Strategic Frame Analysis: Reframing America's Youth

Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr. and Susan Nall Bales

Summary

The way youth issues are framed for public consideration has severe consequences for youth policy advocates. How the public thinks about social and political issues, and what policy solutions they regard as appropriate and compelling, are largely determined by the way these issues are framed in the media and public discourse.

Applied to issues affecting children and youth, the way news is framed – through visuals, symbols, inference, and language — can trigger either pictures of self-absorbed, potentially violent, amoral teenagers or inexperienced junior adults experimenting with identity in order to assume their role in the community. That act of framing, in turn, can predispose voters to prioritize the allocation of public resources in different ways. For example, voters may choose prisons over education or volunteer programs.

Social cognition theory tells us that limits on human capacity require people to rely on mental "shortcuts" to make sense out of their world (Hastie, 1986; Taylor & Crocker, 1981; Sherman, Judd, & Park, 1989; Wyer & Srull, 1984). Organizing knowledge into general categories is an efficient way for people to make inferences and judgments about specific instances in their current environment. Furthermore, the content or nature of the incoming information determines which mental representations are called upon in the decision making process (Cantor & Mischel, 1979; Conover & Feldman, 1989; Miller, Wattenberg, & Malanchuk, 1986; Morgan & Schwalbe, 1990; Tannen, 1993). In other words, how the issue is *framed* is crucial to public reasoning.

Most Americans now rely on news reports to learn about public issues (Papper & Gerhard, 1997; Roper Starch, 1994). Increasingly, the real world for most Americans is viewed through the lens of the news media. It is this theory of mass media's pervasive influence in concealing and prioritizing public options upon which strategic frame analysis rests.

Strategic frame analysis, the method advanced in this paper, allows a nuanced understanding of the role played by media and public opinion in impeding or advancing the goals of those who seek more public attention and resources allocated to youth. Strategic frame analysis relies on a series of methods adapted from traditional opinion research, media studies and cultural and cognitive fieldwork including survey research, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, media content analysis, metaphor analysis, and media effects tests. This paper applies the basic principles of strategic frame analysis to discern what Americans think about youth (especially teenagers), why they think what they do, what consequences this has for youth policy and policy advocates, and how policy advocates might best engage Americans in a discussion about positive youth development.

Among the findings:

Adults believe that teens today are "different" than they were in the past. "…only 16% of Americans say that 'young people under the age of 30 share most of their moral and ethical values." (Bostrom, 2000a)

Confronted with what was presented as a "true news story" about recent trends among teenagers, adults consistently overlooked the positive data (which dominated the story) and focused instead on the few negative trends.

In an analysis of television news conducted for the authors, the Center for Media and Public Affairs found a paucity of news reporting about youth — only one out of every 12 stories on local newscasts, and only one out of every 25 stories on network news dealt with young people. The three most frequently reported topics of youth news on the local stations were crime victimization, accidents involving young people, and violent juvenile crime, accounting for nearly half (46%) of all coverage of youth.

While research suggests that "parents of teenagers or those who interact regularly with teenagers are much less susceptible to media portrayals of teens" (Aubrun & Grady, 2000), nevertheless most Americans "tend to resolve this contradiction by judging their own experience to be exceptional, rather than by challenging the media frames...The position of the media has the effect of making their own experience and attitudes seem unusual or even aberrant. They tend to discount what does not fit the media frame as exceptional, rather than questioning or challenging the frame."

The researchers did find a number of instances in which adults described youth in positive terms, often using values associated with work (e.g., discipline and commitment). These activities include: group sports, performing arts, and volunteer/community service.

The authors conclude that the challenge in testing the power of these incipient reframes to overcome the dominant stereotypes of troubled, at-risk youth will be the connection to community responsibility. In virtually every aspect of the research to date, the ability to connect youth outcomes to community programs and public policies proved an insurmountable obstacle for adults. Building responsibility into the frame, beyond youth themselves and their parents, remains a major undertaking.

From the Editor

The media is an increasingly present force in our lives. Research by numerous SRCD members has already demonstrated the powerful influence of television on children's development. Such influence can be both positive and negative. The new technologies from video games to interactive computers increase the range and complexity of such influences.

The research reported in this *Report* describes an additional dimension to the media's influence. Borrowing ideas from *cognitive* science, Gilliam and Bales show how the framing of news stories has dramatic effects on the attitudes viewers form. The way issues are framed through the use of visuals, symbols, inference and language subtly influences the public's views of social issues and the policy solutions they support. Gilliam and Bales demonstrate how the news media are yet another factor competing with research information for impact on public opinion and policy.

Furthermore, these investigators illustrate their use of frame analysis by examining the publics' views of today's youth. The public's view of youth is rather despairing. The proportion of youth engaging in negative behavior is wildly exaggerated, and presenting adults with more positive news stories does not seem to alter views. Clearly, the public's negative perception of youth and the difficulty with which such views can be changed is a policy concern.

Hopefully this issue of *SPR* will serve to increase readers' awareness of framing as one avenue through which the media influence public opinion and of the public's negative views of youth. Both issues are ones for which individual action as well as policy making can have an impact.

