

# Life in the Fishbowl: Culture, Cognition, and Communication

by Nat Kendall-Taylor

As this article explains, “For those trying to make sense of current social and political events and communicate ideas into a complex stew of messages and meanings, an understanding of how culture works in our own backyards—and in the backs of our minds—unlocks the door to social change. It is the key.”

**C**ULTURE CONCERNS EVERY ONE OF US, wherever (and whenever) we live. It is ubiquitous, it is common, and it is quotidian.

Culture shapes how we think and act as individuals and as members of society. It drives our deepest beliefs and attitudes, supporting how we think about issues big and small, mundane and extraordinary. It shapes how we see our lives, how we think about our work, how we understand our health, and how we perceive the places in which we live. As a set of cognitive constructs, culture gives rise to the policies that structure our world and that determine our individual and social outcomes. It is the force that incites change to the very policies that many of us in the nonprofit sector are working to transform.

Understanding culture—what it is and how it informs our collective understandings and perspectives—is essential to driving social change. If we understand how culture affects our thinking, and see the power that these understandings and assumptions have to drive civic behavior and action, then we can develop and

test ways to reframe our thinking and shift the way our society sees and acts on social issues. For those trying to make sense of current social and political events and communicate ideas into a complex stew of messages and meanings, an understanding of how culture works in our own backyards—and in the backs of our minds—unlocks the door to social change. It is the key.

## Channeling Perceptions

The debate over education reform offers an illustrative example. For most Americans, the first image that comes to mind of what good education looks like is that of a teacher.<sup>1</sup> And for most Americans, this image is highly gendered. Indeed, it's not just any individual who comes to mind, but a woman—and, specifically, a kind, caring woman who loves her students and has a personal, innate concern for their well-being.<sup>2</sup>

When considering educational quality, Americans' shared focus on teachers and on their level of caring is an example of how culture shapes thinking. It channels our perceptions in particular directions

and away from other ideas and possibilities. In this case, as we focus on whether a teacher cares or not, culture directs our attention away from the importance of curricula, resources, learning materials, administrative support, and teacher training. That the gender most associated with the idea of a teacher is female contributes to these issues, by strengthening our focus on caring and further obscuring the importance of external supports and resources. We share an implicit sense that teachers should be willing to make sacrifices for their students, a concept that is rooted in the cultural assumption that mothers—above fathers—should be willing to make sacrifices for their children. And it becomes this willingness of a teacher to care deeply and sacrifice selflessly—rather than the degree of support, access to resources, or quality of curriculum a teacher has access to—that determines whether students succeed or not.

And culture doesn't just shape how we think about teachers—it also shapes how teachers think about their students. Important work by Walter



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Gilliam (director of the Edward Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy and associate professor of child psychiatry and psychology at the Child Study Center, Yale School of Medicine) is finding that culture shapes how teachers see and treat students—monitoring behavior and attributing blame to young students of color in different ways when compared to their white counterparts.<sup>3</sup>

What about educational outcomes? Why do some students do well while others don't, even when they are from similar backgrounds? For most Americans, most of the time, the answer is a short list of individual factors—a student's innate intelligence or level of effort, or his or her parents' commitment to education and involvement in school.<sup>4</sup> This is also a function of how culture affects thinking. Here, culture focuses our attention on isolated facets of a much more complicated phenomenon, obscuring an important part of understanding why some kids succeed in school and others don't. It blocks out systemic and environmental factors, such as poverty, racism, and access to healthcare, safe housing, nutritious food, play spaces, and more.

### Culture? What Culture?

Like the air we breathe, our culture constantly influences how we see the world, organize it, and act in it. For the most part, culture plays its role without our even knowing it. In the words of prominent psychological anthropologist Naomi Quinn, culture is “referentially transparent,” nudging us into connections that seem so natural and commonsensical that we cease to see them as connections made and view them as natural truths.<sup>5</sup> This way of thinking about culture is captured by the above cartoon.

It may be tempting to believe that culture affects thinking for many Americans but surely not those of us who are highly informed and attentive to issues, but think again. Ask yourself what determines a child's development, why a child turns out the way that he or she does. I'm guessing that for most, the answer will be “parents.” Indeed, for most Americans, most of the time, parents is the top-of-mind answer. But while it's undeniably true that parents powerfully and uniquely shape how a child turns out, there are many other factors that explain developmental outcomes and shape individual differences. For one thing, the

context in which a family lives and where a child grows up is one of the most powerful shapers of development;<sup>6</sup> this, at a minimum, ought to show up on people's lists. But it doesn't. Despite the fact that context determines access to resources, sources of supports, and stressors in a way that shapes every aspect of life, American culture promotes a focus on parents and a way of seeing family as insulated from rather than connected to wider environments.

### A Steady Stream of Stories

At FrameWorks, we call this narrow focus on the family, the “family bubble”; it is a powerful pattern of thinking that screens out other shapers.<sup>7</sup> And this cognitive meme is the result of exposure over time to a common information and experience environment that has led us in a deep and powerful way to focus our attention on certain ingredients of the developmental process and away from others. Looking at media messages over time helps us to make sense of this. We see a steady and selective stream of cues, ideas, images, and stories that have over time shaped the arc of our attention and filed our focus to a narrow edge. Our thinking is honed and sharp when it comes to certain ideas but unpracticed and dull when it comes to others.

