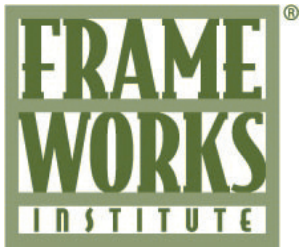

American Perceptions of Sexual Violence

A FrameWorks Research Report

Prepared for the FrameWorks Institute
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INTRODUCTION

The research presented here was sponsored by the National Sexual Violence Resource Center. The goal of the project is to facilitate the design and advancement of effective ways of communicating about what constitutes sexual violence and what can be done to address this in the United States. This particular report lays the groundwork for much of this larger reframing effort by examining both the expert discourse on sexual violence and how Americans talk and think about the topic. The comparison of these two spheres of understanding is used to locate and examine gaps in understanding that can ultimately be addressed through various communication strategies. Future phases of the larger project will seek to fill these gaps by designing and testing tools that can effectively and efficiently be employed to make expert knowledge available and accessible to Americans in how they understand this issue and its solutions.

This report focuses on the first phase of the larger reframing effort. This first phase entails gathering qualitative data from both experts and average Americans, and analyzing these data to locate and examine the differences between how experts explain and Americans understand the concept of sexual violence. More specifically, this exploratory research phase comprises the following three components: 1) an analysis of the expert discourse on sexual violence from expert interviews, 2) one-on-one cognitive interviews with Americans, and, finally, 3) a comparative analysis that "maps the gaps" between expert and lay understandings of this topic.

First, in a series of "expert interviews," we identify foundational themes and concepts by examining patterns in how experts understand, explain, and talk about the issue of sexual violence. Using thematic analysis, these expert concepts are synthesized to create a core story of sexual –violence—a finite set of principles, messages and themes that characterize the essence of the expert knowledge on the issue. FrameWorks then employs cultural models interviews with Americans to understand how they think and talk about sexual violence—in short what the existing cultural understandings are of this complex issue. The application of theory and methods from cognitive anthropology results in the identification of a set of "cultural models"—or shared, common, taken-for-granted assumptions—that Americans rely on when reasoning about the subject of sexual violence. Finally, we "map the gaps" by comparing the expert discourse with Americans' deep-seated perceptions and conceptions. With improved knowledge of these gaps, we are able to move toward the second stage of Strategic Frame Analysis,™ which involves identifying communications strategies that close these gaps and in so doing give Americans access to key but currently missing aspects of the issue of sexual violence that they can then use and apply in thinking about the issue and possible solutions.

The remainder of the report is organized as follows: 1) a summative analysis of the report's key findings, 2) an explanation of the methods used to gather and analyze data from both expert and cultural models interviews, 3) a discussion of the results from these analyses, including the comparative analysis of expert and lay understandings of sexual violence, and, finally, 4) a set of recommendations and key takeaways that will improve communications practice around this issue and inform the next phase of our research.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report documents the incredible strides that advocates who have been working on the issue of sexual violence have made in the last 30 years regarding public perceptions of sexual violence. All of the members of the public we interviewed recognized several forms of sexual violence as punishable, criminal offenses. Furthermore, none of the informants engaged in directly blaming victims for their attacks. This is a major step forward from past public discourse in which sexual violence was often represented as a natural and therefore noncriminal part of (heterosexual) sexual relationships and in which violent acts were assumed to be the sole culpability of sexually "provocative" or "promiscuous" women.[i] Despite this progress, our analysis reveals that evidence-based communication strategies around sexual violence need to be created to address contemporary thinking about the issue.

The experts we interviewed provided a general consensus in how to define, explain the causes of, and how to address sexual violence. Experts elaborated on its pervasiveness, the broad continuum of acts and behaviors that constitute sexual violence, and the most common relationships between victim and perpetrator. They explained that sexual violence was directly linked to cultural systems defined by inequality, i.e., through cultural forms—such as the mass media—groups of people are consistently dehumanized and messages around what constitutes sexual violence are confusing. Experts argue that cultural ideas about sexuality set a context in which sexual violence can occur. The most significant and important aspect of the expert discourse on sexual violence is a consistent contextualization of the issue. In others words, experts explained why sexual violence occurs through a lens that forefronts cultural context, rather than through a lens that characterizes pathologies as within individuals. As such, the solutions they focused on were aimed at changing cultural norms and implementing policies that could be effective at preventing sexual violence.

In contrast, among the members of the public we interviewed, we found that two meta-cultural models underlie many issues related to sexual violence including what it is, why it occurs, the characteristics of actors involved, when and how it takes place, and how it might be prevented or addressed. The first is what we have identified in past FrameWorks research as "mentalism." According to the mentalist model, Americans tend to view outcomes and social problems as a result of individual concerns that reflect character, motivation and personal discipline. As such, the use of mentalist models by the public has a narrowing effect—it boils complex interactions among individuals, contextual determinants and systems down to either the presence or absence of individual motivation and internal fortitude. In the context of sexual violence, informants used this model to reason about the internal motivations of perpetrators and victims as well as to think about interventions that might address or prevent sexual violence. Sexual violence continues to be perceived as a problem solely and fundamentally created by individual moral failings on the part of the perpetrator and, on the part of the victim, the lack of responsibility to ensure one's safety. Employing the mentalist model, strategies for addressing sexual violence were narrowly limited to punitive measures that target individuals and educational programs that teach individuals to protect themselves.

The second model that was at play was what FrameWorks terms the "family bubble," or the idea that the family is the only context of importance in child-rearing. This model was "top of mind" when informants reasoned about why sexual violence occurs. Informants almost universally elaborated on perpetrators' "poor upbringing" to talk about why people commit acts of sexual violence. That is, poor parenting was the primary focus of informants' talk, which precluded discussions of how families are situated in larger social contexts and obscured the notion that cultural systems of inequality can determine incidences of sexual violence. Furthermore, parents were largely responsible for teaching children and adolescents to protect themselves.

Another major finding is that Americans appear to lack an understanding of how sexual violence can be prevented. They can see a way of deterring would-be perpetrators through "stiffer penalties" and prevention of repeat offenses through ongoing detainment, but they were largely unable to think about solutions that might address the roots of the problem.

Overall, the dominance of the mentalist and family bubble models and the lack of understanding about how sexual violence can be prevented demonstrate that people are making cognitive mistakes about the early roots of sexual violence. The informants we interviewed understood sexual violence primarily as a criminal or moral issue. That is, they argued that sexual violence occurs because individuals do not learn right from wrong from their parents as young children. Locked in the family bubble model, they struggle to get community into the equation and fail to see how cultural and social contexts impact the pervasiveness of sexual violence in contemporary American society.

Not surprisingly, there were several gaps that separated expert from public thinking about the topic of sexual violence. Each gap is elaborated in the body of the report, but all reflect a fundamental difference in the ways that the public and experts conceptualize the causes, outcomes and solutions to the problem of sexual violence. While experts look to larger social and cultural patterns to explain why sexual violence is pervasive, the public sees the problem as resting within the minds, hearts and actions of individuals. That is, how the occurrence of sexual violence is shaped by larger social and cultural systems is largely out of the purview of the average American.

This report concludes by addressing how communications might be able to encourage more systems-thinking in the public so that policy-based and preventative solutions become thinkable. While advocates have successfully combated some of the most egregious myths about sexual violence and have changed the course of public discourse, some communications strategies are likely reinforcing the individualism that structures public thinking. While this report represents a preliminary, descriptive phase of the research process, several cautions and recommendations emerged from this analysis. First, our research shows that changing the discourse about victim blaming has not necessarily dislodged public thinking about why people are victims of sexual violence from models of personal responsibility. Relatedly, informing people that most perpetrators are known to their victims has not changed the ways in which the public conceptualizes why perpetrators commit acts of violence. Our research shows that communications strategies need to address deeper patterns of thinking that undergird attitudes and policy preferences related to sexual violence. We conclude that this might be achieved by

telling stories of early child development in which social contexts—and importantly inequality—are made visible to the public.

