

How Two Cognitive Biases Work Against Support for Youth Development Programs:

Findings from Cognitive Elicitations

Axel Aubrun, Ph.D.

Michele Emanatian, Ph.D.

Joseph Grady, Ph.D.

cultural logic LLC

November 2004

This research was commissioned by the FrameWorks Institute for the McKnight Foundation.

This research was commissioned by the FrameWorks Institute for the McKnight Foundation.

BACKGROUND

The state of Minnesota is currently facing a set of economic and political conditions which make youth programs increasingly difficult to maintain. Unlike many initiatives supported by advocates and experts, programs for young people during out-of-school time are a well-established approach to improving the lives of our children—yet these programs are increasingly in danger of disappearing from the Minnesota landscape, as they drop down the list of perceived priorities facing the state.

The purpose of the research reported on here is to explore the patterns of reasoning that average Minnesotans bring to the larger issue of positive youth development as well as to the specific topic of out-of-school time (OST) programs. Without the engaged support of the Minnesota public, youth programs are unlikely to maintain their current levels of funding and other resources, much less to increase and expand to new areas. The hypothesis going into the research, based on experience on other social issues, is that fundamental patterns of reasoning, much more general than the particular issue itself, play a key role in driving levels of support up or down. The guiding principle of the cognitive approach taken in this research is that, to understand why Minnesotans do or do not strongly support youth programs, it is critical to understand more about the other, more general patterns of thought that feed into that motivation.

Previous Research by Cultural Logic and Collaborators

The elicitation research builds on a series of previous projects (commissioned by the FrameWorks Institute and funded by the William T. Grant Foundation¹) which explored Americans' thinking about adolescence and adolescents. A brief summary of key conclusions from this previous research will help clarify the starting points for the present project.

Teens are seen as a “different species.”

One of the most fundamental patterns in American adults' thinking about teenagers is that they seem to be a different *kind* of person, rather than a person undergoing a particular stage of development.

The media distances people further from youths.

There is an overemphasis on crime and, more generally, bad news about adolescents in the news media; but even the positive stories are often subtly damaging. If people are made hyperaware of unusual teenagers – ones who commit atrocious crimes *or* heroic feats – they easily forget the majority who do their homework, help with the dishes, never make the news, *and are much easier to relate to.*

Furthermore, television most typically depicts teens interacting with other teens, rather than relating to people in other age groups.

¹ See <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/clients/grant.shtml> for links to the earlier collection of reports.

Adults often take a “spectator stance” towards teens.

The sensational images that predominate in the media reinforce a tendency for adults to look at teens as objects of amusement (or even amazement), fear, ridicule, and condemnation.

Adults “toggle” between empathy for and objectification of teens.

Adults shift back and forth between two incompatible ways of thinking about teenagers. The Empathetic stance involves recognizing what it’s like to be a teenager, and leads to understandings that are closer to “expert” (psychological) models of adolescence. Often, however, people are in an Objectifying mode, which is all about what teens are like from the outside (e.g. loud, odd-looking, etc.).

Americans lack a cultural model of Mentoring.

A wide variety of evidence suggests that teenagers have a developmental need for relationships with adults outside their nuclear family. Yet common American understandings do not include this idea. Adults often see no other actor in the developmental equation besides parents and teens.

Adults are worried about teens.

Compared to prior generations, adults feel teens are more in need of protection than ever before, but that it is far more difficult, if not impossible, to insulate today’s teens from dangers (related to sex, drugs, and violence).

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

While Minnesotans express general support for such youth development efforts as OST programs, they have a number of straightforward concerns about costs, control of the programs, and their role vis-à-vis parents. Importantly, there are key points about the programs that they currently do not understand. They have little sense of the range of types of activities they may involve; of who creates, designs, and funds the programs, etc.

An even more fundamental problem is that Minnesotans (and probably most Americans) do not fully appreciate the *benefits* of youth programs, though they are able to list several, such as keeping kids occupied and exposing them to new people, information and activities.

The analysis presented here suggests that there are two fundamental cognitive biases which keep people from fully appreciating the importance of youth programs:

The “Mentalist” Bias is a focus on the subjective moral and intellectual growth that occurs during the adolescent period – as opposed to a more concrete grasp of the fact that adolescence is a (biological) *Developmental Process*, which transforms children into adults, partly through the continuing development of brain architecture, particularly in those areas related to judgment and understanding consequences. The tendency to focus on what teenagers *learn* and *figure out* during this critical period diminishes appreciation for youth programs in important ways.

The Individualist Bias is a narrow focus on teens as individuals—rather than as members of the community, who both affect and are affected by it. This tendency obscures the importance of adolescence as a time when young people are integrated into social structures, including the broader community. It also obscures the important fact that the community benefits when young people develop in a healthy way.

To help the public understand the importance of youth programs in general and OST programs in particular, advocates can promote Developmental and Community-based perspectives on the programs. This can include creating new versions of currently familiar narratives, such as helping kids find Direction, and Investing in kids: Direction is about both the Developmental path and about leading kids towards connection and social integration; Investment is the best use of resources to promote healthy Development and connections to Community.

