

# Building an Understanding of Environmental Health

## Navigating the Swamp: Using Evidence to Craft More Effective Communications

*Webinar 1 of a 3-part series*





## **Navigating the Swamp of Environmental Health:**

*Using Evidence to Craft More Effective Communications*

### **Webinar 1 of a Three-Part Series**

Sponsored by the American Public Health Association, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry

March 5, 2015

Presented by Jennifer Nichols, Ph.D.

# Strategic reframing can build public understanding of environmental health work . . . but how does it work?

## *Our Learning Itinerary:*



# The FrameWorks Mission

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To advance the nonprofit sector's  
*communications capacity*  
by conducting, translating and modeling relevant  
scholarly research for framing the public discourse about  
social problems.

# Examples of Our Work

- **Harvard University Center on the Developing Child** – how to translate science of early childhood brain and biological development to inform sound policy
- **Noyce Foundation** – how to build public support for improving informal STEM learning
- **NSF, Suzuki, Turner, Ocean Conservancy, Pew Commission on Oceans** – how to communicate the science of climate change to the general public in the US and Canada
- **National Human Services Assembly** – how to build support for a range of social services and reframe the conversation about supporting healthy development across the lifespan
- **Jacksonville Partnership for Child Health** – cross-sector, inter-agency network working to build support for child mental health as a key to reducing disparities in child outcomes
- **John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation** – how to talk about a range of public issues, including federal budgets and taxes, immigration system reform, and digital media and learning

