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Communication, contextualization & cognition: Patterns & processes of frames' influence on people's interpretations of the EU constitution

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VIII

(Re-)framing framing

As every research program, also framing research selects some salient aspects out of the complex universe of relevant phenomena and makes these its main concern. Seen from the knoll where the framing researchers mounted their easel, the world is composed of uncounted issues liable to change in meaning when embedded within different context. Copying fascinating context structures and their effects onto their canvasses, however, framing researchers have often remained remarkably unconcerned about those views offered from the surrounding hills and valleys. For once, they rarely descend to investigate the intricate details of frames up close. While a handful of still life pictures have revealed functional as well as propositional microstructures within the frame, most pictures use a large brush and often show frames as mere ominous blots of paint. The common perception that frames must and can be defined as a whole has rarely been questioned (Matthes & Kohring, 2008; van Gorp, 2010). Also the landscape view from the surrounding mountains has not appealed much to framing researchers to date. Frames, for most parts, are pictured in groups of two or few, and even when many frames are captured within the same artwork, each tends to be portrayed as an individual (however, see Medrano, 2003). The pattern by which frames are interrelated has evaded the gaze of researchers.

As a third omission, the pictures drawn mostly represent one frozen state in the life of the frame – normally, the moment when it is communicated. Only sometimes, traces of their origin are iconically represented, and a rare collection of images depicts the frame crafters at their work (B.T. Scheufele, 2006). What happens to the frame after it has been marvelled at by some passerby and how the frame might affect her further life is hardly reflected. Depicted framing effects are usually limited to the immediate, sometimes cognitive, mostly evaluative response to the frame (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2010). Neither the knowledge structures processing the frame, nor the ones derived from possible frame acquisition are part of the picture: At most, they appear as blurred background conditions in front of which the frame is more or less well perceptible (Chong & Druckman, 2007c). Focused on representing the perceived ‘main’ interaction – between frame and immediate cognitive response – accurately on the canvas, the context surrounding both frame and response is swallowed by thick shades outlining the scene.

Finally, throughout all concern with picturing frames and framing effects, framing researchers have taken a rather documentary approach: They capture on canvas the world as it presents itself to them, true to detail and careful to avoid commentary or criticism (Carragee & Roefs, 2004). This is particularly curious since frames have elsewhere both been depicted as ready tools in the hands of the powerful, and creative devices for the individual formation of reasoned interpretations (Druckman, 2001, 2003; Gamson, 1996). If frames are as ubiquitous and – at least potentially – powerful as they appear to be, the normative question which master’s bidding frames do cannot legitimately be avoided

(D'Angelo, 2002). It is necessary to lift the easel from the familiar knoll, take a stroll around, and start picturing the whole scene.

This dissertation has attempted to break out of the rich, but tight frame of current framing research. Bringing the internal structure and external alignment of frames, their use within and contribution to human reasoning into focus, the above four chapters have provided insightful empirical data. This data can certainly be only the beginning of targeted research exploring those theoretical perspectives opened up by the schematic network theory. In the following discussion, I will attempt to bring those various concerns raised throughout this dissertation back together, suggesting four new angles from which to picture the lives of frames.

VIII.1. Frames & framing

The first dimension explored in the above studies concerns the structure of information underlying the processing of frames. Three important distinctions have been advanced above: First, I have distinguished between the belief structure underlying a frame and the semantic macrostructure – the COI – that renders the set meaningful. Second, I have distinguished between the semantic interpretation raised by frames and the evaluative implication deriving from these interpretations. Third, I have proposed a distinction between instantiated frames and the more enduring, closely related but not identical structures embedded in messages and stored in memory. Based on these three distinctions, I have provided an integrated theory of the framing process that links instantiated frames to both cognitive and communicative information structures. The theory reconciles automatic belief retrieval and conscious integration, semantic interpretation and evaluative judgment, which are understood as different stages within the same cognitive process. Let me discuss these propositions in turn.

The notion that frames might be wholes whose meaning is fixed and communicatable derives, mostly, from the observation that they function as wholes. Not individual propositions or cues lead people to alter interpretations and opinions, but frame components unfold their meaning only when taken together (B.T. Scheufele, 2003, 2004a; van Gorp, 2007). However, for the set of ingredients to mold into a coherent frame, a conscious act of integration is required. While the belief structure to be integrated provides ample information that helps constructing the frame, it does not already 'contain' the COI: Although beliefs are the more likely to become part of the macrostructure the more they contribute to coherence within the set, the same beliefs still supports different possible COIs (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983).⁷¹ At the same time, knowing the set of retrieved beliefs, the range of constructable frames is closely delimited already. This observation is essential to the approach introduced above: While meaning is latent, subjective and situational, those propositions informing it can be verbalized,

⁷¹ When researchers code textual representations according to their central organizing ideas, strictly speaking, what they code is their own cognitive models making sense of the observed textual cues. Since integration occurs upon processing, texts do not 'have' meaning, but they are assigned meaning by their readers (albeit in often similar, consistent ways, Graber, 1988). These meanings, however, are informed both by the text and the reader's knowledge and motivations, only part of which is, only approximately, socially shared. There is, as van Gorp (2010) wisely concluded, no way to get subjectivity entirely out of the coding of frames.

replicated, communicated, stored, and – crucially for research – coded. This dependency of constructed frames on the information entering construction has also been observed by van Gorp (2010), Matthes and Kohring (2008), Boudana (2008), van Atteveldt (2006) and others, and may thus provide an avenue for a much more reliable, researcher independent study of frames.

