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# Using Emotions to Frame Issues and Identities in Conflict: Farmer Movements on Social Media

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## Keywords

framing, conflict, identity, emotion, social media, animal welfare, animal husbandry.

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## Abstract

Polarization and group formation processes on social media networks have received ample academic attention, but few studies have looked into the discursive interactions on social media through which intergroup conflicts develop. In this comparative case study, we analyzed two social media conflicts between farmers and animal right advocates to understand how conflicts establish, escalate, and return dormant through issue and identity framing and the discursive use of emotions. The results show that the two groups used the same set of frames throughout the three phases. We identify this as a symmetric conflict framing repertoire. The groups both use a dominant moral frame (animal welfare is of absolute value), but express distinct views on policy solutions. This triggers a contestation of credibility (who knows best and who cares most for animals) in which the two groups use the same set of issue and identity frames to directly oppose each other. The binary opposition is initially established through issue framing but escalates into an identity conflict that involves group labeling and blaming. The discursive use of emotion reinforces this escalation in two ways. First, it reinforces a vicious cycle in the contestation of credibility: While emotions are implicitly used to frame oneself as caring and trustworthy, emotion is explicitly used to frame the other party as deceptive and irrational. Second, disputants use collective emotions as a response to the other group's offensive actions (blaming) and as a justification of one's own collective actions. We discuss how this conflict differs from previously studied conflicts to provide plausible explanations for these findings.

## Introduction

Research has extensively investigated the role of social media networks in group formation and polarization. Social media users tend to interact with like-minded people through which group formation takes shape (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011), but social media platforms also provide a space for people from different backgrounds to encounter one another (Del Vicario et al., 2016). In cases of contentious political

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[Correction added on 20 February 2020, after first online publication: Two references and its corresponding citations have been added.]

issues, such encounters can lead to intergroup conflict: an antagonistic pattern of interaction between online communities (Halevy & Cohen, 2019).

Farmers and critical citizen-consumers, for example, rarely meet in everyday life. Yet these groups, which tend to have distinct views on animal livestock farming (Kendall, Lobao, & Sharp, 2006; Laine & Vinnari, 2017; Owen, Howard, & Waldron, 2000; Te Velde, Aarts, & Van Woerkum, 2002), do meet online. The online debate about intensive animal farming in The Netherlands shows frequent clashes between farmers and animal right advocates (Stevens, Aarts, Termeer, & Dewulf, 2018). Dutch animal right organizations strategically build communities and continuously trigger, convene, and curate the social media conversation about industrial animal farming and food production. Generally, they address corporations or politicians for problems related to industrial livestock farming, leading to one-directional, uniform attention in which the masses blame the few powerful institutions (Stevens, Aarts, & Dewulf, 2019). However, if animal rights activists address politicians about issues that relate to farming practices, farmers tend to collectively respond, which can trigger a conflict between these two groups. These conflicts seem to have a unique pattern of activity, framing, interaction, and media interplay reflected in three phases (Stevens et al., 2018). However, it is unclear exactly how such online conflicts establish, escalate, and return dormant through the discursive interactions between the two parties.

Conflict research has demonstrated the important role of framing (Brummans et al., 2008; Dewulf et al., 2009; Fuller & Putnam, 2018; Hurt & Welbourne, 2018; Idrissou, Paassen, Aarts, & Leeuwis, 2011; Paul, Geddes, Jones, & Donohue, 2016) and emotions (Bar-Tal, Halperin, & de Rivera, 2007; Bramsen & Poder, 2014; Guerrero & La Valley, 2006; Gross, Halperin, & Porat, 2013; Hurt & Welbourne, 2018; Iyer & Leach, 2008; Jennings, 2011; Pluut & Curşeu, 2013; Solak, Reifen Tagar, Cohen-Chen, Saguy, & Halperin, 2017) in conflict dynamics. The interactional-constructionist stance on framing has proved to be particularly relevant in understanding the dynamic of conflicts, including conflict transformation, negotiation, and mediation (Brummans et al., 2008; Dewulf et al., 2009; Fuller & Putnam, 2018; Hurt & Welbourne, 2018; Idrissou et al., 2011; Paul et al., 2016). However, this field of research tends to focus on intragroup conflicts, for example, within teams in the field of organizational communication (Coleman, 2006; Hurt & Welbourne, 2018; Pluut & Curşeu, 2013) and multiparty conflicts that generally include negotiation between multiple parties in decision-making processes, for example, in environmental governance (Brummans et al., 2008; Davis & Lewicki, 2003; Lewicki, Gray, & Elliott, 2003), and has not yet looked into online, public conflicts between two groups. Yet online, public, intergroup conflicts play a big role in today's network society and are an "understudied area that would benefit greatly from future investigations" (Halevy & Cohen, 2019).