Advocates must also carefully consider the terms they are currently using to refer to various youth programs: Unfamiliar terms like “out-of-school time” are often awkward and confusing, and abbreviations like OST are usually no better. Instead, advocates will be understood more clearly if they use familiar terms like “youth program,” “structured time,” or even “programs for kids during non-school times” or “non-school hours.” If entirely new terms are to be introduced, it is worth investing time and energy – and possibly resources for testing – to ensure that the terms can be accepted and grasped by the people they are supposed to be meaningful to. It will probably be helpful if the terms focus on the benefits of programs (e.g. they offer structure,

promote development, help build connections).

RESEARCH METHOD

The analysis presented here is based on intensive one-on-one interviews conducted by Cultural Logic in the fall of 2004 with a diverse group of twenty individuals in Minnesota.² Subjects were recruited through a process of ethnographic networking – researchers began with “seed contacts” in each of the target communities, and developed a pool of subjects from which a diverse range was selected for interviewing.³ The sample included 11 women and 9 men. Subjects’ ages ranged widely – 7 subjects were in their 20s, 4 in their 30s, 3 in their 40s, and 6 were 50 or older. 11 of the subjects were European-American, 3 were African-American, 4 were Asian American, and 2 were Native American. Attention was paid to the inclusion of a mix of political orientations in the sample (6 conservatives, 1 independent, and 13 liberals). Educational backgrounds also ranged widely (high-school only to graduate degree) as did occupations.

Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed from a cognitive perspective, meaning that, rather than expressions of opinion, the analysis focuses on underlying patterns of reasoning, which are often expressed indirectly via, for example, the omission of certain topics, associations drawn between one topic and another, the metaphors used to talk about an issue, and so forth.

Importantly, the method seeks to identify the default patterns of reasoning people use, even if they “know better” on some level. For instance, while many people are intellectually aware that conditions in a community have an influence on the life outcomes of a young person, they may also default to a (contradictory) view in which individuals are entirely in control of their own fates.

The Cognitive Approach

Subjects participated in semi-structured, recorded interviews (“cognitive elicitations”), conducted according to methods adapted from psychological anthropology. The goal of this methodology is to approximate a natural conversation while also encouraging the subject to reason about a topic from a wide variety of perspectives, including some that are unexpected and deliberately challenging. This type of data-gathering – and the analysis of transcripts, based on techniques of cognitive anthropology and linguistics – yields insights not available from standard interview, polling, or focus group techniques. It does not look for statements of opinion, but for patterns of thought that may even be unconscious. It does not look for familiarity with issues in the news, but for more well-established and long-standing, default reasoning patterns. Some of the clues to these important patterns come from topics that are *omitted*, moments of *inconsistency* where one understanding clashes with another, and the *metaphors* people use to talk about a subject. Furthermore, the method is designed to explore the differences between *rhetorical mode* – in

² The authors thank Brendan Cooney, M.A. for his assistance in conducting this research.

³ See discussion of “snowball sampling” as a key technique of ethnographic research in H. Russell Bernard’s *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches, 2nd Edition*. 1995. (pp.97ff).

which people define themselves in opposition to other groups and perspectives, and repeat ideas and phrases familiar from public discourse – and *reasonable mode* – in which they reflect their own experiences, think for themselves, and are more open to new information. Put briefly, this analysis focuses on *how* people think rather than *what* they think. (See the Appendix for a fuller discussion of Cultural Logic’s cognitive approach.)

Cognitive research works on the premise that unconscious, default understandings of the world (cognitive and cultural *models*) guide people’s understanding of an issue in ways they do not even recognize. One of the most important aspects of these default models is that they often lead people to understandings that they might reject at other moments of more careful reflection. For example, average Americans recognize on an intellectual level that America’s fortunes are tied to economic and other developments abroad – yet a habitual conception of America as a world unto itself obscures this understanding, and creates a cognitive “blind-spot.” People who *know better on some level*, still slip easily into a mistaken view because of well-established, default understandings of the world. These hidden, underlying understandings can be very difficult to challenge and displace, and, if they are not accounted for, can derail communications.

OVERVIEW OF ATTITUDES TOWARDS YOUTH PROGRAMS

During the course of our conversations with Minnesotans, Cultural Logic researchers explored a wide range of understandings and views related to young people and what they need – including, of course, subjects’ thoughts about out-of-school time programs themselves. In this section we summarize the views that were expressed during the interviews, which often confirmed findings from other types of research. While this type of “top-of-mind” response to an issue is not the focus of elicitation research, it is helpful to begin with this overview of lay people’s thinking, since much of the analysis in the rest of the paper seeks to shed light on the patterns of response described here.

Widespread Support for Programs

When Minnesotans are asked to think about programs for young people (including out of school time programs), they tend to be supportive.

That’s where teams and camps and things like that come into play. That’s a good way to get exposed to social activities and build your social skills and stuff like that.

[urban, female, 26]

I: What kind of activities do teenagers benefit from?*

S: I think sports, team building, I think volunteer work and some extra-curriculars, depending on what it is.

I: How do they benefit from that?

S: Like I said with sports, team building skills, and volunteer work they view / they’re exposed to more variety of types of people and their situations and they can appreciate where they are, things like that. [suburban, female, 22]

You know, whether it’s sports or theater or band or anything like that, I think any sort of organized activity outside of school is probably a good experience. [suburban, male, 34]

Many offered personal anecdotes about attending such programs themselves, or articulated the benefits of programs their children participated in.

