**FRAME WORKS INSTITUTE**

How Americans Understand Teens:
Findings from Cognitive Interviews

Prepared for the Frameworks Institute
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## I. INTRODUCTION

### Background

This report has been undertaken as part of the W.T. Grant Foundation's ongoing enterprise to promote the welfare of American young people. In particular, we have set out here to determine Americans' basic understandings of youth — not focussing on their opinions about particular issues relating to adolescents (these have been extensively documented in previous polls and surveys), but on the more fundamental cultural models that define the American concept of Teenager, and on which the various opinions are based.

*Method:* The basis of the report is a series of ten in-depth, one-on-one interviews which we conducted with Americans representing diverse backgrounds and demographic classes. This is an approach which yields qualitative rather than quantitative data. In this sense, the method is comparable to focus groups and other techniques widely used to study public opinion. However, unlike these methods, which elicit particular opinions, cognitive analysis focuses on the more basic cultural models (i.e., understandings and beliefs) that motivate the opinions. The interview method thus provides a view of strong, recurrent patterns in thinking — a set of values and beliefs that underlie a distinctive American understanding of adolescence. Additional discussion of our methodology is provided in the Appendix.

Note: While various terms are used to refer to the age group between thirteen and nineteen, we found that the term *teenager* is by far the most common and neutral, as opposed to terms like *youth* or *adolescent*. The research applies to American understandings of this population, regardless of terminology, but we usually refer to them as *teenagers*, in keeping with the language of our interview subjects.

### Key findings: How teenagers are understood

Most of the adults interviewed:

- Use the term "teen(ager)," or occasionally "kid," rather than "youth" or "adolescent."

This is significant because the terms "youth" and "adolescent" are widely used by experts, policy advocates and psychologists respectively.

- Are aware of the negative model of teenagers that prevails in the media.

    People understand and are able to articulate the media's theory about teens, which includes propositions about selfish, disrespecful, outrageous, and even dangerous behavior.

- Are aware (at times) that this negative model is a negative stereotype rather than an accurate representation of the teens that they know.

    That is to say, people understand on some level that the media picture does not fit their experience, and is more negative in its portrayal of teens.

- Tend nonetheless 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.

- Toggle back and forth between empathetic and objectifying mindsets; i.e., between taking account of what it's like to be a teenager, and considering teens from the outside.

    The empathetic mindset leads to understandings of teenagers that are closer to developmental psychologists' "expert" model of adolescence than does the objectifying model.

    The toggling depends on the amount of personal experience that people are able to draw upon to counterbalance the media depiction, and on how eager they are to use the category "teen" to express anxieties about a variety of social issues.

- Make little use of a model in which adolescents are mentored by adults outside of the family.

    An important finding of our research is the near-absence of a cultural model that emphasizes teens' need for mentoring from adults outside the nuclear family. The cross-cultural evidence (and arguments from evolutionary psychology) suggest that around the age of puberty, individuals (especially boys) are normally recruited by extra-familial institutions or individuals (e.g., mother's brothers, secret societies, etc.), and may in fact be predisposed to distancing themselves from the nuclear family at this stage. American models, including expert models, often fail to acknowledge this nearly-universal aspect of human development, in effect reinforcing the widespread

idea that the nuclear family bears sole responsibility for guiding the development of youths (see e.g., Zill 1998).

## II. THE PUBLIC'S VIEW OF TEENS: TOGGLING BETWEEN TWO MINDSETS

### The Good News: Contra the public discourse, moderate and sympathetic views are common

The prevailing image of teens in the media is negative — there is a stereotype of an adolescent who is selfish, disrespectful, outrageous, and even dangerous (Kunkel 1994; Berkeley Media Studies Group 1994, 1997; Woodruff 1998). When you ask Americans about prevailing public attitudes towards teenagers, they typically invoke this picture. And yet, the same people who are able to articulate this stereotype, and who attribute it to their neighbors, often hold a much more benign view themselves. In fact, they very often feel more sympathy than resentment towards teenagers. In short, the negative stereotype is an important element of American culture — recognized by everyone — but it is not a reliable reflection of how individuals actually think or feel.

People are aware that the stereotype is promoted (for whatever reason) in the media, and they resist it (to an extent), but they often do believe that this public stereotype reflects the thinking of those around them. Further, although they are skeptical of media portrayals, 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 media frame. This stark contrast between personal vs. public discourse shows up on other issues as well, including foreign aid and the environment (Aubrun and Grady 1999; Kull and Destler 1999).

> [T]he press ... tends to focus on the dramatically negative stories, and not much on the day to day ordinary lives.

> I don't really like the news. I read the paper and watch the news every day but I don't really like it.

> [T]hey [i.e. other Americans] think of teenagers as "the evil bunch" ...

> I think more or less they are scared of them ...

> My perception is that every generation of teenagers has that same experience with the general population. They get tagged with some label.

> *[Y]ou have the vocal group, the negative stories, the shocking stories, taking the headlines, and you assume that a lot more teenagers are like that than really are.*

> *[Y]ou 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.*

One interesting observation from the interviews reflects the fact that people's impressions are not (entirely) formed by what they see in the media: when adults are asked to "picture a teenager" they typically think of a teen they know, or sometimes imagine themselves as teenagers. They are less likely to picture a stereotype learned from the media.