Moreover, conflict research has shown that conflicts are fundamentally emotionally created and driven processes (Bodtker & Katz Jameson, 2001), but has barely looked at the *discursive* use of emotion in intergroup conflicts (Jones, 2001); how emotions are constructed, attended to, and understood in interaction, how they shape the course of the conversation, and how this may influence conflict dynamics. This is a significant deficit because it is the expression of emotions that ultimately influences conflict dynamics (Jones, 2001; Potter & Hepburn, 2007), and because emotional communication seems to shape online interactions (Brady, Wills, Jost, Tucker, & van Bavel, 2017). This study thus aims to investigate how intergroup conflicts establish, escalate, and return dormant through issue and identity framing and the discursive use of emotions. More specifically, we will perform a comparative case study of two online conflicts between animal right advocates and farmers to investigate (a) what issue and identity frames are being used and how these develop in interaction, and (b) how emotions are used discursively to frame issues and identities and how this shapes the interaction and the course of the conversation.

## Theoretical Framework

Conflicting opinions or interests are prerequisites for conflict, but do not necessarily result in conflict. In a conflict, disputants consider their goals to be incompatible and their actions to be directed against the

other, co-constructing a zero-sum situation (“goal incompatibility”) in which the gain of one party means the loss of another. We thus conceptualize a conflict not as a state of the world or a state of mind, but a phenomenon that resides in the social interaction among disputants. This interactive process is a fundamental dynamic through which social organization takes shape; conflict is not just an encounter of extant differences (opinions, interests, values, identities), but also a process through which disputants “make differences” and shape group identities (Van Herzele, Aarts, & Casaer, 2015).

Framing has proved to be a valuable approach in understanding conflict—including conflict transformation, negotiation, and mediation (Brummans et al., 2008; Dewulf et al., 2009; Fuller & Putnam, 2018; Hurt & Welbourne, 2018; Idrissou et al., 2011; Paul et al., 2016). Framing is the discerning selective activity in interpretation and (re)presentation to make sense of reality (Dewulf et al., 2009), and frames form the lenses or filtering frameworks that provide a specific perspective on the issue at stake and the role of actors therein. The interactional-constructionist stance on framing is particularly relevant in understanding the dynamic of conflicts through changes of interactions (Dewulf et al., 2009; Putnam & Holmer, 1992). From this perspective, conflict ensues because of the way people co-construct issues, identities, and interactions.

When it comes to issue frames in conflicts, literature suggests that if disputants cast the issues in incompatible ways and fail to create an acceptable joint framing, conflict is perpetuated (Dewulf et al., 2009). In particular, differences in moral or value frames—which capture a disputant’s concern about issues of right and wrong, good and bad, and moral integrity (Rogan, 2006)—can make conflicts hard to resolve or transform (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997). Moral frames are resistant to change in part because morality tends to define identity and trigger emotional arousal (Jones, 2001).

Identity frames refer to the meanings about oneself and others, and are inherently relational in intergroup conflicts. According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), intergroup conflict or “identity conflict” starts with a process of comparison between individuals in one group (the in-group) to those of another group (the out-group). Identity frames capture how individuals conceive themselves and their membership in social groups (Lewicki et al., 2003). Challenges to one’s identity frame generally produce vigorous defences (Rothman, 1997; Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, & Lerner, 2000) and contribute to the perpetuation of conflicts (Gray, 2004). Common frames about others take the form of stereotypes or characterization frames (Davis & Lewicki, 2003). Characterization frames often undermine the others’ legitimacy, cast doubt on their motivations, or exploit their sensitivity (Elliott, & Kaufman, 1999).