Well, like I was in theater when I was in high school, so I made a lot of friends then and had a lot of fun, learned a lot. ... Just, you know, getting to know people I wouldn’t have gotten to know otherwise, and learning about acting and drama and

* In this exchange and those following, “I” stands for Interviewer and “S” stands for Subject.

theater and all that.

[suburban, male, 34]

I think sports is a really good thing, especially for girls ... I had a few really good friends in high school that I actually met through cross country, and we would go rock-climbing, we'd go mountain-biking, we'd be like, "I wonder if I could do this, I wonder if I could do that," and I feel like a lot of girls don't have that experience of just being in their body for their body's sake, just being, "Well what can I do?," you know, "Am I this strong? What would happen if I tried to lift this?"

[urban, female, 29]

Some people we spoke with expressed pride in the state of Minnesota for offering more programs to kids than are available in other places.

S: I know Minnesota has a lot of resources in [our park districts]. Our park districts are really good. A lot of your churches have youth groups. There is stuff in the communities, depending on the communities.

I: Do you think Minnesota teens are different from teens in the rest of the country?

S: I think the opportunities are here more so than in the rest of the country

[urban, female, age 38]

Limited understanding

On the other hand, common understandings of what youth programs might consist of are limited at best. Typical thoughts include after-school sports and perhaps theater, and often nothing beyond those. Only a few subjects mentioned volunteering, for example.

School, church. Have you ever heard of the YMCA? [suburban, female, 31]

I: And then, if they don't have the money for [sports programs], you said there are other activities that they can do?

S: I think there is Boy Scouts.

[suburban, female, 31]

People also tend to have little idea how programs come about, and often assume that schools are the only sponsors. While some people are, of course, more knowledgeable, our interview findings suggest that lay people's *lack of basic understanding* is a key problem in this issue area.

Resistance to Youth programs

During our conversations we encountered several types of responses that could be categorized as resistance to the programs that advocates would like to see expanded:

- *Public spending*: The Minnesotans we spoke to were not in agreement on the question of whether the programs should receive public funding. While a majority of our subjects felt this was an appropriate arena for government funding, others expressed the common sentiment that government simply spends too much all around.
- *Design and control*: Some of those interviewed expressed the hope that communities would maintain control over programs, regardless of whether the programs were state or municipally funded.
- *Access*: The difficulty of young people getting home from after-school activities, for example, was mentioned by both urban and rural residents.
- *Supplanting parents*: There is a belief among a minority of the interviewees that programs take up time which kids should spend with their parents. Programs and mentors are sometimes viewed as “parent substitutes,” a view which clashes with the common default understanding that parents bear most or all the responsibility for how their children turn out. (For more discussion of this point, see the section on Individual vs. Social perspectives.)

Underappreciating the benefits of youth programs

Perhaps most significantly for advocacy efforts, Minnesotans (and probably most Americans) lack a full appreciation of the potential *benefits* of youth programs. In our view, the public’s impoverished sense of the benefits of the programs is one of the key obstacles to building momentum on this issue in the state. An exploration of this underdeveloped conception of why youth programs are valuable is the focus of the rest of the report.

While elicitation inevitably yield the sort of “top-of-mind” information about public attitudes discussed in this section, the real value of this type of research is in the analysis of the more fundamental patterns of reasoning that shape these opinions. In the next sections, we examine the widespread understandings of young people and their development, which help explain the “shallow” and rather conflicted support we’ve described.

THE “MENTALIST” BIAS

“Common Sense Descriptions”

As Minnesotans think aloud about young people and their lives, and the process by which they become adults, they talk in terms that would be familiar to any American. Adolescents are “in the middle of finding out who they are,” “learning who [they] are,” “really self-conscious,” “like delicate birds... trying to figure out, like, What is this world?” Adolescents are also going through “physical changes... growing and changing” as their bodies become adult-like.

While these descriptions of adolescence sound fair and reasonable enough on the surface, they also reveal an important set of biases in people’s thinking about young people. Much of the rest of this report is devoted to an examination of two of these biases and their implications. These are dimensions of the public’s thinking that are critical for advocates to recognize because they may be hidden keys to explaining why Minnesotans’ support for youth programs is not as strong, unambiguous, or engaged as it could be. Understanding these patterns may also be a key to increasing that support.

In this section, we focus on the first of the two critical biases – the tendency to think of teens in “Mentalist” terms, to the exclusion of “Materialist” perspectives.

The “Mentalist” vs. “Materialist” Models – “Filling the Vessel” vs. “Building the Machine”

Minnesotans’ understanding of what it means to move from childhood to adulthood revolves mainly around images of kids learning about life and about themselves – essentially, *filling their minds with the ideas and facts that they will need* – as opposed to a more expert view of a transformative, developmental process which is like *the construction of a mechanism that can accomplish more and more functions*. From the vessel-filling, “mentalist” perspective, growing up involves becoming aware of important information about the world, learning a set of moral guidelines to live by, being exposed to ideas about jobs and other key choices in life, seeing the various possible routes one’s life might take, understanding the consequences of one’s actions, etc.

I: Can you describe the changes a person goes through from age 12 to 18?

