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# Frame Construction in Interaction

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## Introduction

Integral water-management, land-use planning or environmental issues, are complex problems because of the involvement of many actors with different backgrounds, interests and opportunities, and with sometimes completely different perspectives of both problems and solutions. These perspectives imply specific interpretations of realities and the responses to these, constructed by the actors involved, according to their backgrounds and interests (Weick, 1995).

In general, complex problem solving requires the recognition of mutual dependence between the actors involved. In such situations negotiating both problem definitions and solutions is needed. Therefore, the process of solving complex problems urges for considerable *reframing* on the side of a range of the actors involved (Gray, 1997; Lewicki, Gray and Elliott, 2003).

The concept of frame is used for understanding the 'rules' which govern our appreciation of our world and enables us to differentiate between different sorts of 'reality' (see Goffman, 1974). Framing has to do with making sense, interpreting, and giving meaning to what happens in the ongoing world. Processes of framing are linked up with people's specific sets of values, norms, objectives, interests, convictions and knowledge at a certain moment. Reframing suggests that people recognize the mental models that underpin how they operate and realize that they interpret the world around them and the things that happen in the world according to their specific backgrounds and interests. This is needed in order to make a step towards new ways of framing, which mostly means that people will get a different and/or broader view on their own interests, opportunities and/or identity.

Research on framing reflects a wide variety of approaches and topics. Approaches can roughly be divided on two dimensions: a cognitive and an interaction view on framing (see Dewulf et al, 2005 for an extended discussion on both approaches). The cognitive approach emphasizes the way frames are stored and represented in memory. In line with this framing effect, as well as the sources of these effects, form an important object of study for social psychologists (see for example Jou et al, 1996; Levin et al, 1998). The interaction approach focuses on the enactment of frames in ongoing interaction. Besides, the cognitive approach looks for 'structures of expectations' whereas the interaction approach concentrates on 'alignments negotiated in interaction', emphasizing that frames do not have a stable cognitive basis.

In this paper we will explore the way both approaches to framing are interrelated by analyzing the process of framing in interaction at a micro-level and by focusing on the way cognitions play a role. It will be discussed whether or not the approaches can be considered as supplementary.

## Frame construction in interaction

Although not always consciously, but nevertheless actively, people construct specific frames in interaction in order to reach goals. As Entman puts it: "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993: 52). By framing events, developments and/or phenomena in interaction people are doing something or, in other words, become active agents (Frake, 1977). Out of innumerable possible descriptions we choose specific descriptions of reality in order to accomplish goals in the interaction. These goals may have to do with influencing the content, the process and/or the relationship with the other actor(s) involved. For instance, in case of a discussion with a friend about the restaurant to be visited, I may prefer the Italian restaurant around the corner. However, not wanting to give the impression that my preference should be decisive, I will promote a (seemingly!) neutral procedure for deciding which restaurant to go, showing that I take into account previous knowledge as well as the interests of all the people involved. In order to reach all these goals frames are constructed and communicated concerning suitable restaurants and concerning the criteria for choosing one, also depending of course on what my friend will come up with in the interaction as well as what I expect her to do. The result might be, for instance, the next utterance that shows the concern for both content, and process and relationship: "I would suggest the Italian restaurant around the corner, because the food and the prices are as good as in other restaurants, but this one is very near, and since you dislike walking long distances ...".

In general, people are extremely creative in integrating multiple goals in one utterance, even while they are often not aware of doing so! It has to be emphasized that people mostly do not have the frames that they put forward in interaction readily available beforehand; instead they construct and legitimate frames in interaction by linking text to contexts (Chenail, 1995).

The specific frames they construct integrate past (experiences), future (expectations, goals) and present (the direct context in which the utterance takes place (see also Rosales, 2004). By studying the frames people produce in interaction their experiences, expectations and interests with regard to content, process and relationships can be discovered.