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**Strategic Frame Analysis:
Reframing America's Youth**[1]

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How does the public come to understand social and political issues? That is, what determines the nature of public thinking? More importantly, how does this dialogue influence public choices? These simple questions are at the heart of an approach we call *strategic frame analysis*. Our primary interest is in how the public reasons about a given issue and the policy consequences of those conceptual decisions. Our core argument is that how issues are *framed* – both in the public mind and the mass media — has a measurable impact on public discourse. By framing, we mean how messages are encoded with meaning so that they can be efficiently interpreted in relationship to existing beliefs or ideas.

This is significant because how people think about issues influences policy outcomes (Lakoff, 1996; Lippman, 1921). Applied to issues affecting children and youth, the way news is framed – through visuals, symbols, inference, and language — can trigger either pictures of self-absorbed, potentially violent, amoral teenagers or inexperienced junior adults experimenting with identity in order to assume their role in the community. That act of framing, in turn, can predispose voters to prioritize the allocation of public resources in different ways. For example, voters may choose prisons over education or volunteer programs. In short, the way youth issues are framed for public consideration has severe consequences for youth policy advocates. Strategic frame analysis, therefore, allows a more nuanced understanding of the role played by media and public opinion in impeding or advancing the goals of those who seek more public attention and resources allocated to youth.

Theoretically situated in the social and cognitive sciences, strategic frame analysis seeks to identify dominant *frames* of public understanding taking into account the dynamic role that media plays in creating and activating particular frames, and excluding others. Our approach is strategic in the sense that we empirically test the impact of dominant

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frames on public reasoning and then develop and test alternative *reframes.* We use the term reframe to mean changing "the context of the message exchange" (Rogers, 1994, p. 98) so that different interpretations and probable outcomes become visible to the public. In this way, we are able to assess the extent to which rival frames produce different decision outcomes. Thus we are positioned both to test competing theoretical arguments and to inform the work of issue advocates.

According to Harold Lasswell (1939) a core research mission of the study of communications is "…to clarify probable significant results." Following this directive, we are neither advocates for the status quo nor for the policy proposals we test. Yet, we do adhere to the belief expressed by Robert S. Lynd (1939) at the dawn of the study of mass communications:

> I am for describing what is, not in terms of itself as a final datum, but within a framework of conceptual orientation to a possible line of action that we as social scientists decide is intelligent. This gives us more precise focus and a projective thrust to our data on what is, because it is oriented to something specific other than merely describing what happens to be before us.

Our work is meant to explore the likelihood of public consensus around those policies that experts in youth development currently deem most promising for supporting the healthy development of American youth.

The objective of this paper is to present the theoretical structure of strategic frame analysis and apply it to the study of youth issues. In the next section, we identify key concepts in the social and cognitive sciences that serve as the theoretical foundation of our approach. We also call special attention to the role of the news media in connecting public understanding to policy results. We then turn to an application of this approach to youth issues. Here we identify the dominant frames of youth as reflected in public opinion and the mass media. From this work, we specify empirical tests to assess their effects on attitudes and policy preferences. The last step is to identify and develop possible reframes that can allow the public to consider and evaluate alternative policy prescriptions. We conclude with a brief discussion of the implications of our approach for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers interested in youth issues.

Social cognition theory tells us that limits on human capacity require people to rely on mental "shortcuts" to make sense out of their world (Hastie 1986; Taylor & Crocker, 1981; Sherman, Judd, & Park, 1989; Wyer & Srull, 1984). Organizing knowledge into general categories is an efficient way for people to make inferences and judgments about specific instances in their current environment. Furthermore,

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the content or nature of the incoming information determines which mental representations are called upon in the decision making process (Cantor & Mischel, 1979; Conover & Feldman, 1989; Miller, Wattenberg, & Malanchuk, 1986; Morgan & Schwalbe, 1990; Tannen, 1993). In other words, how the issue is *framed* is crucial to public reasoning.

Anthropologist Gregory Bateson first used the term "frame" in 1955 to refer to two key aspects of communication. First, frames are cognitive models (such as an understanding of what a "family" is) that allow an audience to interpret and to evaluate a given message. The cognitive models that particularly interest anthropologists are "cultural models," understandings that are shared and durable, and have motivational force. In Bateson's second sense (which was later borrowed by sociologist Erving Goffman), frames are "metacommunications," i.e., messages about messages.

Frames tell an audience how to interpret a message — and even what counts as part of the message and what should be ignored — by evoking particular cognitive models and not others. Referring to government programs as handouts, for example, brings to bear cultural models of laziness, but not of suffering. In a recent Florida lawsuit against the tobacco industry, jurors reported their final ruling was based not "on whether people had the choice to smoke or not to smoke," as they had originally thought, but rather on the fact "that the companies knew they were selling a defective product." (Bragg & Kershaw, 2000, p. 1) Had "choice" predominated as the frame, jurors admitted they would not have levied damages; in moving to the "defective product" frame,

they assigned the largest damage award in history (Bragg & Kershaw, 2000).

Both of Bateson's senses of "frame" are key to strategic frame analysis. We use the term frame throughout this paper to refer both to the way meaning is encoded in a particular message, and to the "labels the mind uses to find what it knows" (Schank, 1998, p. 67). Put simply, the frame triggers its own interpretation, allowing us to process information quickly and efficiently, based on past experiences, beliefs and expectations. Schank (1998) describes this dynamic in the following way: "Finding some familiar element causes us to activate the story that is labeled by that familiar element, and we understand the new story as if it were an exemplar of that old element." (p. 59) For purposes of this paper, except where specifically addressed, we will use frame in the broadest sense, incorporating such related concepts as scripts, stories, schema, cultural models, plans, and classifications.

