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News Framing Effects and Emotions

ANDREAS R. T. SCHUCK and ALINA FEINHOLDT

Abstract

Framing research is thriving and has become ever more popular among researchers and students alike. This essay reviews some of the latest trends and developments in the field, explains key terms and concepts, identifies likely future research lines, and zooms in on one of these in particular, that is, the role of *emotions* in explaining news framing effects. We distinguish different theories on emotions and how they have been and can be used in the context of framing research. Furthermore, we present a basic model of how to investigate the role of emotions in framing effects research. Finally, we discuss some of the most promising future research lines with the potential for students or scholars to make their own contribution and present results of a small-scale expert survey indicating what some prominent scholars consider to be the most important challenges and promising future trends in the field right now.

NEWS FRAMING—KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

A never-ending stream of studies has documented the presence of different frames in political news coverage with a wide range of effects on audiences. Given the availability of so much evidence and research that could guide one's own investigation, one could get the impression that frame analysis is easy to conduct and that effects are likely to be found. However, upon closer inspection it becomes much less obvious and agreeable *what* a frame is and *how* and *under what conditions* frames have *what kind of* effect. In the following we first discuss some of the key terms and concepts as well as current trends and developments in framing research and then zoom in on one of these, that is, the role *emotions* play in news framing effect research.

The number of definitions today of what a frame is, is literally uncountable. Gamson and Modigliani (1989), for example, defined a frame as "a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events" (p. 143). Thus, a frame suggests what an issue is about, that is, how one should make sense of it. This is done through the use of selection, salience or emphasis, exclusion and/or elaboration (see, e.g., Chong & Druckman, 2007). In its most basic sense, news framing refers

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to the observation that media can portray one and the same topic in very different ways, emphasizing certain aspects and/or evaluations or only parts of an issue at the expense of possible others. In terms of what *types* of frames exist in media content, research often distinguishes between generic frames and issue-specific frames (de Vreese, 2005). Some frames, such as conflict, attribution of responsibility, morality, human interest, or economic consequences, are commonly applied to a wide range of topics, whereas others are bound to a particular issue. Think of, for example, the recent uprising on Maidan Square in Kiev in the Ukraine as being a "fight for freedom" or an issue of "disrupting public order." Importantly, a news frame represents a consistent construction of an issue, suggesting certain associations, attributes, judgments, or decisions. Simply put, it is *more* than just an isolated argument on a particular issue. This means to be wary of the unfortunate trend that seemingly everything nowadays becomes a "frame," for example, coding the mere mentioning of a certain topic in a newspaper headline or an isolated evaluation does *not*, will not and should not (ever) be classified as a frame, that is, it needs more than that.

How can a frame in political news coverage then be identified or measured? Conceptually, this question relates to the process of *frame-building*, that is, the question what determines the emergence and shape of a news frame to begin with? In the abovementioned example of the Maidan Square in Kiev, multiple players are involved in the construction of what eventually can be found as a frame in the news, for example, the journalist, political elites, public movements, and so on. There are certain factors that influence the qualities of a frame, which can be internal to journalism (e.g., editorial policies, news values) or external (e.g., public opinion climate, events, political agendas). In interaction between journalists and news organizations, political elites, and the public, news frames eventually take shape and studying this process is a distinct field of research (e.g., Hänggli, 2012). Only then can we start analyzing news frames and their content characteristics.

Methodologically, frame analysis can either be done inductively in a *qualitative* coding approach (e.g., Pan & Kosicki, 1993), or, as is most commonly done, deductively in a *quantitative* approach according to a predefined set of content-analytic indicators that represent the frame (e.g., Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). How frames are conceptualized and measured is often connected to problems such as a lack of operational precision or insufficient reporting of intercoder reliability (Matthes, 2009). Most frame analyses are still conducted manually and with a narrow focus on print newspaper coverage. Television coverage, on the contrary, with its visual elements and because of its sometimes limited accessibility, is less often analyzed. The same is the case for online news with their often more interactive features and despite their obvious relevance.