So far, we have focused on the goals that people pursue in interaction. To understand the process of frame construction in interaction it might be useful to grasp what social psychologists have to offer. Taking into account both social and cognitive processes can help us to understand why people act the way they do, including their communicative behavior. According to Smith and Mackie (2000) social processes refer to the ways in which input from the people and groups around us affect our thoughts, feelings and actions, whereas cognitive processes refer to the ways in which our memories, perceptions, thoughts, emotions and motives influence our understanding of the world and guide our actions (Smith and Mackie, 2000: 5). What is real for each of us is a construction of reality, shaped by cognitive processes (referring to the way our minds work), by social processes (interaction with others who are 'actually' present), and by the continuous interaction between both. Here we touch at symbolic interactionism, being a major theoretical

perspective in sociology that emphasizes the subjective meaning of human behavior, the social process, and pragmatism. From the symbolic interaction perspective language gives humans a vehicle by which to negotiate meaning through symbols. Thought modifies each individual's interpretation of symbols. Symbolic interactionism examines how individuals and groups interact, focusing on the creation of, for instance, personal identity through interaction with others (see, amongst others, Blumer, 1969).

Within social psychology insights of cognitive and other approaches - such as symbolic interactionism - are more and more combined for a better understanding of people's behavior (Oakes et al, 1994; Abrams & Hogg, 1999; Van Rijswijk, 2001). As Smith and Mackie (2000) argue: "Cognitive processes affect every aspect of our lives, because the content of our thoughts, the goals towards which we strive, and the feelings we have about people and activities - all the ways we act and react in the social world - are based on what we *believe* the world is like" (Smith and Mackie, 2000: 5). In order to highlight specific aspects of the process of frame construction we will now focus on the role of cognitions in interaction.

### **Cognitions in interaction**

Cognitions refer to pieces of information that, as a result of former interactions, are kept somehow in our minds. These pieces of information consist of thoughts, feelings, associations, visualizations and language concerning the world around us, the people, events and phenomena. Cognitive processes operate as we piece together fragments of information, draw inferences from them, and try to weave them into a coherent whole (Smith and Mackie, 2000: 15). Cognitions can thus be understood as building blocks that are flexibly used. In a specific setting, including an interaction situation, cognitions are triggered and combined, depending on the issue at stake and the context, including the interaction setting. In order to understand how cognitions are triggered, the distinction between 'hot' and 'cold' cognitions might be useful. According to Teasdale and Barnard (1993) cold cognitions are thoughts about the self that are conscious, intellectual and considered without associated affect. That means that as long as cold cognitions remain unevaluated, they are not sufficient to produce emotions. Cold cognitions can be pictured as coagulated experiences. Hot cognitions are 'triggered' cold cognitions. Hot cognitions emerge when people are highly involved. Watching an important football game, for instance, will probably lead to fans of each team framing the game differently, because different cognitions will be triggered and get hot; all fans are motivated to see the players of their own team as the 'good guys' whereas the players of the other team will be pictured as the 'bad guys'.

Cold cognitions refer to notions that people have in mind as a result of their experiences. The concept of priming helps clarifying the process of triggering cold cognitions. Priming refers to the activation of a concept or cognitive structure when some stimulus brings that concept to mind. As Hamilton (2005) argues: "Once it is accessible, that stored knowledge, or cognitive structure, is more easily retrieved and will be available for use in judgments, in decision-making, and for guiding behavior" (Hamilton, 2005: 148). Srull and Wyer (2005) demonstrated the importance of 'recency' and frequency of activation of a concept. A concept that has recently been primed is more accessible to influence information processing than is a concept that has not been primed recently. In addition, frequently priming the same concept can increase its activation level, and

therefore its accessibility to influence processing persists. The relation between priming, agenda-setting and framing has been pointed out by several researchers, representing different positions concerning the way the concepts are interrelated (see Scheufele, 2004).

