Strategic Frame Analysis™ Approach: Disciplinary Influences

For several decades, many disciplines have embraced the study of framing as an important analytic tool for understanding processes of human cognition as well as the workings of social life. Disciplines such as anthropology, cognitive sciences, linguistics, political science, communications and sociology all contribute both theoretically (how do we define frames and framing?) and methodologically (how do we study them?) to the strategic frame analysis™ approach. Frame analysis is a rich field of inquiry because of the fusion of disciplinary approaches. These various disciplines differ, however, in the emphasis they place on the location of the processes and effects of frames and framing: at the level of cognition, in a given text like a newspaper article, or as a part of larger national or even global discourses. The strategic frame analysis™ tool kit is unique in that our research approach emphasizes all locations where frames and framing can occur. The following paragraphs show how each discipline contributes to the strategic frame analysis™ approach.

Anthropology

The subfield of cognitive anthropology is the primary area where anthropologists study frames and framing. Cognitive anthropologists use many words that are synonymous with or very similar to frames including schema, scripts, scenes and scenarios (Alverson 1991; Casson 1983; D'Andrade 1995; Holland and Quinn 1987; Schank and Abelson 1977). Scholars working in this tradition understand frames as mental constructs that help people make sense of the world around them, but as anthropologists, they emphasize the socially shared and culturally constructed aspects of frames.

The strategic frame analysis™ approach draws on anthropological work on framing in two very important ways. First, cognitive anthropologists have developed incredibly sophisticated methods to elicit cognitive frames, such as in-depth interviews. We utilize these methods to identify current use of frames in specific social issues such as race or early child development. We use these analyses to develop new ways of talking about an issue that may shift unproductive framing. Second, the strategic frame analysis™ approach emphasizes the “cultural part of cognition” (D'Andrade 1981). Through our research, we demonstrate that people in a social group share ways of understanding the world that are deeply connected to a specific cultural context.

Linguistics

One of the primary ways that scholars are able to elicit how frames work is by analyzing how people construct meaning through discourse. Scholarship on framing in linguistics is often traced to Noam Chomsky’s (1957) work *Syntactic Structures*, which proposed that language is largely wired into our genes. This proposal was in direct opposition to the dominant theoretical
perspective of the time, Behaviorism, which held that language learning was shaped by
conditioning and imitation. Chomsky’s innovations in linguistics inspired a great deal of
research, across disciplines, into how language develops and is structured. He may arguably be
cited as having given rise to a particular subfield of linguistics, Cognitive Linguistics, which has
made major contributions to the study of framing. Cognitive Linguistics arose out of several
prominent linguists’ dissatisfaction with their field’s preoccupation with research on linguistic
structures and syntax (a la Chomsky), to the detriment of exploration into the construction and
organization of meaning. One of the fathers of this movement, George Lakoff, argued that
meaning must be central to the study of language. In one of his seminal works, Metaphors We
Live By (1980), Lakoff and colleague Mark Johnson argue that metaphor constitutes the basis of
our conceptual system. In other words, metaphors are not just linguistic tools, but are instead
expressions of the very nature of our thinking.

The strategic frame analysis™ approach draws heavily on the attention to metaphors
given by cognitive linguistics. With our research, we identify metaphors that people use to make
sense of an issue and demonstrate how those metaphors may promote different considerations
about social problems. We also conduct research on how to metaphorically express complex
social problems so that they are easier to understand for the public. FrameWorks develops
“simplifying models,” which distill expert knowledge into a “simplified,” metaphorical
explanation that allows the public to understand what experts understand about the causes of and
solutions to particular social problems.

Cognitive Psychology

The origins of Cognitive Psychology also owe a lot to Chomsky’s nativist theories of
language, which were a direct assault on the rein of Behaviorism at the time (which holds that all
of psychology can be reduced to the study of observable behaviors, without the need to consider
internal mental states). Cognitive Psychology, to the contrary, studies the internal mental
processes that underlie our behaviors such as perception, memory, decision making, problem
solving and other learning processes.