At this point, more studies are needed analyzing frames in *nonstandard news formats*, such as political cartoons or political satire shows or other soft news or political entertainment programs that attract new and wider audiences. Furthermore, two more trends can be predicted, or are already advancing: (i) a focus on *visual framing*, that is, the analysis of frames in visual material as well as the interaction between text and visual information in what constitutes a frame, and (ii) *computer-assisted, text-based content analysis* of large quantities of print and/or online news, employing a machine-learning approach (at lower costs), but also of social media content such as Twitter or online discussions or comments on articles or blog posts. Overall, the analysis of "journalistic" news frames is expanding to include frames employed in user-generated media content, which also carries implications for new research on frame-building and the conditions under which frames emerge and spill over from the news to the audience and vice versa and likely influence each other.

Turning to the *effect* side, framing studies have demonstrated effects on the evaluative direction of thoughts, issue interpretations, attitudes, perceptions of an issue, and levels of policy support and political behavior. Recently, the focus has shifted away from the question *if* frames have an effect and toward more nuanced issues such as (i) determining the role of individual predispositions and contextual contingencies, that is, the *conditions under which* news frames have (stronger/weaker/no) effects (i.e., *moderation*) (e.g., Schuck, Boomgaarden, & de Vreese, 2013); (ii) describing the *underlying processes* and *mechanisms* that explain *how* news frames cause an effect (i.e., *mediation*) (e.g., Slothuus, 2008); and (3) testing news framing effects in *more realistic* settings and research designs, for example, the role of *competitive* and/or *repetitive* framing on the *strength* and/or *duration* of framing effects (e.g., Lecheler & de Vreese, 2013).

Media effects are not the same for everyone, that is, they are contingent on so-called *moderators*, factors that determine if an effect is stronger or weaker for a certain individual and/or in a certain context. Depending on personal characteristics (e.g., personality traits) and individual predispositions (e.g., political knowledge, personal values) or other characteristics (e.g., source characteristics, interpersonal communication), frames can have either more or less of an effect or no effect at all (see, e.g., de Vreese & Lecheler, 2012). Especially *contextual* moderators can be seen as a hot topic in framing research right now, as they do not only include issue- or frame-relevant factors (e.g., issue importance, repetitive or competitive framing, and episodic or thematic framing) but also *country-specific characteristic*s. For example, recent comparative research shows that the same news frame can have different effects depending on, for example, the general public opinion climate toward an issue in a country or the general information environment

in the respective national media (e.g., Schuck, Vliegenthart, & de Vreese, 2014).

More recently, framing effect research has increased efforts to investigate the underlying mechanisms that explain how framing effects operate, that is, the so-called *mediators*. However, most research by far has been devoted to *cognitive* processes. Framing effects, in this perspective, can be explained by different processes such as *accessibility change* (i.e., making considerations more salient and likely to be used), *belief importance change* (i.e., altering the weight of certain considerations), or *belief content change* (i.e., adding new beliefs) (see e.g., Slothuus, 2008). What is strikingly missing from this list of possible mechanisms is the role of *affective* factors in mediating framing effects. In political communication research, several studies so far have shown how certain news frames, such as conflict, valenced or episodic frames, can be particularly effective in sparking emotions and/or how these mediate framing effects (e.g., Aarøe, 2011; Gross & Brewer, 2007; Lecheler, Schuck, & de Vreese, 2013). Yet, this first empirical evidence remains fragmentary and a comprehensive theoretical framework with an integration of cognitive and affective factors is still lacking.

How can researchers analyze framing effects? In terms of methodology, two possible research designs are most commonly employed to study news framing effects. Most often, framing researchers employ *experiments* in which respondents are randomly assigned to different news frames (or a control group) and differences in the relevant outcome variables are then attributed to the respective frame manipulation. More recently, there have been notable advances and these standard designs have been extended including, for example, *repetitive exposure* to the same frame or to *competing frames* and/or repeated exposure with different *time delays* (reaching from several minutes or hours to multiple weeks) to track the strength and persistence of framing effects over time and in a more realistic setting (see, e.g., Lecheler & de Vreese, 2013). Easier access to the use of *online samples* has reduced the reliance on student or other convenience samples. Other innovations include the use of *implicit* or *physiological* measures to assess affective responses to news frames more accurately and reduce reliance on self-reports. A second way of accounting for news framing effects takes a different approach and combines a *media content analysis* with *panel survey data*. This design consists of two steps, (i) measuring the presence of certain news frames in news content over a certain period of time, for example, the weeks before an election, and combining it with (ii) panel survey data spanning over the same time period and including detailed media exposure measures for the same outlets. By combining these two data sources it is possible to compose an individual-level weighted media exposure measure that takes into account the exact frame "dosage" an individual has been

exposed to, and account for its impact on *changes* in opinions, attitudes, or between behavioral intentions and actual behavior over the period of the time interval (see e.g., Schuck, Vliegenthart, & de Vreese, 2014).