The beliefs entering the frame not only constrain the range of derivable semantic interpretations, they also form the base for evaluative judgment (Rhee, 1997). In line with the propositions advanced by cognitive appraisal theory, beliefs entail evaluative implications which inform opinion once a belief is retrieved (Brewer & Gross, 2005; Ortony *et al.*, 1988). In consequence, in order to form a judgment, a person needs to form an interpretation first. This interpretation need not be coherent (i.e., no frame has to be formed, Zaller, 1992), but whenever a person constructs a *reasoned* judgment, semantic coherence must be achieved before a judgment derives (Pennington & Hastie, 1986, 1988). It follows that the evaluative effect that is most saliently connected with the study of framing is only indirectly related to the frame (Rhee, 1997). Frames retrieve (semantic) beliefs, among which coherence is instated. Only the resulting set of coherent beliefs informs judgment. As a consequence, the beliefs raised by communicated cues may not figure saliently in the set of beliefs that remains after semantic integration. Even if they do, there is no guarantee that people evaluate these beliefs the same way that a message suggested (Neuman *et al.*, 1992). The distinction thus points to two important contingencies in the study of frames: First, it emphasizes the role of cognitive responses to frames, which may be triggered by communication frames, but are not necessarily derived from these (Graber, 1988). Second, and relatedly, it underlines the importance of the personal schematic knowledge and attitude structure within which a frame is processed (see below). Unless the receiver's issue-relevant knowledge and attitude structure can be predicted reasonably well – due to specific measurement or reliance on culturally shared beliefs and values – the evaluative effects of frames can hardly be anticipated. While certainly the most well-known effect of frames, they are neither their most direct, nor the most reliable one.⁷² Since acquired semantic relations are usually stored in memory while formed opinions are not, they may not even be the most socially relevant effect.⁷³

⁷² The high reliability with which framing researchers have reproduced opinion change under the influence of frames may be an artefact of the rather specific frames used in most experimental studies: These frames typically refer to semantic contexts highly consistently evaluated due to cultural values or simple utilitarianism (e.g., free speech, public security, economic gains and endangered health, Druckman, 2003; Tewksbury *et al.*, 2000). Such cases are characterized by a near perfect covariation of semantic and evaluative content. For frames referring to inconsistently evaluated semantic contexts, semantic interpretations raised by the frame should fail to predict their evaluative implications. However, although uniquely evaluated frames are only one specific variety of frames, their prevalent use in political communication research makes a lot of sense: Political actors advance their ideas by relating them to values and ideas that are widely endorsed in society (Edelman, 1971). Also, only consistently evaluated frames may potentially affect public opinion in a systematic way. Still, it is important to note that 'pro-' and 'con-frames' – more precisely, frames that can be expected to refer to predominantly positively or negatively valenced beliefs – are only one occurring phenotype of frames.

⁷³ Of course, online judgments may be formed and stored as evaluative properties of the respective concepts, such that the evaluative framing effect persists (Matthes, 2007). It is unclear, however, how common such formation is.

The contingency of framing effects on available knowledge leads me to the third important distinction, namely, the transformation of information upon frame construction. When information is processed, few cues retrieve a much larger range of familiar beliefs from memory, which then form the frame. The ‘frame’ as it is represented by the received cues (e.g., in a message) is likely to be highly incomplete – the more so the more reliably its author expects the cues to retrieve the targeted knowledge among the recipients (Donati, 1992; van Dijk, 2003). The frame package thus deviates from the formed frame at least in terms of completeness, and may deviate also more profoundly if other influences interfere with construction (Neuman *et al.*, 1992). At the same time, while some beliefs may be newly acquired or inferred from perceived cues, most of the information required to form the frame is raised from memory (Greenwald, 1968). After a frame’s belief structure is committed to memory, all information required to reconstruct the frame is available within schematic knowledge. Beside these, however, memory holds also many other beliefs that were not retrieved. Without precise knowledge about both attended cues and the stored and discovered connections between concepts, it is impossible to predict which out of the belief structures available in memory will actually be used in frame construction. This point is most impressively underlined by the unexpected finding in chapter IV that cues targeting one schematic structure also retrieved beliefs from adjacent, not explicitly referenced schemata. Both message ‘frames’ and schematic memory contain a wealth of useable propositions and beliefs, however, which of these come to mind when forming a frame is fully determined by neither (Greenwald, 1968).

The schematic network theory introduced in chapter II provides an explanation for how the different states of ‘frames’ are related to one another. In this approach, message ‘frames’ primarily figure as packages of cues, which help identifying coherent belief sets within the vast reservoir of information available in memory. The theory is thus primarily located within the ‘accessibility’ based tradition of framing process models (Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009). However, it proposes two important amendments to the existing theory.

First, it extends the network metaphor underlying old accessibility models, arguing that such networks are schematically structured (Axelrod, 1973). The very alignment of information within memory already contains detailed information about the relevance and coherence of beliefs related to particular concepts. Activation spreading through a schematically structured network, hence, does not retrieve random, disconnected sets of related beliefs: With just a slight amendment in the imagined spreading process, the mindless, subconscious process is capable of reliably achieving high coherence among retrieved beliefs (Druckman, 2001; Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988). The information automatically retrieved from memory already reflects belief applicability, which is stored in the structure of the belief network. Nelson *et al.*’s (1997) accusation that accessibility models are incapable of explaining the smart filtering of irrelevant, related information can be countered.