Cognitive linguist George Lakoff (1979) introduces the notion that frames derive from a vast conceptual system whose unit is metaphor. "Metaphors as linguistic expressions are possible precisely because there are metaphors in a person's conceptual system." (p. 9) The systematicity of this vast conceptual framework allows individuals to understand new information in the context of what they already know to be familiar, and to reject information that does not fit. "Metaphors may create ... social realities for us," according to Lakoff and Johnson (1979, p. 10). A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. Indeed, their very purpose is to connect random information to myths, ideologies and stereotypes that allow the individual to process and store the new with the old. In this sense, frames reinforce world-view (Lakoff, 1996) because "the frame strikes a responsive chord in that it rings true with extant beliefs, myths (and) folktales" (Snow & Benford, 1992, p. 141).

If, as researchers suggest, these frames are durable and instantiated by common usage, how then can we consider new ideas? Social movement theorists observe that advocates must engage in reframing when they wish to introduce a new set of ideas: "new values may have to be planted and nurtured, old meanings or understandings jettisoned, and erroneous beliefs or 'misframings' jettisoned" (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986, p. 473). Schank (1998) suggests that reframing is possible only because "we don't understand them as new stories" (p. 58). To reframe, then, is to change the interpretive lens through which new information is processed by reorganizing the encoded elements of the frame. In a study of the Civil Rights Movement, for instance, Allison Calhoun-Brown (2000) asserts that "the culture of the black church helped leaders to frame the meaning of the nonviolent message and encouraged churchgoers to respond to it positively" (p. 168) because Martin Luther King

rooted the story of political action in the religious story of Moses. In this sense, King "reframed" political resistance as a "liberation struggle" as old as that waged against the slavery of Pharaoh's Egypt, strongly rooted in parishioners' "grassroots ideology." In reframing, we seek to identify alternative frames of interpretation, which, although weaker or less common to media, can nevertheless serve the labeling function and foreground different policies or actions.

Although our general interest has to do with the nature and impact of mass media, we call special attention to the important role played by the news media in constructing and maintaining public perceptions about social issues. The reason, of course, concerns the pervasiveness of news programming in the United States. Put differently, much of what the public knows (or think they know) is conveyed by print and broadcast media. We follow this line of reasoning in the following section.

Framing and the News

Most Americans now rely on news reports to learn about public issues (Papper & Gerhard, 1997; Roper Starch, 1994). Increasingly, the real world for most Americans is viewed through the lens of the news media. How the media frames public issues, however, is critical to the final resolution of public problems (Mutz, 1998; Mutz & Soss, 1997). News presentations have been categorized as falling into two types of frames — episodic or thematic. Episodic news frames, the predominant frame on television newscasts, depict public issues in terms of concrete instances. That is, they focus on discrete events that involve individuals located at specific places and at specific times (e.g., nightly crime reports). By contrast, thematic frames place public issues in a broader context by focusing on general conditions or outcomes (e.g., reports on poverty trends in the U.S.). Researchers have shown that the type of news frame used has a profound effect on the way in which individuals attribute responsibility. Iyengar (1991) concludes:

> The use of either the episodic or the thematic news frame affects how individuals assign responsibility for political issues; ...episodic framing tends to elicit individualistic rather than societal attributions of responsibility while thematic framing has the opposite effect. Since television news is heavily episodic, its effect is generally to induce attributions of responsibility to individual victims or perpetrators rather than to broad societal forces.

A vivid example of media framing effects is provided by the literature on crime, race, and the news. Researchers have identified a pattern of crime news reporting that contains two striking regularities: crime is violent and criminal perpetrators are nonwhite (Entman, 1990, 1992; Gilliam, Iyengar, Simon, & Wright, 1996; Romer, Jamieson, and de Coteau, 1998). As Entman (1998) notes, "TV news, especially local news, paints a picture of Blacks as violent and threatening toward whites, self-interested and demanding of the body politic — continually causing or being victimized by problems that seem endless." (p. 19)

Gilliam and Iyengar (2000) find that this framework of crime news reporting, contributes to a narrative "script" that has taken on the value of common knowledge.[2] In a series of experimental studies they show that exposure to a "mug shot" of a violent black perpetrator in the news leads white viewers to endorse negative stereotypes about African-Americans and support punitive crime policies such as the death penalty and "three strikes" legislation (see also, Peffley, Shields, and Williams, 1996). The script is so ingrained, in fact, that about two-thirds of the white subjects who saw no perpetrator at all mistakenly claimed they had seen a perpetrator, and over three-quarters of these people said the perpetrator was black (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000). In other words, the issue of crime, like other issues such as welfare and drug use, has become "race-coded" (Gilens, 1999; Beckett, 1995). In understanding the power of frames, we must be able to interpret not only what is obvious in the symbolism, but also what has been encoded over time into the references; this will become especially significant as we examine youth issues and their relationship to race.

Messages conveyed by mainstream media take on the value of public narratives about the ways of the world.

In sum, the modern literature on framing confirms and extends Bateson's original observation. As Vincent Price (1992) concludes, "public opinion — whether viewed in philosophical, political, sociological, or psychological terms — remains fundamentally a communication concept." (p. 91) Thus messages conveyed by mainstream media take on the value of public narratives about the ways of the world. Thus, according to Dearing and Rogers (1996), "…the media can do more than set the public agenda; it can also direct how individuals will evaluate issues." (p. 12) It is this theory of mass media's pervasive influence in concealing and prioritizing public options upon which strategic frame analysis rests.

