Communicating about Child Athlete Wellbeing

Research Methods and Sample Composition

This supplement provides detailed information on the research that informs FrameWorks' strategic brief on reframing child athlete wellbeing. Below, we outline the research conducted with researchers, advocates, and practitioners and with members of the public that provides the evidence base for the brief, describing the methods used and sample composition.

The Field Story of Child Athlete Wellbeing

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 garnered from researchers, advocates, and practitioners in the field of child protection in elite sports. FrameWorks researchers conducted nine one-hour interviews with researchers, advocates, and practitioners in the field of child protection in elite sports, along with a review of relevant literature on this issue. Interviews were conducted between March and April 2020 and, with participants' permission, were recorded and transcribed for analysis. FrameWorks compiled the list of interviewees in collaboration with the Oak Foundation. To refine the field story, FrameWorks conducted a 90-minute feedback session with researchers, advocates, and practitioners in May 2020.

Interviews with members of the field consisted of a series of probing questions designed to capture their understandings about child athletes and their participation in elite sports; what child athletes need; the risks that child athletes face when participating in elite sports especially the risk of abuse; and what should be done to prevent and address these risks. In each interview, the researcher conducting the interview used a series of prompts and hypothetical scenarios for members of the field to explain their research, experience, and perspectives; break down complicated relationships; and simplify complex concepts.

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Interviews were semi-structured in the sense that, in addition to pre-set questions, FrameWorks researchers repeatedly asked for elaboration and clarification and encouraged members of the field to expand on concepts they identified as particularly important.

Analysis employed a basic grounded theory approach.[1] A FrameWorks researcher identified and inductively categorized common themes that emerged in each interview and across the sample. This procedure resulted in a refined set of themes, which researchers supplemented with a review of materials from relevant literature.

Public Understandings of Child Athlete Wellbeing

A primary goal of this research was to capture the various commonly held assumptions, or cultural models, that members of the public use to make sense of child athletes, elite sports, and child athlete wellbeing, and issues related to this topic. 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.[2] These are ways of thinking that are available to all members of a culture, although different models may be activated at different times. Individuals belong to multiple cultures, each of which include multiple models (e.g., people participate in public cultures at multiple levels, including national and subgroup cultures). In this project, our goal was to explore the models available in American public 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 findings thus differ 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 child athletes, elite sports, and child athlete wellbeing, we are able to understand the obstacles that prevent people from accessing the field's perspective described in the field story. We are also able to identify opportunities that communicators can take advantage of—existing ways of thinking that can help people arrive at a fuller understanding of the issue.

To identify the cultural models that the public uses to think about issues related to child athletes, elite sports, and child athlete wellbeing, FrameWorks researchers conducted a set of interviews with members of the public. FrameWorks researchers conducted 20 interviews over Zoom with members of the public from across the US in June and July 2020. A diverse sample of participants was recruited, with variation along key dimensions including race and ethnicity and socioeconomic status (see below).

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 cultural models, that participants use to make sense of a concept or topic

area—in this case, issues related to child athletes, elite sports, and child athlete wellbeing. Interviews consisted of a series of open-ended questions covering participants' thinking about children and sports in broad terms, before focusing more specifically on their thoughts on child athletes, elite sports, and child athlete wellbeing. The interviews touched on what "elite sports" means, what being a child athlete involves, what "wellbeing" means for child athletes, what shapes becoming a child athlete, the effects of being a child athlete, and what can be done to better support child athletes and their wellbeing. Researchers approached each interview with this set of topics to cover 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, income, employment status, 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 nine women, nine men, and two non-binary participants. Of the 20 participants, eight identified as white, four as Black, four as Hispanic or Latinx, three as Asian, and one as Native American. Nine participants reported a total annual household income of less than $49,000, eight reported an income of $50,000–99,999, and three reported an income of $100,000 or more. Five participants had a high school degree or less; five had completed some college; two had completed a vocational or trade school; five had graduated from college; and three had postgraduate degrees. Nine participants reported being employed full-time; six participants reported being employed part-time; one participant reported being a full-time student and another a part-time student; one participant reported being a homemaker, one participant reported being unemployed, and one did not respond. Eleven participants were 18–39 years old and nine participants were 40-60 years old. Four participants described their political views as "conservative", three as "independent", two as "middle of the road", five as "liberal", and six as "other".

To analyze the interviews, researchers used analytical techniques from cognitive and linguistic anthropology to examine how participants understood issues related to children in sports, child athletes, and child athlete wellbeing.[3] First, researchers identified common ways of talking across the sample to reveal assumptions, relationships, logical steps, 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 brought to bear on the same issue. In such cases, one conflicting way of understanding was typically found to be dominant over the other, in that it more consistently and deeply shaped participants' thinking (in other words, participants generally drew on this model with greater frequency and relied more heavily on this model in arriving at conclusions). To ensure consistency, researchers met after an initial round of coding and analysis, comparing and processing initial findings. 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 to the 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 and arrived at a synthesized set of findings.

Analysis was centered on ways of understanding that were shared across participants. Cultural models research is designed to identify common ways of thinking that can be identified across a sample. While there is no hard and fast rule 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 reported only if there is a clear reason why these models only appeared in a limited set of interviews (e.g., the model reflected the thinking of a particular subgroup of people).

While a sample of 20 participants is too small to ensure the sample is perfectly *statistically* representative, its demographic variability is adequate to ensure the identified patterns in thinking are shared across different groups within the United States. While larger sample sizes are needed to investigate variability *within* a population, or to allow for statistically significant comparisons between groups, the goal of cultural models analysis is to describe common ways of understanding within a population. As a result, for cultural models research, sample size is determined by the concept of *saturation*: A sample is considered to be of a satisfying size when new data do not shed any further light on underlying patterns of thinking within a population. For this project, our analyses confirmed that a sample size of 20 interviews was sufficient to reach a point of saturation as far as cultural models of child athletes and child athlete wellbeing in the United States were concerned.

Endnotes

1. Glaser, B. & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research (observations)*. Chicago: Aldine; Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
2. Shore, B. (1998). *Culture in mind: Cognition, culture, and the problem of meaning*. Oxford University Press.
3. Quinn, N. (Ed.). (2005). *Finding culture in talk: A collection of methods*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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January 2021

Please follow standard APA rules for citation, with the FrameWorks Institute as publisher.

FrameWorks Institute (2021). *Communicating about Child Athlete Wellbeing: Research Methods and Sample Composition*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

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