The interviews also made clear that people do not simply accept media representation of teens as strange characters.

> *But I think the majority of teenagers are just normal looking kids.*

### The Mixed News: Empathy and objectification

On the other hand, attitudes towards teenagers are by no means universally positive. A major finding of the cognitive interviews is that people tend to toggle back and forth between what we term the *empathetic* and *objectifying* mindsets. The difference is between taking into account what it's like to be a teenager, and considering teenagers from the outside. The empathetic mindset corresponds more closely to the developmental perspective taken by experts on adolescence. It also corresponds more closely to what George Lakoff (1996) has called the Nurturant Parent model of child rearing. This model places a high value on appreciating the uniqueness and the subjective experience of an individual child, as opposed to the Strict Father model, which emphasizes judgements and punishments based on actions (and is aligned more with the objectifying mindset). The objectifying mindset is more vulnerable to media stereotypes about teenagers.

The two major mindsets available to Americans cannot be summed up simply as the views that teens are "good" or "bad," although as a rule people are more likely to be sympathetic toward teens when they are thinking about what it is like to be a teenager. We use the labels "empathetic mindset" and "objectifying mindset" to refer to basic cognitive perspectives rather than to opinions or beliefs. These cognitive perspectives determine, in a literal sense, what is seen and not seen, thought and not thought; and thus provide the basis for what is believed.

**The two mindsets lead to different views**

In various ways, discussed in the next section, the two different mindsets lead to different understandings of teenagers, and different opinions about them. Here are two examples:

"Not ready" vs. "Essentially different ": From the empathetic stance, teens are like anyone else, but have not yet developed important skills of adulthood — they are just people who are not yet fully prepared for adult life. From the objectifying stance, on the other hand, teens are an essentially different category of person — with different values, different behavioral and emotional patterns – and should be treated according to a whole separate set of rules.

There is an important parallel with the analysis of the public's attitudes towards early childhood. A number of studies have shown that the public has an insufficient appreciation of the various ways (moral and intellectual as well as social) in which young children are developing. This attitude derives from an essentialist perspective and leads to an underestimation of environmental factors in early childhood (see Bales 1999).

"Teens are teens" vs. "teens are getting worse": People operating in the empathetic stance are more likely to feel that teens are the same as they have always been, despite changes in style. People operating in the objectifying stance (and again, the same people may alternate between the two stances) are more likely to feel that teens have changed in fundamental ways over the generations, usually for the worse. Because they look different and engage in some different activities — i.e. because they seem different to someone observing them from the outside — this stance leads to the conclusion that they have changed fundamentally as a group.


**Toggling between the two mindsets**

Based on various factors, including political orientation and personal experience with teens, individuals tend towards one or the other of these two mindsets; but nearly everyone is capable of seeing teens from either perspective. The success of any attempt to frame teens in a positive way depends on understanding this deep ambivalence. Our report describes a number of cultural models that bear on how teens are perceived, and explores some of the factors that cause the toggling between empathetic and objectifying attitudes. This is a first step towards designing a communications campaign that will frame adolescents in the most productive way possible.

When asked about their views of teenagers, respondents often had to make an (unconscious) choice about which perspective to take — considering either what

it is like to deal with teenagers, or what it is like to be a teenager. For instance, here are two partial responses to a question about whether teenagers are different today from how they were a generation ago:

> *[M]y first vehicle, I bought it, arranged for it, bought the insurance. I don't see that happening today. I don't know of a 16 year old today that does that.*

> *My perception [about the difference between today's teens and those of a generation ago] would be the pressure that that age group is under these days. It seems to be much more severe now ... I grew up in a pretty laid back time, the 60's. Things seemed to be pretty carefree.*

The first response focuses on teens' behavior (and defines them negatively as a group), while the second refers to the conditions affecting teenagers today.

## What causes the toggling?

Even though these two mindsets seem so far removed from one another — and even though they are based on two fundamentally different cognitive perspectives — people tend to toggle back and forth between them quite a bit. It is clear that understanding the dynamics of the toggling — what causes people to shift between the two perspectives, and what might help them favor the empathetic perspective — is critical to the purposes of the W.T. Grant mission.

In particular, there are two factors that stand out as keys to creating conflicting perspectives towards teens in people's minds, which we discuss in the next two subsections: the clash between media depictions and personal experience with teens, and the tendency for thinking about teens to become associated with broader topics.

## Public information vs. Personal experience

Given the negative portrayals of teens in the media, it is not surprising that people's perspectives on teens depends in part on their experience or lack of experience with actual teenagers. Parents of teenagers or those who interact regularly with teenagers are much less susceptible to the 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.

> *Well, the media distorts everything.*

In America's age-segregated society, unfortunately, many adults have few opportunities to interact with teenagers. It is especially challenging for these

adults to disregard the prevailing public portrayal of teens; they have to work very consciously to do this — e.g., by reasoning from general facts about the world, or by reference to distant or limited personal experience. Often though they simply fall into the default mode of accepting the media picture.