Second, the above theory proposes that only retrieved information can be used to consciously further process the activated beliefs. This proposition has two main implications: First, since all information that is not activated cannot inform interpretations, and belief retrieval is highly selective, people do not usually access much of their knowledge when forming an opinion (Zaller, 1992). While people generally

possess much more information that could be used to scrutinize and contextualize a formed frame, people need to be motivated to retrieve this additional information before it can be used (Brewer, 2001). However, if a frame is constructed from entirely coherent beliefs, people have little reason to distrust their retrieved memory, and will not usually access additional information. Only when made aware of possible discrepancies – due to mismatching beliefs raised to attention – they can be reasonably expected to reconsider the retrieved information. Thus, the key question for investigating people's possible resistance to frames is what conditions raise the probability of discrepant beliefs being activated upon belief retrieval. Second, if the range of information available for conscious processing is confined to those beliefs raised to attention, biases in belief retrieval are generally reinforced upon conscious consideration – both with regard to further retrieval, belief weighting, and the construction of new beliefs: The same contexts tapped initially are likely to be found again if retrieval is resumed deliberately, raising new contexts only where these are easily found from the already active belief structure. Beliefs central during belief retrieval will appear as most important again when their relevance is judged. Conscious appropriateness judgments may be theoretically distinct from subconscious applicability, however, without any additional available information, they are unlikely to deviate from it (Price & Tewksbury, 1997). Finally, also belief content change can occur only within the set of retrieved beliefs, inferring new connections from adjacent beliefs, or updating single relations (Slothuus, 2008). Both belief weighting and belief content change are constrained by the set of retrieved beliefs: If beliefs have not been added to the set considered, either by automatic or subsequent deliberate retrieval, they can play no role in the formation of interpretations or opinions.

The above theory hence integrates the three main processes discussed in framing theory into one unified theory (Chong & Druckman, 2007c; Price & Tewksbury, 1997). Framing is understood as an interactive process, which rests on the ability of perceived cues to manipulate the use of information that is – for most parts – already present in an individual's knowledge (Rhee, 1997; van Gorp, 2007). Assuming that knowledge can be represented as a schematically structured belief network, a small set of simple activation and processing rules suffices to account for phenomena as diverse as equivalent, countervailing, and indifferent responses to framing. Conceptualizing frames as composite, consciously integrated, predominantly semantic phenomena, the above perspective thus hopes to contribute to the development of a more consistent, and more precise theory of framing processes and frames.

VIII.2. Knowledge & information

The second dimension explored in the above studies concerns the structure of information that enters into, and derives from the formation of frames. Understanding frames as hybrid constructions feeding on various information sources, the question arises how these sources influence those frames that can be formed. According to the introduced perspective, information can be divided into cues and propositions/beliefs: The role of cues lies in their ability to suggest which concepts should be considered, thus creating sources of activation for belief retrieval (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009; van Gorp, 2007). Beliefs describe those relations between concepts available to a person,

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which may transmit spreading activation to further concepts (B.T. Scheufele & Scheufele, 2010). Propositions differ from beliefs only in the sense that these are not (yet) stored in memory, but must be acquired to participate in belief retrieval. Propositions in a message that are not acquired remain irrelevant for the formation of frames. The same proposition, however, may serve both as template for a belief, and as a cue: by virtue of being perceived in a particular situation, the concepts raised by the belief are marked as relevant and contribute to belief retrieval from memory. Basically, any kind of stimulus can serve as a cue: Each concept contained in a message, raised by sensory input, tapped by current processing motivation, or still active in mind due to prior use may guide processing. Among the tapped sources initiating the spread of activation, a communicated message may be responsible for many or fewer cues, but it is unlikely to be the only provider. This availability of additional cues is potentially highly consequential for the interpretation formed based on a message: Since messages are often not provided in a format that resonates with a person's current trains of thought, intentions or perceptions of the situation, other cues may direct activation along paths unanticipated by an author.

Conceptualizing the potential influence of distracting cues, however, the difficulty remains that the precise selection of cues that a person attends to can hardly be predicted (Price & Tewksbury, 1997). Therefore, this study has opted to restrain the availability of additional cues for frame processing as far as possible within a real communication situation: Obtrusiveness was low, the availability of endorsement heuristics crude, and motivation should have been mostly constrained to the desire to form voting decisions (chapter III). Simultaneously, due to limited prior knowledge, also the availability of beliefs for retrieval has been constrained. Despite the considerable gain in realism, the investigated case thus still represents a rather exceptional situation. However, it is possible to derive expectations regarding how frame processing and acquisition should differ if the above restrictions are loosened:

First, when people process information following diverse processing motivations, the similarity between derived interpretations should be reduced (Huang, 2000). Already in the present study, those motivated to understand the ambitions and provisions of the EU constitution derived systematically different interpretations than those who did not care to understand the treaty (chapter VI). Without prejudging causal relatedness, this distinction coincided with the divide between Yes- and No voters. Motivated reasoning oriented to support a predefined vote choice may already have added to diversity (Druckman & Bolsen, 2009). Deviant motivations direct selective attention and retrieval, belief transformation and integration and can thus be expected to profoundly influence constructed frames. Second, the availability of direct observational information should provide individuals with both discourse-independent knowledge and directly perceptible cues guiding retrieval. When interpreting policy issues closely related to their daily lives, people should be able to contrast provided frames with experiential knowledge, easily rejecting publicly advanced interpretations (Gamson, 1992). Moreover, due to the possibility to acquire knowledge from personal experience, their schematic knowledge may differ considerably, limiting the predictability of how communicated cues will be processed. That being said, however, chapter VII showed that people relied strongly on media interpretations of the referendum campaign despite the availability of direct observations (Gamson, 1992; Graber, 1988; Neuman *et al.*, 1992). Hence, it is unclear

how much obtrusiveness shields people from reliance on discourse frames. At least when they wish to, people should be capable of forming independent understandings of obtrusive issues without relying on media, which was not an option regarding the EU Constitution.

Even if deviant information cannot be obtained by direct observation, communicated propositions may endow people with available knowledge in quite different ways. At one end of the continuum, publicly advanced interpretations may be highly consonant – a tendency pronounced in journalistic coverage (Walgrave & van Aelst, 2006; Zaller, 1992). Such information is highly influential for three reasons: First, people are exposed frequently to highly similar frames, and bound to acquire at least some of the implied propositions (Peter, 2003). Second, unless other information sources are available, only few competing interpretations are advanced (Druckman, 2004). Thus, whenever considering the respective issue, the same frames are likely to be resorted to and rehearsed. Third, and as a direct consequence of the former two, people are likely to discover – and can reasonably expect – that everyone else possesses similar schematic representations of the issue (Moscovici, 1961). They thus can refer to this common knowledge in their communication, and attribute the same knowledge to an author whose frames they try to reconstruct. The more homogenously publicly proliferated frames contextualize information, the more are these able to influence people's interpretations (Walgrave & van Aelst, 2006; Zaller, 1992). At the other end of the continuum, interpretations may be highly diverse – a tendency associated with political accounts in the present study (Brewer & Gross, 2005; Sapiro & Soss, 1999). In this case, it is unclear which frames a person has been exposed to, and even less clear which she will adopt: Being provided with diverse accounts, frames are unlikely to regularly resonate with already familiar knowledge, leading to misperceptions and the rejection of frames perceived as inconsistent with present knowledge. At the same time, people exposed to competing frames on the same issue are enabled them to discretionarily choose those that resonate best with their convictions (Druckman, 2004; Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988). People are bound to disagree on which frames they consider most compelling, forming highly idiosyncratic schematic representations. If various interpretations are saliently publicized, internally diverse social representations may derive where various frames and accounts are recognized, but not necessarily endorsed by most people (Moloney & Walker, 2002). Given lower publicity, frames may fail to form social representations, leading to diverse understandings communicatable only to a limited extent between people (Dewey, 1927). In the present case, the Dutch referendum campaign featured both consonant media coverage and limited, salient diversity among political interpretations (Aarts & van der Kolk, 2005; Kleinnijenhuis *et al.*, 2005). Considering electoral or referendum campaigns, most other cases should differ only in degrees from the investigated case: Political accounts may be more or less diverse and more or less salient, but it is hard to imagine a campaign without diverse interpretations publicized widely – at least in pluralist democratic societies. Likewise, journalistic media should normally try to cover various sides of a policy or election and provide some factual background, anchoring interpretations in some common points of reference. Only in public spheres with highly partisan media, this common ground in public discourse may be absent entirely, resulting in interpretations non-communicatable between the

competing camps. Still, also differing degrees of consonant and divergent framing may lead to radically different results in opinion formation.

Regardless of whether common information is recently acquired or vested in long standing public wisdom, the availability of similarly structured schematic knowledge heavily influences the formation of frames (Rhee, 1997). Unlike experiential knowledge, social representations can be systematically targeted by communication cues (Moscovici, 1986). The structure of common knowledge thus not only prejudices to a large degree what constructions people are likely to make, but also, which kinds of frames they are likely to be confronted with in public discourse. In the present study, the structure of people's EU-related knowledge could be characterized as relatively sparse, dominated by a few long standing stereotypes (Medrano, 2003). Many other starting conditions are imaginable: If knowledge is entirely absent, people need to rely more on publicly proliferated accounts, acquiring many new beliefs from these. At the same time, provided frames should regularly fail to connect, leaving the recipients unaffected (Graber, 1988; Hewstone, 1986; Wolfe *et al.*, 1998). Attempts (e.g., by political accounts) to integrate knowledge grasp at nothing, whereas consonant frames may locally succeed in establishing new knowledge. If, by contrast, knowledge is well developed and dense, provided frames have little trouble raising resonant belief structures. However, they would also find people well equipped to counter the offered accounts (Neuman *et al.*, 1992; Wolfe *et al.*, 1998). In such a case, specific frames should succeed only when they are highly plausible. Most offered accounts will be crowded out by better-confirmed prior knowledge. Media frames should hardly be able to create new shared beliefs. However, the capability of political narratives to integrate available knowledge into powerfully persuasive accounts may still shape the public's perceptions. This is particularly likely to happen when social representations contain dilemmatic or otherwise incoherent interpretations – e.g., when multiple, diverse narratives are saliently communicated in public (Moloney & Walker, 2002).