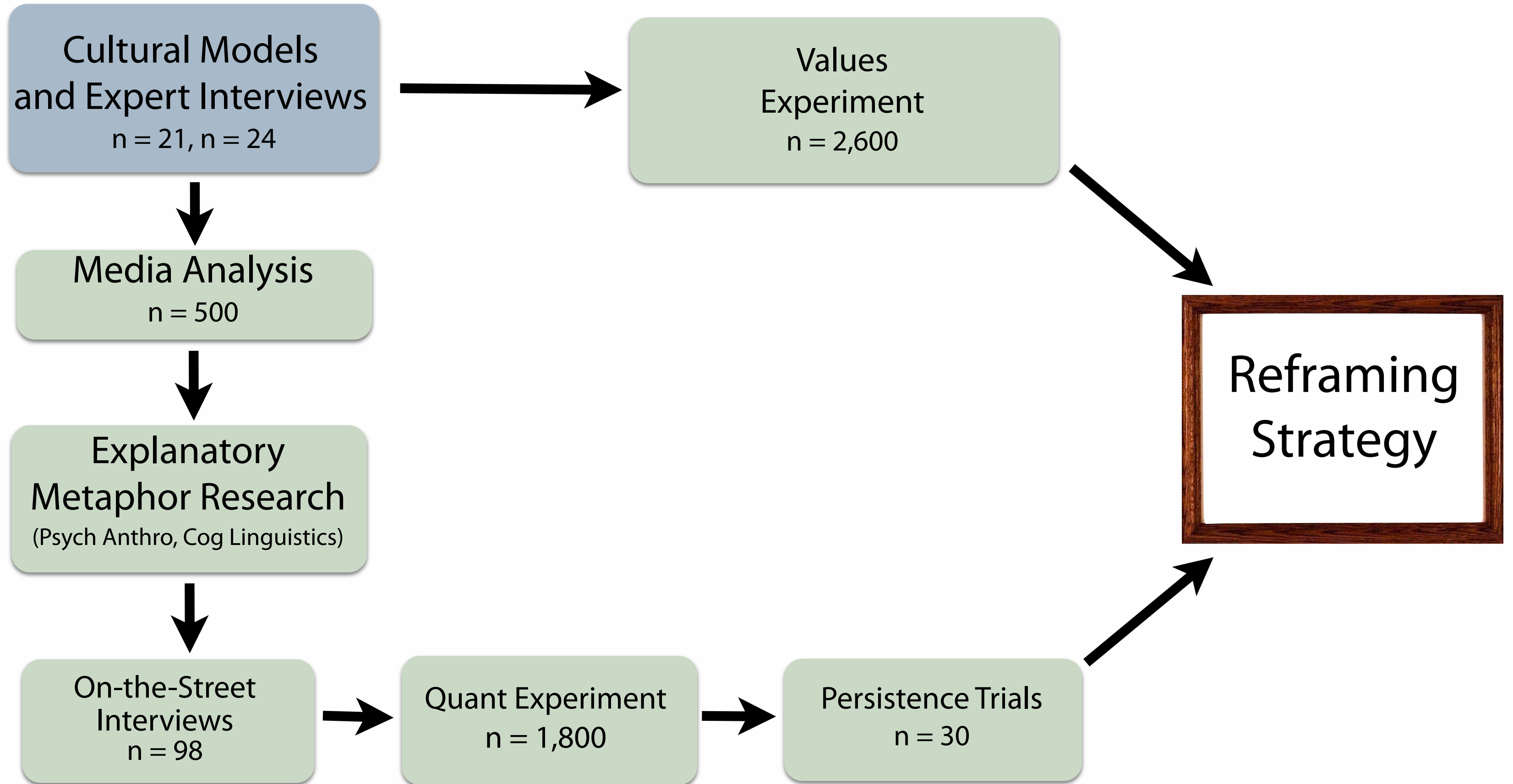


## **The Research Question:**

How can environmental health professionals more effectively educate the public about

- the relationship between environments and public health?
- the challenges of addressing environmental health risks?
- the importance of environmental health research and regulation?
- the largely invisible work of thousands of highly trained environmental health professionals?

# Research on Environmental Health (2011-2014)



# Framing research sponsored through APHA and CDC

## PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

- People, Polar Bears, and the Potato Salad: Mapping the Gaps between Expert and Public Understandings of Environmental Health (2012)

## MEDIA CONTENT ANALYSIS

- The Media Narrative of Environmental Health (2012)

## REFRAMING RESEARCH

- Using Values to Build Public Understanding and Support for Environmental Health Work (2013)
- Pictures in Their Heads (Video Memo summarizing our cultural models research)
- We Need a Ground Crew for Environmental Health Working Upstream: Using Explanatory Metaphors to Improve Public Understanding of Environmental Health and Its Workforce (2014)

## STRATEGY & APPLICATIONS

- Talking Environmental Health: A FrameWorks Message Memo (2014)
- Building Public Understanding of Environmental Health: A Communications Toolkit (2014)



# Resources to Help You Reframe Environmental Health Communications



## The EH Toolkit includes:



Swamp  
Graphic



Video



FAQs



Talking  
Points

## Use it to:

- Apply evidence-based frames to your communications
- Answer tough questions
- Identify and avoid unproductive communications frames