While our approach outlines a different conceptual framework, it also relies on a unique methodology that seeks

to marry the principles of the cognitive and social sciences. In the next section we discuss our research design and the various measurement tools we utilize to understand public thinking about youth.

Methodology

Strategic frame analysis relies on a series of methods adapted from traditional opinion research, media studies and cultural and cognitive fieldwork. These include: survey research, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, media content analysis, metaphor analysis, and media effects tests. While some of these methods overlap and may appear redundant, we have found that the validation of outcomes across disciplines and methods allows greater confidence in what are often counterintuitive findings. We use combinations of these methods for both the framing and reframing phases of our work.

The underlying research value of our approach is methodological pluralism. As such we rely on both qualitative and quantitative methods. Strategic frame analysis proceeds by first identifying the dominant frame of an issue as it resides in both public opinion and the mass media. With regards to public opinion, we typically perform an analytical review of existing public opinion data (from a variety of national, state, and local polls) to determine the public's general attitudes and policy preferences pertaining to a particular issue. When resources are available, we also conduct our own national survey.

From this quantitative data, we form general impressions about public thinking that, in turn, guide the development of qualitative instruments for focus group analysis and "elicitations," an adaptation by Cultural Logic, Inc. of one-on-one cognitive interviews. Both approaches carry the advantage of allowing for a more textured reading of public thinking. The latter do so by utilizing a semi-structured interview format that allows trained cognitive observers to study participants engaged in their own reasoning about a particular issue. Thus we are able to insert new information into the dialogue and to observe the process by which ordinary people return to their original frames. This technique also allows us to challenge participants' issue positions, to ask for elucidations and to study the grammar of these cognitive transactions. In focus groups, we observe group dynamics to determine how well strongly held cultural models, and alternative models that are weaklier held but promise

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better policy-related attitudes, hold up to public discussion and group critique. At the same time, we also use focus groups as the preliminary test bed for evolving hypotheses about alternative "reframes." The end result of this stage of the research is to characterize how an issue is framed in the public mind and accepted in public discourse.

Content analysis is a widely accepted practice in communications research to ascertain news media frames (Entman, 1990). The basic technique is to capture news reports — either broadcast or print — over a given time period and code media coverage of a particular issue. For example, a content analysis of local television news would develop codes that characterize the frequency (e.g., how often the issue is reported), content (e.g., are the stories episodic or thematic?), presentation (e.g., lead story, visuals), and tone (e.g., empathy, objectification) of the issue coverage (Dorfman & Woodruff, 1998; Gilens, 1999; Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; McManus & Dorfman, 2000).

Our approach to content analysis has been to adapt core principles of strategic frame analysis to this technique, including for example new definitions and measurements of episodic and thematic coverage, of solutions-oriented subthemes, and of the kinds of news messengers typically included in broadcasts. The immediate result is a clear understanding of the elements of major frames that characterize reporting on any given issue, as well as an identification of those frames the media chooses to ignore. Overall, this approach allows us to identify the relevant news media frames that give meaning to social, political, and cultural phenomena.

Our next task, following this body of completed work, is to determine how media frames influence public thinking about issues. In other words, we seek to empirically gauge the effect of dominant media frames as well as potential reframes. Controlled experiments are the method of choice among media effects researchers. Experiments have the advantage of greater precision in estimating causal effects. Random assignment of study participants means that the only difference between any two groups of subjects is exposure to the experimental manipulation. Since all other attributes of the experiment are identical we can attribute any observed differences on outcomes to the treatment.

The preceding work on framing makes it possible for us to derive hypotheses about the impact of dominant frames on public reasoning. Put differently, we use the findings from the framing analysis to aid in the construction of the experimental questionnaires. Thus the questionnaires ask participants to reveal their attitudes about the causes of, and solutions to, social problems and their views about specific groups, institutions, and policies. The answers to these questions are used to operationalize core dependent (and in some instances, intermediary) variables. In substantive terms, this

means we assess the impact of the experimental manipulations by observing their influence on subjects' social and political beliefs.

To reiterate a point we have been making throughout the paper, our approach is strategic in the sense that it develops and empirically tests alternative frames, or what we call *reframes*. The basis for the reframes is also a product of the framing analysis. In other words, we look for metaphors, messages, icons, and language to construct alternative media depictions of target groups and issues. These *alternative* models become the material for the experimental treatments in the reframing analysis. We then proceed to empirically test the impact of reframes on public attitudes and preferences in the same manner as the analysis of dominant frames described above.

In sum, our theoretical structure is rooted in key concepts from the social and cognitive sciences that explain how people reason about the world. In our formulation we call special attention to the role of the news media in creating and evoking particular cognitive models. Thus strategic frame analysis identifies the dominant frame as it exists in public opinion and is reflected in the media, demonstrates its impact on

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public thinking, and identifies, measures, and tests alternative frames that can change decision outcomes. It does so by relying on a varied approach that equally values quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Strategic frame analysis is different from other approaches in several important respects. At a broad level, our method is a marriage of both basic and applied research. Our point of departure is a perception among issues advocates that current policy solutions are being driven by a skewed perception of reality resulting in proposals that differ markedly from those proposed by experts. Our research design tests the assumption that public perception is indeed at variance with expert remedies, as defined by scholars and policy advocates. We then explore the contribution of media to this distortion, documenting the specific impact on public attitudes of the dominant frames of news coverage. Drawing from our identification of alternative models people hold, we construct and test their impact on policy positions. We then explain these dominant frames to issues advocates and share with them those reframes that have the greatest potential for encouraging public reconsideration of an issue (e.g., alternative policy solutions). We believe the outcome of this work has much to offer issues advocates and policy experts. Unfortunately, this kind of anticipatory research is altogether missing from most mass media efforts devoted to public education.

