Talking Public Health: America’s Second Language

Lawrence Wallack, DrPH
Dean, College of Urban & Public Affairs
Portland State University

University of Washington
School of Public Health
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Compassion and vision

The problem is whether we are determined to go in the direction of compassion or not . . . . If I lose my direction I have to look for the north star and I will go to the north. That does not mean I expect to arrive at the north star. I just want to go in that direction.

Thich Nhat Hanh
“Inequality kills.”

It is now clear that standards of population health are overwhelmingly affected not so much by medical care as by the social and economic circumstances in which people live and work.

Commitment to social change

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed it’s the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead
Basic Public Health Question

Will the public’s health improve primarily as a result of:

individuals getting more and better knowledge about personal risk factors

OR

groups getting more skills and opportunities to participate in changing public policies?
PUBLIC HEALTH
The importance of framing

If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about answers.

Thomas Pynchon
Gravity’s Rainbow
It Depends on How You Ask

The public's desire for tax cuts can be hard to measure. Pollsters asking what should be done with the nation's budget surplus got different results depending on the specifics of the question.

THE QUESTION

President Clinton has proposed setting aside approximately two-thirds of an expected budget surplus to fix the Social Security system. What do you think the leaders in Washington should do with the remainder of the surplus?...

Variation 1

... Should the money be used for a tax cut, or should it be used to fund new government programs?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>60%</th>
<th>25</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TAX CUT</td>
<td>NEW</td>
<td>OTHER</td>
<td>DON'T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROGRAMS</td>
<td>PURPOSES</td>
<td>KNOW</td>
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Variation 2

... Should the money be used for a tax cut, or should it be spent on programs for education, the environment, health care, crime-fighting and military defense?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>22%</th>
<th>69</th>
<th>63</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TAX CUT</td>
<td>PROGRAMS</td>
<td>OTHER 'DON'T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PURPOSES</td>
<td>KNOW</td>
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Source: Pew Research Center
Framing

Framing is more than just a message. It represents a conceptual system in which major issues are connected by a common understanding of values.
Lakoff’s levels of analysis

Level 1: Big ideas and universal values like fairness, equality, and justice

Level 2: Issue types such as housing, civil rights, the environment, public health

Level 3: Specific issues such as rent subsidies, beer taxes, toxic waste sites

Adapted from The Frameworks Institute
http://www.frameworksinstitute.org
Korten’s Questions

- How will we prosper?
- What will make us secure?
- How will we find meaning?
Social Justice Values

- Shared responsibility
- Interconnectedness
- Strong obligation to collective good
- Basic benefits should be assured
- Government involvement necessary
  - Good government rather than small government

Adapted from Beauchamp, 1976
Dominant Values

- Self-determination/Self discipline
- Rugged individualism
- Benefits based solely on effort
- Limited obligation to collective good
- Voluntary and moral nature of behavior
- Limited government intervention
  - Smallest government is best government

Adapted from Beauchamp, 1976
Telling a story

Danger or threat
Victim
Attacker
Means of doing harm
Protector
Means of protection

Pamela Morgan
Rockridge Institute
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pollution</th>
<th>Danger or threat</th>
<th>Limits on individual rights, economy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The environment</td>
<td><strong>Victim</strong></td>
<td>Individuals, small businesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big business, greedy, irresponsible corporations</td>
<td><strong>Attacker</strong></td>
<td>Environmentalists, government bureaucrats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dumping toxic wastes, billowing smokestacks</td>
<td><strong>Means of doing harm</strong></td>
<td>Regulations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmentalists, government agencies</td>
<td><strong>Protector</strong></td>
<td>Advocacy groups, anti government politicians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulations</td>
<td><strong>Means of protection</strong></td>
<td>Roll-back of regulations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Whoever tells the stories of a nation need not care who makes its laws.

Andrew Fletcher
Scotch Patriot
1653-1716
Conclusion

The language of community is the language of public health. This is America’s second language and we need to make it more prominent. In order to do this we need to make more visible the values that animate the mission of public health and integrate them into our everyday professional and casual language.
More Info on Framing Strategies

Berkeley Media Studies Group

www.BMSG.org

Framing and Media Books

G. Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*

G. Lakoff, *Don’t Think of an Elephant*

L. Wallack et al., *News for a Change: An Advocate’s Guide to Working with the Media*