

Communicating about Physical Activity

Research Methods and Sample Composition

This supplement provides detailed information on the research that informs FrameWorks' strategic brief on physical activity. Below, we outline the research conducted with experts and members of the public that provides the evidence base for the brief, describing the methods used and sample composition.¹

The Field Story of Physical Activity

To develop an effective strategy for communicating about an issue, it's necessary to identify a set of key ideas to get across. For this project, these ideas were gathered from researchers and practitioners in the field of physical activity. FrameWorks compiled the list of interviewees in collaboration with the National Physical Activity Plan Alliance (NPAP Alliance) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). To explore the field's knowledge about core principles of physical activity, FrameWorks researchers conducted 8 one-hour interviews with researchers and practitioners who have expertise across the different areas that comprise physical activity. Interviews were conducted between July and August 2019 and with participants' permission, were recorded and transcribed for analysis. To refine the field story, FrameWorks conducted a one-hour-long feedback session on a preliminary version of the field story with approximately 10 researchers and practitioners.

Expert interviews consisted of a series of probing questions designed to capture expert understanding of what physical activity is, what factors influence engaging in physical activity, what the outcomes of being physically active are, and what can be done to increase the public's engagement in physical activity. In each interview, the researcher conducting the interview used a series of prompts and hypothetical scenarios to challenge experts to explain their



research, experience, and perspective; break down complicated relationships; and simplify complex concepts. Interviews were semi-structured in the sense that, in addition to pre-set questions, FrameWorks researchers repeatedly asked for elaboration and clarification while encouraging experts to expand on concepts they identified as particularly important.

Analysis employed a basic grounded theory approach.² Common themes that emerged in each interview and across the sample were identified and inductively categorized.³ This procedure resulted in a refined set of themes, which researchers supplemented with a review of materials from relevant literature.

A draft of the field story was shared and discussed during the feedback session with prominent members of the field in August 2019. This session included a mix of researchers and practitioners who had already been interviewed and some who were new to the process, who were identified in collaboration with NPAP Alliance and the CDC. Based on this session, FrameWorks researchers refined and finalized the field story.

Public Understandings of Physical Activity

The primary goal of this research was to understand the many and deeply held assumptions, or cultural models, that the public use to make sense of physical activity and related issues. Cultural models are cognitive shortcuts to understanding: ways of interpreting, organizing, and making meaning of the world around us that are shaped through years of experience and expectations, and by the beliefs and values embedded in our culture.⁴ These are ways of thinking that are available to all members of a culture, although different models may be activated at different times. In this project, our goal was to explore the models available in American culture, but it is important to acknowledge that individuals also have access to other models from other cultures in which they participate.

In exploring cultural models, we are looking to identify *how* people think, rather than *what* they think. Cultural models research differs from public opinion research, which documents people's surface-level responses to questions. By understanding the deep, often tacit assumptions that structure how people think about physical activity, we are able to understand the obstacles that prevent people from accessing the communications goals described in the field story. We are also able to identify opportunities that communicators can take advantage of that can help expand the public's understanding, attitudes, and support for policies supported by the field.

To identify the cultural models that the public use to think about issues related to physical activity, FrameWorks researchers conducted a set of interviews with members of the public. FrameWorks conducted 20 in-person, in-depth interviews in Santa Fe, NM; Charleston, SC; and Kansas City, MO between August and September 2019. These locations were chosen for regional variation. FrameWorks conducted 6–8 interviews with members of the public in each location.

Cultural models interviews are one-on-one, semi-structured interviews lasting approximately two hours. These interviews are designed to allow researchers to capture broad sets of assumptions, or the cultural models, that participants use to make sense of physical activity and what needs to happen to better support it in the US. Interviews consisted of a series of open-ended questions covering participants' thinking about physical activity in broad terms, before focusing more on related issues. The interviews asked the public to talk about how they understood physical activity, the influences and effects of physical activity, the solutions to getting more people to be physically active, the social determinants of physical activity, and some terminology (e.g., "active living"). Researchers approached each interview with the same interview guide, but allowed participants to determine the direction and nature of the discussion. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, with participants' written consent.

All participants were recruited by a professional marketing firm and selected to represent variation along several dimensions. For all participants, this included age, gender, race and ethnicity, educational background, residential location, political views (as self-reported during the screening process), and family situation (e.g., married or single; with or without children).

The sample of members of the public included 12 women and eight men. Of the 20 participants, 12 identified as white, four as Black or African American, one as Latinx, one as other, and two as biracial. Eight participants described their political views as "middle of the road," three as "liberal," four as "leaning liberal," two as "conservative," and three as "leaning conservative." Eight participants reported living in an urban area, eight in a suburban area, and four in a rural area. Participants ranged in age from 20–71. Education was used as a proxy for socioeconomic status; nine participants had some college; seven had college degrees; and four had graduate degrees. Eleven were single and nine were married. Twelve had children and eight did not have children.

To analyze the interviews, researchers used analytical techniques from cognitive and linguistic anthropology to examine how participants understood issues related to physical activity.⁵ First, researchers identified common ways of talking across the sample to reveal assumptions, relationships, logical reasoning, and connections that were commonly made but taken for granted throughout an individual's talk and across the set of interviews. In short, the analysis involved discerning patterns in both what participants said (i.e., how they related, explained, and understood things) and what they did not say (i.e., assumptions and implied relationships). In many cases, analysis revealed conflicting models that people relied on to make sense of the same issue. To ensure consistency, researchers then went back to transcripts to revisit differences and explore questions that arose through this comparison. As part of this process, researchers compared emerging findings about public understandings of physical activity to findings from previous cultural models research, using this as a check to make sure that they had not missed or misunderstood any important models. Researchers then came back together to make sure their analysis was consistent with FrameWorks' existing body of research and arrived at a synthesized set of findings.

Analysis was centered on ways of understanding physical activity that were shared across participants. Cultural models research is designed to identify common ways of thinking that can be identified across a sample. It is not designed to identify differences in the understandings of various demographic, ideological, or regional groups, which would be an inappropriate use of the method and its sampling frame. While there is no hard-and-fast rule about the percentage used to identify what counts as “shared,” models reported are typically found in the large majority of interviews. Models found in a smaller percentage of interviews are only reported if there is a clear reason why these models only appeared in a limited set of interviews (e.g., a particular issue was only explored in some interviews but whenever it was discussed, the model arose in participants’ talk).

In summary, FrameWorks researchers examined the similarities and differences between how the field and public understand physical activity. This research sets the stage for testing new communication tools and strategies in the next phase of research.

Endnotes

1. This research received IRB approval from the University of Michigan (HUM00150845).
2. Glaser, B. & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research (observations)*. Chicago, IL: Aldine; Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
3. The field story was developed through a collaboration between Dr. Dan Busso, Director of Research at the FrameWorks Institute and Dr. Michelle Segar from the University of Michigan.
4. Shore, B. (1998). *Culture in mind: Cognition, culture, and the problem of meaning*. Oxford University Press.
5. Quinn, N. (Ed.). (2005). *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

About FrameWorks

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