How about what determines whether (and explains why) someone is obese? In a discussion about obesity, most Americans will talk about a person's choices, willpower, and discipline. While people may think they are expressing a private view or even a factual “truth,” in reality that's culture again, sneaking in and shaping how we see the world. Culture is not wrong, but it is limiting—it keeps us from seeing the whole picture and hearing the whole story. As a result, we fail to see how our environments influence our health, whether through access to bike paths and safe play spaces in our

communities or to healthy food and physical education at school. It pushes our attention and traps it in certain ways that make it hard to see other important parts of the story. And when we've decided that we "know the story," we stop thinking. We stop trying to figure it out. We stop being open to new information, and are unlikely to engage with new ideas or change our views.

Culture is surely about the behaviors, practices, materials, and patterns of social organization that mark membership in and differences among groups. Culture is absolutely out there in our material and social worlds. But culture is also *in here*. It is psychological. And the locations of culture are connected in what cultural models researcher Bradd Shore has called the "double birth" of meaning.<sup>8</sup> Forms of culture in the mind—assumptions, implicit understandings, patterns of reasoning—also exist in the material world: in architectural forms, rituals, and, most famously, language. In this way, our ability to make sense of our worlds is born both from the culture we hold in mind and from the way that our constructed social and material realities embody and reinforce these understandings.

An elegant example of this interplay between culture on the inside and culture on the outside can be found in Shore's structural analysis of the American sport of baseball. Shore describes the ways in which the very rules and structure of the game engage cultural tensions and tropes in our thinking about individuals and collectives, home and away, and time and space—reinforcing the way we think and see the world. Like this, culture is built into our sports and rituals in ways that remind us, in this case, of some of the deepest tensions that we constantly straddle and negotiate. Baseball, according to Shore, gives us a way to play with culture, and in so doing, drives it deeper into our collective psyche.<sup>9</sup>

## Culture Shapes Cognition

Cultural psychologists and psychological anthropologists have long thought about culture and cognition as fundamentally intertwined. With this lens, culture can be seen as a set of shared assumptions and implicit understandings that shape how groups of people think about how the world works and why it is the way that it is.

This view on culture is born out of a drive to understand *how* people think, not just what they say or the opinions that they hold. From a communications perspective, understanding how thinking works and understanding the models that people use when thinking is an infinitely more flexible, durable, and powerful tool than a tally of responses to a set of questions. The explanatory *how* yields a deeper strategy than the descriptive *what*. With an understanding of how thinking works, communicators can predict and anticipate how people will respond to issues and how they will work with information. This enables communicators to arrive at sound and testable hypotheses for cutting through unclear and/or incorrect assumptions and models and communicating ideas more effectively.

The study of how culture influences thinking offers another strategic insight—people are rarely, if ever, of a single mind on any given complex issue. Rather, culture in mind comes as a set of lenses that, with the right cue, can be applied to thinking about the same issue in dramatically different ways. This is why I can think about children as little adults one second, and as not really people but rather their own individual species in the next. And this is the meta-connection between anthropology and framing: this "of multiple minds" way of thinking about thinking lies at the core of strategic framing. In its cues and contexts, our communications (linguistic and

otherwise) have the power to activate one or another cultural lens on how an issue works, what it's about, and what can and should be done to address it.

This way of thinking about the culture we are all swimming in allows us to explain why we think the way we do about the social issues we care about. It enables us to predict the directions people will go in when we ask them to think with us about how issues work: how climate change happens, why some people become addicted and others do not, how the immigration system functions, where people end up living.

## Culture Complicates Communications

Understanding how culture shapes cognition is key to cutting through mired communications and moving people in new directions. We can't hope to make progress on issues like immigration, addiction, climate change, and affordable housing if we don't understand the culture we are communicating from and into, and the power it has to block, morph, or amplify our messages and ideas. If we understand that most Americans see housing as a consumer good that offers us quality we can pay for—and that we deserve what we get—we can see why framing housing issues around the values of hard work and deservingness only make affordable-housing reforms harder to think about and more difficult to get behind. Seeing culture in mind allows us to predict the effects of messages on thinking, feeling, and acting, and provides insight into how alternative messages might change the tint of culture and lead to new optics.

If you're a communicator, culture is constantly complicating your job. If you're not aware of *how* culture filters and shifts the meaning that people make of your messages, your communications are likely to go unseen or unnoticed—or worse, be distorted, compounding the

very problems you're seeking to solve. If, on the other hand, you understand the shared cognitive equipment that people have and use to understand your issues, you can be intentional and strategic in helping people to take in what you're trying to say. This is what being a strategic communicator is all about.

If you know that Americans have two distinct ways of thinking about government—one in which government is inept, wasteful, and corrupt, and another in which government performs vital public services that we all rely on—and if you know what activates these ways of thinking and where these ways of thinking take people, then and only then can you be strategic in your issue framing.<sup>10</sup> You can avoid the traps of ill-conceived framing and use your messages to lure and pull forward more positive and productive ways of thinking. If you know that people think about climate change as a huge, scary, and unapproachable problem yet also realize fundamentally that nature exists as a set of beautifully balanced and interconnected systems, you can use this knowledge to boost engagement with climate change.<sup>11</sup> If you know that people can think of immigrants as “them” yet simultaneously as “us,” you can choose cues that activate dramatically different responses to discussions of immigration. In this case, different cultural lenses can be cued by something as seemingly insignificant as the pronouns you pick.

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We live in culture our whole lives. It's with us everywhere we go and in everything we see. Realizing how it shapes thinking and using our messages to bring its various facets productively to light are the core of communications and at the heart of being strategic about them. To effect real and lasting change, we must understand culture as a system of beliefs that exists inside our minds and in our

collective consciousness. If we want to change the culture around us, we must first change the culture in mind.

#### NOTES

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