In nearly all imaginable cases, the range of both cues and belief structures for frame construction should by far exceed the amount of information that can be actively considered. Even though it is possible to determine the general implications of additional information for people's reliance on provided frames, the concrete selection of cues and beliefs drawn upon remains fundamentally unpredictable. Unless it is known which out of a range of available cues a person attends to, all knowledge related to an issue is potentially within reach for frame formation. Experimental studies have mostly circumvented this problem by constraining the range of available cues, and manipulating people's motivation for processing (Kinder, 2007; Lecheler *et al.*, 2009). Consequently, they have rarely considered the role of additional information, mostly focusing on the role of prior attitudes and values. This approach, however, misrepresents the amazing complexity of cues and information available to people in real-life situations (Chong & Druckman, 2007a; Druckman, 2004; Kinder, 2007). To my knowledge, no study has yet provided an explicit theory of their potential influence, certainly none that includes as wide a range of information as this study. While this dissertation has begun to theorize this gap and test some predictions, much remains to be done to fully understand the importance of the cues and cognitive resources feeding the framing process. The evidence provided throughout this study clearly mandates that limited attention and rich,

idiosyncratic knowledge should not be ignored as external disturbances, but included as integral elements in the study of framing.

VIII.3. Integration & construction

The third dimension explored in the above studies concerns the construction of coherent accounts beyond individual frames. This dissertation has focused on three salient aspects of this construction: First, I have addressed need to instate evaluative coherence between different considerations within the same account. Second, I have examined people's strategies for achieving semantic coherence, and sketched the properties of accounts that meet this requirement. Third, I have assessed the origin of such constructions: Do people mostly take over sponsored narratives, do they patch together elements of reasoning from various sources, or do they construct their own interpretations mostly from scratch? Given people's ability to account coherently for their decisions despite highly inconsistent knowledge, frames might provide a key concept which helps analyzing and understanding the integration of information.

The achievement of evaluative coherence has already been subject to some theorizing in the study of communication. Three main views have been advanced in the literature: The first, simplest possibility is that people select one or few considerations which point in the same direction, and disregard all other evaluative information. This view, which is popular particularly in the heuristic voting literature, assumes that people are unmotivated to consider much information and construct coherent accounts (Franklin, Marsh, & Wlezien, 1994; Hobolt, 2007; Kuklinski & Quirk, 2000). However, the derived expectation that people mostly resort to few disconnected considerations when accounting for their choices does not tie in with the observations made in this study. The second explanation rests on Zaller's (1992) expectancy value equation and assumes that people determine the (possibly weighted) average of retrieved valences. Again, semantic integration is not expected, while people may trade off differently valenced considerations against one another (Nelson *et al.*, 1997). While this view accurately describes the observed tendency to discount selected considerations, it fails to account for two striking observations: First, contrary valence was not always discounted, but sometimes reinterpreted in light of the quality of the connection between concepts. Second, people did not merely trade off different considerations against one another, but semantically linked these together into coherent accounts. The close link between semantic and evaluative integration is precisely the strength of the third advanced approach: According to Pennington and Hastie (1988), people consider the qualitative links between different considerations and try to determine how these are related (Holyoak & Thagard, 1995; Kintsch, 1998; van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). Based on the established semantic relation, subsequently, evaluative loads are transformed: Negative evaluations of an object seen in opposition to another consideration may well contribute to a positive evaluation (Brewer, 2001). Discrepancies are resolved by means of reframing and resorting to additional information (Nelson *et al.*, 1997). Where no semantic link can be constructed, evaluative loads may be disregarded entirely. Unlike the other two views, this last approach explains how people could justify support for the EU constitution by pointing at negative aspects of European politics. Dissociating the constitution from the problem and associating it

with the solution, evaluations were inverted. The construction of coherent judgment, hence, did not require coherently valenced considerations. It did require, however, the construction of semantic coherence between considered frames (Pennington & Hastie, 1986).

As for the semantic integration of frames, theoretical knowledge to date is scant, if available at all. While a few authors have recognized a link between narrative macrostructures and frames as possible components of narratives, little has been said about the quality of this connection (Nisbet *et al.*, 2003). Despite the good empirical support accrued throughout this study, the propositions advanced in chapter II.7 remain exploratory. However, it seems reasonable to draw at least two main conclusions regarding the integration of frames into coherent accounts: First, the recurring reference to a limited set of concepts provides a necessary prerequisite for coherence. However, if different frames merely place these concepts in varying contexts, as is often the case in news discourse, this does not yet achieve coherence. Political narratives, by contrast, were found to not only refer to the same concepts recurrently, but also locate these concepts within the cores of raised frames (Gerhards & Rucht, 1992). While further study is necessary to corroborate this interpretation, it seems that frames that cohere with one another share parts of their core propositions. The second finding that may provide an explanation for the narrative coherence of frames is the presence of central frames which organize the account, defining roles, core problems and evaluations. Such COFs could be imagined in close analogy to the COIs integrating frames (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987). They resonate with the observation that complex narratives can be summarized in a small number of propositions, while determining the range of elaborations that can be linked in by other frames (Gerhards & Rucht, 1992). COFs define narrative roles, the situation to be dealt with, and the evaluative standards by which actors and actions alike can be judged (Benford & Snow, 2000; Bennett, 1980). Just as COIs integrate various beliefs into coherent, meaningful interpretations of an object, COFs integrate various frames and considerations into a coherent account of a possibly complex series of events. The presence of such integrating core frames may simultaneously explain why frames have been so difficult to locate in social communication and cognition: If highly similar structures exist on different levels of abstraction, it is hardly surprising that researchers looking at one phenomenon have been drawing upon findings derived from the other one without necessarily noticing (B.T. Scheufele, 2004a). However, the two phenomena should not be confused.⁷⁴