RESEARCH METHODS

I. Expert Interviews

Subjects
To locate experts on sexual violence, FrameWorks relied on a list compiled by the National Resource Center on Sexual Violence. This list included key practitioners working on issues related to sexual violence who have expert knowledge of its causes, consequences and who have worked with involved parties and towards the prevention of this issue. A total of 10 one-on-one telephone interviews were conducted with these experts in April and May 2010. The interviews lasted approximately one hour and, with the participants' permission, were recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Interviews
Expert interviews followed an interview guide which consisted of a series of probing questions meant to capture the expert understanding of sexual violence—in short, its definition, causes, consequences, the people who are involved, its long term impacts, as well as strategies and challenges in addressing the issue. The interview consisted of a series of prompts and hypothetical scenarios designed to challenge expert informants to explain their experience, break down complicated relationships, and simplify concepts from the field. In one scenario, for example, experts were asked to imagine that they were speaking to a community group and had to explain important concepts related to sexual violence. In addition to the questions included in the guide, the interviewer probed for additional explanation and information. For example, the interviewer asked questions that members of a hypothetical audience might ask in response to the informant's initial explanations. In this way, the interviews were semi-structured collaborative discussions with frequent requests from the interviewer for further clarification, elaboration and explanation.

Analysis
Analysis employed a basic grounded theory approach, a method of analysis used in the social sciences to analyze qualitative data.[ii] Common themes were pulled from each interview and categorized, while themes that were not articulated by every expert were also noted. These negative cases were incorporated into the overall findings within each category, resulting in a refined set of themes that synthesized the substance of the interview data. Consistent with this method, the themes we identified were then modified and appropriately categorized during each phase of the analysis to account for disconfirming or negating themes and concepts presented by other experts.

What we present here is the refined set of themes that emerged from this process. Together, these themes represent the core components of the expert story of sexual violence. These themes establish a baseline understanding against which subsequent communication recommendations

can be judged. Designing communications that yield public understanding and consideration of these expert messages is the ultimate goal of FrameWorks' research in this area.

II. Cultural Models Interviews

To complete the other side of the comparison, we conducted interviews with members of the American general public. The findings presented below are based on 20 in-depth cultural models interviews with Americans in Los Angeles, California, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The interviews were conducted by two FrameWorks Institute researchers in May 2010.

Subjects
Twenty informants were recruited by a professional marketing firm through a screening process developed and employed in past FrameWorks research. Informants were selected to represent variation along the domains of ethnicity, gender, age, educational background and political ideology (as self-reported during the screening process). In addition, individuals working in fields where they would be likely to have expert knowledge of the subject (counseling, social work, abuse centers) were screened out and not included in the sample. The inclusion of professionals from such fields would have likely brought expert knowledge into our sample and impeded our ability to gather data and discern broad cultural models employed in reasoning and processing information about the target concepts. Furthermore, the gender of the informant was matched with the interviewer because of the potentially sensitive nature of the topics covered in the interview.

Cultural models interviews require gathering what one researcher has referred to as a "big scoop of language."[iii] Thus, a large enough amount of talk, taken from each informant, allows us to capture the broad sets of assumptions that informants use to make sense and meaning of information. These sets of common assumptions and understandings are referred to as "cultural models." Recruiting a wide range of people allows us to ensure that the cultural models we identify represent shared, or "cultural," patterns of thinking about a given topic. And, although we are not concerned with the particular nuances in the cultural models across different groups at this level of the analysis, we recognize the importance of questions of variation and representativeness of these findings. These interests could be taken up in subsequent quantitative phases of this project where research methods are more appropriate to answering questions of representativeness.

We were careful to recruit a sample of civically engaged persons because cultural models interviews rely on the ability to see patterns of thinking—the expression of models in mind—through talk, and it is therefore important to recruit informants whom we have reason to believe actually *do* talk about the issues in question. Moreover, to ensure that participants were likely to have ready opinions about these issues without having to be overly primed by asking them directly about the target issue[iv]—in this case, the issue of sexual violence—the screening procedure was designed to select informants who reported a strong interest in news and current events, and an active involvement in their communities through participation in a wide range of community and civic engagements.

All in all, the sample was split exactly in half with respect to informants' gender. Eight of the 20 participants were Caucasian, six were African American, four were Hispanic, and two were Asian. Seven participants self-identified as Republicans, seven as Democrats and the remaining six as Independents. Eight participants were under the age of 40. We must note here that although the sample was constructed to include as much variation as possible, it is not nor was it meant to be nationally representative in any statistical way. Issues of demographic variability and representativeness of the findings presented here are typically taken up in a subsequent phase of FrameWorks' research. In this later method such questions can be more appropriately and effectively addressed in a large sample size, online experiment where more rigorous statistical sampling techniques are possible.

Interviews

Informants participated in one-on-one, semi-structured "cultural models interviews" lasting 1½ to 2½ hours. Consistent with the interview methods employed in psychological anthropology,[v] cultural models interviews are designed to elicit ways of *thinking* and *talking* about issues. As the goal of these interviews was to examine the cultural models Americans use to make sense of and understand these issues, a key to this methodology was giving informants the freedom to follow topics in the directions *they* deemed relevant and not in directions the interviewer believed most germane. Therefore, the interviewers approached each interview with a set of general areas and topics to be covered but left the order in which these topics were covered largely to the informant. In this way, researchers were able to follow the informant's train of thought, rather than interrupting to follow a set and pre-established course of questions.

Informants were first asked to respond to a general issue ("When you hear the term sexual violence, what do you think about?") and were then asked follow-up questions—or "probes"—designed to elicit explanation of their responses ("You said X, why do you think X is this way?" or "You said X, tell me a little bit more about what you meant when you said X." or "You were just talking about X, but before you were talking about Y, do you think X is connected to Y? How?"). This pattern of probing leads to long conversations that stray (as is the intention) from the original question. The purpose is to see where and what connections the informant draws from the original topic. Informants were then asked about various valences or instantiations of the issue and were probed for explanations of these differences ("You said that X is different than Y in this way, why do you think this is?"). In this way, the pattern of questioning began very generally and moved gradually to informant-generated differentiations and more specific topics.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Quotes are provided in the report to illustrate major points but identifying information has been excluded to ensure informant anonymity.

Analysis

Elements of social discourse analysis, cultural models analysis and grounded theory were applied to identify larger, shared cultural models.[vi] First, patterns of *discourses*, or common, standardized ways of talking, were identified across the sample using a basic grounded theory approach to thematic analysis. These discourses, or patterns in talking, were analyzed using techniques described by Quinn and Strauss to reveal tacit organizational assumptions, relationships, logical steps and connections that were commonly made but taken for granted throughout an

individual's transcript and across the sample. In short, our analysis looked at patterns both in what *was* said (how things were related, explained and understood) as well as what was *not* said (assumptions).

FINDINGS FROM EXPERT INTERVIEWS

Below is a list of the core themes that emerged from analysis of the expert interviews. These themes establish and comprise the foundational components of the "core story" of sexual violence and can be divided into three types of themes: how experts define what sexual violence is (definitional), why they think sexual violence occurs (causal) and how it might be addressed (policies and interventions). This "core story" is important because it provides a baseline understanding from which communications and translation of expert material for public audiences are derived.[vii] In this way, the core story simultaneously represents the object that the communication research seeks to translate and impart, and the outcome against which the success of such communications is evaluated.

I. Definitional

1. Sexual violence is pervasive. All of the experts emphasized that sexual violence impacts all parts of American society and that it happens more frequently than most members of the public realize. Experts emphasized that most people have had some experience of sexual violence; they have either directly or indirectly experienced sexual violence. Despite the pervasiveness and familiarity with the issue, experts we spoke to argued that the public did not have a deep sense of how many people are affected by sexual violence.

2. Sexual violence occurs most often among people who are familiar to one another. Experts across our sample explained that perpetrators are "everyday people" who are known and often loved by the victims. Our interviewees further explained that while most media accounts of sexual violence report incidences of violence among strangers, this is in fact the least common form of sexual violence. They also explained that the notion that sexual violence was mostly a matter of "stranger danger" was widespread among the publics with whom they came into contact.[viii]

3. Sexual violence is a continuum of behaviors that includes both physical and nonphysical acts. The experts universally defined sexual violence as nonconsensual acts that were sexual in nature. Most emphasized that nonphysical acts, such as emotional or verbal abuse, were sexually violent acts. In so doing, violence was conceptualized as more than just the physicality of the act. Experts also pointed out that, although there was a definitional similarity between acts of sexual violence, these exist on a continuum of harm inflicted upon the victim.