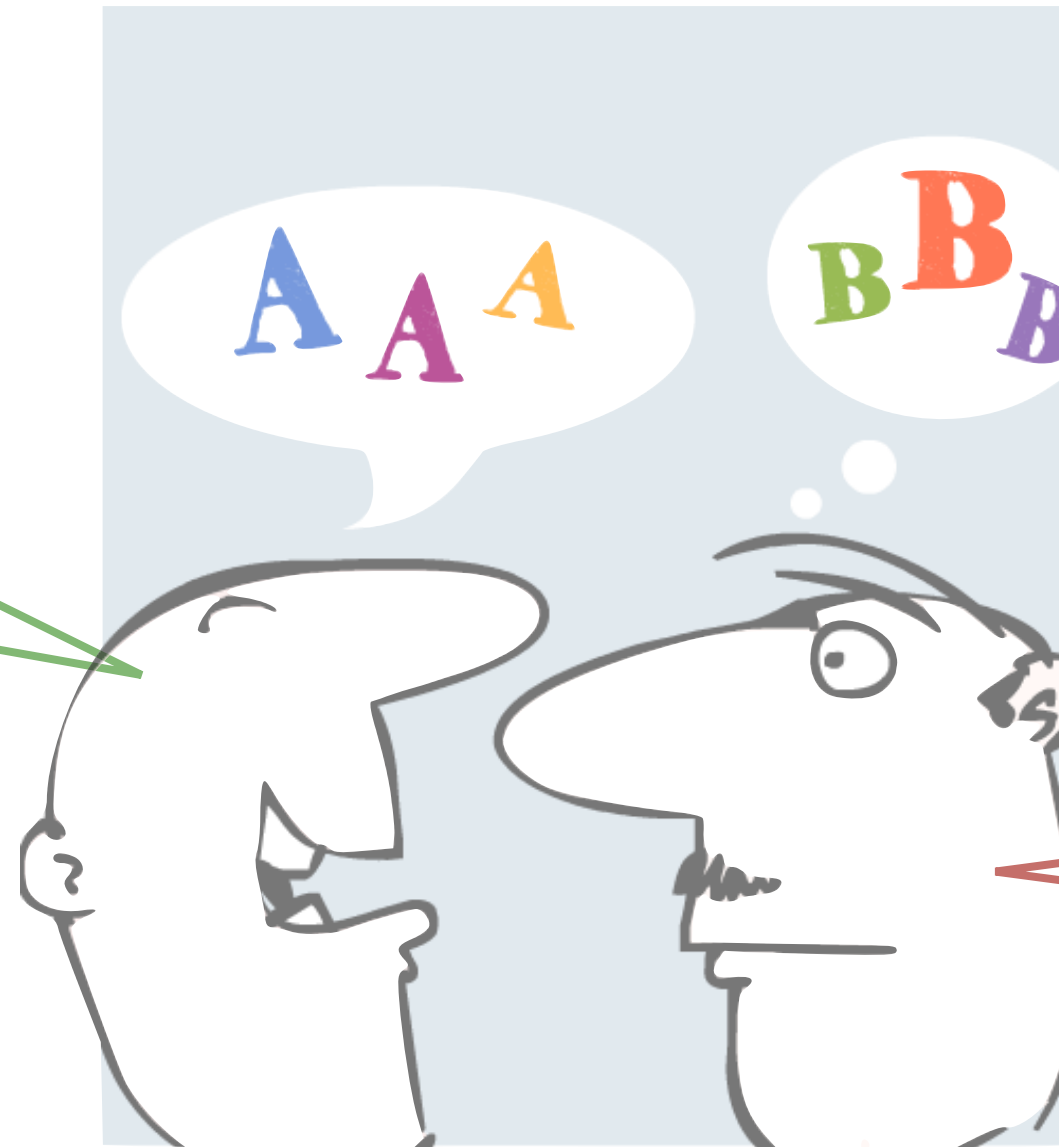
Our multimedia Message Memo summarizes our EH research and includes videos from on-the-street interviews.



<http://frameworksinstitute.org/toolkits/environmentalhealth/>

# Lost in Translation

We need stronger government regulation of industry to protect consumers from unsafe environments and poor air and water quality.



Yes, oil spills and toxic chemicals from greedy corporations are ruining the environment! I'm worried about my family's exposure to contaminants. Maybe I should make more of an effort to buy organic.

