

Highlights of Collaborative Research between NSVRC and the FrameWorks Institute – Phase 1

American Perceptions of Sexual Violence 2010

Background: The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) commissioned the FrameWorks Institute in 2010 to begin a multi-year project studying current perceptions held by the United States public regarding sexual violence. The FrameWorks Institute was selected because they use a multi-disciplinary research team approach to assist social causes in developing effective communications strategies to generate informed public opinion and support. They are experienced in researching controversial and complex topics such as global warming, race, poverty, and children’s mental health.

First Phase: The NSVRC coordinated a national planning team with expertise in various aspects of sexual violence and its prevention that met with researchers in January 2010 to inform and advise this project. In the spring of 2010, FrameWorks researchers conducted semi-structured one-on-one interviews with experts in the field of sexual violence prevention. Analysis of these interviews with experts, who were provided by NSVRC’s project planning team, provided researchers with an understanding of the way experts understand and communicate about sexual violence

Next, interviews were conducted with engaged citizens, meaning individuals that read and talk about issues in the news, vote, and participate in community activities and dialogues. The pool of engaged citizens was selected by a professional marketing firm using a previously-tested methodology designed by the FrameWorks Institute. Participants were not informed of the specific topic in advance. The interviews were lengthy, loosely structured, and were designed to understand *how* people think about the topic – what shortcuts they use to make sense of information or what patterns emerge in their understanding. The goal was to determine the most dominant “cultural models” or thought processes that are common to Americans when thinking about sexual violence,

and which are evident across gender, age, race, political beliefs and other factors. Later phases of the research will test the effectiveness of particular messages with specific groups.

This first phase of the research summarizes the findings from the two groups and “maps the gaps” between what experts know and what the public believes about sexual violence. This initial phase is descriptive and provides direction for future research. It also serves as a benchmark against which to measure change over time following the crafting and use of communication tools. However, knowing that the field is eager to get to the more prescriptive findings, the summary report provides some preliminary recommendations based upon the findings.

Highlights of Significant Findings: One of the most significant differences between experts and the public is in the contextualization of sexual violence. Experts describe the full continuum of physical and non-physical behaviors that comprise sexual violence and the social beliefs and constructs that support it, including various forms of oppression. The public, however, has a highly individualistic understanding of sexual violence. In other words, the public views sexual violence as occurring at the individual level rather than in a larger social context. They see perpetrators as morally flawed, people who are inherently bad, perhaps mentally ill, but also with character defects, and who cannot be rehabilitated. FrameWorks refers to this individual way of viewing an issue as “mentalism.”

Interestingly, the public has clearly heard some of the messages that sexual assault victim advocates have been saying for years, however the underlying assumptions have not changed, resulting in some thinking errors. For instance, the public now knows that most victims know the perpetrators who assault them. In advocates’ or experts’ minds this means that perpetrators of sexual violence look and often act like everyone else and can be our relatives, neighbors, coworkers, professionals, and idols. However, in the public’s mind, the notion of a perpetrator of sexual violence as an evil monster-like predator is so persistent that the information that most victims know the perpetrator means to them that victims of sexual violence must be using poor judgment and hanging around with the wrong crowds. This well-intended, accurate message unfortunately then, ends up playing into a victim-blaming mentality.

The public's narrow understanding of who perpetrators are and how they got that way not only causes them to further blame victims, but also presents obstacles to thinking of effective or creative solutions and prevention strategies. They do not see any role for communities or organizations, and the only policy strategies they can think of are long-term incarceration or castration.

The public understands, on some level, that victims are not to blame for sexual violence. Nearly everyone interviewed emphatically stated that victims were never responsible or at fault. But most quickly followed that assertion with – *“however, she could have made better decisions about what to wear, how to act, where to go, and who to hang out with,”* revealing that they have not logically thought through the deeper layers of their strongly –held victim-blaming beliefs.

In addition to the commonly held model of individual responsibility or “mentalism,” another common cluster of ideas centers around the “family bubble” or the notion that parents are solely or primarily responsible for everything that happens to their offspring. The public response to the question *“what causes people to perpetrate sexual violence?”* typically referred to poor upbringing and bad parenting. Therefore, they reasoned, parents either raise “good” or “bad” boys and either “strong” or “weak” girls.

The public, like experts, talk about perpetrators usually being male and victims often being female. The two groups diverge, however, in their explanations for this. Experts talk about power differentials, coercion, oppression, sexism, and gender and other inequities to explain this phenomenon. The public understanding, however, of the gendered aspect of sexual violence is tied to their understanding of what constitutes acts of sexual violence. Since they (public) limit their view of sexual violence to only those acts which result in serious physical injury, and where consent is explicitly and clearly denied, they assume that it is simply a case of a larger, stronger male physically and aggressively over-powering a smaller, weaker female.

The researchers did discover some secondary cultural models, or patterns of thinking, that are accessible with intentional prompting. One of these models involves a more systems-oriented notion of communities playing a role in the lives of individuals and families.

That reflects the understanding that people are not only influenced by parents, but also by friends, teachers, faith groups, neighbors, media, and others. Another hopeful secondary model uncovered in this study was participants' acknowledgement of the far-reaching impacts or "ripple effects" that extend beyond the people directly involved in sexual violence. These frames may prove to be promising in narrowing the gaps between what experts know and the public believes about sexual violence.

Preliminary Recommendations:

FrameWorks researchers offer these preliminary recommendations to experts who want to develop more effective communications with the public: 1) avoid inadvertently activating individual responsibility frames; 2) provide other models about perpetrators besides the predator model; 3) broaden the ideas of what constitutes consent and harm; and 4) activate the role of communities by telling stories about the social and cultural roots of sexual violence. Readers are urged to proceed cautiously with these preliminary recommendations. They will be tested in further stages of the project.

Additional information: The complete summary, *American Perceptions of Sexual Violence: A FrameWorks Research Report*, is available on the following websites:

<http://www.nsvrc.org/publications/frameworks-report-2010>

<http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/sexualviolence.html>

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