However, in analogy to frames again, people do not seem to take over their narratives unchanged from public discourse (Gamson, 1992). Acquiring and reconstructing frames advanced in various accounts, the explanations collected in chapter VI are no coherent reiterations of some political actors' persuasive accounts, but patched together from various sources. People did not even restrict their use of frames to those promoted by parties agreeing with their respective vote choice. Still, they achieved narrative coherence. Thus, at least in the present case, people took the most demanding route for opinion

⁷⁴ COIs can be distinguished from COFs based on three criteria: First, while COIs organize dyadic beliefs about an object, COFs integrate complex frames revolving around a variety of objects. Consequently, COIs do not define *multiple* actor roles or *competing* considerations. Second, COIs allow the construction of various narratives around them, whereas COFs more or less determine the general direction of the account. Finally, COFs are simply much more complex and cannot be reduced to one to few propositions.

formation: Not only did they transform those frames encountered in public discourse to suit their own interests and preoccupations; they also created idiosyncratic selections of frames reflecting those issues they personally regarded most informative with regard to the referendum (Druckman, 2004; Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988). In doing so, people created new narratives informed and constrained, but by no means determined by public discourse (Gamson, 1992). Grounding their judgments in the narrative structure crafted, they routinely disregarded the evaluative implications suggested by others, reframing information to match their personal accounts (Nelson *et al.*, 1997). While people may have adopted persuasive arguments advanced by single sources, they evidently determined the COFs organizing their accounts themselves.

VIII.4. Competence & judgment

In line with the above, a great deal of active reasoning must have been invested into people's achieved understandings. This activity includes at least four important stages: First, when acquiring proliferated frames, new information is integrated actively into schematic knowledge: Linking in also beliefs not directly targeted by a frame but recognized as related upon retrieval, people created the preconditions for a flexible, discretionary use of acquired frames (Gamson, 1996; Sotirovic, 2003). Second, when accounting for things, people actively select suitable frames. Their selections show neither pronounced biases toward consistently evaluated, nor semantically similar, nor jointly acquired (i.e., provided by the same sponsor) frames. The remaining explanation, which matches the data well, is that their selections are guided by perceived relevance and narrative coherence (Druckman, 2004; Pennington & Hastie, 1988). Third, people regularly alter the evaluative implications of frames. Adjusting retrieved belief structures to match their overall accounts, several arguments considered in favour of the constitution by their sponsors ended up supporting contrary accounts, and vice versa. Likewise, people neutralized evaluative implications by contesting suggested relations, thus instating evaluative coherence based on diversely valenced considerations (Druckman, 2001; Nelson *et al.*, 1997; Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988). Finally, the accounts crafted by participants were not only locally coherent, but could mostly be summarized by some COF: Although not necessarily presented in a linear order, they possessed clear signs of narrative structure (Nisbet *et al.*, 2003; Rhee, 1997). Although their arguments relied widely on interpretative resources adopted from public discourse, there is little reason to believe that they were anything else than deliberate, personal constructions reflecting idiosyncratic preoccupations and preferences (Just *et al.*, 1996).

This conclusion stands somewhat opposed to the common finding that frames exert profound and reliable influences on people's interpretations and judgments. The recently discovered but pressing concern with the limits of framing derives from the impression that frames present powerful manipulative devices in the hands of public communicators (Druckman, 2001, 2003). The many studies showing frames' consistent ability to dominate opinion formation cannot be swept away by pointing at difficulties publishing unsuccessful framing studies alone. The question remains how the documented pervasive influences can be reconciled with the relative independence observed in the present study. Four main sources of independence can be identified. First, the proliferation of

highly diverse, partly contradictory frames produced precisely the situation described by Druckman (2004): Rendering multiple, competing frames accessible in memory, spreading activation easily disregards strong frames if even more compelling ones can be readily identified. Choosing between similarly coherent contexts, people are enabled to select those frames that also relate to an individual's values, current motivations, or other attended cues (Just *et al.*, 1996; Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988). Second, relatedly, the long period allowed for opinion formation enabled people to incrementally acquire rich schematic knowledge (Chong & Druckman, 2007b; Feldman & Conover, 1983; Just *et al.*, 1996). Following and memorizing many different frames over the course of the campaign, they learned which interpretations resonated better or worse with their views, and strengthened those belief structures repeatedly drawn upon. The present study expressly measured residual interpretations after a period of near-absent information in public discourse, leading people to rely on well-rehearsed rather than recently primed belief structures. While shortly after exposure to relevant frames, people might have reported views closely following provided information, the beliefs retaining accessibility long after the last active use should represent those that were stored as most relevant over repeated uses (Burnett, 1991; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Third, people's motivation to arrive at consistent, unique vote choices should have led them to challenge and consider acquired frames in light of their related knowledge and evaluative stance (Slothuus & de Vreese, forthcoming). Enabled by the ready availability of competing and deviant frames, people should have actively scrutinized frames already upon acquisition. Rejecting counterattitudinal interpretations at this early stage, people should have been relatively resistant to blunt attempts to present the vote choice in ways they did not support (Gross & D'Ambrosio, 2004). Finally, also the availability of prior schematic knowledge should have contributed to people's ability to transform frames. Relating provided cues to their long standing European stereotypes and general political knowledge, provided cues may have retrieved well-established attitudes alongside the new information (Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988). Alternatively, due to the scarcity of EU-related knowledge, frames may have never been fully understood way intended by their authors. While not fully under the control of the processor, also the misinterpretation of frames reflects prior concerns and experiences stored in an individual's memory. Together with frame competition, available time and directed motivation, also people's pre- and misconceptions increase their independence from provided accounts.

