the Health Individualism model will acknowledge a social or environmental factor or two.

One important exception to the exclusive focus on the individual consequences of a lack of fitness is *obesity*, which is increasingly framed as a public health issue, although the causes may be left vague or ill-defined.

For instance, in the article “She ain’t heavy,” (*Chicago Sun-Times*, June 27, 2006) the journalist notes that there is “fat pressure” on new mothers to lose weight immediately and they are likely to feel that “the postpartum body is something to be shed in record time.” The article notes that “fat pressure is the last thing new moms need as they adjust to life’s greatest change.” Even here, however, the conversation stays within the Health Individualism model: women should be taught not to diet prematurely.

Some reports emphasize how social pressure can undermine health, as in the case of a girl’s desire to conform to the unrealistic body shapes of stars:

To what do we owe this warped belief that humans should be in negative number sizes? “Many kids have poor body images due to the enormous pressure in celebrity culture to be super skinny,” explains Susan S. Bartell, author of *The Girls-Only Weight Loss Guide*. In the past five years, the numbers of magazines, websites and TV shows dedicated to celebrity worship have exploded. So girls see more images of “perfect” bodies.

“Special Report: weighing in,” *Girl’s Life*, June-July 2006

This particular article points out the health impacts of being “super skinny” and also treats the obesity trends, blaming “lifestyle” changes that include statistical trends of eating more processed food and too much “butt-on-the-seat” time in school and in front of screens.

Yet, despite the fact that social facts behind a public health problem may be mentioned, solutions are typically situated in learning, attitude, and lifestyle change. The prescriptions in the *Girl’s Life* article include: “learn your healthy weight,” “commit to good habits,” “understand Mom” (that is, her weight issues). And they include calls to stop comparing oneself to celebrities and to other girls, to stop pressuring one another to conform, and to learn to respect one’s own metabolism.

Mentalism

Much of the discourse represented by the media we surveyed holds fast to what we call a “mentalist perspective.” This perspective is defined by the tendency to exaggerate the causal importance of mental and non-material factors such as *thinking, wanting, character, ideas, morals, learning*, etc. Within this perspective, mental/psychological factors operate in a causal universe that is removed in important ways from the practical

and material considerations that concern food and fitness advocates and experts. Importantly, while this mental world can involve causal connections (e.g., desires lead to intentions), these causal stories bear little connection to the sort of material events that are central in expert understandings.

Americans bring a strong preference for mentalist perspectives and explanations. The mentalist perspective strongly implies that *knowledge* and the *right attitude* are the key ingredients to making the choices necessary to being healthy. The contrast with the expert perspective is clear: for experts, the relevant factors generally involve big picture (e.g., economic) factors such as being able to afford a personal health “coach,” or environmental factors such as not having a good place to run anywhere near your home or workplace. Judging from the majority of these articles and ads, however, material conditions would seem to have nothing to do with being healthy.

Information and education make the difference in being healthy.

To an overwhelming degree, the message that comes through in these materials is that information is the key to health:

Indoor runners’ mistakes weaken workout value but prove easily fixable . . . “Everyone makes mistakes,” says Rick Morris, professional running coach and author of “Treadmill Training for Runners” (Shamrock Cove, 301 pages, \$15.95).

“Stride-friendly tips for treadmill faux pas,” *Syracuse Post-Standard*, February 5, 2005

The knowledge in question is understood as what an informed consumer, rather than a good citizen, needs to know. With the right information, you can choose to purchase healthy food, achieve your ideal weight, get “support” to keep you motivated to exercise, etc. (see below). The research makes clear that the media environment is cluttered with outlets seeking to sell advice and information on how to make better choices. In fact, there is a whole subset of reporting about helping individuals to filter the glut of information. Typical examples are a sidebar called “Bogus Diet Advice” in *Cosmopolitan* (November 2006), or the heading that warns, “just because the label says it’s good for you doesn’t mean it is. Here’s how to read beyond the marketing hype” (“You call that health food?” *Men’s Health*, November 2006).

Fitness is hard work, but attitude, motivation and willpower make the difference.