In Figure 1 we provide a *basic model how to analyze the role of emotions* in news framing effect research. Importantly, this model can easily be adjusted or extended and simply illustrates one possible way to investigate indirect effects of news frames via emotions on different relevant outcomes. It takes into account the different possible research designs discussed earlier (arrows at the bottom) and the main issue to consider as a researcher at each stage of the design (arrows at the top). Depending on the respective study design and research interest, emotions can also be dependent variables or even moderators rather than mediators. Multiple emotions instead of one single emotion could be included in what would then become a multiple mediation model. Cognitive factors could be added to the model as additional mediators—alongside emotions—to assess the relative importance of cognitive *vis-à-vis* affective factors. Either (or none of the) path(s) from news frame to emotion(s) and/or from emotion(s) to the dependent variable(s) could be moderated; for example, an individual's "need for affect" could condition the extent to which people respond emotionally to news frames (i.e., first path), and/or a person's degree of (political) self-efficacy could condition the extent to which an emotion such as "anger" mobilizes political behavior (i.e., second path). Furthermore, contextual factors could be included as moderator(s) in the model, in comparative research designs, and finally the model could be extended into a serial mediation model in which the indirect effect of a news frame via emotion(s) on opinions and/or attitudes is assessed first, which are then expected to affect political behavior. Finally, there are different ways to analyze (conditional) indirect effects such as those illustrated in Figure 1 and some are more appropriate than others depending on the exact nature of the data at hand and the research objective (see, e.g., Hayes, 2013). Overall, the model in the figure is a graphical illustration of the (possible research) question: *What kinds of emotions are triggered by political news frames, to what extent, under what conditions, and what is their impact on what kind of relevant outcomes?*

THE DRIVING, CHANNELING, AND SIMPLY CENTRAL ROLE OF EMOTIONS IN FRAMING

While emotions are still an emerging trend in news framing research, emotion researchers themselves grapple with numerous issues. In this section, we offer a brief overview of some of the main concepts and questions encountered in emotion research, including two theories that are used within the context of framing effects research.

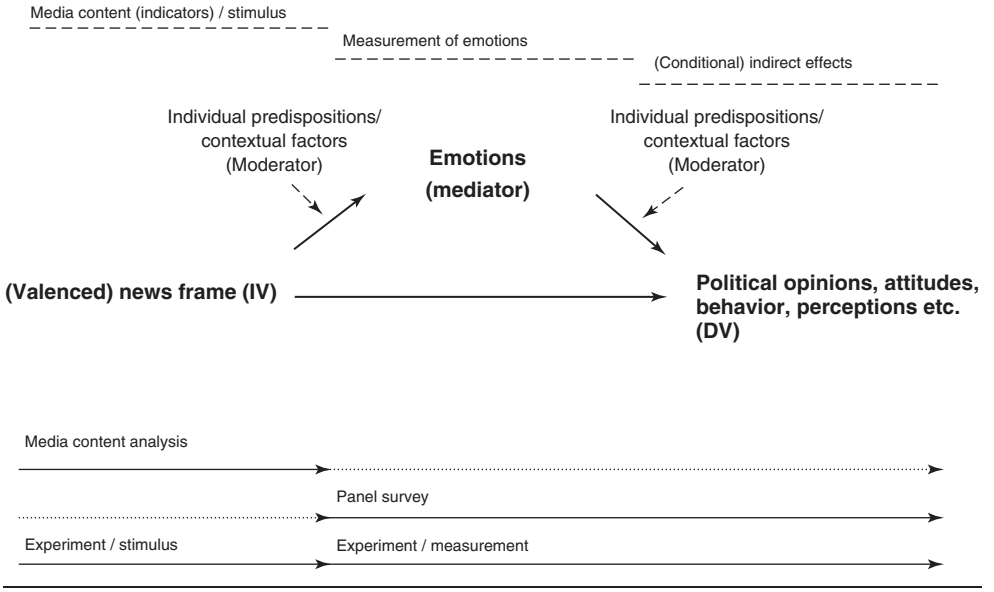

Figure 1 (Moderated) Mediation model of (conditional) indirect framing effects via emotions on political opinions, attitudes, behavior, or perceptions, and so on.