Findings

This section of the paper applies the basic principles of strategic frame analysis to discern what Americans think about youth (especially teenagers), why they think what they do, what consequences this has for youth policy and policy advocates, and how we might best engage Americans in a discussion about positive youth development.[3]

Youth Issues in the Public Mind

Adults believe that teens today are "different" than they were in the past. At the core of this concern is a feeling that today's teens have rejected traditional American values. Bostrom (2000a) reports "…only 16% of Americans say that 'young people under the age of 30 share most of their moral and ethical values.' In the eyes of adults, this puts young people's values above only those of homosexuals, welfare recipients, and rich people." A Gallup poll found that, when asked what word applied to young people in their teens and 20s today, compared to young people in that same group 20 years ago, adults chose "selfish" (81%) and "materialistic" (79%) for youth today, and "patriotic" (65%) and "idealistic" (49%) for the youth of yesteryears (Bostrom, 2000a).

Bostrom concludes, "While adults have serious reservations about American youth…the reality is that teens place high value on honesty and hard work, and the vast majority are thinking and planning seriously for the future." Among those values teens say they rank highest are "being honest" (8.6 on a 10 point scale), "working hard" (8.4), "being a good student" (7.9), and "giving time to helping others" (7.6). And majorities of teens say they volunteer, attend church or synagogue weekly, read the newspaper regularly and attend cultural events (Bostrom, 2000a).

Additionally, Bostrom (2000a) notes that, "…while the public tends to blame parents, the reality is that most parents have open, trusting relationships and a solid bond with their teenage children." Indeed, when asked whom they most rely on for making important decisions or for facing problems, parents are the top choice, with 63% of teens saying they rely on their parents a "lot." There has been an important shift in responsibility, she notes:

> While in 1997, the public was equally likely to blame kids' problems on social/economic pressures as well as irresponsible parents (41% and 44% respectively), in the

improved economy, they are more likely to blame parents (37% blame social/economic pressures, 49% parents) .

In fact, James Youniss and Allison Ruth (2000) have shown that, on virtually every social indicator, "youth today are at least as healthy or healthier than their parents' generation." Drawing from national databases and trend analysis, Youniss shows that "the percentage of youth who work part-time has remained constant or risen a bit from 1970 to today" and "SAT scores have remained constant since 1970." The proportions of high school students who volunteer have not changed since 1975, and the proportion of high school seniors who say religion is very or quite important in their lives has remained high and constant from 1975 to the present. Thus there is a stark disjuncture between the way American adults view teenagers and what teens think and do (see also Males, 1996).

Are adults simply "misinformed" about the lives and attitudes of today's youth? Typically, opinion research would look for a set of facts which, when put before the public, proved sufficiently powerful to correct the fallacy. By contrast, strategic frame analysis asks whether a simple recitation of the facts can indeed set the record straight. Over the course of six focus groups with parents, we observed astonishing unanimity in the way adults discounted positive statistics about youth. Confronted with what was presented as a "true news story" about recent trends among teenagers, adults consistently overlooked the positive data (which dominated the story) and focused instead on the few negative trends. When asked to re-examine the story and to explain why they thought it was indeed negative when there were so many positive trends, study participants first said they thought the numbers were not correct. When informed that they were indeed correct, they found ways to re-interpret the numbers in order to reach a "not good enough" conclusion (Bostrom, 2000b). Clearly the power of the organizing frame "kids are in trouble" was so strong that it could not be displaced easily.

How do such public understandings become so firmly (if erroneously) lodged in the public's mind? Strategic frame analysis points to the media as an influential source of public affairs information. By featuring some stories, and ignoring others, the media has the capacity to confirm and sustain public perceptions. This being so, we would expect

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to find the dominant media frame routinely depicts youth in a pejorative light. Testing this assertion is the goal of the next section.

Media Depictions of Youth and Youth-Related Issues

In their analysis of television news, the Center for Media and Public Affairs found a paucity of news reporting about youth — only one out of every 12 stories on local newscasts, and only one out of every 25 stories on network news dealt with young people.[4] These stories were "overwhelmingly episodic in nature, focusing on particular events and discrete occurrences, without providing any thematic context or otherwise linking them to broader trends or issues." Indeed, only 7% of the local coverage was deemed thematic. The three most frequently reported topics of youth news on the local stations were crime victimization, accidents involving young people, and violent juvenile crime, accounting for nearly half (46%) of all coverage of youth. Five other frequently reported topics were also negative: property crimes committed by juveniles, domestic violence or sexual abuse, alcohol abuse, individual health problems, and other at-risk behaviors. The authors conclude that "together, these eight topics, which all emphasize the dangers and negative outcomes associated with youth, accounted for nearly 60 percent of all discussions" (Amundson, Lichter, & Lichter, 2000).