Another resounding theme in the fitness articles is the *effort* it takes to exercise. Although occasional articles mentioned the pleasures of exercise, most articles stressed the mental and physical costs that are required.

[Bodybuilding] is no cakewalk, which is why too many people falter in their efforts.

“Journey of a lifetime”, *Muscle & Fitness*, April 2006

You want to work out today. You really do. But what with groceries to pick up, personal calls to make that you didn't get to at work, a dog that needs to go to the vet and a billion other responsibilities ... your motivation is fizzling. We get it – in fact we've been there many times.

“The busy woman's guide to a great winter body,” *Fitness Magazine*, December 2006

In a similar example, “I don't want to be another statistic” (*Men's Health*, November 2006), the writer enjoins the reader to “take the hard path” and to “shock your body.”

Remarkably, a similar effort is required to ‘eat right’. This involves countering bad habits (e.g. going for the easiest, most convenient meal), and sometimes being willing to go it alone when those around you are not committed to eating right:

Says Monique, 12, "My mom is heavy, but she buys fatty food all the time, then tells me to watch what I eat! We have no healthy food in the house. How does she expect me to be healthy?!" If your mom is like Monique's, try talking to her about making better food-shopping choices.

“Special Report: weighing in,” *Girl's Life*, June-July 2006

Effort can be applied to a variety of domains. So, for example, finding the money to buy organic food itself becomes a project requiring effort and advice:

Eating like a hippie shouldn't require a yuppie budget . . . Duke University nutritionist Greg Hottinger, R.D. . . suggests saving cash by preparing more food at home and cutting back on dining and snacking out. "People feel reluctant to spend \$3 on quinoa, but they will spend \$10 on popcorn and soda at the movies."

“Feelin' Groovy,” *Natural Health*, May 2005

More generally, *willpower* itself becomes something that can be explicitly addressed and even marketed:

Says Todd Whitthorne, president of Cooper Concepts, a division of The Cooper Aerobics Center . . . "The problem is not the lack of information; the problem is the lack of motivation and support." Whitthorne says most people who try to lose weight make the mistake of jumping into the action steps first, such as joining a gym, or buying new exercise equipment, without first preparing mentally for the challenge.

“Your weight not your fault,” *Market Wire*, September 2006

While some of these articles and advertisements seem to take social factors into account (e.g. you also need “support” in overcoming “your personal obstacles [to getting fit]” (quoted from the article above) – the logic is still very much consumerist. In fact, the material quoted above from *Market Wire* is actually an ad for a personal telephone-based coaching program, and the text advocates buying the “support” you need.

Character and Guilt are key

In media depictions, if the effort to get fit is an act of will, it is also an expression of character. Laudatory stories about how individuals changed their ways abound:

In April 2001, just a few weeks after the tragedy [of a stillbirth], Hansen began replacing food with exercise as a coping mechanism. In a little more than a year, the extra weight – all 100 pounds – was gone. She didn't have surgery and didn't use pills. "It was a lifestyle change," Hansen said. "That's what it takes."

“Don’t fight obesity alone,” *Deseret Morning News*, July 6, 2006

Other stories address the guilt people might feel (or ought to feel) when they do not manage to make themselves healthy. The overarching message is that we mustn’t be too easy on ourselves and allow weakness of character to lead to poor health. For example, an article “Stride-friendly tips for treadmill faux pas,” emphasizes that, “we’re often too easy on ourselves,” (*Syracuse Post-Standard*, February 5, 2006), while another profiles a diet consultant to celebrities, an admirably tough character who “doesn’t mince words” (“Truth about dieting, weight heavy to bear,” *Syracuse Post-Standard*, February 5, 2006).

The association with fitness and good character is implicit in the following quote about those who “get up early” to exercise:

The great divide in this country isn't between men and women, Republican and Democrat, red state and blue or baby boomer and Gen- Xer. It's between those who get up early and find time to exercise – and the rest of us.

“If Rice and Bush can find time to work out, so can we,” *Deseret News*, March 7, 2006

If such powerful, busy and successful people as Condoleezza Rice and George Bush can do it, we should feel guilty for not being able to do it ourselves. This link between character and fitness can easily lead to blaming people not only for their health problems, but for their weakness of character as well. The same article notes that, unlike Rice and Bush:

Bill Clinton, once famous for his love of fast food, became a convert to healthier eating and exercise after quadruple bypass surgery in 2004.