First, we clarify some of the key terms that are conceptually distinct but are often interchangeably used. Beginning with *affect*, some scholars view affect as a "broader, more inclusive psychological construct" (Gray & Watson, 2007, p. 171) which characterizes the valence of a mood, an emotional state or an individual's intrinsic motivation to act in certain ways. That is, when we speak of *affect,* we do not mean specific emotions or moods but rather evaluations such as positive or negative. *Mood* is another construct that has often been equated with emotions even though there appear to be relevant differences. Both constructs can be distinguished in terms of duration, with moods extending over time and context, whereas emotions embody acute and object-directed states. As such, moods occupy most of our lifetime, while emotions inhabit only a fraction of it. Similar to emotions, mood can substantially influence how people process and deal with information they encounter (e.g., Scherer, 2005). Importantly, however, these differences remain, to a large extent, theoretical, as clear empirical evidence is hardly available. Another candidate causing confusion is the term *feeling* (Mulligan & Scherer, 2012). While many scholars characterize feelings as vague, "by their nature dumb and without intelligence" (Solomon, 2007, p. 137), or "hopeless concept(s)" (Damasio, 2004, p. 50), there is consensus that a feeling is the conscious awareness of a prevailing emotional experience. Still, it is worthwhile mentioning that feelings are not emotion-specific but

embrace both emotions and sensations such as touch, noise, smell, and taste (Averill, 1994).

These definitions highlight that people frequently use "synonyms" for emotions that are more or less related but represent distinct concepts. For framing research, these differences stress the need to be clear about each of these concepts' distinct role. Also, it asks for a more precise operationalization of emotions if these are really the mechanism expected to account for framing effects. Meanwhile, if the concepts discussed are only related to emotions, what then are emotions? For centuries scholars have tried to come up with an unequivocal answer but largely failed to do so. Scherer (2005) even views the goal of specifying what an emotion is as a "notorious problem" (p. 695) because many scholars approach and study emotions from different angles. Here, we opt for a context-based definition of emotions in which emotions are explained from the perspective of a specific theory.

Dimensional Theories

From a dimensional perspective, an infinite number of emotions can be located along the dimensions of *valence* and *arousal*. Valence refers to a subjective state of feeling pleasure or displeasure in response to a certain stimulus and can vary in intensity. Arousal, on the contrary, describes physiological changes ranging from excitement to calmness. Some scholars do also include a third dimension running from potency to control or dominance to submissiveness (e.g., Russel & Mehrabian, 1977). Intersections of these dimensions lay the groundwork for the emergence of an emotion which then determines corresponding behavioral tendencies.

While offering a parsimonious system for how emotions can be described, dimensional theories have two substantial shortcomings: First, not all emotional features can be reduced to two or three dimensions. For instance, jaw dropping or rising eyebrows can be best accounted for by a fourth dimension relating to novelty (Fontaine, Scherer, Roesch, & Ellsworth, 2007), which has been associated with unique activation patterns in the amygdala, a brain region associated with emotion processing (for a review on brain activity and emotions, see Lindquist, Wager, Kober, Bliss-Moreau, Barrett, 2012). Second, dimensional theories are inherently descriptive rather than explanatory. That is, their focus lies primarily on explaining the largest amount of variance in emotional experience rather than on offering explanations how emotions emerge (Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003).

Existing framing studies often have used the dimensional approach for operationalizing frames in terms of positive or negative valence. For instance, Schuck and de Vreese (2009) have tested the effects of differently valenced news frames on voting intention. Others have focused on the effects positive

and negative news frames have on political attitudes (Maier & Rittberger, 2008). These and similar studies highlight that valence paves the way for different types of behaviors or attitudes. Yet, the predominantly descriptive nature of this approach prevents from understanding why valence may cause these types of framing effects.

