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Spicing up politics: how soft news and infotainment form political attitudes

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Chapter 2

Political News with a Personal Touch: How Human Interest Framing Indirectly Affects Policy Attitudes

Abstract

Journalists increasingly use personal exemplars in news stories about political issues. This study experimentally investigated how such human interest framing indirectly affects political attitudes via the way people attribute responsibility of an issue. Results show that exposure to human interest-framed television news increased attribution of responsibility to the government for the portrayed problem, which in turn decreased support for the government to cut public spending on this issue. This article explains how and why these findings are in line with exemplification theory but run counter to findings of studies on episodic framing effects.²

² This article has been accepted for publication in *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*.
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Technological advances and less strict broadcasting policies led to the emergence of commercial television channels, which in turn intensified the competition for news audiences (Barnett, 1998; Bird, 1998; Curran, Douglas, & Whannel, 1980; Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010). Hence, an audience-centered approach to news making has become dominant (Baym, 2010; McManus, 1995). Prior studies, using classifications such as soft news, tabloidization, and sensationalism, investigated different aspects of news coverage that arguably had been adjusted for profit-maximizing purposes: news item topics (Esser, 1999; Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010; Patterson, 2000; Scott & Gobetz, 1992), the packaging of news items (Grabe et al., 2000; Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 2001; Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2005), and the narrative style employed in news reporting (Bird, 1998; Rucinski, 1992). Regarding the latter, it has been demonstrated that journalists increasingly use human interest frames, which include exemplars of ordinary citizens that illustrate broader issues (Daschmann & Brosius, 1999; Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2005; Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2011; Patterson, 2000). This study shows how and why this way of framing may negatively affect public support for governmental policies.

Journalistic decisions to employ laypeople as sources in news stories are made for economic and practical reasons. First, personalized news coverage is believed to be attractive to a wide audience, as interviews with ordinary citizens are easily linked to viewers' own experiences and have dramatic appeal (Bird, 1998). Hence, such news may increase advertising revenues. From a democratic perspective, journalists may prefer personalized narratives because they ease audiences' comprehension of complex political topics and may mobilize involvement (Macdonald, 1998).

Another more pragmatic reason to include human exemplars is that such an approach is a relatively cheap way of producing apparently objective content compared to thorough investigative reporting (Bird, 1998; Iyengar, 1991). Moreover, television news is often strictly time-bound, which works better for reporting on concrete examples than for in-depth, contextualized explanation of political matters (Iyengar, 1991). Finally, with tight deadlines and accelerated news cycles, it is easier to quickly obtain appealing responses of citizens who want to pour out their feelings than of politicians who are closely guarded by their PR advisors (Plasser, 2005). The present experimental study investigates how exposure to this increasingly used style of human interest-framed news reporting indirectly *affects* recipients' political attitudes toward a government's plan via an effect on the attribution of responsibility of the issue in question.

Human Interest Framing and its Effect on Political Attitudes

Many studies on the topic of human interest in news coverage focused on the topics of news items: Do news items deal with issues of political or societal relevance, or do they report on human interest topics such as celebrities, sports, leisure activities, or violence (Reinemann et al., 2012)? This study investigates human interest news from another perspective, by focusing on how *political* news stories are framed. Many different definitions of news frames have been put forward (see e.g., Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989), mostly sharing the view that frames place “an emphasis in salience of certain aspects of a topic” (De Vreese, 2002, p. 27). Emphasizing a particular aspect of a topic with a news frame makes this element more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable, and therefore more accessible and applicable in audience interpretations of the topic (Chong & Druckman, 2007a). This in turn may influence the overall attitude toward the topic (Entman, 1993; Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997; Nelson & Oxley, 1999), for example, with regard to governmental actions (De Vreese & Klausch, 2011; Tewksbury, Jones, Peske, Raymond, & Vig, 2000).

The human interest frame is one of the most commonly used generic news frames (De Vreese, 2005). At the core of most definitions of human interest framing is that a broader issue is explained by portraying one or more specific persons who are personally involved with that issue. Exemplification theory explains how human interest-framed news may affect citizens’ attitudes (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). Exemplification applies to news stories in which individuals and their personal experiences are used by journalists to illustrate a broader societal issue, with the aim of bringing a personal angle to the story (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). These individuals are dubbed “exemplars” and have been found to strongly affect the perceptions of political issues: Human examples in news stories mislead recipients to believe that certain problems are occurring more frequently than actually is the case (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997; Zillmann, Gibson, Sundar, & Perkins, 1996); and consequently, to perceive these problems as being more severe (Aust & Zillmann, 1996). The reason is that people tend to generalize exemplar information to broader judgments (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000), which increases the perceived seriousness of a situation, and eventually may influence people’s attitudes (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Lefevere, De Swert, & Walgrave, 2012; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997).

