

Mental pictures: citizen or consumer?

Rutherford of the University of Chester argues that we need to take control of media images around healthcare if we are to hold on to universal access

'Man's achievements rest upon the use of symbols. For this reason, we must consider ourselves a symbolic, semantic class of life, and those who rule the symbols, rule us.'

Alfred Korzybski

By the middle of the 20th century, most Western nations had agreed that healthcare was a basic entitlement that should be available to all citizens, regardless of income. This important contribution to social justice is now under threat as medical services have become the focus of a concerted campaign that seeks to redefine these commodities to be provided according to the rules of the

market. Should this campaign be successful, one need only look to the US where healthcare is the protected domain of private corporations, and where 41,000,000 Americans currently lack coverage.¹

Despite the neoliberal mantra that the profit motive ensures a more cost-effective service, the American system costs more than three times that of Canada, where healthcare is funded by the state. According to *The New England Journal of Medicine*,¹ the US spends \$1059 per capita on healthcare, compared to \$307 in Canada. The difference between the two is the profit margin, as well as the large sums spent on marketing and underwriting.

Over the past 30 years, the advocates of neoliberalism have sought to 'reframe' our mental picture of the world around us in accordance with the tenets of market capitalism and to redefine its impact on social and economic policies as the 'natural' order of things against which there can be no rational appeal. One might as well lament the effects of gravity. This campaign – like those for the privatization of education and pensions – is being fought and won, not in the political arena, but in the public imagination. As a result, the idea that healthcare, education, public transport – or any other service – should be exempt from the Laws of the Market becomes literally unthinkable.

Like the soldiers concealed inside the Trojan horse, the language employed in this campaign ('Private patients don't jump the queue, they shorten it')² is designed to shape the way we imagine the issues described. Repeated over and over in news reports, advertising and statements by corporate representatives, these phrases evoke powerful cognitive reflexes – stereotypes³ – which become the basis for our (supposedly) conscious and rational decisions.

Carl Jung (1968) wrote:

'And even what we retain in our conscious mind...has acquired an unconscious undertone that will colour the idea each time it is recalled [...] though we are not consciously aware of the existence of this subliminal meaning or of the way in which it both extends and confuses the conventional meaning.'⁴

The use of mental pictures or 'narrative metaphors' is the oldest form of human cognition – our most basic way to assign meaning and to know what something 'is'. In other words, *what* we think of something is determined by the way in which we mentally 'picture' it. Close your eyes and think of 'home', 'my family' or 'my ideal vacation' and your mind will spontaneously summon up a visual image. Hold this picture in your mind and examine it carefully: this image not only stands for the

idea, memory or experience but, in the particular visual details from which it is assembled, it also describes your feelings, assumptions and attitudes about the idea it represents. Do you think of your life as 'a path to be explored', 'a journey to be enjoyed', 'a ladder to be climbed', or 'a competitive struggle against hostile forces to be won'? The way we 'picture' our life determines the evidence we pursue in order to be successful – and what we pursue shapes the life we create.

Imagine 'a terrorist' and notice how the visual elements of your mental image suggest its negative connotations. Imagine 'a welfare recipient': do you 'see' a multinational corporation benefiting from government grants worth millions of pounds – or do you 'see' a single mother whose children are prime candidates for ASBOS? Now consider your associations with the words 'regulation' and 'taxation'. Do you 'picture' government regulation as an onerous burden imposed on the engines of economic development – or as a way to safeguard the rights of workers, the public and the environment? As reported by Deborah Cameron,⁵ the American linguist George Lakoff has suggested that the popular resentment to paying taxes fostered by neoliberalism might be reduced if they were renamed 'social membership fees'.

One of the most profound changes in our modern vocabulary is the way in which 'We the People' are defined. Not so very long

ago, we 'pictured' ourselves as citizens.⁶ As a result, we implicitly acknowledged our shared responsibility to one another (which is why the word is anathema to the proponents of neoliberalism – 'There is no such thing as society...'). Today, we are most often referred to (and therefore increasingly inclined to 'see' ourselves) as consumers – a mental picture that evokes associations with a very different set of allegiances and responsibilities. Welcome to the Matrix.

If our 'democracy' is to mean more than free-market capitalism, in which the pursuit of corporate profit is 'liberated from' the 'burden' (rather than the 'protection') of government regulation, we must rediscover the responsibility of providing informed consent. To be capable of doing so, we must begin to examine the pictures we carry around in our heads and consider their role in shaping our beliefs and assumptions – including those about Truth on Television, Social Justice through Market Forces and Achievement through Consumption – because these pictures determine not only the life we lead, but the shape of the world we will leave behind.

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References

- 1 Woolhandler S, Campbell T, Himmelstein D. Costs of healthcare administration in the United States and Canada. *The New England Journal of Medicine* 2003; 349(8): 768–775
- 2 www.makingbritainhealthier.com; the website of a consortium of privately funded healthcare providers
- 3 The Oxford English Dictionary (9th edition, 1995) defines 'stereotype' as: 'A person or thing that conforms to an unjustifiable fixed mental picture.'
- 4 Jung CG, editor. *Man and his Symbols*. New York: Dell, 1968
- 5 Talking outside the box. *Guardian*, 6 October 2007
- 6 Archaic: Term by which consumers and target markets defined themselves prior to the Corporate Revolution. Its brief period of currency coincided with the popularity of the now-defunct notions of Democracy and Informed Consent.