We could also refer to the notion of cognition by using well-known concepts such as schemas or cognitive frames, being the result of former interactions, and, transformed into hot cognitions, combined and used in 'new' interactions. Tannen argues that schemas or cognitive frames refer to participants' expectations based on past experiences (Tannen, 1993). By distinguishing frames and cognitions (or cognitive building blocks) and reflecting on the way these concepts are related in the process of frame construction it is emphasized that ... "the organized mass results of past changes of position and posture are actively doing something all the time; are, so to speak, carried along with us, complete, though developing, from moment to moment" (Barlett, cited in Tannen, 1993: 42). For this very reason Barlett rejected the term schemata in favor of the term 'active, developing patterns' which he found much more adequate for taking into account the notion of constant change. Since we aim to prevent confusion, as well as to emphasize that the construction of frames takes place in interaction (real or imaginary) we prefer to continue to use the term cognitions or cognitive frames. People seem to have cognitions available, resulting from previous experiences and interactions that, in order to accomplish goals, in interaction or anticipating interaction, are triggered (become hot) and combined into new frames. Here we refer to experiences that are not fixed in iron schemes, but instead form a reservoir of cognitions. Besides, experiences can be recognized that lead to routine behavior, called scripts. In their article, 'The Unbearable Automaticity of Being', Bargh and Chartrand show that processes of automatic self-regulation, developed out of repeated and consistent experience map onto regularities of one's experience and take tasks over from conscious choice and guidance (Bargh and Chartrand, 2005). Such experiences may support the accomplishment of goals as well, for instance when we go to our work by bike, using our experiences in a nearly unconscious way, not seeing anything around us. In such cases, cognitions will only be triggered when routine expectations get confused, for example when something unusual happens.

That cognitions are used in a flexible way is illustrated by Gordon, Franklin and Beck (2005), who studied possible biases towards source attributions. Their research supports the idea that misremembering some details of an event or to forget others altogether sometimes is in our interest (Gordon et al, 2005).

Summarizing it can be stated that frames are constructed and legitimated in interaction by combining and integrating cognitive building blocks referring to previous experiences, expectations and objectives concerning the issue at stake (content), the actors involved (relations) and the process that takes place (process). Based on this brief analysis it can be concluded that the frames people construct, as well as the way cognitions play a role in this frame construction process are very complex, referring to and interweaving many aspects of people's lives and thoughts.

## Exploring interaction for complex problem- solving

Not only for a better understanding of the frame construction process but also for exploring conditions for complex problem-solving, the concept of cognitions is useful. As stated previously, complex problems are characterized by the involvement of different parties with different backgrounds and interests putting forward conflicting frames. For solving such problems, the parties involved should change these conflicting frames into the direction of related frames (Elliott, Gray and Lewicki, 2003). As practice shows, this reframing is not easy since people, in the context of complex problem solving, experience many uncertainties which they tend to reduce. This tendency makes them stick to safe and well-known 'frozen frames' that are repeatedly put forward in interaction (Aarts and Van Woerkum, 2002; Gray, 2003). Stigmas and stereotypes are examples of such frozen frames.

Palmer and Dunford suggest that there are strong parallels between reframing and the ability of people to think in a cognitively complex way (Palmer and Dunford, 1996: 14). It is suggested that, besides differences in backgrounds, interests and settings differences exist in the cognitions that people have available, as well as the way they use these cognitions in interaction. We will elaborate on this suggestion and construct a model that supports the analysis of the way actors involved in the process of solving a complex problem deal with cognitions in interaction. We distinguish between two variables:

1. actors' availability of cognitions
2. actors' open-mindedness towards different frames emerging in interaction

Crossing these variables results in four metaphors, referring to different types of activities that people can show in interaction.

*Model 1: Typology of actors' activities in interaction*

		AVAILABILITY OF COGNITIONS	
OPEN-MINDEDNESS	-	conforming	bureaucratizing
	+	creating	innovating

The model is developed in order to discuss and analyze the way actors deal with cognitions in interaction with other actors involved in the problem-solving process. Let us briefly discuss the four activities emerging in the model:

- conforming
- bureaucratizing
- creating
- innovating

### *Conforming*

In the case of conforming we see that actors do not have a lot of cognitions available, nor do they show open-mindedness towards other frames. In interaction, actors who are conforming tend to construct the same frames all the time, making use of simple heuristics, serving one specific goal. These frames might be called frozen frames, expressed by a lot of stereotyping or even stigmatizing and literally repeating arguments in different situations. In terms of priming, one could suggest that conforming is the result of frequently priming the same cognitions.