Exemplifying information has been proven to be stronger than statistical information and general statements (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997; Zillmann et al., 1996), and information from politicians (Lefevere et al., 2012). There are various reasons why information based on human exemplars is so persuasive. First, messages from fellow citizens are often more vivid and concrete than statistical information or interviews with politicians (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Lefevere et al., 2012). As a result, these messages attract more attention, they are easily comprehended, and more accessible when making judgments (for an overview, see Brosius & Bathelt, 1994, p. 50). Second, message integrity plays a role (Bosch, 2013; Gross, 2008; Lefevere et al., 2012): human exemplars are relatively similar to viewers; they speak from their heart; and most often do not have an overt political agenda. Hence, they may be trusted more than politicians and official sources.³ Furthermore, citizens who are personally confronted with an issue on a daily basis could be perceived to have more expertise about that particular issue than statistical sources or politicians.

Human interest-framed news may thus strongly affect citizens' attitudes in a way congruent with the statements of the employed personal exemplar. Little research has investigated this assumption with regard to political attitudes. Episodic framing, however, has frequently been shown to influence people's *perceptions* of political issues (Iyengar, 1991). Episodically framed stories depict issues in terms of specific instances by focusing on certain individuals or specific events (Iyengar, 1991). Human interest frames thus share with episodic frames the focus on specific examples to portray a broader issue (Baum, 2003a; Brosius & Bathelt, 1994, p. 48; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997, p. 230), but differ on the aspect that human interest frames solely focus on personal exemplars while episodically framed stories may focus both on individuals as well as on events.

Exposure to episodically framed news has repeatedly been shown to cause attribution of individual responsibility: perceiving a portrayed person as being responsible for his own problems, not society (Gross, 2008; Hart, 2011; Iyengar, 1991; Strange & Leung, 1999). The reasoning is that when people are explicitly confronted with one particular case, they are less likely to consider the bigger picture and to perceive the issue as a society-wide phenomenon (Costera Meijer,

³ Various surveys have shown that people trust their fellow citizens more than politicians. For international examples see the U.S. "Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy" (CID) survey and the European Social Survey (ESS). Dutch statistics show the same pattern (Schmeets & Linssen, 2012; Steenvoorden, Dekker, & Van Houwelingen, 2011)

2003; Iyengar, 1991; Rucinski, 1992). Accordingly, episodic framing evokes the perception that society is to a lesser degree considered responsible for solving the portrayed problem. When, by contrast, people see news covered with a focus on the political or societal context (thematic framing), they are more likely to attribute responsibility to society and to perceive the government as being responsible.

The individuals in episodically framed news items of experimental studies often were not only particular in the sense that they portray a broader issue, but also in the sense that they often were not ordinary citizens. Exemplars, for instance were criminals, guiltless drug dealers, minority groups, and even a polar bear (Gross, 2008; Hart, 2011). Remarkably, when studies on the effects of episodic framing featured exemplars of “ordinary citizens” (e.g., poor or unemployed people, or a boyfriend with a foreign girlfriend), the findings were ambiguous. In these cases, effects on attribution of responsibility were either insignificant or congruent with the message of the exemplar.⁴

In sum, extant research relied on two related and well-established theories, which lead to different expectations.⁵ Episodic framing theory expects personal exemplars to cause individual responsibility attribution, but it has only shown to do so with not-so-common people. Exemplification theory, by contrast, predicts a strong persuasive power of ordinary personal exemplars, but it has not been applied yet to the question of responsibility attribution. Following exemplification theory, however, one would expect that if journalists employ exemplars to illustrate broader issues, this would *increase* responsibility attribution to the government, since exemplification evokes the perception that exemplars’ problems are very severe. With these opposing expectations, a research question is formulated first:

How does exposure to a human interest-framed news item affect the attribution of responsibility of a portrayed issue?

Although it is well established that news frames can affect the attribution of responsibility, few studies have gone beyond this and looked at the effects on

⁴ Insignificant: Hannah and Cafferty (2006). Dependent on direction of exemplar: Aarøe (2011).