> *[M]y exposure is limited. So it's just the news and television programs about teenagers ...*

It is revealing that adults are more likely to refer to positive aspects of teenagers when discussing individuals (especially, individuals they know), and more likely to refer to problems when referring to teens as a whole. In the latter context, teens are more of a distant and undifferentiated group — just the sort of category we learn about second-hand through the media, for instance.

The problem is exaggerated when teens of another ethnic group are considered. People tend in this case to have even less personal experience and to rely more heavily on media stereotypes.

## Projection of other issues onto the category "teens"

The cultural category "teenager" is especially susceptible to being used to express attitudes towards a variety of social issues. Many tendencies associated with adolescence — the desire for self-expression most clearly — transform individual adolescents into symbols of larger themes. Thus, people's negative attitudes toward teens often seem to reflect anxieties about the direction that American society is taking.

> *There are periods of time when people are very civilized and periods of time when they are uncivilized. We seem to be in an uncivilized period right now.*

The media is particularly adept at using the category "teens" to illustrate the worst, and occasionally, the best American tendencies.

Similarly, political rhetoric often touches deep-seated fears concerning, for example, the breakdown of traditional authority in society, by focusing on teens' autonomy and appearance differences. A number of features of the Conservative and Liberal worldviews correlate closely with features of the objectifying and empathetic perspectives. For example, the tendency to label individuals as good or bad on the basis of physical appearance (dress, speech, etc.) makes it harder for Conservatives to see things from a teenager's point of view. And the typical Conservative emphasis on self-reliance (see Lakoff 1996) comes out strongly in discussions of teenagers.

> *When I wanted something when I was [young] I figured out a way to get it. I did not expect it to come to me by asking for it.*

As might be expected, projection of larger issues onto teens is mostly (but not exclusively) negative, as when it comes out in relation to sensitive issues such as concern about societal racism.

> *I don't know what they would do to me to harm me as an African-American woman ...*

Teenagers, like any other stereotyped group, may also be sensitive to the way in which they are "constructed" in public discourse, and may tend in various ways to live up, or down, to the expectations.  Since teens are often less constrained than adults in their thoughts and actions, such influences could have strong and noticeable effects.


## III. THE MAJOR CULTURAL MODELS: ADOLESCENCE AS "LIMBO"

Although teenagers are easily identified by their numerical age, there are various ways in which they belong to a category which is difficult to grasp. The basic cultural assumption is that teens are "neither here nor there," liminal beings in transition between the better-understood and more stable categories of childhood and adulthood. By being adultlike in some ways and childlike in others, teens share features of two prototypes that are normally exclusive.  There are several points to underscore here:

- <u>The assumption that teens are in a state of limbo underlies most American models relating to adolescence</u>

Americans regularly refer explicitly to the idea that teenagers are in a kind of limbo.  American cultural models relating to adolescence often unconsciously reflect this basic cultural assumption.

The model offered by the media attempts to counter this assumption — it tends to objectify teens as a category; to present them as something like a fixed and alien kind of person.

- <u>The limbo view is in agreement with expert views</u>

A salient feature of expert models is that the psychological and social transition from childhood to adulthood involves a period of liminality, when adolescents are children in some ways and adults in others.  Thus, many cultural models relating to adolescence, particularly those based on the "empathetic perspective," agree with expert (i.e. scientific) understandings. This fact is noteworthy because on so many other topics (e.g., international relations), the public's understanding is sharply at odds with expert views.

For the purposes of this report, the significance of the agreement between public and expert models is that the expert models are the ones that tend to be more sympathetic and more likely to promote productive policies towards

adolescence. Playing on these models is easier given that they closely parallel certain understandings that already have wide currency in the country as a whole.

- <u>This in-between status is part of why it is sometimes unsettling for people to think about adolescents</u>

As cultural and cognitive anthropologists have shown, there is a general tendency for objects that blur conceptual boundaries to be seen as troubling or even dangerous.  For example, negative attitudes toward "gender-bending," or paranoia about the "divided loyalties" of minority groups are in part rooted in a psychological desire for clear conceptual categories.

For similar reasons, when we think of teens as either children or adults, we experience a lack of conceptual fit:  they can seem like inadequate adults or out-of-control children.  The interviews reveal that people continually remind themselves that teens are in limbo.  And when they call this assumption to mind, they tend to feel sympathy for teens.

*And so they're in this limbo that can be very unfair at times.*

In the following subsections we present a list of common American cultural models of adolescence, all springing from the understanding that teens are in between two stages of development. In some cases we discuss two competing models that people may toggle between, one based on the empathetic stance and one based on the objectifying stance.

**Difficulty drawing the line between teens and kids/adults**

Aside from the superficial definition of the teenage years, many people feel that there are no sharp lines representing the transitions to or from adolescence.

*I'm having trouble finding something for him because he's too big for toys really but he's not really a teenager yet so I don't know what to do.*

*I think an adult is probably between 25 and 30.  ... I was probably 30 years old before I matured enough to be considering myself an adult.*

*I don't believe there's any difference [between a teenager and a nine year-old], just in age... But again I have to go back to the media — just seems like they have a ready access to sexual knowledge, they are into sex, smoking, drinking and doing all these other things.*

*When I was growing up, you could usually tell a teenager by their size, but nowadays a lot of them are much bigger, so the kids that you think are teenagers are only 9 or 10 year olds, 11 or 12 year olds*

## Physical vs. mental development

Teens may be large and physically (and sexually) developed, but they are often thought of as more like kids when it comes to certain aspects of thought and behavior.

