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Equivalence and emphasis frames

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The concept of framing in political communication has been studied in different disciplines, including communication science, political science, psychology, and sociology. As a result, previous framing research has been diverse in approach and has examined many different types of frames. A useful distinction here is that between equivalence and emphasis frames. Equivalence frames present an aspect of the same issue in logically equivalent ways (e.g., two-thirds wins vs. one-third loses). Emphasis frames, however, focus on different aspects of the same issue (e.g., moral vs. economic consequences). Studying each type of frame has advantages and disadvantages for advancing our understanding of the uses and persuasive impact of framing in political communication, for instance in terms of the generalizability and applicability of findings. Therefore, differences in characteristics between equivalence and emphasis frames have sparked much scholarly debate about which type of frame is best to study.

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The concept of framing in political communication has been studied in different disciplines, including communication science, political science, psychology, and sociology. As a result, previous framing research has been diverse in approach while examining both the uses of an abundance of different frames in political discourse and their effects on citizens' political decision-making (Brugman & Burgers, 2018). This entry focuses on a useful distinction in the framing literature, which is between equivalence and emphasis frames.

The Differences Between the Two

Equivalence frames present an aspect of the same issue in logically equivalent but different ways. They have their origin in the seminal work of psychologists Kahneman and Tversky (e.g., 1984), who examined the influence on people's judgments of presenting information positively (i.e., as *gains*; e.g., two-thirds of voters are in favor of this new policy) or negatively (i.e., as *losses*; e.g., one-third of voters are against this new policy). In this tradition of framing research, equivalence frames represent different sides of the same coin, with each side having its own connotations or implicatures. They thus tend to differ from each other in valence of the labels that describe a particular quantitative attribute (Olsen, 2020).

Rather than through a difference in valence, equivalence frames can also manifest through a difference in scale or metric (Olsen, 2020). Examples of this form of equivalence frames are describing quantitative attributes (a) per day versus per month or per year, (b) for every 100 versus every 10,000 people, and (c) in cents rather than dollars/euros/et cetera. For instance, when politicians or journalists discuss poverty in their country, they can emphasize that each day in the last year 100 families lost their homes, or that the number of families who became homeless that year was $(100 \times 365 \text{ days}) = 3,650$. While these techniques are much more often studied in fields such as behavioral economics and less frequently recognized as equivalence frames in traditional framing research, transforming numerical dimensions such as by expanding or contracting them certainly fits the frame's definition (Pedersen, 2017).

Equivalence frames can typically be used to describe political discourse regardless of the specific issue under discussion (e.g., climate change, immigration, social inequality). This is the case because most issues in politics involve some kind of quantitative information that can be presented in equivalent ways. Frames that are universally applicable and are therefore not bound by one theme or topic are often referred to as generic frames (de Vreese, 2005). In general, one could thus argue that equivalence frames constitute generic frames by default.

Emphasis frames differ from equivalence frames in that they do not present logically equivalent information, but rather focus on different aspects of the same issue. In the case of poverty for example, politicians and journalists could highlight the moral consequences of families becoming homeless (e.g., it strips children of their right to live in safe and secure housing) but the economic consequences as well (e.g., it leads to increased costs for emergency services such as shelters). This means that emphasis frames are characterized by the selection and emphasis of different dimensions that are relevant to the issue. This type of frame is typically traced back to important work done by sociologists Goffman (1974) and Gamson and colleagues (e.g., Gamson & Modigliani, 1987), who studied how people construct meaning about politics specifically but also about the world around them more generally.

In contrast to equivalence frames, some but not all emphasis frames are generic frames. Some generic emphasis frames have received a great deal of scholarly attention. For instance, inspired by Iyengar (1991), researchers have extensively compared the uses and effects of so-called thematic and episodic frames. Thematic frames present an issue in its broader context, while episodic frames focus on a single case, thereby highlighting individual experiences. Another example of prominently studied generic emphasis frames includes Benford and Snow's (2000) diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames. Diagnostic frames highlight the cause of a problem and attribute blame. Prognostic frames propose solutions to the problem. Motivational frames, finally, give reasons for a need for collective action to solve the problem using certain strategies or tactics. A third example worth mentioning concerns Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) collection of emphasis frames that are commonly used in political discourse: those that attribute responsibility for a cause or solution to a problem (responsibility frame), emphasize conflict between individuals, groups, and/or institutions (conflict frame), highlight personal and emotional aspects of the issue of interest (human interest frame), connect issues to moral values and norms (morality frame), and lastly, those that emphasize economic consequences of a problem or solution (economic consequences frame).

The counterparts of generic frames are often labeled issue-specific frames (de Vreese, 2005). Issue-specific frames can be defined as frames that are uniquely applicable to certain issues. A great deal of them have been identified in content analyses and studied in framing experiments (Borah, 2011; Brugman & Burgers, 2018), examples of which are the free-speech frame (in the context of political protests), health-risks frame (in the context of health care policy), and democratic-deficit frame (in the context of the European Union).