⁵ The argument that effects of human interest frames cannot straightforwardly be explained by solely relying on episodic framing theory has also been made by Gross (2008) and Aarøe (2011). They, however, did not link their findings with exemplification theory.

attitudes. This, however, is very relevant, since it gives insight in how human interest-framed news can affect public opinion, which eventually may have consequences for vote decisions and perceived legitimacy of government (Dalton, 2000). Therefore, this study not only investigates how human interest framing affects attribution of responsibility, but also whether this subsequently affects people's attitude toward a proposed governmental policy change.

Returning to the theoretical backdrop, which suggests that human interest framing may affect responsibility attribution of societal problems, next it was posited that this could affect people's attitude toward a plan of the government to help or not help the citizens involved in the portrayed problem. Perceiving the responsibility not to lie with individuals, but rather in society, intensifies people's belief that the individuals involved should be helped by government programs and that more public money should be spent on the issue (Hannah & Cafferty, 2006).

The attribution-affect-action model gives further ground to this expectation (Betancourt, 1990; Schmidt & Weiner, 1988): More empathy will be evoked when individuals are perceived as not being responsible for their problems, which in turn increases support for societal help and government spending. Thus, as people attribute more responsibility to the government for a problem rather than to the individuals involved, they will have a more positive attitude toward a government's plan to help these individuals, and vice versa. Building on the research question, the following was expected:

If human interest framing causes attribution of responsibility to the government, then attitudes toward governmental assistance programs will positively be affected by exposure to such framing; if, by contrast, human interest framing causes attribution of responsibility to individuals, then this will negatively affect these attitudes.

In sum, when people see a human interest-framed news item, this may increase the attribution of responsibility to either the portrayed person (according to episodic framing theory) or to the government (according to exemplification theory). Subsequently, attributing responsibility to individuals will negatively affect attitudes toward governmental help, while responsibility attribution to the government will positively affect attitudes toward such governmental support. So, an *indirect effect* was expected of human interest framing on citizens' attitude via the attribution of responsibility, but the direction of it is still uncertain.

Method

Experimental Design

An online experiment was fielded between January 13 and 16, 2012, to test the causal relationships described above. The experiment employed a 1×3 between-subjects factorial design (reporting style: strong human interest frame; weak human interest frame; no human interest frame) with control group. Human interest framing was thus compared with two basic conditions: a control condition in which participants did not see the manipulated news item; and one in which the news item was reported in a traditional manner without human interest frame.

Thereby, the effectiveness of human interest framing could be assessed on its own merits. If human interest framing would have been compared with another type of framing, as commonly is done in framing experiments, only its relative influence can be measured (Chong & Druckman, 2007b). The operationalization of the no human interest frame condition followed Reinemann et al.'s (2012, p. 233) definition of hard news: news that "reports in a thematic way, focuses on the societal consequences of events, is impersonal and unemotional in its style."

This study's experiment also differed from most framing studies by having a strong and a weak framing condition. Content analyses have shown that only few news stories are exclusively episodic or thematic (Iyengar, 1991), hard or soft (Boczkowski, 2009; Brants & Neijens, 1998; Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010), or treat topics solely in a personal or systematic way (Rucinski, 1992). By including a condition in which human interest-framed information was mixed with politically substantive information (weak human interest frame) and including a condition that more strongly relied on human interest framing (strong human interest frame), these observations have been incorporated in the experimental design. This also sheds light on the question whether strong frames are more compelling than weak frames. Following Chong and Druckman (2007b), in the strong human interest framing condition the relative quantity of human interest information was greater and more intense compared to the weak human interest framing condition.

Participants

A sample of Dutch adults was recruited via the online panel of market research company PanelClix.⁶ A random selection of approximately 1,200 panel members

⁶ People enrolled for the panel via text links, banners, email campaigns, mouth-to-mouth advertising, and editorials. They participate in surveys in exchange for small financial compensations. The panel is ISO-26362 certified.

was invited by e-mail to participate. Quotas were set to ensure that the sample varied on age, gender, and educational level. Of those invited, 303 participants started the experimental procedure by answering the quota screening questions and watching the video (response rate: 25.3%). Eventually, 242 participants successfully finished the questionnaire (completion rate: 79.9%).⁷ Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 64 ($M = 33.50$, $SD = 13.86$), and 52.2% of them were females. It took on average 24 minutes to complete the experiment.

Procedure

By clicking the hyperlink provided in the invitation e-mail, participants were sent to the experiment's website on which they were explicitly asked to turn on the sound of their computer, and not to skip or replay any parts of the video. After the pre-test questions, participants were randomly assigned to one condition: the strong human interest frame item ($n = 60$), the weak human interest frame item ($n = 56$), the no human interest frame item ($n = 64$), or the control group ($n = 62$).⁸ The assigned news video automatically started to play, and a timer made it impossible to continue before the video finished. Subsequently, a questionnaire was administered.