A president often characterized as weak in character did not take on healthy habits until forced to do so by the “wake up call” of ill-health.

The theme that poor health is a result of poor character is apparent in articles that appear to deal with much bigger picture issues. An article about Medicaid enlists the stereotype of the ignorant and irresponsible hick:

No question, John Johnson is a doctor's nightmare. Speaking from the easy chair where he spends his days in a small wooden house near this small Appalachian town, his left trouser leg folded by a safety pin where a limb was lost to diabetes, he lighted another cigarette. Mr. Johnson, 61 and a former garbage collector, takes insulin and goes to a clinic once a month for diabetes checkups. Taxpayers foot the bill through Medicaid, the federal-state health coverage program for the poor. But when doctors urged him to mind his diet, "I told them I eat what I want to eat and the hell with them."

Medicaid plan prods patients toward health," *New York Times*, December 1, 2006

It is worth noting that advertising is often a counterweight to this general message. For example, one offer to sell a personalized behavior modification program is titled: "Your weight not your fault" (*Market Wire*, September 2006). Presumably, this has much to do with what sells: putting it another way, the *effort and the commitment* to improve oneself are represented by the monetary *cost* of the product.

Fitness as Appearance

The expert and advocate understanding of "fitness" is closely related to understandings of "health." Research with ordinary Americans suggests that fitness is understood in terms of personal/physical appearance or beauty as well as health. This round of research suggests that print media takes this tendency to the extreme, however, and tends to make appearance central to most discussions or depictions of fitness.

The tendency is, unsurprisingly, most pronounced in the case of advertising, which is on the one hand able to portray beauty visually and thus directly, and on the other hand most immediately concerned with creating associations between handsome/beautiful models and particular products or brands. Many ads simply put beautiful individuals in the scene along with a product and/or tagline, often relying on an effect of envy or desire on the part of the viewer. Print stories, by contrast, often take an "insider" perspective, offering advice on reaching your goal of becoming more attractive. In cognitive terms, the communications achieves a similar effect – to reframe fitness as appearance.

Being fit is being beautiful, having an attractive appearance.

Magazines especially abound with pieces with titles like, "Slim, Strong and Sexy in 4 weeks" (*Fitness*, Dec 2006). Below, bikini model Daniela Pestova is profiled about her fitness regimen in a way that stresses how it improves her physical attractiveness:

She does 40-50 minutes of cardio on the bike, the elliptical trainer or occasionally the treadmill. After stretching, she does resistance training to stay toned. Since she's been a Shape reader for more than eight years, she says many of her moves – be they leg-toning

squats or sexy arm-baring biceps curls – have come straight from our pages!

“My simple rules for getting bikini-fit,” *Shape*, June 2006

Although this emphasis on physical attractiveness is most intense for women, articles also remind men about how unattractive their unfit (and healthy) bodies are. The editor of *Men’s Health* confessed:

Three months before my wedding, I had a realization: *I don’t want to be a fat groom.* After all, a cummerbund can only hide so much. And besides, what kind of man would marry a beautiful woman knowing he’s going to die young?

“Lose 30 pounds in 3 months,” *Men’s Health*, November 2006

Beauty sells products: Good stuff goes with beautiful people

The advertising industry spends billions of dollars annually in advertisements that use the simplest and most widespread marketing strategy that exists: they place their product or service next to something else that is attractive and desirable, and often enough that desirable thing is a fit and healthy person. And because so much advertising is visual, there is tremendous stress on the superficial, physical appearance.

Not surprisingly, our sampling of articles and advertisements offers many, many pictures of exceptionally attractive (and often exceptionally fit-looking) people. As individuals are bombarded with marketing messages, attractive physical appearance is linked with all sorts of status activities and commodities. The causal association works in both directions: Not only is a young person likely to think that a cool car makes him look better, but also that better-looking people are more likely to have a cool car.

The backlash against this general trend is a concern about body image, particularly for women.