> *... that limbo, that non-adult period that they're in, ... they're physically mature but not adults yet ...*

## Inexperienced adults

Sometimes they are thought of as adults who simply lack any experience which could help guide their decision-making.

> *I think that driving accidents ... [have] to do with inexperience rather than lack of maturity, to a large degree.*

> *They probably take more risks because they don't know the consequences ...*

This, by the way, is and has been the traditional view in many cultures outside the modern West.

## Inadequate vs. Undeveloped

Closely related to the idea of an Inexperienced Adult is the idea of an Undeveloped (or "Partial ") Adult. Everyone agrees that teenagers have relatively little sense of responsibility regarding the consequences of their actions. Experts, people who deal professionally with adolescents, discuss this ambivalence in developmental terms — teens have developed in some ways but not others. This model is also common among the public.

> *[I]t's a sense of this irresponsibility, that "I can do all these things and not be held accountable" ... Maybe they [need] a little bit more developing, developmental growth ...*

A negative variant of this model, held by some members of the public (and available to all of them) is that teenagers are Inadequate Adults — people who should but do not have a sense of morality, or responsibility for the consequences of their actions.

> *... there's a sense of no consequences, or irresponsibility.*

> *Irresponsible, more so than teenagers in years past, generations past.*

### "Not Ready" vs. "Essentially Different"

Everyone agrees that teenagers are not just like adults, but there are two different ways people view the differences, based on the different mindsets described above. The empathetic mindset is correlated with the idea that teens are essentially the same as adults, but haven't yet developed into maturity. They are "not ready" for adult life.

> [Y]ou shouldn't drink any younger than twenty-one.  Mentally you're not ready for that responsibility or the circumstances that could happen.

[This, by the way, is a view that distinguishes contemporary American society from other times and cultures, where teenagers have often been considered competent to marry and have children, provide for themselves and their families, wage war, and so forth.]

The objectifying view, by contrast, is usually based on an assumption that teens are a special category of person, essentially different from adults.  This tendency lends itself to a judgemental perspective, in which teens are quickly assigned to the status of "good" or "bad," more often the latter.

> A lot of teenagers nowadays, their morals are different.  They don't think like we think.

> [T]hey will shoot you faster than an older person would, some teenagers would, and they don't seem to care.


### Are teens growing up faster or more slowly?

One of the more interesting questions relating to the ambivalent status of teenagers is whether they are growing up faster now than ever before or more slowly. People appear to have conflicting views on this point.

> [T]hey're definitely growing up faster.  They learn stuff quicker than I did in the past

> Even my granddaughter is growing up faster than my son did when he was a kid. I just think things are going so fast.

> Years ago ... there was a sense of responsibility that started at 3, 4 and 5 and 6 years old.  I don't think that that's started any more in that level ... So the teenagers today that are 13 or 14 or 15 or 16 are older ten year olds.

> Even though he or she may be worldly ... I still think of [a teenager] as a child.

The resolution of this conflict parallels the understanding that teens are mature on the outside but immature on the inside. Teens grow up faster now than in the

past in the sense that they acquire knowledge, freedom, and power much earlier than in past generations (at least according to popular models) — they live more grown up lives. On the other hand, they mature more slowly in the sense that it takes longer for them to develop adult competence and self-sufficiency now than it took their parents and grandparents. This understanding is reflected in the fact that drinking and driving ages have risen over the past generation.

## Technology increases teens' power, freedom

Technology is seen as an important factor contributing to contemporary teenagers' accelerated (and unhealthy) development.

*Now they have their own phones, their own TVs, their own cell phones, their own pagers and all that.  And I think to a certain degree I think it might be kind of bad.*

## The child-king

A variant on the fast-development vs. slow development question is the idea that teens look like adults (and have the destructive capacities of adults), but are children inside.

*They just don't grasp they have that much power.  A wheel does not weigh much.  It doesn't look like much either, but it is a deadly device ...*

*I said [to my son] "because you're big" — he's like a 250- pound African American male — "people are going to look at you a certain way," and I said "if I walked down the street, perhaps I might be frightened of you, too."*

## Individualism

Teens are seen as being very self-centered (while at the same time very interested in their peers).  This is related to the ideas that they have few obligations, have no place in a hierarchy, and are somewhat unpredictable and inscrutable.

*[Y]ou don't know what you're going to encounter when you come upon a teenager.*

## Lack of work experience

Although a high percentage of teenagers hold paying jobs, most adults still perceive teens as a whole as lacking work experience. Given that the importance

of work is a defining American cultural value, teens' perceived distance from the work world also contributes to the view that they are irresponsible.