Some emphasis frames can be both generic or issue-specific, such as metaphorical frames (Brugman et al., 2017). The game frame for instance is a generic frame because it metaphorically compares politics to gameplay, which can be universally applied to any political issue involving debates among citizens, politicians, lobbyists, and/or other political forces. By contrast, some issues are metaphorically framed as a specific game, such as policymaking as poker. While just as well metaphorical, the poker frame may only be applicable to certain power struggles, making it issue-specific.

Brugman and Burgers (2018) conducted a systematic review of framing experiments in political communication and examined the types of frames researchers investigated. They found that approximately one out of ten frames in previous experimental research into framing effects constituted equivalence frames, and nine out of ten emphasis frames. About half of the employed frames were generic and half issue-specific. Furthermore, these findings were discipline-specific (Brugman & Burgers, 2018). For instance, experiments from psychology more often tested the effects of equivalence frames than experiments from other disciplines, while communication science experiments had the highest proportion of emphasis frames. This latter finding was also supported by a systematic review conducted by Borah (2011), who synthesized both framing experiments and content analyses in the field of communication.

Which Type is ‘Best’?

There has been much scholarly debate in communication research about which type of frame best advances our understanding of the uses and effects of framing. An argument in favor of equivalence frames and against emphasis frames is that there is conceptual overlap between how some researchers have studied emphasis frames and related concepts such as agenda setting and priming (e.g., Cacciatore et al., 2016; Scheufele & Iyengar, 2012). Both emphasis frames, agenda setting, and priming focus on explaining the effects of the presentation of different aspects of issues. As a result, it has been argued that effects of emphasis frames may not be exclusively attributed to framing (e.g., Cacciatore et al., 2016; Scheufele & Iyengar, 2012). What thus sets equivalence frames apart from related concepts is that, because equivalence frames present the same information, they represent a more distinct concept than emphasis frames.

Another advantage of studying equivalence over emphasis frames is that, on average, their results tend to be more comparable than those of emphasis frames, such as across different issues, types of media (e.g., written vs. audiovisual media), genres (e.g., news

reporting vs. political speeches), and time periods. A reason for this is that, as discussed above, equivalence frames more often constitute generic than issue-specific frames. Because of greater comparability between studies into the uses and effects of equivalence (vs. emphasis) frames, there may also be greater generalizability of findings of this type of frame (Borah, 2011). It has been argued that this higher level of generalizability of equivalence findings also leads to more theoretical development for framing (Borah, 2011).

Given these advantages of studying equivalence frames vis-à-vis the disadvantages of studying emphasis frames, there have been calls to move away from studying emphasis frames (e.g., Cacciatore et al., 2016; Scheufele & Iyengar, 2012). Still, there are also good reasons to keep studying both (e.g., Brüggemann & D'Angelo, 2018; Leeper & Slothuus, 2018).

First, frames that seem equivalent may actually not always be equivalent (e.g., Sher & McKenzie, 2006). Logically equivalent arguments could still convey different information. This has to do with how changing valence labels, in particular, also changes the reference points recipients use to process the information (e.g., Sher & McKenzie, 2006). In the example of two-thirds of voters supporting a new policy, while one-third does not, the argument is logically equivalent. However, which frame a speaker chooses provides additional information to recipients about the speaker's communicative intent (e.g., whether the speaker him-/herself supports the new policy or not). Such equivalence frames may thus fail to be *information* equivalent (Sher & McKenzie, 2006). This means that, as with emphasis frames, there may also be some conceptual overlap with equivalence frames (i.e., those that provide equivalent arguments but differ in reference point) and concepts like priming.

Moreover, an argument in favor of emphasis frames and against equivalence frames is the degree to which results are ecologically valid (e.g., Brüggemann & D'Angelo, 2018). It is safe to say that politicians, journalists, and other public figures do not only frame issues in equivalent ways. In order to convey their stance on issues, they also regularly highlight certain issue dimensions over others. Given these complexities of political discourse, citizens often need to weigh conflicting considerations about politics and society. Therefore, results of studies that focus on emphasis frames tend to more accurately reflect reality than those that only examine the uses and effects of equivalence frames (e.g., Brüggemann & D'Angelo, 2018). Research that focuses on emphasis frames can thus contribute to framing theory development by providing more thorough and deep insights into the role of framing in political discourse.

In light of the frames' strengths and weaknesses, framing researchers are advised to always be clear about which type of frame is studied, why, and how (Leeper & Slothuus, 2018). In this way, both equivalence and emphasis framing research can remain a valuable source of scientific knowledge about how different kinds of political communication shape how the general public makes sense of and makes decisions about all things politics.

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