Stimulus material

Stimuli consisted of a short Dutch news broadcast with three items. The last two news items were non-manipulated and served to disguise the research objective. The first news item, which was not shown in the control condition, was

⁷ The 61 people that dropped out during the experiment did not differ significantly on age, $t(301) = 0.52$, $p = .607$, nor gender, $t(301) = 0.23$, $p = .82$, from the final sample. The 61 participants who dropped out include five participants who were excluded from the analyses, because their observations strongly violated the assumptions of regression analysis. These assumptions are especially important with relatively small sample-sized studies, such as experiments as in this study. The observations had Cook's Distance values that were at least more than two times (2.14) larger than the normally used cut-of-point, $4/(n - k - 1)$, and could easily be distinguished from other observations' Cook's Distances using a box plot. These observations were equally spread over the experimental conditions.

⁸ Analysis revealed that randomization was successful. The four groups did not differ significantly on age, gender, education and whether participants had personal experience with mental disorders as ADHD. Neither did participants in the four conditions differ on levels of political knowledge, satisfaction with the current government, political interest, how intensively they followed the news on political issues, or how frequently they talked about political matters.

manipulated in line with the three experimental conditions. This manipulated news item dealt with a health care policy reform proposed by the national government. The plan's aim was to reduce government spending in the public health sector by driving back the use of medicine against mental disorders such as ADHD among children and adolescents; parents should either buy these themselves or they should look for other solutions.⁹

The manipulated news item originated from an original news program, *NOS Journaal*, which was broadcast on November 9, 2011. *NOS Journaal* is the most watched news program in the Netherlands and universally known by Dutch citizens. The manipulated news item was edited by cutting some fragments (interview with mother or interview with politician) and inserting visuals from other news broadcasts (children or politicians). Voice-over texts, spoken in Dutch, were adapted and recorded by a professional journalist to fit the particular condition. This resulted in three different, though still very similar and realistic news items.¹⁰

A manipulation check confirmed that participants perceived the videos differently in the way they were supposed to. Participants indicated on a 0-to-10 Likert scale whether they believed the news item focused on the personal or the political side of the topic. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) with Bonferroni post-hoc tests, $F(2,179) = 27.74, p < .001$, showed that participants in the strong human interest frame condition ($M = 6.47, SD = 1.86$) perceived the item more personal than participants in the weak human interest frame condition ($M = 5.57, SD = 1.84; p = .032$) and more personal than participants in the no human interest frame condition ($M = 4.00, SD = 1.91; p < .001$). Perceptions of the weak and no human interest frame condition also differed significantly ($p < .001$).

The manipulated videos had many elements in common: the introduction by the host and voice-over, similar arguments were expressed, and videos were

⁹ This topic is not a frequent news topic. The website of the Dutch national public news broadcaster (<http://www.nos.nl>) shows that between April 2012 and June 2008 only 6 items had been broadcasted about this topic on either television or radio. This topic is also not very prominent among citizens, as it was not mentioned in open questions of national surveys such as the Dutch Parliamentary Elections Survey 2010.

¹⁰ In the experiment, participants were asked whether they had specific questions or remarks. Only 5 participants mentioned that they thought the news item was not totally credible. In the pre-test with 26 students, only two mentioned that they thought the voice-over was not exactly the same as in news items they normally see on television. All the others did not notice anything peculiar about the video.

equal in length and number of shots. In all three items, the voice-over ended his introduction by stating that there were plenty of critical reactions to the government's plan that he just explained. Subsequently, the key manipulations were inserted: an interview was shown with either a mother of a child suffering from ADHD (strong human interest frame condition), or with a politician of an opposition party (no human interest frame condition), or both the interviews with the mother and the politician (weak human interest frame condition).

In the strong human interest frame item, the mother spoke in personal terms, raised her voice, and obviously was indignant and angry that the government planned to reduce spending on her son's medicines. The voice-over in this strong human interest frame item talked about her son specifically. In the condition without human interest frame, the voice-over talked about children in general, gave a rough sketch of the political landscape. The interviewed politician in this condition spoke calmly and without much emotion about families in general, while using the same main argument as the mother in the other condition. It should be acknowledged here that the conditions not only differed on the manipulated presence of a strong or weak human interest frame. The gender of the interviewed actors (mother or male politician) differed as well, and both actors may cause different perceptions on intrinsically linked concepts as credibility, likeability, and emotionality.¹¹

Visual elements were used to strengthen the manipulations. While the voice-over was speaking, the no human interest frame video showed visuals of inside Parliament. The strong human interest-framed video, by contrast, showed children in a class room and explicitly zoomed in on one boy. Elements of both conditions (interviews, voice-over, and visuals) were combined in the weak human interest frame item.