**ADVOCATE**

**PUBLIC**

# The Questions We Ask

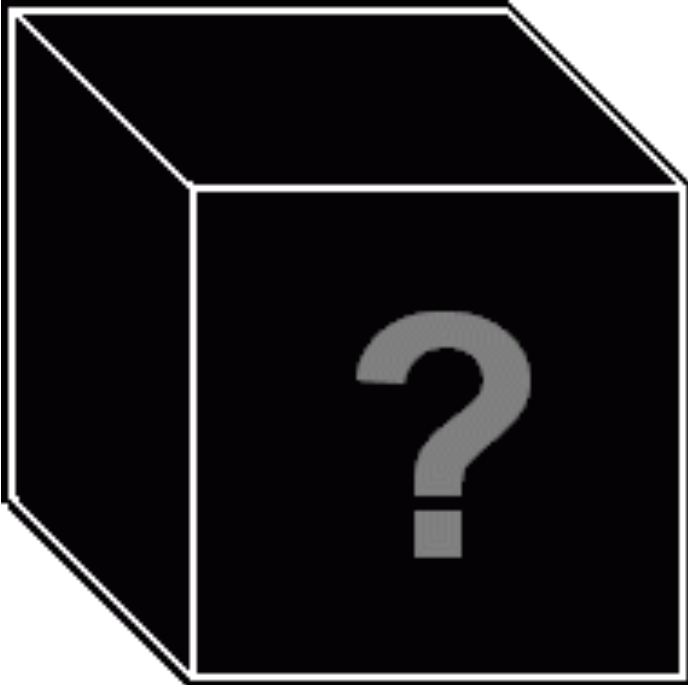


- What have people learned about the issue that drives their thinking and policy preferences?
- How can we anticipate these expectations and identify better ways to reframe our engagement and our follow up messages?
- How can we use potent frame elements—e.g., values and metaphors—to redirect thinking in productive directions?
- What habits of communication need to be reformed in order to advance better understanding and support?

# What have people learned about environmental health that drives their thinking about it?



# Selected, Dominant Cultural Models of Environmental Health



**“BLACK BOX”**



**CONTAMINATION**



**HEALTH INDIVIDUALISM**



“People approach the world not as naïve, blank-slate receptacles who take in stimuli ...in some independent and objective way, but rather as experienced and sophisticated *veterans of perception* who have stored their prior experiences as an organized mass. This prior experience then takes the form of expectations about the world, and in the vast majority of cases, the world, being a systematic place, confirms these expectations, saving the individual the trouble of figuring things out anew all the time.”

-- Deborah Tannen, *Framing in Discourse*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

# Characteristics of Cultural Models

- Cultural models are cognitive short cuts created through years of experience and expectation. They are taken-for-granted and largely automatic assumptions.
- People rely on cultural models to interpret, organize and make meaning out of all sorts of stimuli, including experiences, feelings, thoughts.



# 1. Cultural models are widely shared



**What trends do you notice in these pictures?**



## 2. There are multiple cultural models on every topic



Determinism:  
Nothing can prevent it.