An article in *Essence* lays out the problem:

The pressure that society imposes on all women to meet a certain beauty standard has not [improved]. "The preoccupation with thinness in American culture is beginning to have an impact on Black women," says Gloria Morrow, Ph.D., a psychologist in Upland, California, and author of *Too Broken to Be Fixed?* (Shining Glory Publications). While it's true that Black folks in general are more accepting of different body types and a wider variety of beauty ideals than the general population, sisters are not immune to the twin demons of low self-esteem and poor body image. Experts point to evidence suggesting that the number of Black women who suffer from eating disorders is on the increase . . . "More and more, I'm seeing patients who suffer from body-image distress," Morrow says.

“The 6 keys to body confidence,” *Essence*, January 2006

Ultimately, however, this article does not challenge the pressure that women feel to be beautiful. It tries instead to increase the number of body types that ought to be considered beautiful and which women should strive for. The article concludes with the results of a poll in which readers had ranked the beauty of celebrities in 8 categories ranging from “tight and all right,” to “full-figured and fabulous.”

When it comes to the obsession with physical attractiveness and the physical and psychological costs involved, some articles try to navigate the mixed messages of “like yourself” and “make yourself more attractive” by criticizing how unrealistic are current beauty standards:

Says Cheryl Dellasega, author of *Mean Girls Grown Up*. "Girls are sold on gorgeous images that aren't real and, as a result, they feel enormous pressure to look like something that's unachievable unless you have a team of professionals and digital retouching."

“Special report: weighing in,” *Girls’ Life*, June-July 2006

This article makes some effort to lay out the health costs of trying to achieve these unrealistic body types, ranging from anorexia to just plain unhappiness.

Little picture context

Taken as a whole, the print depictions of food and fitness we surveyed tend to reinforce the illusion of a limited, personalized environment – a cognitive “life box,” that corresponds to one’s immediate surroundings and choices. This “life box” amounts to a set of habits of thought that, taken together, create effects analogous to the way a person would think if s/he had real walls around him/her, creating a small, insulated space, and limiting action, thinking, and perception.

The “life box” itself is basically *invisible* to consumers – people in this situation are not consciously aware of how their thinking is being limited. But they do experience it in some very particular ways. It makes the world around them – a world of products, habits, small choices – feel like a natural, unquestioned set of “givens” with no causal history.

Although the sample articles tend to talk about fitness in the person-focused senses discussed above (i.e. individualism, mentalism and individual physical attractiveness), the texts do provide some sense of an immediate *environment*. Without clear access to “big picture” understandings about how more general physical or social conditions have impacts on people’s health, however, it is difficult for readers to move beyond a consumer perspective on food and fitness.

Tips and gadgets for managing your (micro)environment

As a consumer, you are taught to think about the “little ways” that you can change things in your life – often with the help of consumer products or by following the advice of the voices in the media. In a typical example, the magazine article, “The busy woman’s guide to a great winter body” (*Fitness Magazine*, December 2006) offers tips on how to stay fit even though your “calendar is out of control.” This piece offers no reason why

women's lives are organized in ways that are so unhealthful, and no hint that there might be other kinds of responses we as citizens might make, instead of just better individual time-budgeting.

Other articles give advice on how to manage your eating environment (e.g. surrounding yourself with healthy foods instead of unhealthy snacks), or your workspace, or other aspects of your immediate environment.

Cold temps keep you inside where it's warm and cozy. Unfortunately indoor heating systems dry out the mucus that washes away bacteria and viruses from your nose and lungs. Plus you're cooped up with everyone else's germs too.

"Why people get sick right now," *Seventeen*, December 2006

What's missing? A systems view

To the extent that there is a bigger picture, it is the "given" to which people must learn to adapt -- somehow. People are rarely encouraged to think about larger social trends or public policies.

In one sense, the texts serve to give people a very narrow and limited sense of empowerment. You can take control of your own destiny (in terms of health and fitness), but in another sense the texts are profoundly *dis*-empowering, because there is no sense that people are engaged with a system that could be changed in any significant way.