Measures

Attribution of responsibility: Whether people thought individuals themselves (e.g., the parents) or the government should take responsibility for ADHD problems was measured on a 7-point scale. Participants were asked whether problems of children and adolescents caused by ADHD should be solved by the people involved or whether the government should solve these problems. The scale ranged from

¹¹ Controlling for perceived credibility of the item, emotions experienced while viewing the item, and gender of participants did, however, not substantially alter any of the findings.

“totally solve problems themselves” (1) to “totally solve problems by the government” (7) ($M = 3.77, SD = 0.92$).

Attitude toward the government’s plan: The attitude toward the plan of the government to reduce public spending on ADHD medication for children and adolescents was measured by adding up the responses to the following three statements: (1) How much do you approve or disapprove the plan of the government to let doctors prescribe less medication to children and adolescents against behavioral disturbances caused by disorders as ADHD; (2) How much do you approve or disapprove the plan of the government to cut budget by prescribing less medication to children and adolescents against behavioral disturbances caused by disorders as ADHD; and (3) It is a good idea that young people and their parents should first learn how to deal with behavioral disturbances, before using medication.

Participants responded to these statements on 7-point Likert-type scales from -3 (*totally disapprove / disagree*) to 3 (*totally approve / agree*). The three items loaded on one factor (Eigenvalue = 2.07) and formed a reliable scale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .77$). The sum of the responses resulted in a normally distributed scale that ranged from -9 to 9 ($M = 0.55, SD = 4.17$). Higher scores indicated more support for the government’s plan to reduce spending on ADHD medicines for children.

Results

To keep models parsimonious and in line with the experimental logic, control variables were not included in the analyses as randomization made these redundant.¹² An ANOVA tested whether participants in the four experimental conditions showed different intentions when attributing responsibility of problems caused by ADHD. The ANOVA findings are based on 10,000 bootstrap samples,¹³ and yielded a main effect on the attribution of responsibility, $F(3,238) =$

¹² Including control variables for age, education, personal experience with ADHD, talking with others about politics, how much people followed news about current affairs, political interest and satisfaction with the current government did not substantially alter the findings.

¹³ The choice has been made to use bootstrapping, because of its greater precision, its ability to generalize results to the population, and because the “attribution of responsibility” variable was not normally distributed. The distribution of this variable was skewed to the left and had a high peak; bootstrapping can partly correct for this.

2.76, $p = .043$, $\eta^2 = 0.04$. Table 2.1 shows the estimated means per condition for the assessment of responsibility attribution.

Table 2.1. Means and standard deviations of the “attribution of responsibility” variable (1 to 7) in the experimental conditions. Higher scores indicate that more responsibility is attributed to the government.

Condition	<i>M</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	95% CI [Lower, Upper]
Control condition	3.66 ^{a b}	(0.11)	[3.45, 3.88]
No human interest frame condition	3.56 ^a	(0.12)	[3.33, 3.79]
Weak human interest frame condition	3.93 ^b	(0.10)	[3.72, 4.14]
Strong human interest frame condition	3.95 ^b	(0.13)	[3.70, 4.20]

Note. Means that do not share a common superscript letter differed significantly at $p < .05$ by Bonferroni bias-corrected post-hoc tests based on 10,000 bootstrap samples.

Participants attributed more responsibility to the government in the conditions with human interest-framed information (strong and weak human interest frame condition) than in the conditions where participants were not exposed to human interest-framed information (no human interest frame condition and control condition). This difference was significant between the strong human interest frame condition and the no human interest frame condition, as well as between the weak human interest frame condition and the no human interest frame condition.¹⁴ Although the two conditions that showed human interest elements (strong and weak human interest frame condition) did not differ significantly from the control condition at $\alpha = .05$, there was a similar trend at $\alpha = .10$ that more responsibility was attributed to individuals when participants were not exposed to human interest-framed information.¹⁵

¹⁴ The bootstrapped Bonferroni post-hoc test for the difference between conditions provided bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals that did not exceed zero: strong human interest frame condition versus no human interest frame condition, $M_{\text{difference}} = 0.39$, $SE = 0.17$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.73]; weak human interest frame condition versus no human interest frame condition, $M_{\text{difference}} = 0.37$, $SE = 0.16$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.67].