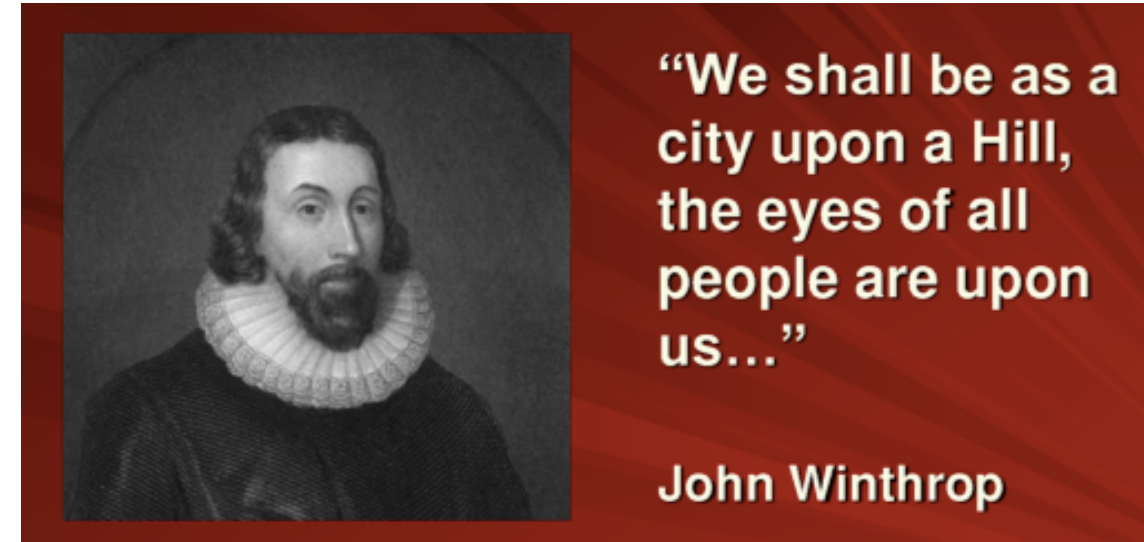
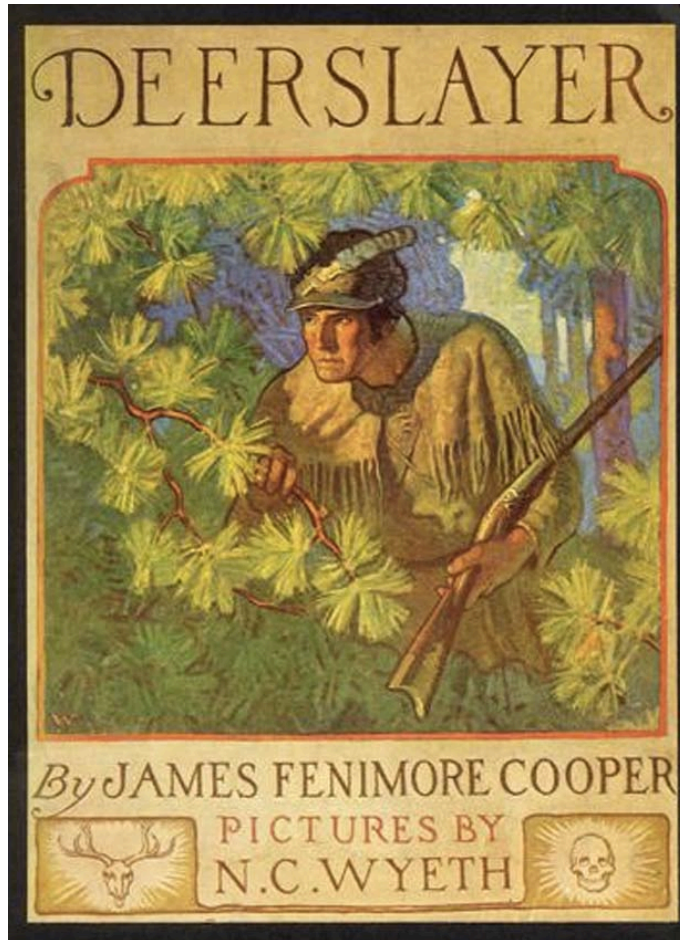
Contamination:  
Threats to food, water, air.



Individualism:  
Health is a personal choice.

*Three cultural models Americans use when thinking about environmental health.*

### 3. Cultural models are durable



## 4. Cultural models structure thinking



“Healthy living is a choice. It’s up to individuals to take care of themselves.”



“All of us, no matter where we live, should have the opportunity to enjoy good health.”

## 5. Models are “activated” by associated information

“Government should protect us from businesses that break the law and harm our environments and our health, but we can’t trust politicians and bureaucracy to save us. They just aren’t reliable or effective.”



**Government’s Responsible**

“All Americans deserve the opportunity for good health. We need to work with public agencies, community groups, and local businesses to make sure all of our communities are safe, healthy places.”



**Opportunity for All:  
Let’s Ensure Fairness**

# Cultural models as basis for strategic communications

Characteristic of cultural models	Implication for communicators
Shared	Can plan strategies that are relevant to all audiences
Multiple	Need to know the models the public will bring to bear Everyone is a potential ally AND a potential skeptic
Durable	Research has a long shelf life (unlike opinion research) Need to change the context of communication Need to have a long-term strategy for change
Structuring	Need to distinguish between productive and unproductive models
Activated by association	Need to plan to cue up the productive models Need to avoid cueing up the unproductive models



Which of these is NOT a feature of cultural models?

- a) Only some people fall back on them
- b) They are learned over time, through repeated experiences
- c) They help people to make sense of information they encounter
- d) They can be manipulated to fit new situations



Which of these is NOT a feature of cultural models?

- a) **Only some people fall back on them**
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Which of these IS a feature of cultural models?

- a. They can be turned on and off
- b. They are only passed on from interpersonal interaction – one person to another
- c. They never change
- d. They are the same in every culture





Which of these IS a feature of cultural models?