An analysis of the visual backdrop to news reports about youth found the local news emphasized school settings. The criminal justice system accounted for one out of every four visual backdrops in local news. When not shown in school, youths were most likely to be seen as part of community activities, or in a crime-related or other socially dysfunctional setting. A mere two percent of young people were portrayed in the home, while just one percent were shown in a work setting.

To chart the implications for policy solutions, we asked the Center for Media and Public Affairs to count the instances in which a reporter or source specifically voices concern about the risks or dangers faced by young people. The 242 sound bites that resulted were concentrated in two areas: violence (33%) and other at-risk behaviors (31%), such as drug and alcohol use and dangerous driving. "Only about one in three expressions of concern were accompanied by any discussion of the locus of responsibility for solving whatever problem was indicated. And, of these assignments, parents

and youth themselves accounted for 37% of the responsible agents, followed by schools (30%) and government (26%)."[5] (Amundson, Lichter, & Lichter, 2000).

How do these negative media depictions square with adults' own observations of the youth around them? In the main, according to our focus groups, not very well. A father of younger children spoke up about teens in his neighborhood: "I have some extremely intelligent, articulate, young — 12 to 16 year olds. Surprisingly, actually, to speak with such perfect English, respectful. Sometimes it shocks me" (Bostrom, 2000b). When presented with statistics about volunteers, while most participants refused to believe the data, one woman acknowledged that she lacked the information required to make a judgment:

> Personally, I wouldn't know because I haven't volunteered...I see them (teens) at church because I go and I'll see them in the mall because I go. But perhaps if I went and served at a soup kitchen, I might see it jack full of teenagers. Because my butt is at home eating my soup in front of the TV, I don't see them.

In short, people are routinely uninformed or ill-informed about American youth.

Personal experience does play a strong role in resisting these stereotypes. Aubrun and Grady (2000) found that "parents of teenagers or those who interact regularly with teenagers are much less susceptible to media portrayals of teens." These people either reject media accounts outright or concede that they must be true in some abstract sense (or TV wouldn't be saying so), but not in any practical sense. The more people's views are informed by 'face time' and the less by the media, the more likely they are to hold a more empathic view of teenagers.[6]

As Aubrun and Grady (2000) assert, most Americans:

> Tend to resolve this contradiction by judging their own experience to be exceptional, rather than by challenging the media frames. This reflects a broader pattern of Americans' response to the contradiction between what they know at first hand and what media and public discourse tells them. The position of the media has the effect of making their own experience and attitudes seem unusual or even aberrant. They tend to discount what does not fit the media frame as exceptional, rather than questioning or challenging the frame.

Aubrun and Grady's interviews demonstrate as well that most adults "are aware (at times) that this negative model is a negative stereotype rather than an accurate representation of the teens that they know." They cite one informant who observed, "You know that there've got to be hundreds of thousands of them that are going to college and that have made national honor society or...who are trying to do the right things. But you hardly ever hear about them."

The absence of an experiential base for some adults, and the power of media images to trump personal experience for others, leaves most adults with few alternatives to the images provided by their daily feed of news and entertainment.

The findings from previous media effects experiments further informed the research agenda we pursued on adolescence. In the course of an inquiry for the National Funding Collaborative on Violence Prevention, we tested the impact of two issue ads that reflect conventional wisdom about how to demonstrate the effectiveness of program intervention in positive outcomes for youth. These spot ads were created by the advertising firm of Martin and Glantz for paid placement as part of a campaign to recruit liberal activists for gun reform petitions. The ads were reportedly effective in meeting this very specific objective. Our interest in them was, however, broader. First, we wanted to evaluate their impact on preferences across a much broader viewing public. Second, because the two ads reflect a manner of framing common among child advocates, we wanted to test their actual impact on public views.

Both ads asserted that program intervention in the lives of children could make a dramatic difference on outcomes. In the first ad – "Jeremy Estrada" – a young person tells the story of his initial brush with violence, and how he was put in a mentoring and rehabilitation program that turned his life around.[7] Presumably, the reason Jeremy is now on track to enroll in medical school is because he was not tried as an adult or subjected to more punitive criminal justice measures. The prediction was that this ad would lead viewers to endorse similar youth intervention programs and to reject punitive laws for youth. The findings, however, were mixed at best. While exposure to the Jeremy Estrada PSA did increase people's optimism about solving youth crime, it also reduced subjects' willingness to support social remedies to youth crime (Gilliam, 1999).

In the second ad – "Jimmy's Flashback" – a young (white) person is shown in a robbery and the "flashback" sequence suggests the many possible points of intervention when his life could have been turned around, had effective

programs been available to him.[8] This ad suggests the popular prevention frame that we need to start early and to intervene often in order to keep kids on track for achievement. The prediction is that exposure to this ad would reduce fear of crime and increase support for social interventions. To the contrary, our experimental results indicate that exposure to Jimmy's Flashback increased fear of crime by 14%, decreased the number of people who believe no age is too late to help a young person, and reduced levels of support for more social spending (Gilliam, 1999).

From the view of strategic frame analysis, the failure of both ads to move public will in the desired direction is not

In virtually every aspect of our research to date, the ability to connect youth outcomes to community programs and public policies proved an insurmountable obstacle for adults.

surprising. In both cases, the ads relied upon a similar script. The youth was initially portrayed as violent, or even criminal. Thus once the readily familiar image of the teen "superpredator" was evoked, no amount of argumentation or facts could negate that powerful cultural model. In effect, this kind of "straw man" presentation is a flawed frame.

