

HOW CULTURAL MODEL THEORY INFORMS STRATEGIC FRAMING

Four Things Every Framer Should Know and Use

There are four things about cultural models that are useful to understand and apply in strategic communications:

1. Cultural models structure thinking.

As members of a culture we share implicit mental models of how the world works and apply these models in understanding novel, unfamiliar ideas. These “cultural models” help us filter and categorize new information, determine relevance and priorities, and guide our decision-making. We use cultural models to reason and make sense of information and come to opinions. For instance, a visitor reasoning from the model that the ocean is like a ‘bottomless grocery store’ is more likely to express the opinion that restrictions on fisheries are unwarranted. That same visitor, reasoning from another model that they also have in mind – the model that ecosystems are all connected and should be protected – becomes more likely to express the opinion that there is a place for sensible regulation of fisheries. The takeaway point is that communicators can worry less about the opinions that people have already expressed, because we know that opinions are fleeting, shaped by the model that the person happens to be reasoning from at a given time. And we know that the way we frame information has the power to bring up other models, ones from which a message is more easily processed. *Cultural models are important for communicators to consider because they shape and constrain how people think about an issue and the solutions that they see as effective and appropriate.*

2. There are multiple cultural models on any given topic or issue.

People who study cultural models have found that more often than not people use *multiple* cultural models to think about an issue or concept. For example, people may think about zoos using the understandings that they work to conserve species and habitats, but may also employ the assumption that wild animals should not be caged. This means that, from a science translation perspective, not all of the models that are available to people are equally productive—some may impede an understanding of science messages while others may be productive in creating ways of thinking from which the science is easier to understand and use in decision making. The implication for strategic framers comes in the technique of avoiding ‘activating’ unproductive cultural models; and in finding ways to cue and strengthen those ways of thinking that allow people to reason more productively about a message or piece of information. *Because there are multiple models available; because some are more productive than others; and because we can use frames to activate one or the other, knowing the cultural models available on a given issue provides a strategic advantage to communicators.*

3. Cultural models are widely shared.

Cultural models are common to virtually all members of a culture – shared even across the demographic groups that communicators sometimes assume have very different opinions. We pass on and reinforce cultural models within culture, through family interactions, through school, the media, and interactions with others. The widely-shared nature of cultural models makes them incredibly valuable for strategic framers who wish to change the conversation about a complex social issue. *Rather than trying to tailor the content of a message for tiny slices of the population, a strategic framer tailors the message around the cultural models that she can safely assume are shared by everyone she encounters. This is more efficient, and ultimately, more effective.*

4. Cultural Models are Durable.

The understandings that members of a culture share and use to process information are the result of persistent exposure to common experiences over time. We share cultural models because we share experience that have led us over time to incorporate certain assumptions about how our worlds work. This means both that existing understandings are durable and that the genesis of new models takes time. Whereas survey and polling research that looks at explicit opinions becomes obsolete with minute changes in sentiment, the durability of cultural models means that research that works at this level has a long shelf life and recommendations remain evergreen. The durability of models appears to present a pessimistic picture of change—if models are so constant over time, how can we ever hope to enact change at this level? The solution to this apparent dilemma lies in the fact that there are *multiple* durable models but also in that models derive from exposure to common experiences over time. If communicators can change the context in which people experience an issue—through the media, through advocacy and through policies that change the context—they can, over time, enact deep, meaningful and sustainable changes at the level of cultural models. *The durability of cultural models means that communicators need to be aware of these ways of thinking and that they need to work hard over time to create new ways for people to think about social issues.*