More specifically related to framing is the work of those who study social-cognition, or
how social knowledge is constructed and processed. The Swiss biologist Jean Piaget proposed
the concept of “schema” as the building block of thought. Schema are mental models that
represent a person’s general understanding of objects or events; they are conceptual categories
and function essentially as categorical rules that allow us to interpret incoming information
without having to treat all incoming information as new or novel. Schema guide our
interpretations and expectations so that we can process information quickly

One important lesson that FrameWorks takes from research on social cognition and
schema is that people bring their own interpretive schema to social issues, and people base their
judgments about issues on the most accessible or available schema. This is precisely why the
Strategic Frame Analysis™ approach empirically investigates which schema or mental models
are being activated when individuals make judgments or evaluations about social problems.
Certainly how the news frames a social problem, emphasizing certain considerations over others,
can have a further effect on which mental models will be most available to most people when
making judgments about social issues (see Zaller, 1992).
Political Science

Political scientists typically understand frames in terms of competing perspectives on a given political phenomenon. Kinder and Nelson (2005) contend that “frames live inside the mind; they are cognitive structures that help citizens make sense of politics” (103). Like other social scientists, such as communications and sociology, work on framing in political science tends to emphasize public manifestations of frames. Political scientists are, in general, concerned with how and why different actors, such as politicians or media analysts, create frames and struggle over the meaning of political events. They analyze how certain groups can be more successful at framing issues than others (James 2001; Riker 1986). And finally, political scientists are interested in how frames can impact public opinion and policy outcomes (Gilliam and Iyengar 2000; Gilliam et al. 1996; Iyengar 1991; Iyengar 2005).

Policy outcomes, as emphasized by political scientists, is very important to the strategic frame analysis™ approach to communications. FrameWorks researchers study how existing frames shape public support for certain policies and what can be done to shift the public conversation about those policies. Political scientists, along with other disciplines, typically analyze the media to identify the frames in play and test the impact of these media frames on the public’s policy choices. They are able to accomplish these tasks through public opinion polls as well as content analysis of media and other forms of public political discourse. These are very important methodological contributions to the strategic frame analysis™ toolkit.

Communications Theory

Scholars in communication argue that “framing refers to the way events and issues are organized and made sense of, especially by media, media professionals, and their audiences” (Reese, Gandy and Grant 2001: 7). Communications scholars show that framing is a selection process by which parts of perceived reality are made more salient in a form of communication, like the media. Frames promote “a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman 1993). Identifying frames in the media are crucial for understanding how audiences understand a given phenomenon.

Emphasis on the power and centrality of the media to shape how people understand the world is the major contribution of communications theory to the strategic frame analysis™ approach. Communications scholars, in concert with other disciplines, have developed both quantitative and qualitative content analysis strategies to analyze all types of media, from television shows to newspapers, to blogs. Content analysis methods employed by communication scholars inform FrameWorks’ approach to studying media frames.

Sociology

Most accounts of the origin of scholarly studies of framing in sociology point to Erving Goffman’s (1974) work on the subject. He defined frames as “schemata of interpretation” that allow people “to locate, perceive, identify and label” what happens in their own lives and the outside world (21). Sociological approaches to framing focus on what parts of our social world “activate” frames in our minds as well as the creation of frames in the public sphere. In general, sociologists, with others, tend to study groups and institutions that frame public issues. They
look at how issues are constructed and made meaningful to people (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Gamson 1992). While sociologists study framing in the media and in politics, framing became a central theoretical tool in the sociological study of social movements. Social movement scholars seek to understand how, why and when people become part of collective movements and what kind of frames inspire everyday people to organize for social change (Benford and Snow 2000; Gamson 2006; McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996; Polletta and Jasper 2001).

FrameWorks interest in the social movements literature allows us to show how people working together can construct new meanings about the world and how issue advocates can effect change on issues for which there are entrenched default frames. Sociologists of social movements emphasize how frames can assist coalition building and growth of certain movements through effective frames. These are important lessons that we impart to advocates about how they can garner public support for their causes.

Works Cited


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