Navigating the Swamp:
Using Evidence to Craft More Effective Communications

Webinar 1 of a 3-part series

Sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registries
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:

1. **3/5**
   - **Navigating the Swamp**
   - What keeps people from “getting” environmental health work?

2. **4/7**
   - **Using Values to Promote Public Support**
   - Which Value frame helps the public to see the salience of environmental health issues?

3. **5/5**
   - **The Power of How**
   - How can tested Explanatory Metaphors build public understanding of environmental health work and impacts?
The FrameWorks Mission

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)

Cultural Models and Expert Interviews
- n = 21, n = 24

Media Analysis
- n = 500

Explanatory Metaphor Research
(Psych Anthro, Cog Linguistics)

On-the-Street Interviews
- n = 98

Values Experiment
- n = 2,600

Quant Experiment
- n = 1,800

Persistence Trials
- n = 30

Reframing Strategy
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.

Talking Environmental Health

A FRAMEWORKS MESSAGE MEMO

Susan Nall Bales & Eric Lindland
March 2014

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.
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.”

Cultural models are cognitive shortcuts 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.
What trends do you notice in these pictures?

1. Cultural models are widely shared
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

“We shall be as a city upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us…”

John Winthrop

By James Fenimore Cooper
Pictures by N.C. Wyeth

America
A Shining City upon a Hill
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.”

“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.”

Government’s Responsible

Opportunity for All: Let’s Ensure Fairness
### Cultural models as basis for strategic communications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic of cultural models</th>
<th>Implication for communicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shared</td>
<td>Can plan strategies that are relevant to all audiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>Need to know the models the public will bring to bear Everyone is a potential ally AND a potential skeptic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durable</td>
<td>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</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structuring</td>
<td>Need to distinguish between productive and unproductive models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activated by association</td>
<td>Need to plan to cue up the productive models Need to avoid cueing up the unproductive models</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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
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 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?

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
CULTURAL MODELS AS BASIS FOR STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

Some more productive than others

Multiple models available

Choose the cues that activate the most productive
KNOWING THE CULTURAL MODELS OF A GIVEN ISSUE PROVIDES A STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE TO COMMUNICATORS
What’s in the “Swamp” of Cultural Models of Environmental Health?
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

Contamination
- Threats to food, water, air

Determinism
- Result of modern life
- Remediation, not prevention

Health Individualism
- Health is each individual’s responsibility
- Household = environment

Environmentalism
- Extreme
- Puts animals over people

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

What’s in the swamp of . . .

Environmental Health
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*

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.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>You Say...</th>
<th>They Think...</th>
<th>What's Triggered in Their Minds?</th>
<th>What Helps?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>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.</td>
<td>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.</td>
<td>Environmental Health</td>
<td>Environmental Health</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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"?

**THE FALSE START ANSWER**
Environmental health extends far beyond disaster cleanup, and environmental health professionals perform a wide range of functions, including cleaning up contaminated sites.

**THE REFRACTED ANSWER**
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 which we live.

http://frameworksinstitute.org/toolkits/environmentalhealth/
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?