For example, a recent issue of *Jet Magazine* includes a brief segment on coping with flu season. Public health professionals and the CDC are quoted, and it is made clear that this is a huge public health issue. ("Each year the contagious disease kills nearly 36,000 people in the United States.") Yet, the article manages nevertheless to keep the topic focused entirely in individualistic, "little picture" terms:

Flu prevention tips: Get vaccinated; Avoid people who are sick; Cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze and wash your hands; Rest, exercise, drink fluids and eat healthy foods.

"What you can do to protect yourself from the flu," *Jet Magazine*, October 13, 2006

Though all of this is good advice, the piece is an example of readers not being addressed as citizens, but rather as inhabitants who have control only over their individual "life box."

This is typical of topics that people are accustomed to dealing with in consumer mode.

Small Science

A surprising proportion of the articles and advertisements surveyed in this round of research provide extensive technical information. Usually clearly and concisely expressed, often as "news you can use," the pieces offer simple causal explanations about a wide variety of issues relating to food and fitness.

At the same time, however, the information that is shared tends to be narrow, and to

present a limited view of the issue, often amounting to lists or tips that help the consumer make choices. These “small science” explanations provide the reader with a sense of a deeper understanding that is satisfying, but that often risks substituting for the sorts of bigger picture understandings that advocates would like the public to adopt.

I can't say enough about the importance of goal-setting for beginners . . . Set certain benchmarks like adding 10 pounds of muscle, squatting 50 more pounds or getting your bodyfat below 12%. And once you hit those goals, it's time to set the bar higher. The beauty of bodybuilding is that you can constantly readjust your goals and your body will adapt! Make sure your goals are realistic, measurable and attainable, and you'll find yourself piling up small successes left and right.

“Journey of a lifetime,” *Muscle & Fitness*, April 2006

Often these texts give the impression that good health requires extremely specific knowledge, like the detailed instructions below at understanding a “serving” of cheese, or exactly what happens to sodium nitrite in our bodies:

If you slice the cheese a quarter of an inch thick and in a two-inch square, and you cut two slices, you'll have one serving. Sample serving: two slices of cheddar, 226 calories and 19 grams of fat.

“The shocking fat trap,” *Fitness Magazine*, December 2006

Meat and Cancer Eating as little processed meat as one hot dog a day--about 1.5 ounces--increased the risk of pancreatic cancer by a startling 67 percent in a University of Hawaii study of 191,000 men and women. "We cannot attribute the increase to total fat, saturated fat or cholesterol," lead researcher Ute Nothlings, DrPH, of the Cancer Research Center of Hawaii, tells VT. The culprit, the researchers told a meeting of the American Association for Cancer Research in April 2005, appears to be sodium nitrite, which is used as a preservative in hot dogs, sausages and other meat products. After it's eaten, sodium nitrite forms compounds called nitrosamines which promote cancer growth. (Nitrosamines are also found in beer and tobacco products.) Makes a veg diet sound better and better!

“This just in: need-to-know news about your health, diet, mind, body and the world you live in,” *Vegetarian Times*, January 2006

Even relatively detailed reports on scientific advances are often narrowly focused on how they affect the health of the individual consumer. For example, the report below emphasizes how genetic engineering will save consumers from having to make any changes to their diet by making pork more heart-healthy and peanuts less allergenic:

[Pigs] are at the vanguard of a new wave of genetically modified products. The first batch debuted in the mid-'90s and was designed primarily to make life easier for farmers – bug-resistant corn, herbicide-tolerant canola . . . The new stuff, on the other hand, is being designed to directly benefit you, the consumer.”

“Guess what’s coming to dinner,” *Men’s Health*, November 2006

The article continues on at great length about the benefits to the consumer, with only passing (and dismissive) references to issues like environmental dangers or larger issues like global trade and hunger.

Pressure to present a simple message provides an incomplete picture.

Even in serious journalistic reporting there is a strong tendency to take scientific studies (which are often complex and full of uncertainties) and present them as something simple, compelling and relevant. This effort to “boil things down” probably feeds into and reflects the almost telegraphic, factoid-oriented “small science” that fills the pages of magazines and serves as material for advertisements.