4. Sexual violence is not just a "women's issue." Despite the gendered nature of the issue—that vast majority of victims are *women* who are victimized by *men*—experts explained the potential harm in casting sexual violence as a "women's issue." They noted that while men are much less likely to be victims of sexual violence, they are impacted when their family members

and loved ones are victimized and play a critical role in preventing violence. For example, many of the experts worked in programs aimed at encouraging men to recognize their role in sexual violence and encouraging them to change certain behaviors that may contribute to its perpetuation. The experts explained that when sexual violence is cast as a "women's issue," it is difficult for everyone to understand their role in preventing it.

5. Sexual violence has widespread, societal ramifications. Experts described the long-term and devastating impacts of sexual violence on victims, their families and loved ones, as well as perpetrators and their families and loved ones. However, their discussion of the impacts of sexual violence did not stop at the effects on those directly involved. Experts described a "ripple effect" of sexual violence: they listed the costs to the criminal justice and health care systems, the decline in worker productivity, and general feelings of unease among all community residents when violent acts occur, among other impacts.

II. Causal

1. One of the primary causes of sexual violence is a culture of unequal power relationships. The experts we talked to defined culture to include the values, behaviors and ways of living shared by a social group, as well as dominant public representations of any social group (i.e., representations created and reinforced by mass media). They explained that sexual violence is, in part, the result of the American cultural system in which unequal power relationships across such variables as gender, race and socioeconomic status shape everyday interactions. They elaborated that culturally prescribed relationships between these groups affect and shape the ways that individuals relate to and behave towards others. For example, if one group is perceived to have power over another, the ways in which they relate to the other group is negatively impacted. In this way, unequal relationships were discussed by experts as products of culture and were seen to "give people permission" to dehumanize others. Experts explained that this dehumanization encourages violence by making it more socially acceptable. The social acceptability of violence is further reinforced by the sexualization of women in the public sphere through the media. Several of the experts noted that the commercialization of sex in the media plays an important role in how Americans define sexual violence. The media creates a "culture of confusion," especially for young people, so that many are unclear about what constitutes sexual violence and that normalizes violence towards women.

2. Acts of sexual violence build on another. While most experts we spoke to acknowledged that rape might cause more harm to a victim than verbal assaults, they pointed out that sexually violent acts or behaviors build on one another. On the one hand, sexist language and attitudes, for example, create and reproduce cultural norms in which more "serious" actions like rape or battery can occur. On the other hand, language and attitudes also create a culture in which inequality is continually reinforced.

III. Policies and Interventions

1. Policies can reduce the incidence of acts of sexual violence. Experts identified a set of policies that have the power to reduce the incidence of sexual violence. These policies included such measures as implementing ongoing curricula about sexual violence and sexual health in schools and having clear policies about sexual abuse and violence in workplaces and other institutions.

2. Sexual violence is preventable. Experts emphasized that sexual violence is not a "natural" part of human social life, but that it is a social problem that is preventable. More than one expert used the "upstream" metaphor. According to this metaphor, instead of focusing resources on pulling drowning people out of a river, more effective preventative measures should be taken to figure out why people are getting into the river or why the water is as dangerous as it is in the first place. Experts discussed many preventative actions, but the overwhelming consensus was that the most effective way to prevent sexual violence is to change cultural norms regarding gender inequality, especially as these mores are represented in the media.

3. Interventions need to be evidenced-based. The need for evidence-based and effective interventions was a theme that ran through the expert interviews. Within this topic, many questioned whether the emphasis on punitive policies primarily meted out by the criminal justice system was effective in reducing rates of sexual violence. Experts stressed the need for research and evaluation to identify and implement the effective programs that represented optimal use of limited public funds.

4. The importance of defining sexual *health*. Experts explained that recognizing and defining sexual *violence* requires understanding what constitutes sexual *health*. One expert likened the relationship to mammogram screenings for breast cancer: one needs to be able to recognize breast health in order to detect abnormalities or malignancies. Most experts agreed that the concept of sexual health included autonomy over one's sexuality and the ability to engage in noncoercive sexual relationships or activities. Furthermore, experts explained that the confusing and often contradictory messages about sexuality in American culture are often detrimental for healthy sexual development, especially for children and young people. Therefore, they explained, defining, communicating and achieving healthy sexuality is extremely difficult in the current social context.

FINDINGS FROM CULTURAL MODELS INTERVIEWS

We now turn to the results of the cultural models interviews that were conducted with a wide range of civically engaged Americans.

I. Dominant Cultural Models

Our research has shown that Americans use a core set of assumptions to think about and make sense of sexual violence. In the interviews, the informants used these models to reason about the definition of sexual violence, the actors involved in sexual violence and the reasons why such people commit or become victim to violence, where sexual violence occurs, and what can be done to address sexual violence. Together, these models constitute a larger, dominant cultural model of sexual violence.[ix]

The research showed that in practice, informants frequently co-recruited or drew on multiple models in a way that many times appeared contradictory or illogical. However, it is critical to keep in mind that the emergence of seemingly contradictory models applied to understand an issue is by no means exceptional. The messiness and contradictory nature of the model-recruitment process demonstrate a basic feature of how people make sense of information by applying existing categories and discrete mental structures to process incoming information (see appendix for more detailed discussion of features of cultural models and cognition). While thinking about sexual violence in one way may recruit a specific way of understanding, a momentary shift in the informational context might result in the application of a second, logically contradictory, assumption in making sense of the issue. The cognitively opportunistic application of one or the other in a set of conflicting models is key to understanding the widely varying views and opinions that Americans have about sexual violence and to designing strategic communications.

What is sexual violence?

Informants conceptualized "sexual violence" in terms of two required and related characteristics: (1) it is nonconsensual, unwanted, and forced; and (2) it results in some kind of "harm." However, within these implicit definitional criteria, categorizing the "kind" of harm and making specific distinctions between "sexual violence" and other kinds of nonconsensual sexual offenses was complicated. Thinking about these distinctions frequently revealed contradictory assumptions and views. Below we discuss the two assumptions—sexual violence is nonconsensual and sexual violence causes harm—that, in concert, were used by informants to define sexual violence. We also examine the way that reasoning about a definition of sexual violence brought conflicting implicit assumptions into relief.

A. Sexual violence is nonconsensual

When engaged in the definitional task of reasoning about "what is sexual violence," all the informants in the sample made use of a fundamental assumption about consent. In explaining what defines an act as sexual violence, informants assumed that it is fundamentally the lack of consent that determines the classification of an act as being an instance of "sexual violence."

Interviewer: Unwanted exposure to pornography?

> "Yes; it's unwanted and they're being exposed. Those two words will definitely fall under violence, for sure, as well as sexual violence, because it wasn't wanted and they're being exposed to something that they did not agree to."

Further evidence of the definitional role of this assumption was apparent in the way that informants disqualified certain instances as examples of sexual violence. In this way, informants reasoned that, if someone consents, an act is, "by definition," not "sexual violence." The following quote shows how informant discourse about what *was not sexual violence* helped reveal the fundamental features of what *is sexual violence*.

> "It has to be consent all the way across the board. If someone consents to it, then it's not sexual violence."

Furthermore, several informants argued that the ordinary sexual experiences of a prostitute are usually not viewed as "sexual violence" because prostitutes enter into essentially contractual relationships.

As further evidence of the foundational nature of the concept of "consent" in understanding sexual violence, informants very frequently employed force-related words—such as "invasion" and "violate"—in describing why an act was defined as sexual violence.

> "Anytime a person has something done to them against their will, it's a crime. It's a violation and a crime. . . . It's a tremendous violation; it's a crime, a terrible crime."

In a similar vein, informants repeatedly asserted that those who commit sexual crimes refuse to acknowledge that "No means No."

> "If the woman says no, no means no. . . . You hear guys say, 'Well, no really means yes.' No. No means no. Okay? That's the end of that. No means no."

While consent was used as a primary definitional construct, in cases where the presence or lack of consent were not clearly discernable, attempts to define an act as sexual violence became more difficult for informants. This definitional murkiness is further evidence of the use of "consent" as a fundamental cognitive signpost in how Americans conceive of sexual violence—when cues as to consent are absent, individuals have a much harder time and exhibit less patterned views about what is and what is not sexual violence as compared to cases where information about consent is available.