Issue and identity frames generally hang together as coherent frames to make sense of the situation; situations are labeled as problems (named), their causes are discussed (blamed), and those responsible are confronted (claimed). In conflict framing research, the concept of “conflict framing repertoire” captures such coherent frame constellations. A conflict framing repertoire defines what a conflict is about and what the role is of disputants, such as the role of oneself vis-à-vis the roles of others (Putnam & Holmer, 1992). Since the frames of disputants interact in ways that tend to reinforce their stability (Putnam & Holmer, 1992), a repertoire can become salient and even stable, which is referred to as an intractable conflict.

Although the frames in intractable conflicts tend to be resilient, conflicts are typically associated with cycles of high and low intensity (Coleman, Vallacher, Nowak, & Bue Ngoc, 2005). This forms the basic paradox of intractable conflicts: They are essentially stable despite volatility and change (Coleman et al., 2005). Conflicts can go through various phases of escalation or de-escalation (Putnam & Shoemaker, 2007) and emerge, evolve, and end (Idrissou et al., 2011). Most protracted conflicts do not begin as intractable, but become so as escalation, hostile interactions, and sentiment change the quality of the conflict (Coleman et al., 2005). This can be triggered by moral and identity differences and/or struggles for power and self-determination (Coleman et al., 2005; Kriesberg, 1993).

To understand these conflict dynamics, research has looked into discursive interactions or “communication sequences” (Paul et al., 2016). This approach can help to (a) uncover the micro-processes that escalate and de-escalate a conflict and (b) show how communication patterns develop into phases that define the rhythm and flow of conflict (Paul et al., 2016). In conflict situations, parties tend to portray

their actions as responses provoked by the other party, which involves blaming through discursive punctuation (Dewulf et al., 2009). For example, one party might construct a sequence of messages as nagging criticism in reaction to the other's withdrawal, while the other sees a different start and end point of the sequence and depicts it as defensive withdrawal in response to the other's nagging criticism. Such recriminations can contribute to escalatory conflict spirals—an infinite series of oscillating cause–effect patterns (Gunkle, Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 2006). Hence, to understand how conflicts evolve, we need to study frame interactions and specific discursive processes through which these develop. Dewulf et al. (2009) have called for integrating the discursive psychology tradition in conflict framing research for understanding how, through linguistic choices in describing situations, frames are shaped.

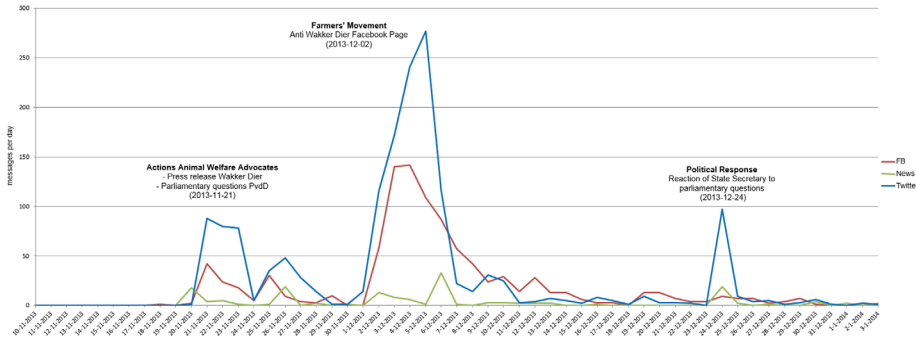
In particular, the discursive use of emotion seems to play a crucial role in conflict dynamics (Jones, 2001; Paul et al., 2016; Weatherall & Stubbe, 2015). Conflict is an emotionally created and driven process (Bodtker & Katz Jameson, 2001). As summarized by Jones (2001); conflict is emotionally defined and valenced, and emotional communication morally frames conflict and identities. In general, value differences can lead to emotional communication that drives conflicts. From a discursive perspective, emotional communication does not reflect a cognition or a state of the world, but rather a social practice with a function in social interaction. In the foundational work *Emotion Discourse*, Edwards (1999) uses a variety of empirical materials such as transcripts of relation counseling sessions and media reports to list various “rhetorical affordances” that indicate how emotion is used discursively. For example, emotions can be treated either as involuntary reactions or as under agentive control, as internal states or public displays, and as reactions or dispositions. Through these rhetorical contrasts, emotions can be used to construct the nature and cause of events, to build and undermine the sensibility of a person's actions, and thus to manage rational accountability or credibility. In group conflicts, collective emotions play a pivotal role in shaping societal responses to conflicting events, and in contributing to the evolution of a social context that maintains the emotional climate and collective emotional orientation (Bodtker & Katz Jameson, 2001). When it comes to the use of emotions in group conflicts, it is important to consider the attribution of emotions to both individual and collective agents (as dispositional characteristics) and their actions in the process (as cause or consequence). In sum, to understand the role of emotional communication in conflict framing, this study aims to analyze the ways emotion is explicitly and implicitly employed (as discursive device) to frame issues and identities during intergroup conflicts (as discursive function). We distinguish between the explicit use of “emotion\*” as discursive category and various emotion words (psychological thesaurus) that refer to or imply specific emotions as distinct discursive devices (e.g., anger, love, sadness) and analyze their function in issue framing and identity framing (differentiating self and other, as individual or group).