S: I think they just try to figure themselves. I think closer to the age of 15, trying to discover who they are and by the time that they’re 18, I think they have a better understanding of who they are.

I: So they come out a different person?

S: Yeah. I’d say so. [suburban, female, 22]

You realize the best teacher in life is screwing up and making mistakes. The only way that your kids will become wise ... is by going out there and f’ing up and making their

own mistakes. That's the road to wisdom. [urban, male, 42]

This perspective is so natural that it takes some effort to recognize that the world of ideas, morals, learning, belief, intentions, motivation, will power, etc. has a more concrete, objective counterpart. This is the world of brains and hormones, mental and emotional “health,” the *capacity* to form lasting relationships, etc. In short, there is a “Materialist” perspective on young people’s development that guides the thinking of experts and many advocates, but is (relatively) absent from the default patterns of reasoning just described.⁴ We will use the term Developmental Process to refer to the more scientific, materialist view of adolescence.

Importantly, we do not suggest that narratives about morals and learning are *wrong* – only that they are incomplete and must be complemented with narratives and explanations about the Developmental Process.

The Physical Side of Adolescent Development

Note that thinking in terms of the Mentalist Bias does not mean that people ignore the physical changes that go along with adolescence. Everyone is very aware of the ways in which young people’s bodies change during this critical period, and this is a key part of Minnesotans’ understanding of what kids are going through.

But while people do mention rapid growth and the development of secondary sex characteristics, for example, they almost never refer to the physiological changes in the brain which are also occurring during this time. There is a strong dualism in average people’s thinking about young people and what they need – mind and body are seen as two very different dimensions of the developmental process.

Difficulty of Shifting to Materialist Perspective

To be fair, of course, much of the scientific research on adolescent brain development is relatively recent, and has not had the opportunity to spread to a wider public. But the more general observation is that the Developmental Process perspective – which includes topics that have been well studied for decades – is not one that lay Minnesotans naturally take. Because their default models concern the more subjective and abstract domains of thinking, learning, and morals, lay people may hear new information without really absorbing it. They may remember fragments of information they have heard in the news, but have no clear, solid, and established understandings that can help guide their thinking.

S: I guess it doesn't surprise me [that during teen years you are forming new neurons]. Does it have anything to do with the fact that you are still learning so much because

⁴ For more on the Mentalist-Materialist distinction, readers may refer to our earlier research, including "Moving the Public Beyond Familiar Understandings of ECD [Early Childhood Development]: Findings from TalkBack Testing of Simplifying Models," Aubrun & Grady, 2003.

those are the years that you are still so involved in school? Does that have anything to do with it, do they know?

I: I don't know.

S: Because that would make sense. You're learning so much. You've got to make more room in there. [urban, female, 26]

I: Do you think that brain development comes into this anywhere?

S: I suppose yes, it would, because the more opportunity they have, you know, the more they will try to learn, and the more they learn, the broader the spectrum gets, and the more information they have, they just / their minds tend to gear differently than somebody that's out, for instance, on a farm milking cows, and that's all they do day in and day out. [rural, female, 57]

Note that in the elicitations, 45 to 60-minute discussions during which people were asked many different types of questions about how adolescents develop, virtually no-one mentioned the brain before the researchers brought up the topic late in the interview.

Implications of the Mentalist Bias

The vessel-filling perspective is often a perfectly reasonable way of thinking about what happens as kids grow: learning a system of morals really is an important part of growing up, kids really do gain new knowledge and insights as they get older, and we really do use our knowledge to make choices that can be wise or unwise. Nonetheless, the Mentalist bias is significant because it obscures and distorts other important aspects of adolescence, which are more easily seen when we think of the person, or the mind, as an object which is being *constructed* throughout the developmental process, and which takes many years to achieve all the functions it will ultimately be capable of.

Judgment and consequences

Most people don't realize, for example, that in an important sense kids aren't *biologically* equipped to make adult judgments. Understanding long-term consequences and weighing complex sets of factors are beyond the capacities of the average 12-year-old for good developmental reasons. Kids of this age still have undeveloped brain architecture, particularly in areas used to make judgments. But because of the Mentalist bias, it is difficult for lay people to focus on this type of information as a central fact about young people—this is information which has no place in the default models of kids and adolescence.

I: How does a kid learn to make choices?

S: Just be responsible and, I don't know, it just kind of comes about.

I: *How does a kid learn responsibility?*

S: *I'm not sure actually. It just kind of happens.* [suburban, male, 24]

Well, my thought always was just to teach them about the morals, your morals and values and standards, and let them understand they can talk to you about pretty much anything, and then it's up to them to choose whether they're going to do the right thing or the wrong thing. [rural, female, 57]

Every moment counts

From the default Mentalist perspective, much of healthy development is about opportunity: Kids learn when there are opportunities to learn, and as long as there are enough of these opportunities (e.g. enough evenings and weekends spent with mom and dad) they will eventually take in the important lessons of life. If adolescence is viewed as an intense, ongoing *developmental process* however (more in line with the Materialist perspective), then it is easier to see that an “idle” afternoon or weekend day spent isolated in front of the TV is more than a wasted opportunity—it is an input to the developmental process, and not a healthy one.