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# CULTURAL MODELS AS BASIS FOR STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

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SOME MORE PRODUCTIVE THAN OTHERS



MULTIPLE MODELS AVAILABLE

CHOOSE THE CUES THAT ACTIVATE THE MOST PRODUCTIVE



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**KNOWING THE CULTURAL MODELS  
OF A GIVEN ISSUE PROVIDES A  
STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE TO COMMUNICATORS**

A photograph of a dense forest with many tall, thin trees and a grassy floor with fallen logs. The text is overlaid on the image.

**What's in the "Swamp" of  
Cultural Models of Environmental Health?**

## Health Individualism

Health is each individual's responsibility  
Household = environment

## Everyone Is Responsible

Government is corrupt/inept  
Business is greedy, focused  
Community is key  
Individuals must do what they can

## Contamination

Threats to food, water, air

What's in the swamp of . . .

# Environmental Health

## Determinism

Result of modern life  
Remediation, not prevention

## Healthy Environment = Basic

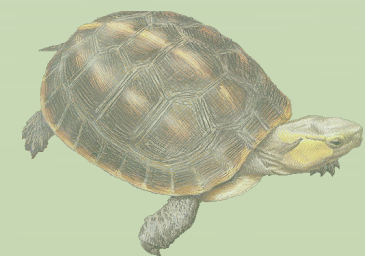
Context influences  
Organization of the built environment matters  
Social relations important  
Economic conditions influence outcomes

## Environmental Health Work?

= Black box  
Taken for granted

## Environmentalism

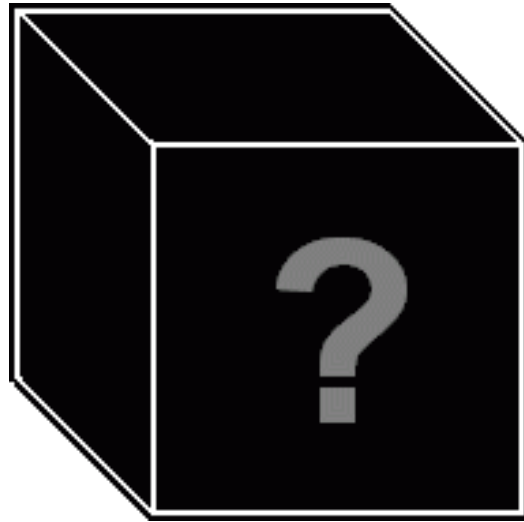
Extreme  
Puts animals over people



# Dominant Cultural Models Constrain the Public's Understanding of Environmental Health



# Selected, Dominant Cultural Models of Environmental Health



**BLACK BOX: WHO DOES ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH WORK?**



**GOVERNMENT IS INEFFECTIVE**



**CONTAMINATION:  
IT'S ALL ABOUT THREATS**



**INDUSTRY IS CORRUPT**



**HEALTH INDIVIDUALISM:  
WE ALL MAKE CHOICES**

# What cultural models might “eat” this message?

California’s Department of Toxic Substances Control has acknowledged a basic lesson our parents teach: We need to clean up our own messes.

After a half-dozen years of study, hearings and hand-wringing, the department last week finally approved Chemical Waste Management’s request to expand its 1,600-acre hazardous-waste landfill in a remote part of Kings County known as Kettleman Hills, on the west side of Interstate 5. It is overdue.

During the years when the permit application was pending, Waste Management dramatically reduced the amount of waste it would accept. But California continued to produce more than its share of hazardous waste, 1.7 million tons each year, and sent it by rail to other states, where rules are more lax.

Consider the hypocrisy: California authorities couldn’t bring themselves to allow for the disposal of the mess created by Californians. But California was perfectly happy to agree to ship toxic material to Nevada, Utah, Idaho and other states, which have less stringent laws governing what constitutes hazardous waste and how it must be disposed of.



# What cultural models might “eat” this message?

Kids in East Harlem are twice as likely to have asthma as neighbors just a few blocks away in the Upper East Side. Serious asthma episodes can be caused by a variety of factors, including tobacco smoke, dust mites, furred and feathered animals, certain molds, chemicals, and strong odors in the environment.