## **Methodology: A Comparative Case Study of the Calf Puller and Calf Separation Case**

We performed a comparative case study of two online conflicts between animal right advocates and farmers in The Netherlands. This comparison involved the analysis and synthesis of similarities and differences for theoretical generalization; to determine the influence of framing processes and the discursive use of emotions in conflict dynamics. The social media analysis software *Coosto* was used to select cases based on typicality (Seawright & Gerring, 2008) of the conflict dynamic. The conflict dynamic in this context is a pattern of activity, framing, and media interplay that reflects three phases: (a) Animal welfare advocates problematize farming practices and address politicians to take action; (b) Farmers mobilize a counter movement using identity frames and social media venues, which generates peak news media attention; and (c) the State secretary announces a policy decision on the matter, the attention for the issue diminishes, and the conflict returns dormant (Stevens et al., 2018). From 2012 to 2018, the discussion about the calf puller for laboring the calf (in 2013) and the discussion about the separation of the calf from the cow right after birth (in 2015) best reflect this conflict dynamic. The cases are described according to the three phases in Box 1.

**Box 1:** Description of cases with graphs that show the three phases of the conflict based on the number of messages on Facebook, Twitter, and News media (vertical axis) per day (horizontal axis).

**The Calf Puller Issue and the Anti Wakker Dier Movement (2013):**



*Phase 1 (11-20 till 11-30): Animal Welfare Activism and Parliamentary Questions*

On 21-11-2013 Wakker Dier (animal welfare organisation) sent out an open letter to the state secretary stating that farmers massively use an illegal tool and asking her to enforce the law that prohibits the use of the calf puller. At the same time the PvdD (Political Party for Animals) announced to pose parliamentary questions. This generated a first wave of activity.

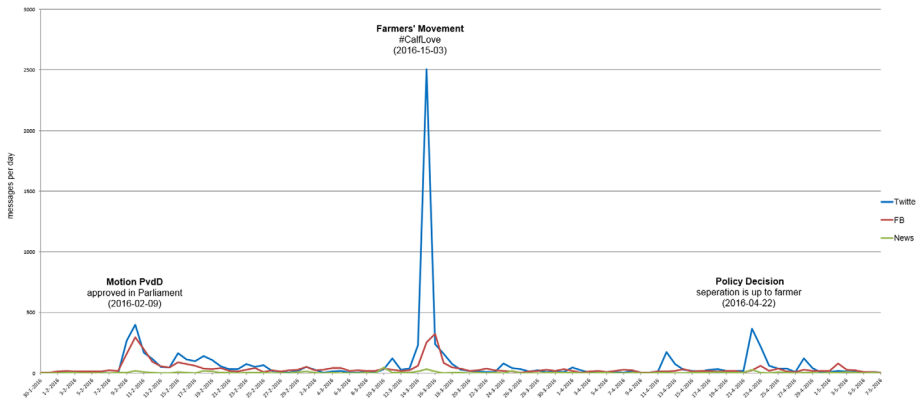
*Phase 2 (12-1 till 12-23): Farmers' Movement: Anti Wakker Dier Facebook page*

Activity gradually diminished, but ten days later a 23-year old farmer launched the *Anti Wakker Dier* Facebook page, which generated the second and biggest wave. Farmers stated to be 'fed up' with Wakker Dier's misleading negative portrayal of livestock farming. Within 3 days, the page was liked 10.000 times. News media messages peaked only after social media attention, which indicates that the media reported mostly about the conflict, rather than the calf puller issue.