Moralizing fills the “vacuum”

From the Mentalist perspective, it is easy to see young people as morally defective or inadequate adults. After all, they seem to resist adults’ attempts to instill responsibility in them, and they never seem to take the right factors into account when making decisions—even simple decisions, like how fast to drive (for those old enough to get behind the wheel).

Note again that this moral perspective is not “wrong,” but it leaves out a vital part of the story of young people, regarding their developmental capacities.

Lack of support for youth programs

Finally, if people have little or no developmental perspective, they are oblivious to one of the key arguments in favor of creating healthy settings, activities, and options for youth. The availability and quality of youth programs have important implications for young people’s development, yet even people who are generally supportive don’t tend to recognize their real value, and may even assert that the programs are nice but essentially unimportant.

INDIVIDUAL VS. SOCIAL UNDERSTANDINGS

Another critical dimension that distinguishes different ways of understanding young people and

their needs is between what we will refer to as the Individual view and the Social view. These perspectives shape people's understandings of a number of topics directly related to youth programs and their value—including the goals for young people's development, the best conditions for promoting healthy development, and the assignment of responsibility for creating those conditions.

The Predominant Perspective: Life Story of an Individual Teen

Minnesotans (and probably other Americans) tend strongly to think of young people as *individuals* who are in the process of developing their own abilities, knowledge, habits, strengths, etc. These personal attributes are seen as the keys to young people's future (individual) outcomes, including their success or failure in various spheres of life.

S: I think kids are going to turn out in spite of themselves, they're going to do fine by the time they wake up, unless they're a druggie.

I: It just takes them a while to wake up?

S: Yeah, it takes kids time to figure out where it's at.

I: How do they do that?

S: I don't know how they figure it out. The toughest one for us was our third one. He was the tall one in the class, people always expected too much. He didn't study – he didn't really skip school because he liked being in school, he liked the social aspect – but he didn't study. We told him that he had other people to think about besides himself. That didn't matter, and I think it just.../ I don't know what it takes. They just have to figure it out for themselves.

This Individual view is strongly dominant in American (including Minnesotan) culture, and it is inevitable that it should play out in people's thinking about teens. The pattern is partly a reflection of the American Individualist ethos—the moral view that individuals are and should be responsible for their own behavior and their own fates.

I: [Who is] responsible for how teens turn out?

S: I don't know. That's a very difficult question. I think the ultimate responsibility is on the teen.

While the Minnesotans that participated in the study did not tend towards extremes versions of this position, there is certainly a widespread default view that individuals are responsible for themselves.

A cognitive lens as well as a moral philosophy

More subtly, and perhaps more significantly, the Individual perspective is a pattern in how people *see and understand* teens—i.e. it is not just a belief about how a life should be led, it is also a cognitive lens which determines whether people can see the connections between teens and the broader community. That is, *the lack of discussion in the elicitations of meaningful connections between young people and the communities they live in* was just as striking as subjects' observations about individual teens' responsibility for themselves. (See further discussions of what is obscured by the model, later in this section.)

When people do recognize connections between teens and other people, these other people tend either to be members of the teen's nuclear family or the teen's peers (see the next two sections for more). In either case, connections to the broader community are largely absent from people's thinking.

“Family Bubble” effect

Interviews with Minnesotans revealed a widespread, default view (certainly shared by most Americans) in which young people's lives are strongly shaped by family life, and the family is largely responsible for determining their outcomes—regardless of “external” factors like money, opportunity, or the quality of life in a community. For example, many people see no role or a very weak role for community contributions to teens' moral growth.

S: [Moral development is] very important. Without moral development I guess you end up with that single-minded like “it's all about me” perspective ...

I: Is there a way for communities to contribute?

S: I think that is more of a family thing, like what you learn in your family, because I don't think it is necessarily the community's obligation to develop a child morally. ... I think it's more up to the parents to teach their kids right and wrong.

I: How do we learn about making choices?

S: That's probably also something you [do] more in house. Like you see what your parents do. You see the choices your parents make. I think that's why a lot of us tend to vote the way our parents do. [urban, female, 26]

This kind of thinking is especially predominant with respect to children younger than teenagers, but it is nevertheless still a strong default when it comes to lay people's thinking about kids in the age range to be helped by youth programs. In the default thinking of many people, the nuclear family is solely responsible for how a child turns out.

“Teen World”

Another striking (and somewhat contradictory) pattern in Minnesotans' discussion of young

people is that they are so often talked about as though they only interacted with others their own age, as though they occupied their own world separate from that of their families and communities. While young people are certainly thought of as social, the generation taken as a group seems to be isolated and self-isolating by nature. (Naturally this is more true for teenagers than for slightly younger kids.)

I: Can the community contribute something to moral development?

S: I would say so, yeah. ... being able to offer group community activities, things like that, giving them places to interact with each other, with other kids. I think that's an opportunity for reinforcement... [rural, female, 57]

As previous research has demonstrated, this pattern of thinking about kids is reinforced by TV representations of teens, which tend to depict them in a way that suggests all their important actions and interactions relate to others in their own age group.

Note that, partly due to the media, this “age segregation” seems natural and even inevitable. But in fact, it is a phenomenon which has appeared and increased over the past several generations in American life—ages were much less segregated a hundred years ago (in schools, homes, and elsewhere), and are much less segregated in many other cultures today.