B. Conflicting understandings of harm

In the absence of information on consent, or when thinking about acts in which the presence or absence of consent was more difficult to establish (for example, inappropriate comments), informant classification of acts as sexual violence was not as clear cut. There were several different assumptions that were made in determining whether or not an act constituted as "harmful" and therefore whether or not it could be considered sexual violence. Below we discuss

the assumptions that were used in determining whether or not an act was harmful and therefore whether or not it could be thought of as sexual violence.

In some contexts, informants drew on the assumption that acts of sexual violence must entail a physical element that causes harm.

> "I think associating the physical stuff with the emotional and mental stuff makes it more in the category of sexual violence when you put all three components together. That's why I would differentiate sexual harassment. There could be harm [with sexual harassment]. It could take its toll on a female or male, or whatever the situation is—but I don't think I'd put it under that sexual violence term."

> "No, I don't think [sexual violence] could be just mental, but now what you just said, "sexual harassment"—but that's just harassment and not sexual violence. Yeah, I would say it has to be physical to make it violence."

When employing this assumption about sexual violence, informants also reasoned that a threat or attempted act is not enough to qualify as "sexual violence."

> *Interviewer: And what about "attempted nonconsensual sex acts"; so an "attempted rape"; is that a form of sexual violence?*
> "No. Because it isn't the actual act yet."

> "It doesn't have to be a physical act that caused the harm. It could be the intention of it that causes the harm."

As the above quotes demonstrate, at certain points of the interview, several respondents argued that physical acts constitute what is harmful and were a key component in defining what constitutes sexual violence. The assumption that sexual violence must entail physical harm in order to be classified as violence was dominant and was most frequently employed by the informants.

However, there was another, conflicting, assumption that informants employed in classifying something as harmful and that therefore could be defined as sexual violence. In some instances, informants reasoned that negative emotional and psychological consequences constituted harm and belong in the category of "violence."

> "Isn't that violence on some level, that you're actually causing emotional harm, physical, mental, spiritual, emotional harm?. . . It would have the same effect on you as something that was physically done to you."
> *Interviewer: And have a long-lasting effect.*
> "Longer maybe."

> "'Emotionally' . . . is a different form of hurt."

> "It's not always a beat-you-up, tie-you-up kind of stuff."
>
> "You are taking something from them and their respect, their pride, everything. You know? And that could hurt more than a knife."

Many informants displayed an internal contradiction by switching during their interviews from one model to the other—sometimes defining harm and sexual violence based on issues of physicality and other times using the more expansive assumption that harm entails emotional and psychological dimensions.

Who is involved?

Unlike the conflicting models employed to define sexual violence, informants were very consistent in their understanding of who is involved in sexual violence and why they commit or "fall victim" to these acts. In fact, two larger or meta-models were at base of most of their reasoning about actors and their motivations in regards to sexual violence: the "family bubble" and the mentalist model. The combination of these two models provided very consistent reasoning about the people involved in acts of sexual violence: parents raise "good" or "bad" or "vulnerable" or "strong" children. The instillation of certain kinds of motivations for action later determines what type of people they will become. In the next sections, we show how these models were used to reason about several aspects of who is involved in sexual violence.

A. Perpetrators of sexual violence are male

Informants overwhelmingly employed the tacit taken-for-granted assumption that perpetrators of sexual violence are male. This assumption was clearly evident in the ways that they answered open-ended and supplied examples of scenarios. In all of these informant-generated examples, the perpetrator was male. Below are several examples where this tacit assumption is visible.

> "If the larger majority of sexual predators are men, and in many cases that really is the case . . ."
>
> *"*What I'm thinking about sexual violence often the first thing that comes to my mind is a woman, being beat up by a man, you know? The victim is always—usually—it's a woman."

When asked explicitly if women can be perpetrators of sexual violence, informants acknowledged that this is possible, but unlikely. These responses were further illustration of the power and implicit understanding that sexual violence perpetrator = male. These quotes demonstrate that informants reasoned that perpetrators are male because of their physical strength. It is important to note that these ideas are not tied to any notions of *social* inequalities between men and women.

B. Perpetrators as predators

In addition to being male, informants overwhelmingly employed ideas about predators in thinking about the people who commit sexual crimes. Informants consistently described these individuals as "predators" who "stalk" and "attack" the "vulnerable" or "defenseless" in our communities—language that clearly displays the assumption that those who commit acts of sexual violence are predators, preying on victims. In addition, potential victims were described as targets or "prey" who must struggle to "protect" themselves.

> "Predators are like jungle animals. . . . Predators go after those that they believe are the most vulnerable."

This metaphor was pervasively operative in the ways informants talked about those who commit sexual crimes and those who are their targets.

C. Sexual predators are made, not born

Informants overwhelmingly expressed the idea that being a sexual predator is not normal human behavior. They regarded sexual predators as individuals who had acquired mental "sickness."

> "They're mentally disturbed violent people. . . . They're sick people."

Despite the use of the label "sick," the informants did not conceptualize committing sexual violence as a health issue. Rather, "sickness" and mental disturbances were employed to classify perpetrators as completely outside of the norms of appropriate human behavior. "Sickness" was not defined in opposition to a state of health, but rather as opposing moral behavior. That is, sexual violence was primarily conceptualized as a morality rather than a health issue.

More important than the assertion that predators are abnormal were the responses as to why perpetrators were sick or how their "wiring" had "gone bad." Informant explanations revealed an assumption that difficult life experiences, rather than innate, inborn qualities were the primary factors that explained why someone committed an act of sexual violence. The following quotes illustrate this assumption used to reason about why sexual predators do the things they do.

> "These predators or attackers or whatever you want to call them might have experienced [sexual violence] when they were young so they grew up thinking it's right and thinking that that's okay and do it. Others may be mentally ill."

> "It's either genetic or maybe it's a learned performance based on your upbringing, where you were taken advantage of and you think it's the right way to go or you were taken advantage of and you don't give a damn. . . . You know, they always say that an abused child becomes an abuser. . . . I think you're clay when you're born. You get molded."

> "You mold a baby. . . . I don't think it's something they're born with."

Informants focused discussions on why perpetrators commit acts of violence on "upbringing," and disregarded any notion of genetics in creating the internal motivations necessary for a person to commit acts of sexual violence.

> "It's just the way they were raised and exposed to, and it wasn't a good upbringing."

> "It's how you raised, how you growing up; it's also education, you know? It's not genetic. It's not biological. It's a part of how you growing up. It's your environment; it's how you were raised by your parents. It's a combination of things that can help you along the way."

> "It stems from childhood, I think. You know, the wrong upbringing, the bad upbringing. The parents abused them, physically, emotionally, mentally, verbally; they were neglected. That stays with them, it traumatized them, it takes away their innocence, it rapes their innocence. They will become perpetrators themselves, unless they get some serious psychological psychiatric help. It trickles; it's a domino effect. . . . They're self-loathing, they're unhappy, they're all insecure, they're resentful, they're hurt, they're angry, they're full of rage . . . coming from childhood."

On the other hand, good upbringing has the opposite effect.

> *Interviewer: Are there people who are less likely to commit these acts*?
> "Just raised right in a good home, and a good upbringing; really wasn't that exposed to that, and they grew up knowing that that was wrong. They would never do that because that's not what they were taught or showed or exposed to growing up as a child."

In the end, informant explanations revealed the assumption that upbringing, defined here primarily as the degree of caring possessed by parents, is what "really matters." In this way, informants overwhelmingly assumed that predators come from good or bad neighborhoods, but the quality of the parenting was what was most critical in determining who would become predators—in short, that good and bad upbringings have no connection to contextual factors.

> "It still comes back to your upbringing. Just because you're living in a gated community, your father still have beat up your mother when you was a child."

> "You don't have to have a lot of money to be a great parent and help train their kids in the right way."

> "I think if you don't have the nurturing, you have nothing."

> *Interviewer: How do you think someone becomes the one who commits these acts?*
> "It happened to them. And there's no other way they've seen growing up."

> "They . . . end up trying to repeat the pattern because it's all they can remember. . . . It's just what you're used to."