*Phase 3 (12-24 till-): Policy Decision and Aftermath*

In the last phase, about a month after the press release of Wakker Dier, the state secretary declared not to enforce the law, but to allow the use of the birth tool by farmers under certain conditions. Both sides of the conflict celebrated this as a victory. The message that generated most discussion was of a communication and PR manager working for the sector, Caroline van der Plas: "The fact that Dijkma finds calf puller OK, is thanks to all farmers that told their honest and real story on (social) media". The attention for the issue diminished, but The Facebook page continued to function as an important platform for farmers to critique Wakker Dier.

**The Calf Separation Issue and the #CalfLove Movement (2015)::**



**(Box 1: Continued)***Phase 1 (1-19 till 3-11): Animal Welfare Activism and Parliamentary Questions*

The consequences of the increased milk production after the end of the milk quote in April 2015 was a topic of public debate, which led to an investigatory documentary “top- sport in the milk industry” (Zembla, 2015) and led to a parliamentary debate on January 27 2016 (dertig-leden debate). Both in the documentary and the debate, one of the issues brought forward was the separation of the calf and cow right after birth. The motion of the Political Party for Animals to make a plan for keeping the calf with the cow after birth was accepted by the majority of the parliament on February 9.

*Phase 2 (3-11 till 4-22): Farmers’ Movement: #CalfLove*

In response to the accepted motion, a closed Facebook community for dairy farm womans (*‘koeienboerinnen’*) started a movement with the collective action frame *#CalfLove*. According to one of the leaders: “politicians were already responding too much out of emotions, but this was the last straw that made us decide to take action” (Karin van der Toorn). To counter this movement, animal right advocates also began to use *#CalfLove*. The hashtag became number 1 trending topic on Twitter in the Netherlands, and led to peak Facebook and news media attention. The farm womans started a petition and presented this at the parliament in Den Haag on March 15.

*Phase 3 (4-22 till -): Policy Decision and Aftermath*

State secretary van Dam did not accept the motion to make a plan, and instead waited for a research report. He positively evaluated the fact that all parties had a common interest: the care for animals. In his reflection on the public turmoil he stated: while some react out of emotion, others emphasize the facts”. He concluded that “the seperation of calves from cows is up to the farmer”. The decision was celebrated by farmers, and Wakker Dier and Political Party for Animals remained silent.

## Methods and Data

### Data Collection

For both cases, a search query was developed to collect all messages about the issue and identities (search query in Appendix S1). Coosto was used to collect social media messages (Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, Instagram, Blogs, Fora). Twitter and Facebook were identified as the most relevant social media networks for the data analysis (most used and most inclusive platforms in terms of actors and embedded links to other media). For a comprehensive understanding of the cases, political documents and debates (source: <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl>) and the media messages most referred to on Facebook and Twitter were collected (source: LexisNexis).

Based on our interest in the online discursive interactions in this intergroup conflict, the data sampling method focussed on key players in the conflict and the influence of messages on the online conversation. Table 1 shows the data sampling process for each of the four datasets.

On Twitter, we selected tweets of key players (1) and tweets with high influence (2).

(1)The selection of key players was based on the number of messages posted, the number of reactions, their influence (which includes second-level reactions to posts of the account), and the description of the account (e.g., important actors such as the initiators of the farmer movements were included).

(2)The influence of a message is a measure of the amount of discussion a message triggers, which includes first-level reactions and second-level reactions.

On Facebook, we considered key pages (amount of posts and comments on a page), key accounts (based on number messages (including both posts and comments), the number of received reactions), and the discussion length of posts. In order to account for the differences between the cases, we used different selection schemes for each case in order to collect relevant data.