While the notion of a “teen world” offers a slightly wider understanding of social connection than the Family Bubble, advocates recognize the problematic nature of teens spending time with only their own age group day-in and day-out. They see the relative isolation of young people in their own circles as an obstacle to their integration into the surrounding Community. If average Minnesotans see it as *natural* for young people to mainly interact with others their own age, then this unfortunate situation is more likely to persist.

Important relationships between youth and community obscured

The “atomistic” view of young people described in this section obscures two key facts about young people and their development:

- the role of the community in adolescent development (as both an influence and an ultimate goal), and
- the benefits to the community from the growth of solid, decent teenagers.

The need for social integration

Some interview subjects did explicitly acknowledge ways in which young people benefit from interacting with a range of people:

[Teens] need a large community, to tell you the truth, because everybody brings something different to the table and kids need all of that to be rounded. ... They need

to meet a lot of people of diverse backgrounds because if you don't, you get caught in one area and you don't understand other people. [urban, female, 38]

But even this type of observation focuses on the different individuals that a young person can benefit from meeting, rather than the need to connect with groups and social structures. People typically don't see that one of the key dimensions of adolescence is the young person's integration into the community, their "enmeshment" into the social fabric that we all depend on for various aspects of our quality of life—from security to the creation of institutions like schools and churches.

Youth programs can help meet exactly these needs in young people's lives, and if Minnesotans don't fully grasp these aspects of the programs *a key source of motivation is not being tapped.*

How communities benefit when teens develop in a healthy way

The overwhelming emphasis in Minnesotans' discussion of youth programs is on their usefulness to teens, on what teens learn or get. Very few of the interview subjects mentioned how the rest of us benefit if young people grow up in a healthier way. To be fair, of course, the conversations were primarily framed as conversations about what young people need. Yet there were many opportunities for interview subjects to reflect on the broader value of providing young people with situations and activities that promote their healthy development.

This is another key avenue of motivation that is currently untapped—people do want teenagers to develop into adults who can get along with others and make their communities better places to live rather than worse.

I'm 72 years old. ... I get a great deal of enjoyment out of seeing kids develop and go down the right path and be healthy and happy and interact with each other and with me. ... Youth today, I'm just a piece of furniture to them. No acknowledgment, no hi, good bye. There is no socialization going on between them and anybody older it seems. I would benefit from that standpoint. I'd have a good feeling of being able to connect with them, if they were being educated in that manner. [urban, male, 72]

So if we're not putting anything into them, all we're getting out is a me, me, me, because they can't think beyond themselves and their own personal gratification and this here will affect these people over here. That there will affect these people over there ... They're not being taught that, so ... all [they] see is me, myself, and I. [urban, female, 38]

Youth (including out-of-school-time) programs are partly about creating this type of person, and Minnesotans typically don't appreciate that aspect of the programs.

The following exchange is an example of “the exception that proves the rule”: this subject is one of the few who realizes that youth programs might include opportunities for young people to do volunteering, and she also has a greater grasp than others that such programs contribute to socialization.

I: What do the teens get out of those things like sports or [volunteer programs like] Hospitality House?

S: They get a sense of self because someone is encouraging them. Someone is dealing with them outside of the family unit. They learn social skills. Whether they realize it or not, it is still a socialization process, a way to learn to win, a way to learn to lose. It's all socialization that doesn't happen naturally anymore... [urban, female, 22]

While this person's thinking may still be slanted towards a view of what the *individual teen* can gain from the volunteering experience, the idea of socialization provides a natural bridge to a key point: We all benefit when young people are given the opportunity to develop into good neighbors and citizens.

* * * * *

It is interesting to note two groups of people seem to have a stronger sense of the Social side of adolescent development and of OST programs. These are African-Americans, who tend to have a more socially-connected perspective and who are more aware of the dangers of community dysfunction and disintegration, and senior citizens, who have seen first-hand the ways in which social bonds have weakened in their communities over the years. Advocates in this issue area may wish to consider how these and similar groups can serve as either audiences or spokespeople for messages about the value of OST programs.

DIRECTIONS AND MENTORS

To illustrate more clearly how the Individual and Mentalist biases shape people's thinking about young people and their development, we will consider in this section two topics which are central to the issue: the idea of young people choosing a “direction” in life, and the idea that kids benefit from interactions with mentors.

Direction

Minnesotans, like other Americans, often look at themselves and their lives in terms of direction and movement. Life itself is a journey, and the many activities we pursue may be seen as motion towards various goals. This model is often applied to young people and their development.

They have to know what to do and what not to do, be taught. Again, they need some direction. [suburban, male, 50]

If most young people do end up finding a direction, some struggle and are “lost” or “roaming.”

Some have jobs, some roam, some are looking for relationships, family relationships, bonding. It is real diverse. A lot of kids just don't know what to do with themselves. [urban, female, 38]

I think too many people, even smart people with college educations, sometimes bumble through situations in life and you just don't really have a road map, or what the hell am I supposed to be doing. [urban, male, 42]

Although the notion of Direction is primarily Individual-based, and primarily Mentalist, as was discussed in the previous section, this metaphor is so basic and central that it probably cannot be displaced from people's thinking about young people. On the other hand, the metaphor is compatible with some useful perspectives. For instance, adults who help young people make good decisions are naturally understood as “guides.”