> *Interviewer: What do you think can be done to prevent sexual violence?*
> "Well, for one, parents need to just treat their children with utter respect, and love, and love them unconditionally, and not abuse them in any way. If it starts with the parents, then we don't get screwed-up adults."

Finally, the informants classified perpetrators as predators regardless of the relationship to the victim. All respondents recognize two broad classes of predator: people known to the victim and people unknown to the victim. Either way they are predators, whether they are lurking in shadows or are camouflaged, like wolves in sheep's clothing. Therefore, the relationship to the victim does not alter informants' understanding of who perpetrators are and why they commit these acts.

D. Victims are victims because they are vulnerable

Informants assumed that the primary characteristic of a victim of sexual violence is "vulnerability."

> "It's the vulnerability that attackers see in their victims. . . . We act vulnerable and people that are much stronger than us will take advantage of that."

> "They're just not aware of their surroundings, and someone's preying on them, and taking advantage of them at their weakest moment."

Analysis of informant discussions of victims demonstrated the assumption that vulnerability is conferred mostly by gender and age: most targets of sexual violence are women and children.

> "It could be anybody. It could be a man, woman, or a child. It could be an older person, an elderly. [But], for the most part, it's women. I'm sure I've heard of men getting raped, but physically, the way we're designed, men are always stronger. It's not like you hear men getting gang raped by a gang of women, but you've heard of women getting gang raped by men. So, for the most part, it is women."

As further evidence of this assumption of vulnerability, the word "innocent" was often used to describe these targets, both in the sense of "not guilty of anything" and also "being untouched by the world." As one informant noted, "being violated in such a violent way is like being robbed of innocence."

> "These are average, innocent people, who are preyed on, and I can't know how to categorize them; they run the gamut. Could be a young child, could be a young woman, could even be an older woman, and possibly they're defenseless. They don't

> have the strength of a man, in many cases, to fight back. So they become targeted as a victim. That's what they all have in common."

E. Victims are not to blame…or are they?

Analysis of interview data revealed a dominant discourse—a highly standardized pattern of talk—in which informants espoused the opinion that victims are "never responsible."

> "I would never, ever blame the victim for the violence. . . . The victim is never the one responsible. The victim may have allowed the circumstance to exist because they haven't been paying attention to what they should be paying attention to, but it's never their fault."

> "Some of them unintentionally because of the way that they dress, the way they look, or the way that they act. Just because you look like a floozy doesn't mean that you are, but they send mixed messages and men or women take it the wrong way and it ends up horrible."

While informants resoundingly voiced this opinion, analysis revealed the presence of a deeper assumption about responsibility and blame was in play here—despite the presence of the "victims are never to blame" pattern of talk. In places where they were less directly asked about responsibility, informants fell back on an assumption that people hold responsibility to ensure their own safety. In short, the assumption was that people are responsible for being aware of their surroundings and taking necessary steps to protect themselves.

> "I wish [my daughter would] make the right decision. Just instill good values in her and hopefully she can—good values can prepare her to better judgment. . . . Be aware of your surroundings, and know your friends."

> "Just always thinking before doing anything is how I could protect myself. Always thinking ahead of what could happen if I do that, or just thinking twice about his or her actions. Just knowing that it's not safe to be in an environment where you're at risk of danger. You know—going out to a club and meeting by yourself, things like that."

> "You have to be able to see it coming to survive it."

> "I always told my girls, my daughters . . ., 'Look, you're not bulletproof, okay? Keep your eyes open. Keep your ears open. Always be prepared to anything. Know what's around you. Know what's behind you. Always.' I always told them that. Just be aware of your surroundings."

Informant explanations that behavioral characteristics make an individual more likely to be target for a sexual predator was further evidence of the persistence of an underlying assumption of individual responsibility, despite the surface "victims are not to blame" discourse. Informants focused on how when victims dress "provocatively" or go into dangerous places such as bars or bad neighborhoods they draw the attention of a "roaming," opportunistic predator. These behaviors make those that make these "bad decisions" particularly good "targets of opportunity."

> "It would be like a smorgasbord or something for [predators]."

Informants talked about girls and women needing to "think about" and "choose" the kinds of clothes they wear, the places they go to, behaviors such as walking alone, and the company they keep. Several informants talked explicitly about how women should be able to live their lives as they choose. However, they continued by asserting that the world is the kind of place where unfortunately this is not possible. In the world as it is, it is very unwise to attract the attention of a sexual predator by associating with the kind of people who think that violence is normal, or by going into "dangerous territories" "where you're going to fall victim" to a predator in his "hunting grounds," or, especially, by dressing in an attention-getting fashion.

> "It's called freedom of choice. That's this wonderful country; it allows us freedom of choice. She has the freedom to dress any way she wants without being worried about that the way I dress is going to cause me some kind of harm. I don't think anybody should have to worry about that. Now unfortunately, that's not the real world; that's the problem, okay? That's fantasyland, okay? The real world says that if you dress like that somebody is going to think exactly what your conversation led to. Somebody is going to think the wrong things. And that's not good."

Where it occurs

When posed with the task of explaining where sexual violence typically occurs, informants again relied on conflicting assumptions. Sexual violence could at once be a completely random occurrence but then was also perceived to happen more often in poor, urban neighborhoods. These conflicting assumptions were based on notions of the poor upbringing of predators and the assumption that poor upbringings happen most often—although not exclusively—in "bad" neighborhoods. But assumptions about the lack of pattern to incidences of sexual violence were structured by the predation model, in which men strike whenever they can.

A. Poor, urban environments at night

Informants overwhelmingly made tacit assumptions that sexual violence occurs in poor urban neighborhoods.

> "I think education and poverty and health care are the first three [most important social issues]. . . . When those things are not effectively run in, then you run into situations to where you're producing more of the predators."

> "This is just life; this is the way it is that makes it so. I would say [that people are more or less vulnerable to sexual violence according to] economics, environment, and education."

When asked to explain why they assumed that these locations were the primary sites of sexual violence, informants reasoned that these are locations where people have low income and little education. But acts of sexual violence were not directly linked to the lack of resources in communities, but instead connected to ideas about the "poor upbringing" among those who commit sexual violence.

> "If you grow up poor, you don't have the same chance of going to school, the same chance of going to college. Mom and Dad is working, and you usually stay home alone. And where you live you're probably going to follow your friends' footsteps, doing bad things."
> *Interviewer: So education seems to be key here?*
> "Oh, absolutely."

> "I think family is important. It's important to have family and people close to you that are there for you growing up. So, if they come from not having much family or kind of being on their own, they might not have that sense of…and they might just be kind of misguided through growing up…not really have much guidance and not really understand and just kind of take it into…kind of figure things out for themselves and you never know. If they're a highly sexual person, that could cause them to act out. Even if they're not."

Informants also assumed that sexual violence is more likely to occur in places that are either very isolated or very crowded as long as perpetrators can find and violate their victims away from other people, and night is more dangerous than day.

> "In many cases it's a perfect stranger grabbed off the street."

> "It can be the teller at your bank. It can be anybody you come into…it can be a complete stranger. It could be someone you just see when you make a deposit at the bank. You know? She catches your eye and you want that and maybe that adds up in your head and you decide to commit this act."

B. Anybody, anywhere, anytime

In addition the very specific assumptions informants employed in thinking about the location of sexual violence, analysis of interview data also revealed a more general assumption that sexual violence can occur *at any place and at any time.*

> "It could be anybody. It could. I wouldn't say there's a certain group of people who could be sexually violent. It could be anybody."

> "That could happen anywhere. That can happen in school, that can happen in factories, or worker's offices; it could happen at home, so you got all those places it could happen. The 'violence,' now that's home, mostly, I think, than it is outside, but it does happen on the outside a lot."

This is another example of a question—where sexual violence occurs—that informant employed two, in this case, conflicting assumptions to answer. Again, oscillations between the very specific urban spaces and the more expansive anyplace, anytime assumptions were frequently employed by the same informant in different places throughout their interview. This supports the theory of cultural models by illustrating the discrete packaged nature of individual assumptions and how the process of cognition is one of associations and application of discrete parcels of meaning rather than one of based on achieving coherence and rationality.

What can be done?