In sum, the absence of an experiential base for some adults, and the power of media images to trump personal experience for others, leaves most adults with few alternatives to the images provided by their daily feed of news and entertainment. And while they may understand this to be the case, and resent the media for it, they nevertheless will find their reasoning directed by these images.

Reframing Youth

The overwhelming assessment for adults are that kids are trouble or troubled; these frames emerged again and again from the research as the frames that dominated discourse and blocked the consideration of new facts or policy recommendations. In the course of this research we rejected four potential reframes derived from hypotheses common among youth advocates and researchers:

Hypothesis 1: By presenting people with the "true" facts about youth (which are not received through the media), we can succeed in getting them to reconsider and reject negative stereotypes about youth.

Finding: The positive facts were rejected, both in

focus groups and in the elicitations, or reinterpreted as negative or "not good enough."

Hypothesis 2: By showing that most kids are busy doing normal things, adults will resort to their own experience with youth and realize that most kids are doing well.

Finding: Adults exceptionalized their own experiences and the images of ordinary kids presented, and resorted to the stereotype.

Hypothesis 3: By showing adults that youth are working, we can demonstrate that youth have work values.

Finding: In fact, adults first denied the statistics and then explained away the values youth might acquire from work experience by attaching their motivation for work to consumerism.

Hypothesis 4: By connecting adults to their own adolescence, we could create empathy with today's teens and a reconsideration of youth.

Finding: Adults did express greater empathy for youth and the challenges of adolescence when focus groups began with a priming exercise that required them to remember their own teen years. But, while this exercise did generate greater empathy, it also served to remind them how different and dangerous is the world in which they perceive today's teen to live, and deepened their concern for the physical safety of youth.

At the same time, we did find a number of instances in which adults described youth in positive terms, and often using values associated with work (e.g., discipline and commitment). These activities include: group sports, performing arts, and volunteer/community service. For example, focus group participants, confronted with the image of a young woman playing soccer, said, "When I see a girl in sports, I immediately think she has a chance to succeed in life." Reacting to a picture of a young boy volunteering at what appeared to be a soup kitchen, one mother commented, "He is going to be an asset to his community just because he is already at a young age involved in community." Hypothetically, assessments of youth involved in these activities are the basis for successful "reframes."[9]

By extension, coaches and volunteer/community leaders may prove effective spokespersons in attesting to the values that youth are acquiring from these types of activities. Likewise, the recognition that the problem with adult perceptions of youth is related to their perceived lack of values, especially work values, may dictate that we use seniors to attest to youth's worthiness. Older Americans, especially of the World War II era, appear to convey a lifetime of work habits and values.

The challenge in these incipient reframes will be the connection to community responsibility. In virtually every aspect of our research to date, the ability to connect youth outcomes to community programs and public policies proved an insurmountable obstacle for adults. Building responsibility into the frame, beyond youth themselves and their parents remains a major undertaking. This is the challenge facing our next phase of research.[10]

Discussion

We advance an approach to the examination of social problems called *strategic frame analysis*. Our framework is theoretically grounded in the social and cognitive sciences. Thus for any particular issue we identify dominant frames of understanding as they are found in public discourse and the mass media. We then empirically assess their impact on public attitudes and policy preferences. Based on this analysis, we develop and later test the capacity of alternative frames to influence public will. In sum, we employ a wide array of analytic and methodological approaches to study the dynamics of public action.

In this paper we have applied strategic frame analysis to the issue of America's youth. In particular, we examined how the public thinks about adolescents, how the media depicts adolescents, and how this affects the policy context. Our initial research has shown that the dominant public and media practice is to frame youth in a negative light. The consequence is that the adult public has come to view youth as a liability. While these findings are troubling and clearly present important challenges, more troubling still are the implications for public policy. Advocates are likely to find that the driving force for policy consideration is a sense that youth are at-risk for negative outcomes and must be protected from danger and dangerous influences. Thus, more remedial and punitive policy is likely to be considered, while programs and policies seeking to help youth develop their academic, personal and career potential are likely to be deemed irrelevant.

What this means is that even within specific issue domains, the policy options that translate into keeping youth out of trouble will be most salient. For example, after school programs for troubled youth will be deemed more important than those that promise to develop youth's potential or to promote positive mental health. In such a debate, issues of program quality and efficacy are lost to the over-riding concern for safety, keeping youth out of trouble and protecting

Can we change the story we are telling about youth in such a way that it triggers an understanding of systemic influences on individual outcomes and foregrounds positive adolescent development, not risky individual behaviors?

society from them.

Our research suggests that the locus of responsibility for problem solution is likely to be on youth and their parents first, followed by schools. The role of community and government in promoting youth development remains invisible to the public and is therefore incapable of exerting pressure on policymakers. In this, our work confirms earlier research that demonstrates public willingness to blame parents more than social forces for problems with kids (Public Agenda, 1999). The implication is that attributions of responsibly will revert to individual youths and their families, not to the society at-large. The next iteration of our research is to test whether it is possible to "reframe" youth in ways that engage adults in their healthy development. Put differently, can we change the frames through which we see our youth in such a way that adults resist the pressures to demonize and distort in favor of an appreciation of adolescence as a developmental stage? Or, put another way, can we change the story we are telling about youth in such a way that it triggers an understanding of systemic influences on individual outcomes and foregrounds positive adolescent development, not risky individual behaviors? The proof is whether exposure to these reframes can increase support for policies and programs suggested by experts in adolescent development. Early results have uncovered several intriguing possibilities. The next step is to subject these hypotheses to empirical testing utilizing controlled experiments of the sort described above. In other words, is it possible to change the lens with which American adults view youth today?