You need to, I think, be able to see viable options for your life, and... there's a lot of people I've talked to who sort of feel like they got off track in their teenage years. A lot of that is because they didn't have dependable people in their lives and they didn't have models of various things that they could do. [urban, female, 29]

There are also ways in which the Direction metaphor is compatible with a more Developmental and Society-based understanding of what kids need, and what youth programs can give them. See the Recommendations section that follows.

Mentors

A number of the people we spoke with expressed the important role that adults outside the family can play in a young person's life. For example, they mentioned young people's need for an “outlet”—someone outside the family who listens and is supportive.

[Adults who are not parents] offer an outlet that is based on unconditional things. ... People outside of that family unit, they can offer an unconditional but nonjudgmental perspective. ... [A comment from such a person] is not coming from someone who has got a vested interest in it. [urban, female, 38]

S: Sometimes they need another outlet...

I: Outside the family.

S: Yeah. ...it would be somebody ... who they consciously know is interested in their welfare. ... just to have that other support post there. [urban, male, 42]

On the other hand, the most common conception of mentors is something like a literal teacher or tutor. The idea of mentors as teachers, or even role models, is an excellent example of a Mentalist understanding of development. If growing up is mainly about “filling the vessel” – i.e. exposing kids to the right knowledge and ideas, as opposed to healthy brain development, for example—then mentors provide both direct “teaching,” and examples to follow.

They should have other role models besides parents. ... If they've got, like I say, some good shepherding, some good role models... then I don't think they have real traumatic changes going on. [urban, male, 72]

I: How do we learn about making choices?

S: Again, role models. Imitating parents, imitating older siblings. [urban, male, 72]

Missing from this understanding of a mentor's role is that the relationship itself, between the younger and older person—the existence of this type of bond—is one of the key ways in which mentors help. The interactions between mentor and adolescent create conditions for healthy growth.

Some lay people do see this:

[We should make sure teens are exposed to] real people who are willing to be real with them, not just talking trash and saying what the kid wants to hear. Real relationships showing them real relationships between people. [urban, female, 38]

This understanding, that mentors are about practicing and developing the capacity for social connection, is one that can be built on in materials that promote youth programs.

Another piece often missing from lay people's understanding of mentors is a sense of how others besides the “mentee” benefit from the relationship—including the mentor and the broader community. One exceptional subject, with experience in volunteer mentoring pointed to these benefits in the following exchange:

I: It sounds like [mentoring programs are] a community building kind of thing?

S: Yes, well, yeah it could be. Obviously community, if you've got teens involved in

things like that, obviously community is going to benefit because those kids that need those mentors are going to get what they need.

I: And then maybe they would do the same.

S: Exactly. [urban, female, 26]

In this sense, mentors are links between various members of the community—and youth programs are partly about establishing those links.

REFRAMING DIRECTIONS

In this section we explore a number of directions emerging from the elicitation research that advocates may wish to consider and explore further. These initial ideas, subsequently refined, figure in additional FrameWorks research devoted to this topic.

Terminology

As we have already pointed out, the term “out-of-school time” is awkward and difficult to understand. It is fine for insiders who understand the reference, but if advocates want to build public momentum, they need to use (and possibly test) terms that lay people will find easy and helpful. Familiar terms like “youth program” and “kids activities” are easily understood and not off-putting, and even longer phrases like “programs for kids during non-school times” are clarifying, even if they are not useful in names and titles. If advocates feel that there are important concepts which these terms do not capture, or that new terms are needed for other reasons, it will make sense to devote serious attention to developing and assessing these terms. They will probably be most helpful if they help convey and reinforce central concepts, such as the idea that the programs offer structure; promote development; and help build connections, social integration and community.

Promoting Developmental and Community-based Perspectives

Youth programs are about much more than keeping young people out of harm's way, giving them something constructive to do, or even giving them new knowledge about the world. The chief recommendations coming out of the elicitation research are that communications about the programs do more to explain how they promote Development, and how they promote relationships between young people and the community. By emphasizing aspects of the programs which are currently underappreciated by Minnesotans, advocates can tap into new sources of motivation, and can give lay people new and helpful understandings about why the programs are so important.

To make this case, advocates would need to emphasize points like the following:

- Adolescence is a process of (objective, material) Development, including the continuing growth of brain architecture, especially in areas relating to judgement and understanding consequences.
- One key developmental goal of adolescence is to integrate young people into social structures that make up communities.
- Communities (and, more generally, others besides the young people themselves) stand to benefit significantly from programs that promote healthy development.

Working with the Direction/Lifestory model

One natural way of introducing these new understandings may be to build them into models that are already familiar, using them to enrich these models and make them more specific.

Moving towards the community

Advocates can emphasize that as young people find their “Direction,” well-designed programs can help ensure that young people are moving towards the community and toward social integration. Rather than just finding their own individual path (or failing to), development should be understood as movement into social connection with the rest of us. The programs themselves help young people establish connections and bring them within the community fold.

Moving along the Developmental path

The Direction metaphor usually does not take into account a young person’s limited biological and psychological capacity for understanding complex consequences and making judgments. It would be very accurate to say that the most important journey that young people take during adolescence is the Developmental journey that transforms them, in a very concrete sense, from children into adults. This is a journey that youth programs promote, and that advocates can help the public grasp.