> *[T]hey haven't had the experience necessarily of having to pay taxes or to … go out and work.*

> *All that laying back because you've got three classes and "I'm going to come home and do nothing all day" – can't work like that for me, not in my family.*

> *I think [teenagers become adults] when they get their first real life experience … maybe when they get their first job… Because then you realize you have responsibilities …*

> *I feel that the teenagers haven't gotten to that step yet; they haven't been out in the working world where they can experience and reason.*

## Independence from family authority

Most informants recognize that teens need to establish a certain sense of autonomy, even if they are not capable of true (eg., financial or emotional) independence.

> *an impulse to break away*

> *I think you have to spread your wings.*

## Weakening of family structure

Some informants connect this tendency to their sense that the family structure is weaker today than it was in the past — this interpretation leads to a more negative view of teens' desire for independence, as well as a harsh judgement of today's parents.

> *we don't teach the responsibility of drinking.*

> *[B]ucking authority [is] one way to get attention.*

> *I don't think they get any guidance from home. I think everything starts at home.*

## Independence from social authority

The public recognizes that teens have a tendency to express their separation from the societal authority, for example by dressing very differently from how their parents dress. This tendency is associated with "bad" teens more than "good" teens. It is also associated with today's teens, and with the current lessening of social order.

*[T]heir lifestyle is so different from what I think of the rest of the population.*

## Weakening of social structure

Many informants referred to the fact that society has become less ordered in the last few decades, often mentioning the sixties as a turning point.

*[W]e were more friendlier. We could get along more even if we did do some fighting and cursing. You were still friends the next day or even an hour or two; but now it's rough for them. Step on a $150 tennis shoe and someone is going to get the gun.*

*[I]f a neighbor told you to do something or hit you that was all right because they were concerned about you.*

*We were just students, you know.*

## Influences on teenagers are like forces pulling them in particular directions

Teens are seen as eager to be recruited by influences outside of the family. When people are operating from the empathetic perspective, this is seen as an understandable desire, even when it takes antisocial form. This metaphorical framing highlights teens' impressionability. The fact that they lack experience and maturity means that they are susceptible to influences and temptations that an older person would resist.

*[T]hey gravitate more to what the street is offering, more so than what could possibly come out of, say, the home or the church or some other social areas.*

*And overall if they don't have a steady influence that can pull them greatly in a positive area, then it's so easy for them to fall prey to what's out there for them ...*

*[Gangs] seem to be everywhere, a false church.*

*Once you get into a gang, it is not easy to get out of a gang.*

*[A gang] almost seems like a clique on steroids or something!*

*[T]he pull of the street had more influence on him than me as a single parent.*

*[T]hey gravitate more to what the street is offering.*

This model is also sometimes connected to the model that the family structure is weaker now than it should be, so that teens' desire to join a gang is seen as a failure of the family rather than of the "village." Importantly, informants made little mention of positive influences outside of the family, eg., teachers, ministers, coaches, bosses, mentors, etc.

**Teens are like malleable material**

This metaphorical framing highlights the fact that teenagers are still developing, and that their development can be influenced from the outside – either for the better or for the worse.

> *[A teenager] is like a piece of clay. It is someone you can mold and make into a fairly responsible person given the right exposure, the right education and the right things culturally in a friendly family environment.  It is a potential piece of material to work with.*

**Advertising as a powerful and destructive force**

One of the strongest voices in the lives of teens is seen to be the advertising media.  Many informants' negative attitudes toward the media are extended to this point.  Advertisers exploit limbo state/insecurities about identity.

> *And it sends out the wrong message, that you have to look like this to be accepted and to be pretty, and if you had all these things this is how you would feel*

> *I think it is a shame that the whole American culture, especially for the American girl is to grow up to be this perfect super model type woman.*

**Teens make bad parents**

This model reflects the view that teens are physically adults, but psychologically not ready to take on the responsibility of parenting.

> *I think [teenagers' lack of direction] would stem more from a parental factor.  You're looking at teens now who are probably born to teens, who were probably **born** to teens.*

**At a fork in the road**

Most informants agreed that being a teenager means embarking on a rapid, high-stakes journey.

> *[T]hey have a sense that what they do will have long-term effect with their future, but not enough experience to understand / to truly understand that and make choices with that in mind.*

> *[T]his is like the first level of where they're gonna step off the cliff,  do or die.*

**Two types of teens**

Informants regularly spoke in terms of a dichotomy between "normal" or "good" teens and "strange" or "bad" teens.

> *I see the teenagers that hang out on the street and the teenagers in my church and they are totally different.*

> *Two extremes: one is criminal activity,  and the other is where you see or read or hear about groups of teenagers going on trips to South America to build churches.*

> *You see both types.*

## People feel sorry for teens

A common correlate of the empathetic stance is the expression of sympathy for the teenage condition.

> *a general overall teenage panic kind of thing*

> *I see … teenagers who are very motivated to prepare themselves for the future.  And hard working and competitive in a way that makes it more difficult to be a teenager sometimes*

> *It's a difficult time for teenagers.*

> *Peer pressure, they have to achieve, parents forcing them to be much more productive, much more/achieving a lot more goals.*

## IV. ADDITIONAL MODELS

In this section we present a variety of other important models that do not relate directly to the idea that teenagers are in a limbo state between two more clear-cut stages of life.