Based on the results of the above study, hence, there appears to be reason for optimism regarding the sometimes suspected manipulative power of frames in political discourse. While frames clearly possess the capability to affect people's opinions, this influence is both contingent upon the availability of well-integrated knowledge, weakened by the proliferation of competing frames, and subject to scrutiny – particularly when ample time is allowed for opinion formation (Graber, 1988; Just *et al.*, 1996; Neuman *et al.*, 1992). These limiting factors, however, have received insufficient consideration in the present literature on framing, which has mostly relied on single, one sided frames and immediate post test measures (Druckman, 2004; Kinder, 2007). While frame competition has finally become a concern in the field, showing strongly diminished framing effects (Chong & Druckman, 2007c), the time consistency of effects has been addressed in less than a handful of studies (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2010). Motivations remain a black spot in framing research, and prior knowledge, while long since recognized, remains grossly

underspecified (Druckman & Bolsen, 2009; Lecheler *et al.*, 2009; Rhee, 1997; van Gorp, 2007). Concluding from such patchy evidence that voters regularly abandon their own preferences if properly framed, supplanting the free will of citizens and debasing democracy, seem exaggerated, to say the least (Brewer & Gross, 2005; Chong & Druckman, 2007a; Shen, 2004; Slothuus, 2008).⁷⁵ True to the somewhat more encompassing view presented in this study, frames can be interpreted as a resource that suggests specific aspects of an object for consideration. While people regularly follow this suggestion when encountered, it is neither given that they will agree with the suggested judgment, nor will they necessarily agree that the suggested aspect is truly informative for opinion formation. Being exposed to many such suggestions, people are enabled to select those aspects they personally regard as most relevant. While the intention behind many frames voiced in public remains persuasive and possibly manipulative, their effect on public opinion formation may well be liberating and enlightening. This effect is, of course, contingent upon a sufficient variability of provided frames, sufficient motivation to consider information actively, and the availability of sufficient schematic knowledge about the framed concepts. However, in the context of the Dutch EU Constitutional referendum, the proliferated frames enabled people to explore, develop and construct their own, personal interpretations and judgments (Gamson, 1992; Just *et al.*, 1996; Neuman *et al.*, 1992). The accounts provided by voters speak of a badly informed, yet highly reasonable electorate, using the knowledge it holds to achieve the best vote choice possible.

VIII.5. Methodological remarks

Before concluding this dissertation, two final remarks are in order regarding the methodological advances proposed throughout the above studies. In line with the theoretical ambition to provide a more precise, consistent grip onto the elusive concept of frames, also the methodological implementation has aimed to measure information as precisely as possible, on a low level of abstraction. Both in the experiment of chapter IV and the subsequent content analytic studies of chapters V and VI, existing measures have been adapted to achieve the highest possible degree of intersubjectivity – a concern that has been particularly vexing in the study of frames (de Vreese, 2005; Matthes & Kohring, 2008; van Gorp, 2010). Measures have been defined to code associations and propositions, as far as possible, without resort to background knowledge or interpretative inference (van Atteveldt, 2008). Building upon this micro level data, subsequent analytic treatments have relied on carefully chosen, rule bound operations. Provided with the same codebook, following the same aggregation rules, other researchers would report

⁷⁵ Another mislead conclusion based in an imprecise conceptualization of framing effects holds that frames present a violation of rationality. According to Druckman (2001, 2004), evaluating the very same information in inconsistent ways violates the requirement of preference invariability (Bütler & Maréchal, 2007; Popkin, 1991). However, in view of the above conceptualization, people do not evaluate the very same information – they evaluate the same object, but in relation to different contexts. Different judgments may result from applying consistent preferences and evaluation rules to different sets of activated beliefs. Frames, thus, merely indicate that people may possess differentiated attitudes and are not usually aware each and every aspect of their attitude structure.

precisely the same results from Dutch discourse as in chapter V. Someone applying the same aggregation algorithms to the focus group data should obtain those graphs displayed in annex IX.13, which echo precisely those core structures described in chapter IV. Despite this systematic removal of subjective judgment from the analysis, the results presented at a much higher level of abstraction than the original codes give little reason to doubt the validity of measurement (B.T. Scheufele & Scheufele, 2010). The main point of contention, then, remains the choice of coding instructions and aggregation rules. Applying analytic strategies closely grounded in the advanced theoretical framework, I have opted for choices somewhat beyond the current mainstream in framing research (Reese, 2007; Schaap, 2006). The price paid for the attempted truth to theory is reflected in the lengthy method sections throughout this study. Drawing upon recent innovations particularly in semantic network analysis, several procedures applied in this study have not previously been tested on data of comparable scale and structure. Both statistical theory and social scientific experience are thin concerning some computations which have only just become practically feasible (van Atteveldt, 2008). Other procedures simply have not yet been considered from the perspective taken above. It is hence possible that, after the publication of this study, questions will be discovered that remain unanswered above. I have tried, to my best abilities, to consider and reflect the available knowledge regarding the applied procedures. Whatever flaws remain lie beyond the information that was available to me while conducting these studies.