An illustrative case in point is a rather straightforward report on life expectancy that was widely reported in the media. In summarizing the study, the *Boston Globe* claimed that the study showed *race* to be the main factor:

Asian women in Bergen County, N.J., typically live at least 30 years longer than Native Americans in South Dakota, highlighting an enormous gulf in life expectancy between the longest - and shortest-lived people in the United States, according to a provocative new Harvard University study. Nationally, the study finds that Asians live the longest -- 84.9 years on average -- while urban blacks in high -crime areas have the shortest life expectancy, just 71.1 years.

“Wide gaps in US life expectancy data vary across races, regions,”
Boston Globe, September 13, 2006

Businessweek, on the other hand emphasized that it is simply *where you live*, and that income played no role:

Life expectancy in the U.S. varies widely, based not on how much you earn or how good your health insurance is, but on where you live.

“Say aloha to long life,” *Businessweek*, September 15, 2006

The Boston Herald reported that it was a *combination of location, race, and income*:

It turns out that where you live, combined with race and income, plays a huge role in whether you die young, says a study issued Monday that contends the differences are so stark it’s as if there are eight separate Americas instead of one.

Harvard study says where you live can affect how long you live,”

The Boston Herald, September 12, 2006

The San Diego Union-Tribune reported that the source of the disparities was a combination of *race and lifestyle*:

The often enormous gaps in lifespan appear to stem from a complicated mix of race and lifestyle habits that differ from region to region. In particular, lifestyle patterns are the leading indicators of premature death caused by high blood pressure, heart and lung diseases, diabetes and injuries from alcohol-related collisions and other accidents.

“Wide gaps shown in mortality rates,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, September 12, 2006

And finally, the *St. Petersburg Times*, boiled it down entirely to lifestyle choices in their aptly entitled report, “Study: Habits, not wealth, predict life span” (September 12, 2006). In each case, the need to summarize the science into a single, easily digestible nugget of information causes the journalist to interpret and over-simplify.

“Small science” often lends itself to reversals.

People often report feeling confused or betrayed by recurrent revisions in the information they get out of reports. First something is good for you, then it is bad, then it is good. The narrow, often out-of-context, information that constitutes small science contributes to this problem. The style of reporting – apparent in much advertising as well as articles – often uses bits and pieces of fragmentary or conjectural science to spin plausible scenarios for the reader:

If you love chocolate but not the guilt that comes with eating it, take heart. In light of mounting evidence, experts now agree that the darling of the dessert world is actually good for you. "Dark chocolate and its cousin cocoa are teeming with potent antioxidant plant chemicals called flavonols that emerging science reveals protect the health of the cardiovascular system by improving artery function," says Ann Kulze, MD, author of *Dr Ann's 10-Step Diet: A Simple Plan for Permanent Weight Loss and Lifelong Vitality*.

“Sweet news about chocolate,” *Better Nutrition*, October 2006

More generally, the cumulative effect of these technical discussions is to provide an overabundance of information, with consumers jumping from one to the next. Ironically, but perhaps not surprisingly, the shifting and unreliable nature of this torrent of information helps to ensure that there will be readers for the next month’s “news you can use” segment.

THE EXCEPTIONS THAT PROVE THE RULE: PRINT COVERAGE OF THE BIGGER PICTURE

Although the qualitative survey conducted in this round of research revealed patterns of coverage that are mostly counterproductive, a number of articles seemed designed to provide the sort of bigger picture understanding that advocates would find helpful:

Working toward a holistic view of exercise

Some articles on the health of kids buck the trend and focus on the bigger picture. For example, one article, “Phys Ed: On the Rebound” (*Chicago Sun-Times*, August 30, 2006), reports on the trend toward more exercise in schools, gives evidence for it, and even extensive background on the history and context of the problem of declining physical education. The article explains why *schools* need to provide opportunities for exercise. It takes into account various social factors, such as statistically higher incidence of disease for certain ethnic populations, and environmental factors such as the fact that “children who live in dangerous neighborhoods often aren’t able to play outdoors.” The article expressly ties health impacts to the practices and priorities of the community at large. It notes, for instance, that “the tendency ... to eliminate fitness to have more time for test prep has got to be reversed, because we’re going to end up with people with diabetes taking tests.”