## "Teens are Teens" vs. "Teens are getting worse"

The empathetic mindset is correlated with the belief that while teens wear different clothes and listen to different music today, they are still essentially the same as they have ever been.

> *The specific interests might have changed a little but nothing substantial.*

The objectifying mindset, on the other hand, is correlated with the belief that today's teeenagers are fundamentally different from (and typically "worse" than) teens of past generations. That is to say, today's teens are inherently more difficult to identify with than yesterday's teens.

*When I was a teenager it was much more smoother. You know, we smoked cigarettes and smoked marijuana and whatever. But we were more friendlier. We could get along more even if we did do some fighting and cursing.*

## Optimism, idealism and energy

Teens are sometimes seen as having a more positive, less cynical outlook on the world than adults. Even if this is understood as a sort of naïveté, it allows teenagers to take risks, imagine change, and invest energy where adults might not.

*They're very naive towards the world so they see everything, like, "no trouble, no problems, we can do everything. What's the problem?" Everything seems to be very easy. Where as an adult would be, "well, you got to do this first. No, you can't do that. ..." ... They don't have any barriers ...*

## Delusions of power, immortality

The negative perspective on teens' optimism is that they feel they can accomplish things that are actually unrealistic. Notoriously, this includes surviving risky situations, like fast driving, excessive drinking, and so forth.

*They take more chances when they are younger.*

*[T]hey haven't been taught any boundaries. You know they now feel and know that they can do all these things.*

## Problems with age segregation

Some people feel that teenage problems stem from spending too much time only with people of their own age — e.g. all day in a large high school. According to this model, current American teens (as opposed to teenagers in other times and places) do not learn important lessons about integrating with the community around them, and don't get sufficient exposure to other perspectives on the world.

*There are certainly teenagers who are ... alienated from their families and from other age groups, and certainly I felt that going to a large suburban high school when I did, that my days were spent with other people my own age, in huge numbers. ... I think that's a terrible mistake for society to make. ... [M]y sense was at the time that I wasn't integrated into the world generally, I just saw lots of other people my same age.*

### Teens look like aliens

Adults are preoccupied with the "looks" adopted by teenagers, especially what is perceived as the widespread fad for tattoos and piercings. An unconventional appearance is seen, as it has been in earlier generations, as a reflection of very different attitudes, and even as a defiance of all of society's values. This is a negative, "objectifying" view that some people are prone to toggle into.

> *I think teenagers nowadays tend to be a bit more on the edge than we were when we were teenagers. Nobody when I was growing up had anything pierced other than an ear.*

### Teens are preoccupied with sex

Contrary to some expert studies (see Hines 1999) the popular American view is that teens are far more focussed on sex than adults are.

> *[In response to a question about what most interests teenagers:] Money and sex (laughs). I would put those two before I'd even say drugs.*

### Teens as a financial burden

Teenagers are sometimes framed in terms of the financial burden they place on a family. They have expensive needs (which they only partially pay for with their own income) and don't help support the family.

> *In their material acquisitions they want to start with something usually much better or much more than they should or could afford ...*

### Teens are self-centered

Teenagers are often perceived as indifferent to the people around them, only concerned with their own needs and agendas.

> *[I]t was like give me, give me, give me and that was it.*

> *Some of them have an attitude of "I don't care."*

> *[In response to a question about what teenagers are interested in:] Themselves.*

This is a corrollary to teens' increasing distance from the "family matrix" and broader "social matrix." And in fact this framing ignores and contradicts the other common view that teenagers are extremely interested in each other — i.e. in fitting in well with particular groups of peers.

**Teens are spoiled**

The idea that today's adolescents have too many privileges shows up occasionally. It provides a counterpoint to the model that it is difficult and stressful to be a teenager, and is connected to the model that today's teenagers are slower than previous generations to accept responsibility.

> *[M]y first vehicle, I bought it, arranged for it, bought the insurance. I don't see that happening today. I don't know of a 16 year old today that does that.*

**"Growing up" means becoming cynical**

A recurring model, even among informants who feel that today's teens are not essentially different from yesterday's teens, is that children in general are exposed to far more adult-oriented media and events than they were in the past, and that this has a strong and negative effect on their view of the world.

> *[T]hey are a little more disillusioned, disaffected with their situation.*

**Teens represent future financial security**

According to this model, parents invest in their children as a hedge against future financial need. This model showed up rarely, which points up a striking difference between current American models of parenting and more traditional views. [Note: This is not identical with the view that Americans should invest with teens in general, since today's teens will constitute tomorrow's (shrinking) class of social security contributors. We found no evidence of that particular model, and no evidence that would suggest its efficacy in helping the public reframe teens in a more positive light.]

> *... I might need to borrow a dollar or two from her one day.*

**Constant decline in teens' lives over the generations**

Some informants expressed the view that there has been a gradual or sudden shift in the experience of teens in recent years.

> *Your teenagers from the 60's on I think have been totally different than any other teens.*

## Teens have little power/cause small problems

This model states that despite the bad press teenagers get, adults tend to cause the real problems in society. This model contradicts the anxiety that people feel about teens' destructive potential, evident in drunk driving and more recently in mass killings.