Cognitive Appraisal Theories (CAT)

Cognitive appraisal theory (CAT) claims that an emotional episode derives from a specific and nearly invariant pattern of appraisals. An emotional episode is a synonym for an emotion but it underscores the fact that an emotion is an emergent event proceeded by a stimulus of which the person can but does not need to be consciously aware of. The presence of a specific stimulus implies also that emotional episodes have a starting and an end point, with different emotional episodes varying in duration and intensity (e.g., Moors & Scherer, 2013). Imagine, for instance, a reporter announcing the implementation of a policy on progressive taxation. In response to this broadcast, someone may experience happiness while someone else may react with anger or sadness. Each one of these emotional episodes may differ in the respective episode onset and how rapidly they will decay.

Furthermore, each emotional episode is accompanied by synchronized changes in several components consisting of (i) cognitive appraisals, (ii) psychophysiology, (iii) subjective feelings, as well as (iv) motivational and (v) behavioral tendencies such as modifications of facial expressions. Cognitive appraisals are mechanisms that monitor and scrutinize external and internal events in relation to the individual's well-being (Ellsworth, 2013). A specific event, however, is not randomly appraised but according to specific appraisal dimensions. The most common appraisal dimensions are novelty (i.e., is the prevailing event familiar or not?), certainty (i.e., is the outcome certain?), agency (i.e., who is responsible for this event?), and coping potential (i.e., can I deal with this event?). Importantly, these dimensions are not fixed. Rather, each appraisal scholar uses a specific vocabulary but also takes into account dimensions that he or she considers more valuable to a specific emotion (Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003).

Proponents of this theory argue that the outcome of an appraisal will subsequently impact the other components and, thus, trigger changes that are characteristic for a specific emotional episode. Correspondingly, any changes in appraisals are accompanied by changes in emotional experiences. There is disagreement about the way such changes occur: While some contend that several appraisals occur simultaneously and thereby influence other ongoing appraisals, others argue that the appraisals follow certain sequences. Besides, appraisals are prerequisite to an emotional experience but their nature and

the precise steps underlying appraisal processes remain subject to further debate (Moors & Scherer, 2013).

The majority of existing framing studies have applied CAT as a framework for explaining the role of emotions as channels (e.g., Aarøe, 2011; Druckman & McDermott, 2008) or processes of news framing effects (e.g., Gross, 2008; Lecheler, Schuck, & de Vreese, 2013). Most of existing studies focus on discrete emotions because they offer the best possible approach toward capturing fine-grained differences that are typical for media stimuli in general and news framing in particular. Media stimuli using specific frames may not only carry information on arousal or valence but also other information such as certainty or responsibility. As emotions share commonalities in some but not other dimensions, a focus on discrete emotions offers more ground for isolating and specifying relationships between a stimulus or frame and an emotional response (Nabi, 2010).

For instance, while anger and disgust are both negative and certainty-oriented emotions, anger may translate into different behavioral tendencies such as approach or avoidance (Turner, 2007). Disgust, on the other hand, will more often than not mobilize avoidance tendencies (Han, Lerner, & Zeckhauser, 2012). Similarly, fear can but does not need to translate into averse behavioral tendencies. Further, common to fear and the positive emotion of hope is a feeling of uncertainty. That is, when the situational demands remain largely unpredictable, both hope and fear are common responses. Yet, to the extent that positive prospects exist, hope will not cause the person to deter from facing an unpleasant and challenging situation.

Thus, it becomes clear that a coarse conceptualization of emotions in terms of positive, negative, or aversive emotions may blur these fine-grained distinctions. However, there are still many media and framing effect studies that combine several negative or positive emotions under the header of a single discrete one. While the abovementioned provides good reasons not to do so, in empirical terms, and given that emotions are often measured with self-reports posing obvious challenges for respondents, combining multiple emotions into broader valence categories (positive or negative) is of course oftentimes supported.

DISCUSSION

The steady rise of media and framing effect studies considering the role of emotions underscores a prevailing and emerging trend in political communication research. In this essay, we have pointed out some of the current developments in the field. With emotions having acquired more attention by framing scholars by now, as is reflected in ever more publications on the topic, we are left grappling with questions which reach beyond asking

if emotions matter but rather ask "what emotions play what role?," "which emotions to measure and how?," or "which individual and/or contextual characteristics condition the experience and impact of emotions and on what relevant outcomes?."