A. Intervention through physical separation

Analysis of interview data suggested that informants assumed that manipulating jail sentences is the primary solution to issues of sexual violence. Informants reasoned that the best that society can do is to restrain predators so that they are physically unable to perpetrate. Prison time was devoid of any understanding of rehabilitation and instead was assumed to function as a "cage," keeping dangerous offenders separated from the community. This assumption functioned on the understanding that the "only way that really works" is to physically keep predators from accessing their prey.

> "They're off the streets; they're in jail; they can't harm anyone."

> "So they can be confined—at least confined, separated, restrained, from committing these acts at least again, at least separated from society."

In addition, another frequently cited solution to prevent repeated offenses was castration. This solution was based on a similar assumption about physically preventing repeat offenses—in this case through surgical rather than spatial means.

> "They should get a stiff jail sentence, and possible castration."

> "The only way to put him back out on the street is to castrate him. . . . You can't put him back on the street just to be a menace again. You can't do that."

B. Prevention through deterrence

Incarceration also represented the only way through which informants were able to think about preventing acts of sexual violence. According to this assumption, if jail sentences were made "tough enough," they would deter would-be predators from committing acts of sexual violence.

"If we stiffen the penalty, I think people would think twice about it."

"There's no one answer other than if you're going to incarcerate them or get them in some kind of treatment facility for the rest of their lives, or some kind of lock down. If they're out there on their own, they're going to. I've seen and heard stories about it."

C. Once a predator, always a predator

Informants also approached the issue of intervention by applying the assumption that once a person perpetrates an act of sexual violence they will surely commit another act at some point in the future. In this way, informants overwhelmingly explained that those who commit sexually violent offenses cannot be rehabilitated. This was a deep-seated, powerful and pervasive assumption in the interviews.

"I believe that these people that are predators set patterns."

"I really don't think that it's something that they can fix. I don't think so. I don't think so. In my opinion, I don't think so."

"How could you fix a mind up? There is no fixing the mind. There is no cure for it."

"I don't think they can be rehabilitated."

"Once you cross that line, you got a taste of it, and there's no way, I don't think, to be rehabilitated."

Again, these models reflect the idea that once these behaviors are learned, sexual predators are beyond any kind of help or intervention. Therefore, extreme exclusion from society—whether it is a result of jail time or removal of sexual organs—is the only logical way in which to stop sexual violence

II. Implications of the Dominant Models Used to Reason About Sexual Violence

1. Strong influence of the family bubble. Previous FrameWorks research has shown that when people reason about early child development, they tend to think about the nuclear family as the only context of importance. The family exists in a bubble, impervious to larger systemic issues. Parenting comes into play in two important forms in the public's model of sexual violence. First, parents and how they raise their children are held entirely responsible for creating "predators." Second, parents are seen as the only source to teach children how to protect themselves from danger or harm. The role of the family bubble in the public's models of why sexual violence occurs and how it can be addressed means that other contexts of importance—such as communities or mass media—and their impacts on the prevalence of sexual violence will not be easily understood. However, the family bubble does offer one important point that advocates can

begin to build on which is its emphasis on the importance of early childhood development. The public's model of development needs to be broadened to include other important contexts that shape outcomes.

2. The predation model and the ineffectiveness of current communications strategies. The presence of the predation model as the dominant assumption employed in thinking about those who perpetrate acts of sexual violence suggests that much of current communications practice on the issue of sexual violence misguidedly focuses on the relationship between victim and perpetrator. Our research shows that stating that most perpetrators are known to the victim, a communications strategy commonly cited by the experts we interviewed, will be largely ineffective in actually changing how the issue is understood by the public. Perpetrators were understood as predators, with all of the entailments of that metaphor, regardless of their relationship to the victim. This indicates that communications that narrowly aim to change people's perception of the most common relationship between victim and perpetrator will not impact how people understand the motivations, actions and potential programs that are aimed at perpetrators. In short, communicating to people that perpetrators are known to their victims does not automatically humanize perpetrators nor allow people to envision how interventions might be effective.

3. The predation model individualizes the issue. The predation model is completely rooted in individual characteristics of certain individuals. As exemplified in the research, predators are conceptualized as people outside of moral society who stalkand victimize vulnerable victims. This model is firmly entrenched and it will render messages that link cultural norms to the rates of and propensity to violence very difficult to think.

4. Discourse-model dissonance over blame and responsibility suggests that patterns of thinking remain to be addressed. The participants did not directly engage in blaming victims. Nevertheless, they still attributed responsibility to individuals to protect themselves from any kind of attack. This means that although victims are not directly held responsible, communications around sexual violence have not been able to dislodge the public's notion of causes of sexual violence from issues of individual responsibility.

5. Undeveloped notion of prevention. Interviews demonstrated that the public has a very anemic sense of prevention when it comes to the issue of sexual violence. In the public's mind, prevention can only occur through individual actions, such as parents teaching children to protect themselves, dress appropriately, or avoid dangerous situations. The only interventions that are imaginable occur after the act has taken place (through punishment and containment of the perpetrator). How to reduce the threat or prevent sexual violence from happening in the first place is very difficult to think. The communications implications of this missing piece are profound. Rather than communications that state that prevention *is possible*, this finding suggests that much more fundamental reframing work is required to give the public a concrete and working understanding of *how* prevention happens. This is a major challenge but one that must be overcome if public understanding on this issue and its solutions is to move forward.

6. Punishment and rehabilitation are all Americans can see. Related to the above point, the public's ideas about how to address sexual violence are narrowly constrained to punitive

measures. Assumptions shaped views that increased jail time, increased monitoring, and even castration were seen as the only "really" effective means of intervention. The presence and dominance of these assumptions blocks the ability of advocates to communicate about other forms of intervention and makes alternative preventative measures feel like less than effective or even misguided means of addressing the issue.

III. Recessive Models

Several other shared and patterned assumptions emerge from the cultural models interviews and, although these models were not as frequently employed and were not used with the same degree of automaticity as the dominant models described above, they are nonetheless important. We call these "recessive" models as they can be thought of as ways that are *available* to the public to think about sexual violence, but patterns of reasoning that individuals don't *readily* or *automatically* apply in understanding the issue. Put another way, these recessive models require specific cuing to become active in the mind. We pursue these recessive models as promising avenues of thinking because they appear to help informants engage in more productive understandings of the target issue relative to many of the more dominant models described in the previous sections.

1. Communities play a role

There was a patterned assumption about intervention across some informants in the sample that if people become "sexual predators" because of their life conditions, improving those conditions should decrease the number of sexual predators. A few informants recognized this implication and focused on education and communication as a method of improving the well-being of families and communities. This would in turn change social circumstances and the upbringings they shape.

> "Communicating is the best thing in the world . . . to try to make [sexual predators] stop. . . . This could stop it a little bit, or it might not stop it at all, but at least it's a little help. So children can grow up a little better, and in an environment that they like."

> "I believe communication and education are really the most important things, and maybe it would stop some of this violence. Because with education, [teenagers] are gonna have answers to their questions."

> "If you grow up poor, you don't have the same chance of going to school, the same chance of going to college. Mom and Dad is working, and you usually stay home alone. And where you live you're probably going to follow your friends' footsteps, doing bad things."
> *Interviewer: So education seems to be key here?*
> "Oh, absolutely."

The sense, however underdeveloped, that communities play a role in upbringing and that environments can shape outcomes will be critical for communications. It indicates that there is cognitive space, however limited, for people to be able to think in more eco-cultural terms about the problems related to sexual violence. At the moment, informants are not able to speak clearly about organizations or government agencies that deal with sexual violence or its victims or perpetrators. Most flounder rather badly. Only very rarely does an informant have even a clear outline of how the pieces fit together.

> "I think there could be some community programs established that could help parents learn how and when to tell their children about [sexual violence] . . . possibly done through the PTA or the school nursing program. . . . I think parents should be present. It could also be done at a community outreach program. Our local representative could have some health department people come and talk to the parents, and help the parents figure it out. . . . I'd try to strengthen the laws. . . . More awareness on TV and in media of what we can do to protect our communities, and then more outreach programs, things like that."

However, while the details are missing, the latent sense that change can happen within specific communities and within the culture at large will be an important model that communicators can strive to tap into.

2. Communities are impacted

Along with the sense that communities may be important sites of interventions, some participants were able to think about the widespread societal implications of sexual violence. In fact, they also discussed a kind of "ripple effect" of sexual violence.