*Teenagers tend to cause fairly temporary problems.*

## Actions determine maturity

A surprising finding from the interviews is that in the case of serious crime adulthood is defined by actions, rather than by physical appearance or emotional maturity. One interpretation of this finding is that childhood is defined by actions that have no lasting consequences. A crime such as murder cannot be undone, and is therefore not the work of a child.

*I think shooting someone is a very adult crime; so the judication of the crime should be at an adult level.*

## V. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The research presented in this report leads to a number of conclusions about productive and unproductive ways of framing youth – i.e. ways which will or will not help Americans value youth as a resource. Many of these research findings can be carried forward by other methodologies that are part of the strategic frame analysis approach. Where we have used a qualitative approach to identify and describe important American models of adolescence, other methodologies (including, for example, a fixed-form survey based on the findings of this report) lend themselves to determining how widely these models are distributed; how strongly they are held; or which messages are most effective moving opinion in the right direction.

- Not surprisingly, actual experience with teenagers is a key factor in determining people's attitudes. The more people's views are informed by "face time" and the less by the media, the more likely they are to share perspectives supported by WTG – i.e. the empathetic view of teenagers. This finding could be tested and refined quantitatively, through investigation of the correlation between the number of hours an adult spends with teenagers (whether in the home, in work settings, in the neighborhood, or wherever else) and the likelihood that the adult empathizes with teenagers. We expect the correlation would be strong.

While the Foundation cannot hope (in the near term) to increase overall interaction between adults and youth, there may be other ways of combating the destructive power of media stereotypes. Our research shows that people are hyperaware of unusual teenagers – ones who commit atrocious crimes or heroic feats – and often forget the majority who do their homework, help with the dishes and never make the news. In short, thanks to the media, they often see the normal as abnormal, and spend more time thinking about teenagers who are the exceptions to the rules, and to whom they probably have a much harder time trying to relate. Using Gilliam and Iyengar's media effects testing methodology it should be possible to determine whether exposure to news stories depicting teens in more typical scenarios could have a positive effect on attitudes. (We recognize of course that this would represent a challenge to advocates and the media, since it amounts to a hope that we can see more "unnewsworthy" teens in the news.)

- People are sometimes very aware of the discrepancy between media models of teens (i.e. as monsters or heroes) and their own experience of "normal" teens. Quantitative measures of the impact of media models (e.g. how often people think in terms of them, how strongly they influence opinions on particular issues) would be valuable, since this information would help the foundation decide on communications priorities. Must the negative media model be combatted directly, or will it be more efficient to reinforce the empathetic model that is already widespread?  Media effects testing could be used to explore the degree to which the public sees a lack of "fit" between their lived experience and the media model, and the degree to which they reconcile the conflict by seeing their own case as special.

- An important finding of our research is the near-absence of a cultural model that emphasizes teens' need for mentoring from adults outside the nuclear family. The cross-cultural evidence (and arguments from evolutionary psychology) suggest that around the age of puberty, individuals (especially boys) are normally recruited by social institutions (e.g., mother's-brothers; religious cults), and may be predisposed to distancing themselves from the nuclear family at this stage.  American models, including expert models, often fail to acknowledge this nearly-universal aspect of human development, in effect reinforcing the idea that the nuclear family bears sole responsibility for guiding the development of youths (see e.g., Zill).

- A question that arises from the interview data is whether the choice of terminology – i.e. *teenager* vs. *youth* vs. *adolescent* vs. *person* vs. *kid/child* – make a difference in how people respond to media representations.  Do people automatically superimpose their own frames no matter what language they are exposed to? Media effects testing is ideally suited to answer this question.

- Framings of teenagers should obviously stress what it's like to be a teenager – the empathetic viewpoint. In addition, they should stress the developmental nature of adolescence: teenagers are in the process of learning and transforming themselves. Many imperfections in their behavior can be traced to this.

**About the Author**

***Cultural Logic***, directed by anthropologist Axel Aubrun and linguist Joseph Grady, is an applied cognitive and social science research group that helps organizations frame their messages for maximum effect. Working with a network of experts and partner organizations including the FrameWorks Institute, Cultural Logic focuses on research relating to public interest issues. Topics have included global warming, violence reduction in communities, conserving the Chesapeake Bay, global interdependence, gender equity in schools, and toxins in the domestic environment.  Axel Aubrun, Ph.D. is a psychological anthropologist whose research and publications take an interdisciplinary approach to problems of communication and motivation. Joseph Grady, Ph.D. is a linguist whose research and publications focus on the relationship between metaphor and other aspects of thought and communication.

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# Appendix: The Cognitive Analysis Approach

The methodological basis of this report is a series of semi-structured one-hour interviews with 10 respondents, followed by close analysis of the transcriptions of these interviews. Language used by the subjects provides a window onto the *cognitive models* that structure their thinking about adolescence and adolescents. In particular, the method identifies widely shared and deeply held beliefs, the *cultural models* that form the foundation of American understandings of the topic. In what follows, we provide a brief summary of the main assumptions of this approach, which integrates aspects of cognitive anthropology and cognitive linguistics.