There are five topics we consider to be particularly important for future framing research and want to highlight: *First*, when it comes to emotions extant research in political communication pursues a rather narrow focus. While negative emotions are studied predominantly, researchers rarely look beyond the same set (mostly fear and anger) of them. Meanwhile, positive emotions (such as hope, empathy, or pride) still continue to play a rather minor role. We believe future research should also look more at self-conscious emotions such as shame, guilt, or envy or other moral emotions, which may offer particularly interesting insights into the formation of political opinions and behavior.

Second, we also need to propel work on identifying which (other) individual and contextual factors influence (i) the extent to which emotions are sparked by media stimuli, as well as (ii) to which extent emotions, once elicited, exert an influence on subsequent opinions, attitudes, and/or behaviors. For instance, framing research pays hardly any attention to the impact of contextual influences such as country characteristics, the general information landscape but also cultural variations in emotions experiences. Importantly, the factors that might condition these effects and processes can be emotion-, context-, and/or topic-specific. Therefore, a research approach that is more nuanced is needed.

Third, framing effects research still lacks an integrated cognitive-emotional perspective. Solving this issue will require scholars not only to assess (i) the relative importance of cognitions and emotions within the same study but also (ii) their interaction with one another. *Fourth*, measurement (currently, mostly verbal self-reports) remains an important problem and implicit, physiological, or neurological measures should be considered by future research. While each of these measures has its own pros and cons, the best approach would involve combining several measures. By doing so, it will be possible not only to compensate for the shortcomings of a measurement but also to gain a more comprehensive insight into the undergoing processes. *Fifth*, visual framing remains an underresearched topic in news framing studies and frame analyses which are primarily text-based. Yet, because emotions are particularly receptive to visuals, going beyond texts may shed light not only on how both visual frames influence emotions but also on how textual and visual and/or audio elements interact in the construction as well as the subsequent perception of a frame.

Finally, to provide further input for our readers from a greater variety of experts working on the topic, we contacted some prominent researchers and

leading experts in the field of framing and/or emotions with a short set of questions asking for the biggest challenges at this point. For their participation and for sharing their views and comments on the topic, we thank Prof. Henk Dekker (University of Leiden, the Netherlands), Prof. Jamie Druckman (Northwestern University, USA), Dr. Eric Groenendyk (University of Memphis, USA), Prof. Eran Halperin (IDC Herzliya, Israel), Prof. Jörg Matthes (University of Vienna, Austria), Prof. Michael Bang Petersen (University of Aarhus, Denmark) and Prof. Dhavan Shah (University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA).

Closer examination of the answers reveals that our experts see two main challenges that can be further subdivided. The first main challenge concerns measurement. Specifically, our experts showed concern about accurately separating personal emotions from thoughts, arguments, perceptions, attitudes, decisions, and actions, but also from collective emotions. In addition, they expressed concern regarding the measurement of the interaction between cognitions and emotions but also the measurement of emotion duration. The second bigger challenge is connected to the first, but is more theory-based: What kind of effects of emotions do we expect? Do we include the correct causes and consequences in our models? Regarding framing research in general, our experts see it as important that studies refrain from identifying frames without solid theoretical justification of the frame's relevance in journalistic practice. Successfully accomplishing these challenges, as recommended by our experts, entails the following steps:

- Careful theorizing instead of simple reapplications of psychological research on the effects of emotions and just calling it "framing effect";
- Developing better (self-report) survey measures of emotions and triangulating them with other methods and/or measures;
- Going beyond single-shot and forced-exposure designs which ignore processes of selectivity before and during reception in modern media environments;
- Applying dynamic research designs and measuring emotions over time—both as the dependent and independent variable.

And most importantly—as almost all of our experts stress univocally: The need to team up with scholars from other fields, such as psychology, neuroscience, or knowledge engineering, to achieve these goals and integrate emotions into existing frameworks. These factors will pave the way to the development of better theoretical models on the influence of emotions as well as contribute to already existing approaches. Finally, we close this essay with the concluding remark by Dr. Groenendyk: "Virtually everyone agrees that emotions matter; they're just difficult to study. This is a great opportunity."

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