Children who live in low-income neighborhoods, like East Harlem, are also at greater risk for developing asthma. The New York City Environmental Public Health Tracking Network teamed up with the East Harlem Asthma Center of Excellence to make the connection between their community and asthma. The NYC Tracking Network mapped childhood asthma hospital stays by neighborhood and studied these stays over time. They found that hospital stays are four times higher for East Harlem kids than for those living in the city’s highest-income neighborhoods.

NYC tracking data also showed that asthma hospital stays for children jump in the fall. Now, health department workers send special messages to doctors and other health care providers via the city’s Health Alert Network, encouraging them to update patients’ asthma control plans. Since this activity started, there has been a drop in rates of asthma-related hospital stays among New York City’s children.



**This introduction will trigger**  
***Health Individualism***

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**This reframe focuses on explanation to**  
**avoid unproductive cultural models**

Kids in East Harlem are twice as likely to have asthma as neighbors just a few blocks away in the Upper East Side. Environmental factors like healthy housing, air quality, and safe ventilation affect children's asthma rates, and not all communities have access to the best environmental conditions. Serious asthma episodes can be caused by a variety of factors, including poor air quality from excessive traffic, weak building ventilation, tobacco smoke, certain molds, and strong odors in the environment.

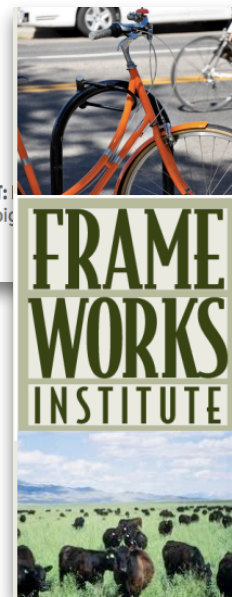
# <http://frameworksinstitute.org/toolkits/environmentalhealth/>



The Media Narrative of Environmental Health

A FRAMEWORKS RESEARCH REPORT:  
Moirá O'Neil, Adam Simon, Abigail Kendall-Taylor

## Research Reports



People, Polar Bears, and the Potato Salad

Mapping the Gaps Between Expert and Public Understandings of Environmental Health

A FRAMEWORKS RESEARCH REPORT

Eric H. Lindland and Nathaniel Kendall-Taylor • September 2011



Video: Understanding the "swamp" of public thinking - Eric

## Video Lectures



Video: Building public will with Values

## You Say...They Think (Environmental Health)

You Say...	They Think...	What's Triggered in Their Minds?	What Helps?
Our health is our most precious resource. We need to bring more attention to environmental health issues - and we need to take a proactive approach to promoting public health.	Yes, health is important! And so is the environment. We all need to recycle more. And we do need to get people to make healthier choices when it comes to diet and exercise.	<i>Environmental Health</i> <i>Environmentalism</i> <i>Health Individualism</i>	

**QUESTION**

I've seen coverage of teams cleaning up environmental disasters like the BP oil spill in the Gulf. Is that what you mean by "environmental health professionals"?

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**ANSWER**

<p><b>THE FALSE START ANSWER</b></p> <p>Environmental health extends far beyond disaster cleanup, and environmental health professionals perform a wide range of functions, including cleaning up contaminated sites,</p>	<p><b>THE REFRAMED ANSWER</b></p> <p>Just like an airport ground crew performs essential work that makes air travel safe, environmental health professionals ensure the safety of the built and natural environments in</p>
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## Communications Guides



**Please complete the evaluation form at the link in the chatbox. We value your insights.**

**P.S. We will make this presentation available as a pdf.**

# Mark your calendar!



## **Webinar 2:**

### **Using Values to Promote Public Support**

Using a Value frame helps the public to see why environmental health issues matter -- but how do you know which one to choose?

<http://frameworksinstitute.org/toolkits/environmentalhealth/>



Visit our website at **[frameworksinstitute.org](http://frameworksinstitute.org)**



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