¹⁵ The bootstrapped Bonferroni post-hoc test for the difference between conditions provided bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals that exceeded zero, but 90% confidence intervals did not: strong human interest frame condition versus control condition, $M_{\text{difference}} = 0.29$, $SE = 0.17$, 95% CI [-0.07, 0.62], 90% CI [0.01, 0.57]; weak human interest frame condition versus control condition, $M_{\text{difference}} = 0.27$, $SE = 0.15$, 95% CI [-0.03, 0.57], 90% CI [0.02, 0.52].

Next, it was analyzed how variation in responsibility attribution affected the attitudes of participants toward the plan of the government. A linear regression analysis showed that these two variables were strongly correlated, $B = -1.21$, $SE = 0.28$, 95% CI [-1.87, -0.57], $p < .001$: The more people attributed responsibility to the government, the less they supported the government's plan to reduce public spending on ADHD medication for children and adolescents.

The two significant direct effects described above gave reason to investigate whether human interest framing indirectly affected attitudes toward the plan of the government. The analyses of this indirect effect were based on bias-corrected estimates of 10,000 bootstrap samples.¹⁶ However, as there were four experimental conditions, and regression techniques cannot properly deal with nominal variables, dichotomized variables were made representing contrasts of one condition versus another condition (e.g., no human interest frame condition = 0, versus strong human interest frame condition = 1). Hence, the indirect effects were analyzed one-by-one. The indirect effects were tested in a simple mediation model (Hayes, 2009, p. 409) as represented in Figure 2.1: one direct effect of the dichotomized condition variable on attitude toward the government's plan (B_1), and an indirect effect via the attribution of responsibility variable on attitude toward the plan ($B_{2 \times 3}$).

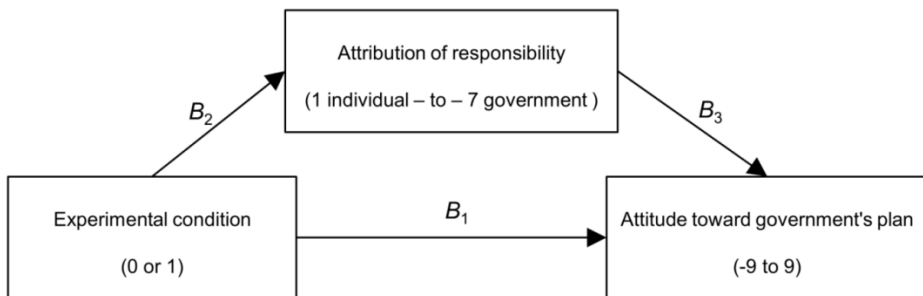


Figure 2.1. The mediation model to test the indirect effect of human interest framing on attitude toward the plan of the government via attribution of responsibility.

Starting with the two main conditions of this study, the indirect effect of the no human interest frame condition (0) relative to the strong human interest frame condition (1) was analyzed first. Just as with the ANOVA, a direct effect on

¹⁶ Modeling tool *Process* was used to conduct these analyses (see Hayes, 2013). Using structural equation modeling leads to the same findings.

the mediating variable “attribution of responsibility” was found (B_2): Participants in the strong human interest frame condition on average attributed 0.39 points more responsibility to the government than participants who saw the item without human interest-framed information. Once again, it was found that this attribution of responsibility significantly and negatively related to the attitude toward the government’s plan (B_3): Those who attributed 1 point more responsibility to the government had 1.08 points less support for its plan to cut spending on children’s ADHD medication. Hence, the analysis showed that exposure to the strong human interest frame condition indirectly and significantly decreased the attitude toward the government’s plan compared to the no human interest frame condition via responsibility attribution with 0.42 points ($B_{2 \times 3}$). The condition to which participants were assigned had no significant direct effect on attitudes toward the plan (B_1).

How and whether the attitude toward the government’s plan was affected in other contrasts of conditions is shown in Table 2.2. This table shows the strength and significance of the direct effect of experimental conditions on support for the government’s plan (B_1 , which was never significant) and on the mediating variable “attribution of responsibility” (B_2), the direct effect of “attribution of responsibility” on the attitude toward the government’s plan (B_3), and the indirect effect of the experimental condition on the attitude toward the government’s plan via the attribution of responsibility ($B_{2 \times 3}$). Findings show that the weak human interest frame condition relative to the no human interest frame condition indirectly decreased the attitude toward the plan of the government in a similar way as the strong human interest frame condition.