My second remark concerns the network conceptualization developed above. While network analysis – and particularly its application to semantic data – is a rather young and still emerging field in the study of social communication, I believe it is well suited to address some concerns that have been haunting framing research in the past (Brewer & Gross, 2010; D'Angelo, 2002; Entman, 1993; Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009). There are at least four main advantages of the approach: First, networks represent data in a formal way, indicating logical relations between components. They are neutral with regard to the measurement strategies employed to determine which relations exist, and therefore allow treating qualitatively and quantitatively derived data within the same analytic framework. Beyond facilitating the use of mixed method designs (Brewer & Gross, 2010), they thus also allow assessing the equivalence of different measurement strategies: If different measures are designed to pick up the same structures within data, they should result in identical networks. The correspondence between the results in chapter IV and the alternative display shown in annex IX.13 presents precisely such a validation of the data. Second, network analysis allows an investigation at multiple levels of abstraction at once, without a need to transform data: Individual links, different, possibly overlapping subgraphs and the network as a whole all can be subjected to a variety of analytic tools (Faust, 2006; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). This may be particularly useful when analyzing compound concepts which, as frames, possess both a micro- and a macro-structure. Third, network analysis is necessarily an analysis of context. Given the recent shift in attention from content to context in communication (Esser & D'Angelo, 2003; D.A. Scheufele, 1999), networks provide a data model which treats contexts without the need to artificially unitize complex data into separate content-context-sets. The model is particularly well-suited to the analysis of structures with unclear delimitation, such as the fuzzy, overlapping sets of beliefs underlying coherent frames. While the present study has

confined itself to networks containing only one type of nodes – concepts – multiple kinds of contexts can be modeled as networks: For instance, concepts can be related to texts, authors, or measurement times in addition to one another (de Nooy *et al.*, 2005). Finally, networks provide a conceptual metaphor which facilitates integrating theoretical approaches from various disciplines. Semantic network approaches have been utilized, above all, in cognitive and social psychology, computational and psycho-linguistics as well as computer and information science. They are empirically well supported in various applications to the study of information, context, and meaning (Carley & Kaufer, 1993; Collins & Loftus, 1975; Doise *et al.*, 1993; Raaijmakers & Shiffrin, 1992; van Atteveldt, 2008; van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). Even many approaches not formulated in terms of networks can be easily adapted to the conceptual metaphor. Beyond the capability of integrating data, the approach thus may also be conducive to a better integration of theory across disciplines. As the mathematical development of semantic network analysis proceeds and computers as well as software grow to meet the need of this computationally demanding, but highly informative approach, semantic network analysis may provide a highly promising tool in the study of communications.

VIII.6. Conclusion

Locating the picture of frames within the larger image of the construction of social meaning, the above study has unrolled the canvas tucked in underneath the tight frame of framing research. Sketching the context within which frames need to be understood, several new perspectives have become visible onto the portrait of frames: Within the frame, the fine brush strokes of intricate, centripetal belief structures appear under the magnifying glass, supporting integrative meaning. Pencilled lines run across and behind the frame, drawing relations to other information and frames. Most crucially, knowledgeable, motivated actors have entered the canvas, interacting with the available frames and transforming them as they do. In place of the imposing frames protruding from a whitewashed wall, a colourful variety of interwoven information structures appear all across a rich wall painting, reaching deep into the portrait: Frames remain but one resource supplying their interpretations to the scene. In consequence, frames appear no longer as mighty manipulators with untarnished capabilities and potentials, but as anxious advocates enmeshed within a messy struggle for meaning. Their now merely loosely superimposed picture frames raise a range of curious questions: How is it, for instance, that some selections of information appear as a frame, whereas others do not? How can it be explained that brush strokes deriving from all kinds of disparate sources suddenly form a coherent scene when seen through the frame? Why do people prefer specific frames, why do they care to reconstruct those they are offered, and what do they use those frames they formed for? Large white patches remain on the canvas, and also the present study has merely begun to sketch the scenes surrounding the frame. Further research has yet to add detail and contour to the picture, correcting where the above conjectures prove inaccurate.

Beyond reminding researchers of the intricacies of real life, however, the picture reminds us why we are studying frames in the first place: Frames are not merely curious contexts that affect how we see the image they surround, but they are also the stuff that

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persuasive narratives and complex understandings are made of. Seen within this wider context, studying frames amounts to investigating how people make sense of the world that surrounds them. Frames may be far more than the borders surrounding and supporting more important things, but they still derive their relevance from the information they frame and the uses they enable. Framing researchers are well-advised to descend from their knoll and start picturing frames in their natural environments: They should depict the messy reality of frames quarrelling and competing, coalescing and blending into constructions determined in full by none of the sources involved; they should paint how frames are truncated and extended, abstracted and specified, twisted and transformed by reasoning individuals putting available information to their own uses. The picture suggested here shows an untidy scene composed of weak and dependent, but sociable and manifold frames. None of the frames depicted in this scene is likely to shift anyone's opinion in large amounts. However, together and in collaboration with many other frames stored and constructed within a person's mind, they make a much more profound, durable difference to people's understandings: Together, they define the meaning of the world.