### *Bureaucratizing*

Having plentiful cognitions available with respect to the issue at stake, 'bureaucrats' know about other possible frames that could be constructed, but they are in interaction not willing to recognize, nor to accept these frames while defending their own. In terms of cognitions we could argue that 'bureaucrats' have plentiful cold cognitions available, but that in interaction with other stakeholders only a very restricted set of cognitions become hot or, in other words, are primed. Bureaucratizing is, for instance, often expressed by professional negotiators of a labor union who are supposed to defend the interests of a constituency. Just like conformists, bureaucrats are risk-avoiding, and therefore not very innovative, nor will they take the initiative to experiment with new directions or ideas. The concept of path-dependency is apposite. Path-dependency refers to situations in which contents, processes and even relations have become highly institutionalized since a particular trajectory has been embarked on (Rotmans et al, 2000; Berkhout, 2002). Breaking path-dependency cannot be expected to be initiated by 'conforming' or 'bureaucratizing'. Instead the mainstream thinking will be followed and expressed in interaction.

### *Creating*

People who in interaction show the activity of creating are open-minded and creative. Being able to combine many out of few, they let cold cognitions easily become hot in interaction. The contribution of creative actors to solving complex problems is constructing new, unexpected and original frames that may inspire the whole group because of opening the way towards new promising perspectives in which interests of the different parties are effectively combined.

### *Innovating*

Actors who take the innovative role have many cognitions available to get triggered in interaction. In other words, they have many opportunities for priming. Whereas creators do not need to take the restrictions of reality into account, innovators combine creativity with adequate knowledge and a sense of reality, resulting in problem solving capacities. Both creators and innovators will be eager to look for possibilities to break path-dependence, to discover new

perspectives, which is often considered as an important precondition for breaking impasses in complex problem-solving.

With the help of the model we have tried to demonstrate the interdependence between the cognitive and the interactive part of framing. The four metaphors (conforming, bureaucratizing, creating and innovating) help to stipulate the way actors (individuals or groups), involved in complex problems make use of cognitions, as well as the way they are operating in interaction. This can be very useful for discussing whether specific positions are effective or not, whether specific positions are lacking or not, as well as how positions that people take in interaction are interrelated. Some people, for instance, may easily conform in interaction with a person who is acting as an innovative conductor whereas other people, in reaction to what creators are posing, tend to act as bureaucrats, expressed by putting forward rules and restrictions ('yes, but ...').

The model should thus not be used in a static way. It should also be stressed that none of the four metaphorical positions is preferable as such. All activities are needed, however, depending on the situation. A specific activity may be preferred at a certain moment. The model helps to recognize, reflect and discuss actors' interaction behaviors in mutual coherence, which is of high relevance in the decision making process concerning complex problems.

### **Conclusion: the need for an integrated approach**

The firm distinction between the interaction approach and the cognitive approach of framing suggests that both approaches exclude each other with the implication that scholars are supposed to choose either one or the other. In this paper we made clear that both approaches emphasize different aspects of the framing process. The interaction approach places the main attention on the process in which frames are constructed in order to accomplish goals. Such goals may vary from constructing credibility for specific utterances to accusing other participants for having the 'wrong' ideas. In other words, the interaction approach studies the way people actively deal with language in interaction for constructing acceptable frames whereas the cognitive approach involves the contents of the interaction, as well as the cognitive background of the stakeholders involved.

Combining both approaches results in a more complete understanding of the framing process, taking into account people's considerations concerning the content, the process and the relationships at stake. Besides, taking into account both approaches enriches the exploration of conditions for reframing. Based on an interaction approach, suggestions, for instance, can be generated for the design of communication and negotiation processes, meant to stimulate the co-construction of frames by all parties involved in the interaction (see also Bodtker and Jameson, 1997) and, more specifically for the professionals who are supposed to facilitate such interactions. As Drake and Donohue argue: "... because conflict intervention professionals play an integral part in this negotiation, they can learn to orchestrate framing patterns in ways that improve the probability of resolutions" (Drake and Donohue, 1996: 316). Starting from a cognitive approach we can learn about the positions that people take in interaction, as well as



about the contextuality, the environmental situatedness of the thoughts and cognitions that they put forward.

By combining both approaches new insights are gained for breaking impasses in intractable conflicts in which frames concerning content, process and relations at stake not only are conflicting, but also have often become frozen.

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