When the strong human interest frame condition and the weak human interest frame condition were compared to the control condition, a similar negative indirect effect was visible as when these two conditions were compared to the no human interest frame condition. Although the direct effects on attribution of responsibility were not significant, their directionality suggests that the conditions with human interest-framed information may have led to more responsibility attribution to the government than the control condition. The indirect effects had 95% confidence intervals of which the upper bounds fluctuated marginally above or exactly on zero, which indicates that the strong human interest frame and weak human interest frame condition via their effect on responsibility attribution indirectly caused a decrease in support for the government’s plan relative to the control condition.

Table 2.2. Direct and indirect effects of human interest framing on attitude toward the government's plan and on attribution of responsibility.

	Experimental condition ↓ Attitude toward government's plan	Experimental condition ↓ Attribution of responsibility	Attribution of responsibility ↓ Attitude toward government's plan	Experimental Condition ↓ Attitude toward government's plan (Indirect effect)
Conditions that are compared:	B_1 (SE)	B_2 (SE)	B_3 (SE)	$B_{2 \times 3}$ (SE), 95% CI [Lower, Upper]
Control (0) versus Strong human interest frame (1)	-0.38 (0.71)	0.29 (0.17) [†]	-1.00 (0.38)**	-0.29 (0.23), [-0.98, 0.01] [†]
No HIF (0) versus Strong human interest frame (1)	-0.43 (0.73)	0.39 (0.17) [*]	-1.08 (0.37)**	-0.42 (0.27), [-1.14, -0.04] [*]
Weak HIF (0) versus Strong human interest frame (1)	-0.08 (0.76)	0.02 (0.17)	-1.37 (0.43)**	-0.03 (0.24), [-0.56, 0.43]
Control (0) versus Weak human interest frame (1)	-0.21 (0.74)	0.27 (0.15) [†]	-1.32 (0.44)**	-0.35 (0.26), [-1.10, 0.00] [†]
No HIF (0) versus Weak human interest frame (1)	-0.23 (0.77)	0.37 (0.16) [*]	-1.39 (0.43)**	-0.51 (0.29), [-1.25, -0.07] [*]
Control (0) versus No human interest frame (1)	0.07 (0.69)	-0.10 (0.16)	-1.02 (0.38)**	0.10 (0.19), [-0.17, 0.67]

Note. HIF denotes human interest frame. Cells contain OLS unstandardized (B) regression coefficients with standard errors (SE) in parentheses. Standard errors and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals of indirect effect are based on 10,000 bootstrap samples.

[†] $p < .10$, ^{*} $p < .05$, ^{**} $p < .01$ (two-tailed)

Finally, exposure to the strong and the weak human interest frame items led to almost an identical responsibility attribution; accordingly, there was no indirect effect on the attitude between these two conditions. Participants reacted similarly to the strong human interest frame item as to the condition with a mix of human interest-framed and substantive political information (weak human interest frame). Participants also reacted similarly to the no human interest frame condition and the control condition: Exposing people to an item without a human interest frame did not change their responsibility attribution, nor indirectly their attitude toward the government's plan compared to seeing no news about this topic.

Discussion

Three conclusions emerged from this study that investigated the effect of human interest framing on citizens' political attitudes. First, human interest framing of a news item caused attribution of responsibility to the government. Second, attribution of responsibility to the government decreased support for the government's plan to cut budget on children's ADHD medication. In a nutshell, this means that human interest framing indirectly affected people's political attitudes via the way they attributed responsibility of a problem. Testing this specific indirect effect helped to understand the mechanism behind the effect of human interest framing and adds detail to the causal sequence it commences (Holbert & Stephenson, 2003; Williams & MacKinnon, 2008). Third, it has been shown that there were no differences in effectiveness between the strong human interest frame item and the weak human interest frame item; both items were equally compelling. As long as people saw *some* of the human interest-framed information, they were more likely to attribute responsibility to the government, and this effect was not stronger when the human interest frame was presented more intensely.

The first two conclusions support exemplification theory, which predicts a strong persuasive power of human exemplars. The human exemplar expressed the problem she experienced and claimed not to be blamable for her child's problems. The people who were exposed to this personal exemplar attributed more responsibility to the government for this particular problem. Accordingly, this also means that this study's findings are not in line with the literature on episodic framing. Episodic framing studies mainly showed that focusing a news story on one individual exemplar caused responsibility attribution to individuals rather than to government. Episodic framing studies, however, mainly focused on not-so-

common examples (e.g., criminals, minorities, or a person who was wrongly imprisoned) (Gross, 2008; Hart, 2011; Iyengar, 1991).