> "The family's involved on both sides, friends, communities. It's far-reaching and very devastating."

> "It's important for the community at large. Just to protect our children, to protect ourselves, so we don't become victims or victimized."

> "It affects everybody. It just permeates. It's like dropping a stone in the water. You just see the rings go out and out and out."

"They're not just raping one victim; they're raping a whole family."

This recessive model is important because it indicates that, at least some of the time, informants understand sexual violence as a problem impacting "those people" over there, but that it is a social problem that impacts entire communities in social groups. This means that the task of explaining why sexual violence is a problem that is important for everyone to care about will be less of a hurdle.

GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING

The primary goals of this analysis have been to: 1) document the way experts talk about and explain the issue of sexual violence, 2) establish the way that the lay public understands this issue, and 3) compare and "map" these explanations and understandings to reveal the overlaps and gaps between these two groups. We now turn to this third task.

Below, we take each one of the conceptual gaps in understanding and discuss its communications implications with greater specificity. More generally, an integral part of FrameWorks' Strategic Frame Analysis™ is to first generate this map. In later phases of research, we are then able to design simplifying models that fill these gaps by cultivating clarifying metaphors that concretize key concepts.[x] Designing simplifying models relies on knowing the locations and characteristics of expert-lay gaps—it requires a detailed, in-depth understanding of the map. Understanding the locations and features of the specific gaps detailed below is therefore essential in order to move from the largely descriptive research laid out in this report to more prescriptive reframing experiments in the future.

1. **Why sexual violence occurs.** Experts discussed sexual violence as an outcome of social and cultural relationships in which groups of people, such as women, are considered "less than" based on historic inequities and popular representations of women. These unequal social systems and the cultures that perpetuate them shape behaviors, making certain acts easier or more acceptable to commit, according to experts. In contrast, the public primarily understands sexual violence as the result of bad parenting. Children who are victims of or witness sexual violence are likely to become "predators" themselves. Parenting, even abusive parenting, is considered by the public to occur within a "family bubble" separate and distinct from social, cultural, political and economic situations. While experts discuss sexual violence as a characteristic of a specific cultural context, the public understands it as a characteristic of bad, sick or immoral individuals. This gap points to the need to communicate a model of how environments shape behavior, specifically how cultures of inequality can translate into certain kinds of behavior.

2. **Characteristics of victims and predators.** While both experts and the public acknowledged that sexual violence typically occurs between people who are known to each other, they differed in their characterization of people who commit acts of sexual violence. Experts emphasized that because of the often close relationship between perpetrator and victim, that perpetrators are "everyday people." The public, on the other hand, characterized perpetrators as sick and fundamentally immoral, which impacted the ways in which they thought about the opportunities for prevention and the chance of rehabilitation. Experts did not emphasize any characteristic of victims, but the public repeatedly talked about victims as being defenseless, passive or easy targets for the predator. The public did not "blame victims," but did place responsibility, in a less direct way, on potential victims for learning to protect themselves. This gap reflects a core and fundamental difference between expert and public understandings: sexual violence as an individual versus systemic issue. Incorporating systems into communications about sexual violence will be essential.

3. **The domain of sexual violence.** The public's models of sexual violence are fundamentally structured by notions of crime and immorality. In contrast, the experts we interviewed were attempting to communicate about sexual violence as a health issue**.**

While several informants referred to predators as "sick," sick was not used in the sense of diseased but to indicate a fundamental abnormality or immoral or criminal action. That is, the public does not categorize sexual violence as a health issue, but as a criminal or moral problem. When we asked participants directly about how they think about sexual health, they were either unable to discuss the concept or defined it narrowly as freedom from disease. [xi] Sexual health was not connected to people's models of sexual violence. This presents a communication challenge as many of the experts we spoke to referred to and made use of the concept of "sexual health" when explaining sexual violence. Simply defining the concept may not change people's dominant models of sexual violence in which attributes of individuals are defining features. For the public, sexual violence is not a health issue, but one that is most appropriately addressed by the criminal justice system. We do caution advocates' impulses to frame sexual violence as a health issue. In previous FrameWorks research,[xii] we have found that the public tends to think about health as the primary responsibility of individuals, and it is extremely difficult for the public to think about how environments shape health. We suspect that simply framing sexual violence as a health issue will not encourage people to engage with the more eco-cultural approach to sexual violence so eloquently articulated by the experts we interviewed.

4. **How to address sexual violence.** While experts emphasized the role of programs, policies and large-scale social changes to prevent sexual violence from occurring in the first place, the public's sense of effective measures to address sexual violence were limited to punishment as a form of deterrence as well as increased education for children in how to protect themselves from an attack. Even though the public conceptualized the propensity to sexual violence as a "learned" behavior and not as an innate trait, this perception did not translate into concrete ideas about how sexual violence might be prevented from happening by focusing early developmental and learning contexts. Rather, incarceration and self-protection were understood as the only methods of stopping people from continuing to commit acts of sexual violence. Preventing violence from occurring in the first place was seen as largely impossible. This gap in how these groups think about intervention represents one of the most conspicuous communications challenges on the issue of sexual violence. The prevention of sexual violence is central to much of the work that advocates are doing around the issue, yet the public, while acknowledging the need for prevention, has a very limited sense of *how* sexual violence could be prevented (i.e., of how prevention works) and can only think about interventions after an act of violence or if that act is imminent.

CONCLUSIONS

This report describes and examines the implications of the ways that members of the expert community and the general public think about sexual violence. Thinking on this topic is examined through the analysis of interview data with members of both of these groups. The primary goals for this report have been to consider the limitations of the dominant cultural models currently in place in the public's thinking and to locate specific gaps between the ways experts and the general public understand and talk about sexual violence. Strategic communications must address both of these communications challenges—redirecting public

thinking away from perceptual traps posed by unproductive patterns of thinking and filling in gaps where content knowledge is missing from the public understanding. In the future, addressing these challenges through the design of specific frame elements including simplifying models and values is a major task if FrameWorks is to move into more prescriptive framing research on this topic.

Ultimately, the report demonstrates the pressing need for experts and advocates to work on providing Americans with alternative ways of thinking about the causes, outcomes and appropriate interventions to sexual violence. It is our firm position that, without new ways to think about sexual violence, the public will interpret communications on this issue through the perspective that sexual violence can be reduced to a problem of individuals and continue to lack an understanding of what prevention of sexual violence is and how it might be implemented. Should these assumptions persist and continue to dominate how Americans make sense of messages on this topic, experts and advocates stand little chance of forwarding the message that sexual violence is a systemic issue in cause and remediation and that social change is necessary in order to address it.

New frames and communications strategies that shift away from patterns of thinking that restrict perceptions are needed. While this research represents the first phase of research, several preliminary recommendations and future directions have become apparent. We present these here as *preliminary communications recommendations* with the caveat that they must be substantiated through further research:

Avoid inadvertently activating individual responsibility frames. The advocates have been successful in getting their don't blame the victim message out there, but this has become a discourse. Despite this progress, the underlying individual responsibility model remains and is in play when people think less directly or explicitly about issues of victim responsibility. The implication is that more work needs to be done to give people different ways of thinking, rather than just talking about blame and responsibility. In other words, changing the surface discourse has not dislodged the notion that being a victim of sexual violence is fundamentally about personal responsibility.

Provide other models about perpetrators besides the predator model. Our research shows unequivocally that simply stating that most perpetrators are known to their victims does not alter the fundamental ways in which perpetrators are conceptualized. Whether a perpetrator is a loved one or stranger, they are nonetheless a predator. The predator model makes it difficult for people to understand how prevention can happen, because predators are fundamentally "bad" people. In short, this model narrows public perceptions of how sexual violence might be addressed.

Establish broad conceptions of consent and harm. Establishing the concept of lack of consent in the way that advocates message about acts that may not traditionally be seen as sexual violence might help people see why things like inappropriate comments in the workplace could be considered sexual violence in that they occur in the absence of consent. These broad conceptions of consent and harm will likely aid advocates in showing how sexual violence occurs within a cultural context—a context created by language, attitudes and public representations.