Unifying the Developmental and Social perspectives

The Developmental and Community perspectives apply to young people of all ages, including infants, but they come together in a powerful way for adolescents. Adolescence is the time when (material, biological) Development depends on and leads to connection with the Community.

This mutually reinforcing linkage between healthy development and connection to community can also help advocates create effective explanations. For instance, consider two teens of the same age, one of whom seems to be “on the right track,” and the other not: People might wonder how kids at the same developmental stage can be so different in terms of their judgment. One answer is that the successful teen is in band, on the soccer team, and reads to the child next door on a regular basis. Put simply, **community connection reinforces healthy development.**

A More Concrete Notion of Investment

Many of our Minnesota interview subjects independently mentioned that it is important to “invest” in kids. While this is obviously a productive take on the issue, it is not enough to help lay people past the other cognitive hurdles discussed in the report – the same people who mentioned investment often had no clear idea of what youth programs really offer to kids.

On the other hand, if the notion of investment can be made more concrete and specific through the addition of the Developmental and Community-based frames, it may take on a richer and more motivating meaning. It is important to invest in kids' healthy development, in integrating kids into the community, and so on. As a responsible society, we need to spend the dollars that are going towards kids in the ways that will be most effective at reaching these critical goals.

Producing “Decent” and “Solid” Kids

One of the common ways of understanding adolescence is that some kids become successful winners, and others don't. There are two models, based on Developmental and Community-based perspectives, which may be very motivating in ways that the “individual winner” model is not:

- A “Solid” kid is emotionally healthy, well-adjusted, stable, and ready to deal with life. These are important Developmental goals.
- A “Decent” kid is one who treats others well and makes the community a better place to live.

Previous FrameWorks research has established that adults shift to a more positive and accurate understanding of adolescence when they see images of kids involved in volunteer activities, sports teams and other pursuits such as playing an instrument in a school group. This is presumably not because it helps the adults see that teens can grow up to be wealthy or powerful winners. Instead, it is because these images promote the sense of decent and solid kids – a sense which can be reinforced through promotion of Developmental and Community frames.

Every moment counts.

One simple message that follows from the Developmental perspective is that there are no moments that don't count towards development. Growth, either healthy or unhealthy, is an ongoing process during the adolescent years, and it makes sense to do as much as we can to ensure that kids are spending time in settings that promote healthy development. This doesn't necessarily mean doing anything “productive” (such as studying or practicing an instrument). Just as importantly, kids should spend time developing the capacity for social connection, not just with peers but with people of all ages.

Youth Programs as extensions of the Community

It is natural for people to conceive of OST programs as “islands” of safety, connection and stimulation for kids. Instead, it may be more helpful to frame them as pieces in the quilt or patchwork of connections that makes up the community. Investing in these programs is investing in extending the structured space of Community, like filling in holes in a fabric.

APPENDIX: THE COGNITIVE APPROACH

This appendix discusses the assumptions and principles that form the basis for the “cognitive approach” taken by Cultural Logic.

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. They are revealed most clearly in the language and reasoning a 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 (*The Development of Cognitive Anthropology*, 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. Cultural theories are closely related to public discourse and, because they are explicit understandings, to rhetorical positions adopted for purposes of argument.

A cultural model, by contrast, consists of a set of largely implicit assumptions that allows a person to reason about and solve a problem. A cultural model specifies relationships between a given concept and others—specific domains (e.g., School) are typically connected to broader cultural assumptions (e.g., understandings about Achievement or Growth). Cultural models are associated with private understanding and individual reasoning.

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 “School” is 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 “weather”—i.e., some of the cultural models used to reason about any given topic 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.

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 relative 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).

THE AUTHORS

Cultural Logic, founded 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 impact. Working with a network of experts and partner organizations including the FrameWorks Institute and the Rockridge Institute, we focus primarily on research relating to public interest issues.

Cultural Logic investigates the shared understandings—*cultural models*—that underlie opinion and behavior, applying findings from the cognitive and social sciences to generate analyses of how people think and talk about specific cultural domains—such as teenagers, global warming or health insurance. Research techniques include cognitive interviews, rapid ethnographic assessments, “TalkBack” testing of language and framing, and analysis of media and other public discourse.

Cultural Logic’s research has been presented at the Aspen Institute’s Wye River Conference Center, the White House Conference on Teenagers, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund’s Pocantico Conference Center, the Benton Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the W. T. Grant Foundation, among other forums.

Axel Aubrun, Ph.D., cofounder of Cultural Logic, is a psychological anthropologist whose research and publications take an interdisciplinary approach to problems of communication and motivation. Aubrun has been a lecturer in cultural anthropology at the University of California, and manager of public relations for an advertising firm in San Diego.

Michele Emanatian, Ph.D., is a linguist whose research and publications center on the relationship among metaphor, culture, the body, and reasoning, in English as well as non-Western languages. Emanatian has taught linguistics at Macalester College and is also a teacher of English as a Second Language.

Joseph Grady, Ph.D., cofounder of Cultural Logic, is a linguist whose academic research and publications focus on the relationship between metaphor and other aspects of thought and communication. Grady has taught linguistics at Georgetown University and the University of Maryland, and also spent a number of years as a consultant helping to analyze and develop brand names.