It is no coincidence that this article, which moves so carefully away from the normal practice of crediting/blaming the individual for their health outcomes, is about children and schools. Children are held to be not fully accountable for their own actions, and we as members of the community are meant to help (or at least not hinder) them. Schools, additionally, are seen as the primary locus of community action in “helping to raise other people’s children.” Promoting the prevalence of stories that target adults as well as children – whose health and well-being are just as affected by the environments around them – is a much more difficult challenge.

The role of the physical environment (and the policies that shape it)

Another article in the *Oakland Tribune* presents an expert view on how environment affects the health of all of us -- “Cities not designed well for health” (March 14, 2006). The analysis presented in this article pins the causes of the “nationwide obesity crisis” on the “constant availability of labor-saving shortcuts” such as escalators and other misguided aspects of urban and suburban design. The article clearly and explicitly takes the onus off the individual. It also represents a radical call for solutions enacted at the level of government and public health: both exercise and better diet must be fostered by government policy and practice, in all agencies and at all levels.

The role of the food industry

Another article, written by Mary Tabacchi for *Nation's Restaurant News*, offers an example of how the food industry might be held accountable for its part in the obesity epidemic. The article explicitly refuses to place all of the blame on consumers, but shows the way in which industry practices are contributing to the problem. We quote it at length below:

There is no question that the United States is a nation with growing health and health care problems. As we have heard, obesity results in heart disease, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke, some forms of cancer, gout and reduced flexibility.

How did all of this come about? The answer is deceptively simple: We eat too many calories and exercise too little. But wait, you may say, it has to be more complicated. And it is . . . Right now it requires work on the part of the consumer to obtain smaller portion sizes, fresh fruits and vegetables, lower-fat foods with the correct fatty-acid composition, and lower-calorie drinks without artificial sweeteners.

For example, sometimes it's difficult to buy a simple cappuccino rather than a creamier version, which boasts about 300 more calories. It's also hard to order just one dip of ice cream in a restaurant, and that second scoop has another 300 calories. There are about 200 additional calories in the butter-laden garlic bread. Filet mignon doesn't usually come without butter or Bearnaise, and fresh, unsweetened fruit for dessert is a rarity. The introduction of unsweetened tea, gourmet crusty sandwiches and dinner salads at quick-service restaurants is excellent. Most culinary schools insist that future chefs not only learn the essentials of nutrition but more healthful cooking methods. The industry should take advantage of these young people who know how to do the right thing. In addition, let's pay attention to portion size, fat--the amount and type--salt, and sugar. Let's focus on how to serve more vegetables and fruits rather than using them as garnish. For every four or five heavier dishes on the menu can we also have one or two lighter items?

“Industry needs to pay better attention to portion size, variety,”

Nation's Restaurant News, July 24, 2006

This article provides a good example of what happens when the press takes responsibility for providing a bigger picture on the issues of health of fitness.

Tying health to a better food system

Although most reporting about food remains solidly in a consumerist mode, with reporting devoted to specific ingredients and individual health effects, there are occasional reports that link health to the actual food system that we rely on. Note this article on the increasing success of local food producers begins, for example, with a health testimonial:

When Donna Laughlin's husband, Tom, was diagnosed with cancer, she set about eliminating all chemicals, preservatives and hormones from the family diet and started searching for the kind of organic food she was sure would help make him well. She didn't have to search very far. Nearly a year later, Laughlin still is buying meat and

produce directly from farmers she knows and trusts near her Town of Oconomowoc home.

“Healthy market: Farmers say demand growing for locally raised,”
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, August 6, 2006

This article goes on to talk about the importance of local markets for producers and communities, and although the author doesn’t dwell at length on the health implications she clearly establishes a healthfulness frame at the outset.