Our findings also have clear implications for the practice of journalism. News organizations must remember that they have civic as well as commercial responsibilities. While we appreciate the pressures to produce a profit, as well as journalistic imperatives to report "newsworthy" stories, we also call attention to the fact that media outlets are part and parcel of the communities they serve. While this obligation is more formal with regards to FCC regulations for broadcasters, print outlets also have community responsibilities. Indeed, this is not lost on news organizations. They routinely engage in "outreach" programs aimed at serving the wider community. Nonetheless, these efforts are often not taken seriously and are shunted off to the fringes of the organization's activities. From our perspective, journalists must understand the impact of their reporting as well as think more seriously about the paradigms within which they work.

These revised practices must begin with the recognition

that news characteristics are often rooted in old stereotypes; that is, a conventionalized frame that directs reporters to emphasize certain elements of a story and not others. It is our contention that news media coverage of youth today falls prey to such common stereotypes. As our research intimates, repeated coverage of such stereotypes takes its toll on the public's willingness to prioritize public dollars for this population. In effect, news coverage of this sort intervenes inappropriately in the public policy process.

Notes

[2] The theoretical basis for their findings is based on the concept of "scripts" (see Schank and Abelson, 1977). The advantage of script-based reasoning is that it allows people to make straightforward and what they believe to be accurate inferences about the world around them.

[3]This body of research was supported by the W. T. Grant Foundation, as part of a multi-year grant to apply strategic frame analysis to youth issues, and supplemented by six focus groups supported by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

[4] Although the work described in this paper deals with the television news media, we have also commissioned work on how youth are portrayed in the entertainment media. Heintz-Knowles (2000) examined one episode of each prime-time entertainment series aired during Fall 1999 between September 20 and November 21 on the six broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, WB, UPN). Those with youth characters (defined as between the ages of 13 and 21) were analyzed according to a set of codes which sought to measure youth activity and concern on TV against real world data. In brief, this study shows adolescent characters on television are not connected to a wider community, including even their own family. TV teens are seen as independent and isolated, living in an adolescent world whose problems are mainly social in nature. They do not require anyone's help beyond their small immediate peer group, and in fact their parents are often portrayed as ineffective or as causing problems. This FrameWorks report concludes that TV reinforces the notion of today's teens as self-absorbed and interested only in trivial matters.

[5] Our study sample was limited to television, leaving us open to criticism that more influential publics may be more reliant on newspapers for their information and, therefore, exposed to more thematic and policy-oriented coverage of adolescents. The work of other researchers, however, would refute this claim. For instance, the Berkeley Media Studies Group (McManus and Dorfman, 2000) studied three California newspapers over the course of a year to determine what kind of attention was being paid to young people with what probable policy consequences. They found that "two topics dominate youth coverage: education and violence" (p. 4), and no other topic receives even a third as much attention. Education received 26% of the coverage. Violence stories comprised 25% of all youth coverage. Thus, these print media show violence as a factor in young people's lives as often as schools. As these researchers point out, "only 3 young people in 100 perpetrate or become victims of serious violence in a given year" and "treating violence and education nearly equally exaggerates the frequency of violence" (p. 4). Finally, "in the yearlong sample, about half the youth stories focus on a problem; many fewer describe a solution" (p. 4). The most often sited solution is greater law enforcement. The study concludes, "…the relative absence of solution frames reinforces the notion that violence is inevitable." (p. 4).

[6] In an increasingly age-segregated society, however, the prospects are fewer and fewer for adults to countermand media stereotypes of teen monsters and heroes with abundant first-hand knowledge of normal teens, going about the everyday business of chores and school, athletics, arts and volunteering.

[7]Jeremy Estrada: This well-known PSA features Jeremy Estrada – a former member of a Latino street gang – who turns his life around after six months in a "rites of passage" program. The dramatic device begins with Jeremy dressed like a gang member. As he tells the story of his transformation, he slowly changes his clothes. At the end of the video, now dressed like a responsible young adult, he proudly points out that he has a university fellowship and plans to attend medical school. His tag line is, "I may cut, but it'll be to take out your appendix."

[8] Jimmy's Flashback: The dramatic device of this ad is a flashback sequence in the life of Jimmy – a teenage Caucasian male who is shown robbing a convenience store. The flashback episodes show different periods in Jimmy's life where he could have been set on the "right track". The tag line is that the failure to intervene early in Jimmy's life is now costing the taxpayers a great deal of money. The ad

ends with a number to call "if you think we can do better".

[9] Interestingly, while these three images did not include parents, the focus group participants inferred that the parents were "good," a rare assessment in our others' research experience (see Public Agenda, 1999). Focus group informants mentioned that parents had to take them to and from these events, regulate their evening hours, keep them on a schedule and teach them focus.

[10] We are currently in the process of producing several news reframes based on the results of the analyses described above. Over the next few months, we will conduct both field and survey experiments to empirically assess the capability of designated reframes to move public will youth-related issues.

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