The expectations regarding effects of episodic framing have neither been confirmed by previous studies that used ordinary people as episodic information, just as has been done in this study (Aarøe, 2011; Hannah & Cafferty, 2006; Iyengar, 1991). It would be interesting to dig deeper into this dissonance between episodic framing and exemplification theory by manipulating exemplars' commonness in further research as this commonness may be key to the generalization process hypothesized in exemplification theory. After all, it seems unlikely to generalize uncommon exemplars to a broader population.

Exposure to human interest-framed news, thus, caused attribution of responsibility to the government. According to exemplification theory, this may be because viewing the mother expressing her problems may cue viewers to belief that this is an example of a broader problem, and hence to overestimate the proportion of the population that is negatively affected by the reported healthcare reform. Additional explanations may be that people felt sympathetic to the struggles of this parent, or that they more easily identified with the mother than with the politician who also opposed the government's plan. Future research is necessary to draw more detailed conclusions about the mechanisms underlying the effect of human interest framing on responsibility attribution by measuring potentially mediating variables as perceived problem severity, identification with, and sympathy for the displayed actors.

The second conclusion stated that effects of human interest frames on attributions of responsibility are consequential and eventually affect political attitudes toward the government's plan: Exposure to the news items with weak or strong human interest-framed information indirectly decreased support for the reduction of government spending on children's ADHD medicines compared to the conditions without human interest-framed information. As human interest framing has become a common feature of current news coverage (Daschmann & Brosius, 1999; Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2005; Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2011; Patterson, 2000), one can speculate this is not particularly helpful for governments to generate public support for their policies. Especially in times when governments are challenged to reduce public spending, this kind of reporting may decrease support for governments and their plans.

This study thus yielded an indirect effect of human interest framing via responsibility attribution on the attitude toward the government's plan; however,

the overall impact of human interest framing was insignificant in this case.¹⁷ Further research is needed to know why framing did not have a total effect in spite of its indirect effect. It may, for example, be that framing of the news item also affected the attitude via other indirect ways that operated in opposite direction to the indirect effect that has been established in this study. Another possible explanation is the number of exemplars per news story. This seems a valid assumption, as the studies that found an overall effect on attitudes used more than one exemplar in the stimuli (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Lefevere et al., 2012; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997), while this study employed only one exemplar.

The current study advances most previous research by investigating framing effects in the context of television rather than in printed materials. It is, therefore, not sure whether the same stories in a print format would have yielded the same findings, which limits the comparability with most existing works. Using participants with different ages and educational backgrounds makes it relatively unlikely that sample-specific effects have been found. That said, the sample was not fully representative of the Dutch adult population, but the key interest of this study was to investigate the causal mechanisms related to human interest framing rather than making general claims about public opinion.

A limitation of the study was the source difference between the strong human interest frame item and the no human interest frame item: The mother and politician were not the same person. Hence, the question may rise whether additional features, such as gender, credibility, attractiveness, or likeability, affected the results. This is an issue in most experimental studies that employ broadcast-based news stimuli, because it is very difficult to create such materials that are both internally and externally valid.¹⁸ Future research should be attentive to this, for example, by hiring an actor to play the different roles, or by including a condition that only shows the baseline information of the item without any interview. Another limitation of this study is that effects of only one manipulated news story were assessed. This limits the ability to generalize the findings as it is not sure

¹⁷ Total effects were estimated with a one-way ANOVA with the dependent variable “attitude toward the government’s plan” and as the independent variable the condition to which people were assigned, $F(3,238) = 0.62, p = .601$. None of the contrasts of conditions yielded a significant difference between the means of two conditions.

¹⁸ It has, however, been found that internally valid precision framing causes effects that are very similar to framing that is more externally valid (Vraga, Carr, Nytes, & Shah, 2010).

whether a human interest-framed story on a different topic would have yielded the same findings.

In conclusion, this study has shown that human interest framing of a news item plays an important role for the way people perceive a topic and consequently form opinions about political issues. Journalist should be aware of this and realize that their selection of exemplars, although perhaps only meant to brighten up news stories, may have important consequences for the way audiences perceive and respond to the issues reported on in the news. The findings of this study also imply that to avoid negative public opinion on their reforms, ministers and MPs of government parties should be readily available to journalists so these may turn less to exemplars. MP's of the opposition, on the other hand, would be most effective if they can refer to or motivate journalists to find appealing personalized narratives of common people that contradict the view of the government.