CONCLUSION AND NEW DIRECTIONS

We might expect print coverage – especially the kind provided in in-depth stories – to produce narratives that advance the public’s grasp of the twin issues of food and fitness, and a minority of the pieces surveyed clearly do. An analysis of one hundred articles and fifty advertisements suggests, however, that print coverage of food issues, including both editorial and advertising pieces, is subject to markedly unproductive framing tendencies. Even if print journalism is generally better (longer, more detailed, etc.) than local TV news coverage, for example, the print coverage typically falls into patterns that prevent readers from deepening or broadening their understanding of food and fitness.²

Moreover, unproductive patterns of the kind discussed in this report don’t necessarily reflect bad intentions, lack of skill or any other easily-identified journalistic flaw. Instead, they reflect common patterns in American reasoning and discourse, or a lack of attention to the ways in which a perfectly reasonable story can interact with the understandings and assumptions of the reading public. Food and fitness present special challenges to journalists and other communicators – the public’s counterproductive ideas are easily evoked, and ways of framing the issue that seem productive at one level too often undermine the goals of experts and policy advocates in other ways.

At the same time, as a brief survey of more productive articles demonstrates, careful attention to some basic principles can make a significant difference in the impact on an audience's thinking. But there is no reason to expect journalism to move in these directions unless advocates offer journalists very concrete help in reframing their stories. The analysis reported in this report offers one tool in helping advocates work towards reshaping coverage of this critical issue.

Beyond this, the research offers tentative support for ways of framing the issues (e.g., in ads and editorial contributions by advocates) that would promote a more productive kind of coverage. The reframes suggested here are often about drawing attention to aspects of the issues of food and fitness that tend to be neglected by print journalism:

Holism

A more holistic approach to personal health – even though it operates within the

² For a discussion of unhelpful tendencies of local TV news, for instance, see Shanto Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible?*, University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Health Individualism paradigm – has the potential to introduce environmental factors that take the reader beyond the “life box.” For example, going beyond willpower and self-esteem to include such intangible relational attitudes as *camaraderie*, might in principle lead to an appreciation of environmental factors such as the *social* benefits of some kinds of physical activity.

Understanding food systems

Previous research by the FrameWorks Institute has led to better ways of communicating about where our food comes from, and in particular about the ecological and health implications of food production. The communications toolkits produced by the FrameWorks Institute should provide a good starting point for helping journalists and marketers of food and fitness-related products frame the issues more productively.

Pleasure

There is pleasure to be had in food. There is even pleasure to be had in ‘working’ out. These things are well-known, of course, but are generally absent from the sample we surveyed.

An exception to the rule suggests the productive potential of including references to the pleasure of healthy food and fitness. The article: “Take it outside...”, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, 6 Aug 06, connects the environment, body, and to some extent, mind, as it describes the workouts available at selected outdoor sites within the city, and their benefits. The article suggests that exercising in the right place outdoors can increase your motivation by decreasing your boredom. This article also makes reference to the safety issues of urban space (though not as a factor in *whether* people exercise outdoors).

Access

Pursuing a healthy way of living requires more than a person having knowledge and willpower. It’s also about *access*. Working out in a gym, buying organic and cooking healthy meals, walking to work or the store or the library – all taken from suggestions offered in our sample of articles – presuppose a “disposable” income and/or childcare and/or available time and/or a safe environment and/or transportation, and so forth. These “access obstacles” to health and fitness are *social* issues/problems, that require social solutions.

Stress

Stress may be a way to connect health to disparity. Handling stress (better) is one of the benefits of being fit. But some people have more stressful lives than others. Just as there is stress in being overextended at work, there is also stress (and associated health problems) that comes with living in poverty, and around

violence (see for example the well-established prevalence of heart disease among urban Black men).

Environmental racism

Pollution, nuclear danger, results of strip mining, etc. take their toll on the population unevenly, in part because of where they're located, often in communities with less political clout, such as Indian reservations and poor urban or rural zones. The use of an environmental "health index" to tally the assets (such as fitness centers, greenways for jogging, etc.) and liabilities (e.g., danger zones) of a given environment would be useful in highlighting disparities.

Finally, it would be helpful to have coverage that takes on the issue of Consumerism itself. Given the structural underpinnings of the media environment, this is of course highly unlikely.

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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Please follow standard APA rules for citation, with FrameWorks Institute as publisher. Aubrun, A, Brown, A. J., Emanatian, M. & Grady, J. E. (2007). Implications of the Consumer Frame for Food and Fitness Cognitive Analysis of Media Depictions. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

APPENDIX: THE COGNITIVE APPROACH

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

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.

Metaphor

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).