Take caution with health frame. Talking about sexual health by itself does not allow people to automatically link it to a discussion about sexual violence. A lot more work is needed to figure out how to build a concept of sexual health and connect it in a productive and strategic way to the discussion of sexual violence. At FrameWorks, we consistently advise advocates to exercise extreme caution when discussing health because it often quickly devolves into notions of individual responsibility (i.e., people are healthy or unhealthy because of individual choices).

Activate the role of communities by telling stories of child development. Our research shows that the public fundamentally misunderstands the roots of sexual violence: that bad parents create immoral and abnormal children who inflict unthinkable harm on others. Discussing child development and how it can be derailed in ways that make the social and cultural contexts visible and perceived as a causal mechanism will possibly aid advocates in dislodging sexual violence as a problem of individuals to a social problem embedded in unequal social systems. FrameWorks' large body of research on early child development might help advocates of sexual violence in telling those stories.[xiii]

About FrameWorks Institute: The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute's work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector, at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

Please follow standard APA rules for citation, with FrameWorks Institute as publisher. O'Neil, Moira and Morgan, Pamela (2010). *American Perceptions of Sexual Violence.* Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

APPENDIX: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The following are well-accepted characteristics of cognition and features of cultural models that figure prominently into the results presented in this report and in FrameWorks' research more generally.

1. Top-down nature of cognition

Individuals rely on a relatively small set of broad, *general* cultural models to organize and make sense of information about an incredibly wide range of *specific* issues and information. Put another way, members of a cultural group share a set of common general models that form the lens through which they think and make sense of information pertaining to many different issues. This feature of cognition explains why FrameWorks' research has revealed many of the same cultural models being used to think about seemingly unconnected and unrelated issues—from education to health to child development. For example, FrameWorks' research has found that people use the *mentalist* model to think about child development and food and fitness—seemingly unrelated issue areas. For this reason, we say that cognition is a "top-down" phenomenon. *Specific* information gets fitted into *general* categories that people share and carry around with them in their heads.

2. Cultural models come in many flavors but the basic ingredients are the same

At FrameWorks, we often get asked about the extent to which the cultural models that we identify in our research and that we use as the basis of our general approach to social messaging apply to ALL cultures. That is, people want to know how inclusive our cultural models are and to what extent we see/look for/find differences across race, class or other cultural categories. Because our aim is to create messaging for mass media communications, we seek out messages that resonate with the public more generally and, as such, seek to identify cultural models that are most broadly shared across society. We ensure the models are sufficiently broad by recruiting diverse groups of informants in our research who help us to confirm that the models we identify operate broadly across a wide range of groups. Recruiting diverse samples in our cultural models interviews often confuses people who then think we are interested in uncovering the nuanced ways in which the models take shape and get communicated across those groups, or that we are interested in identifying different models that different groups use. To the contrary, our aim is to locate the models at the broadest possible levels (i.e., those most commonly shared across *all* cultural groups) and to develop reframes and simplifying models that advance those models that catalyze systems-level thinking. The latter does not negate the fact that members of different cultural groups may respond more or less enthusiastically to the reframes, and this is one of the reasons why we subject the reframes that we recommend to our clients to rigorous experimental testing using randomized controls that more fully evaluate their mass appeal.

3. Dominant and recessive models

Some of the models that individuals use to understand the world around us are what we call "dominant," while others are more "recessive," or latent, in shaping how we process information. Dominant models are those that are very "easy to think." They are activated and used with a high degree of immediacy and are persistent or "sticky" in their power to shape thinking and understanding—once a dominant model has been activated, it is difficult to shift to or employ

another model to think about the issue. Because these models are used so readily to understand information, and because of their cognitive stickiness, they actually become easier to "think" each time they are activated—similar to how we choose well-worn and familiar paths when walking through fields, and in so doing these paths become even more well-worn and familiar. There is therefore the tendency for dominant models to become increasingly dominant unless information is reframed to cue other cognitively available models (or, to continue the analogy here, other walking paths). Recessive models, on the other hand, are not characterized by the same immediacy or persistence. They lie further below the surface, and while they *can* be employed in making sense of a concept or processing information about an issue—they *are* present—their application requires specific cues or primes.

Mapping recessive models is an important part of the FrameWorks approach to communication science and a key step in reframing an issue. It is often these recessive patterns of thinking that hold the most promise in shifting thinking away from the existing dominant models that often inhibit a broader understanding of the role of policy and the *social* aspect of issues and problems. Because of the promise of these recessive models in shifting perception and patterns of thinking, we discuss them in this report and will bring these findings into the subsequent phases of FrameWorks' iterative methodology. During focus group research in particular, we explore in greater detail *how* these recessive models can most effectively be cued or "primed," as well as how these recessive models *interact* with and are *negotiated* vis-à-vis emergent dominant models.

4. The "nestedness" of cultural models

Within the broad foundational models that people use in "thinking" about a wide variety of issues lay models that, while still general, broad and shared, are *relatively* more issue-specific. We refer to these more issue-specific models as "nested." For example, in our past research on executive function, when informants thought about basic skills, they employed a model for understanding where these skills come from, but research revealed that this more specific model was nested into the more general *mentalist* cultural model that informants implicitly applied in thinking this issue. Nested models often compete in guiding or shaping the way we think about issues. Information may have very different effects if it is "thought" through one or another nested model. Therefore, knowing about which models are nested into which broader models helps us in reframing an issue.

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[i] See: Donat, Patricia L.N. and D'Emilio, John. "A Feminist Redefinition of Rape and Sexual Assault: Historical Foundations and Change." *Journal of Social Issues*. 48(1): 9-22.

[ii] See: Glaser, B.G. and Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co. and Strauss, A.L. and Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

[iii] Quinn, N. (2005). *Finding Culture in Talk: A Collection of Methods* (1st ed.). New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 16.

[iv] Priming informants with the content can be problematic in these interviews, as the ability to identify and describe cultural models relies on getting "top of mind" answers and explanations from informants, rather than carefully

thought-out and pre-constructed responses to the issue in question. If primed with the focus of the interview, informants tend to "prepare" by doing "research" on the subject, yielding results that are actually not representative of their own understandings and explanations of issues.

[v] Quinn, N. (2005). *Finding Culture in Talk: A Collection of Methods*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

[vi] For description of grounded theory analysis see: Glaser, B.G. and Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research.* Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co. and Strauss, A.L. and Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications. For description of social discourse analysis see: Strauss, C. "Analyzing Discourse for Cultural Complexity," in *Finding Culture in Talk*. Edited by N. Quinn. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Also see: Strauss, Claudia. *Who Belongs Here and What Do We All Deserve? Americans' Discourses About Immigration and Social Welfare*. Unpublished manuscript. For description of cultural models analysis, see: Quinn, N. "Convergent Evidence of a Cultural Model of American Marriage," in *Cultural Models in Language and Thought*. Edited by D. Holland and N. Quinn. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, 173-194.

[vii] Bales, Susan N. (2005). *Talking Early Child Development and Exploring the Consequences of Frame Choices: A FrameWorks MessageMemo.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

[viii] We analyze this assumption, as well as the assumption about the public's lack of understanding of the pervasiveness of the issue in the cultural models interviews.

[ix] This content and application distinction parallels one made by Quinn between the "Structure" and "Agency" of cultural models. For a discussion of this distinction see: Quinn, N. and Holland, D. "Culture and Cognition," In *Cultural Models in Language and Thought.* Edited by D. Holland and N. Quinn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, 3-40.

[x] For more information, see http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/methods.html.

[xi] Respondents do not contrast "sexual health" with any kind of "sickness" that results in "sexual violence." They are not familiar with the phrase ("I've never heard of 'sexually healthy.'" "I've never heard of sexual health before."). When asked about "sexual health," they flounder and may not even try to define it, but when pressed may consider it to be related to being free from literal disease, or to knowing about one's body and how it functions with respect to sexuality.

> "Well, there's a certain amount of education as to your own body."
>
> *Interviewer: No. So, what is sexual health for you? We don't talk about that a lot.*
> "Sexual health meaning the potential of diseases and stuff?"
> *Interviewer: How do you define it? If you were to define someone as sexually healthy, what does that mean to you?*
> "I can't even answer that. I have no idea."

[xii] FrameWorks Institute (2006). "Health Individualism: Findings from Cognitive Elicitations in Colorado and California."
http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/food_and_fitness/foodandfitnesshealthindividualismca.pdf

[xiii] See http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/ecd.html.