## Frames

Researchers who study cognition and culture have established that people understand all concepts in terms of related networks of ideas, also known as *frames*. For example, the concept of a 'father' is not understood in isolation, but in connection with understandings of mothers, children, families, biology, responsibility, and so forth. People are usually unaware of the frames they are using, and the frames themselves are usually expressed indirectly. Instead, frames are revealed based on the language and reasoning the person uses in connection with a concept. Seeming contradictions in the way a person discusses a topic can be particularly enlightening, because they may reveal conflicting frames at work. It should be noted as well that frame is a general term — used somewhat differently in different disciplines — to refer to more specific concepts such as cognitive model, cultural model, and *cultural theory*, discussed below.

## Cultural models vs. cultural theories

A cultural theory is a set of explicit propositions that describe the nature of some general phenomenon (D'Andrade 1995). Cultural theories are typically the most apparent and immediately coherent structures of knowledge — the ones that are volunteered by focus group participants for example, and the ones that lend themselves to direct description and summary by the analyst.

A cultural model, by contrast, consists of a set of largely implicit assumptions that allows a person to reason about and solve a problem (D'Andrade 1995). A cultural model specifies relationships between a given concept and others — specific domains (e.g., Teenagers) are typically connected to broader cultural assumptions (e.g., understandings about independence or safety).

A classic example of the difference between cultural models and cultural theories is provided by Strauss's study of blue collar workers in Rhode Island (1992). Her informants clearly understood, and explicitly articulated to the interviewer, the

American model of self-made Success.  In some cases, they even claimed that this style of success was important to them. Close analysis of discourse, however, revealed that these men were actually basing their behavior on an implicit model of a Breadwinner, which is more strongly related to ideals of husband and father than to wealth and status.

Cultural models, while less explicit and more challenging to identify than cultural theories, typically have more directive force — i.e., they are more relevant to understanding what people actually do.

## Cognitive Analysis

An important assumption of this view of human motivation is that a variety of cultural models typically compete for expression in a given defined situation. Putting it simply, people often have conflicts about basic issues.  For example, many Americans believe that a woman should work outside the home; a contradictory assumption, held by many of these same people, is that women should stay in the home and nurture children.  Though contradictions such as this one often find partial resolution (e.g., through the contemporary American notion of the "Supermom"), typically such deeply held beliefs are compartmentalized; i.e., only one will be invoked in a given context.

Cognitive analysis first identifies the relevant deeply held models to which a given subject such as "Teens" are connected (literally or through metaphor).  Second, it attempts to map the fault lines that predict which of the models will be expressed as action in a given situation, often triggered by particular cues.  Third, it suggests a picture of the dynamic relationship between public messages, cultural models, and individual action around a given topic.

## Metaphors

It is a universal finding of cognitive linguistics that people use metaphors to think, speak and reason about the world, even on topics as familiar as adolescence and teenagers — i.e., some of the cultural models used to reason about teenagers are metaphoric models. For example, teenagers are sometimes metaphorically understood as unfinished objects, materials that haven't been formed into their final shape.  The metaphors people use to think and talk about teenagers contribute to guiding adults' behavior towards adolescents, including whether and how they choose to nurture, ignore, discipline, or otherwise engage with adolescents. Reasoning by way of metaphoric models also affects adults' evaluation of the appropriateness and efficacy of political policies and programs directed at adolescents (cf. Schön 1979).

**Cognitive interviews**

Because cultural models tend to be organized into distinct and recognizable patterns, they lend themselves to qualitative investigation. The cognitive interview format is designed to approximate a "natural conversation" (Quinn 1982).  In an interview situation people are often most comfortable providing cultural theories (explicit and familiar explanations which are known to have general currency); the semi-structured interview puts them in a situation which encourages them instead to do their own reasoning about the issues we are interested in, i.e., to use the relevant cultural models.

Skilled interviewing shifts the informant away from a "performing" mode and toward a "training" mode.  The natural give and take of a conversation puts informants in a position of teaching the interviewer how to think about a given issue.  The analyst's job is to identify cultural assumptions, first in the interview setting by responding to and subtly challenging or asking for clarification of intuited premises, and second in the analysis of transcriptions by making these assumptions explicit.

Subjects and sample size

Because a culture is defined by a set of broadly shared understandings and assumptions, studying cultural models is analogous to studying the structure of a natural language. One does not need a large group of speakers to determine the basics of a language's grammar and syntax — a few speakers will typically suffice. Similarly, working with only a few subjects, one can identify the commonly held belief system typical of those subjects' culture. In-depth work with a relatively small group of informants has been the norm in cognitive anthropology, allowing researchers to work more closely with subjects than is possible using large-scale methodologies. Findings from cognitive interviews may subsequently be expanded upon and refined through quantitative methods, which may establish, for example, how strongly particular models are held in different segments of the population. Where the cognitive approach identifies the nature of the models, carefully devised quantitative research, using fixed-form surveys for example, can establish the distribution of the models (see Kempton et al 1995).

For this study, the subjects were 10 American adults from different social and ethnic backgrounds, distributed approximately evenly across the following demographic divisions: male/female, over/under 35 years of age, with/without children, European-American/African-American (and 1 Hispanic-American), conservative/liberal.