Table 1  
Data sampling process for each of the four datasets

	Twitter	Facebook
Calf Puller Case	Messages in data set: 1682 Sample: 221 (13%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Messages with influence &gt;10: 104</li> <li>• Key accounts: 18</li> </ul> Phase 1: 48 tweets Phase 2: 158 tweets Phase 3: 15 tweets	Messages in data set: 1397 Sample: 258 (98 posts/160 comments) = 18% 2 key pages: Wakker Dier + Anti Wakker Dier Phase 1: 73 (5 posts/68 comments) Phase 2: 150 (69 posts/81 comments) Phase 3: 35 (24 posts/11 comments)
Calf Separation Case	Messages in data set: 8032 Sample: 322 (4%) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Messages with influence &gt;30: 208</li> <li>• Key accounts: 12</li> </ul> Phase 1: 89 tweets Phase 2: 171 tweets Phase 3: 62 tweets	Messages data set: 4279 (1331 posts, 2948 comments) Sample: 134 (32 posts, 102 comments) = 3.1% <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key posts: 32</li> <li>• Comments on key posts: 881</li> <li>• Comments of key players, on key posts: 102</li> </ul> Phase 1: 42 (14 posts/28 comments) Phase 2: 58 (9 posts/49 comments) Phase 3: 34 (9 posts/25 comments)

- (1) Calf Puller case: We included all posts of the two key players (Wakker Dier and Anti Wakker Dier) and then included all comments to the 5–7 most relevant posts in each of the three phases based on discussion length and diversity.
- (2) Calf Separation case: For each of the three phases, we selected 9 to 14 posts with more than 20 comments on diverse key Facebook pages (news pages, farmer pages and animal right advocate pages) and then also included the comments of key players to these posts.

**Data Analysis**

The selected Twitter and Facebook messages do not form a single conversation with a fixed number of interlocutors and turn-taking structure, but rather form an open online conversation in which the sequence of messages and the textual references, hyperlinks, replies, comments, hashtags, and address signs in messages were used for studying interaction patterns in framing and emotion discourse. The text, time, author, and media source of messages were imported as columns in Excel, and additional columns were created as code categories for issue frames, identity frames and characterization frames (including labels and dispositional attributes), the discursive device and function of “emotion\*,” the use of emotion lexicon (various emotion words, e.g., anger, love, and sadness) that refer to or imply specific emotions as distinct discursive categories, the attribution of emotions to individual or collective agents or actions, interaction indicators (mentioned above) and other significant patterns that emerged from the data such as popular rhetorical devices (hashtags and action frames) and the strategic use of or references to social media.

We then first reconstructed the sequence of events for each case (supplemented as Appendix S2) and determined the key interactions or “discursive shifts” in the conversations (presented in Figure 1) based on significant changes in the above mentioned categories. We then analyzed the structural role of frame interactions and the discursive use of emotions in the course of the interactions (presented as the results of this study): For the framing analysis, we identified the main issue and identity frames in each phase of each case based on synthesizing the codes of step 1. We then studied how these frames interact across the cases and phases (how disputants respond to each frame), which resulted in the conflict framing



repertoire presented in Figure 2. For the analysis of emotion discourse, we identified key discursive strategies across the cases and phases (based on the synthesis of codes), to discern how emotion is explicitly and implicitly employed (as discursive device) to frame issues and identities (as discursive function), of which the results are presented in Figure 3.

## Results

The cases show similarities in issue and identity framing and the discursive use of emotions over the course of the conversation. Figure 1 synthesizes the key discursive interactions between animal rights advocates and farmers in the calf puller (CP) and calf separation (CS) case in 6 steps or “discursive shifts.” To understand these dynamics, the succeeding analysis focusses on the structural role of framing and the discursive use of emotion throughout the conversation.

The main issue and identity frames that we identified in these two cases and throughout the phases are similar. Moreover, each of the issue frames that is pushed forward in these cases implicates a corresponding identity frame. Hence, we identify a conflict framing repertoire (Figure 2) that disputants use to make sense of the situation (understood as conflict) in which both issue and identity frames are based on a binary opposition. The binary opposition is initially established through issue framing (through which the opposition between the groups is implied), but in the second phase escalates into an identity conflict that involves blaming and labeling in characterization and collective identity framing.

### Animal Welfare as Common Value frame

Both parties consider the two policy issues to be a matter of taking care for animals (Figure 1, step 1 and 2: “animals are/will be hurt”). In the debate, animal welfare is considered to be of absolute, not relative, importance; it is unacceptable to weigh animal welfare against other values or interests, such as economic value. Disputants thus share a moral or value frame that is dominant in both debates (reflected by the overarching frame *animal welfare* in Figure 2); decisions and (discursive) actions should be morally right, based on what is best for the cows and calves. However, farmers and animal right advocates have

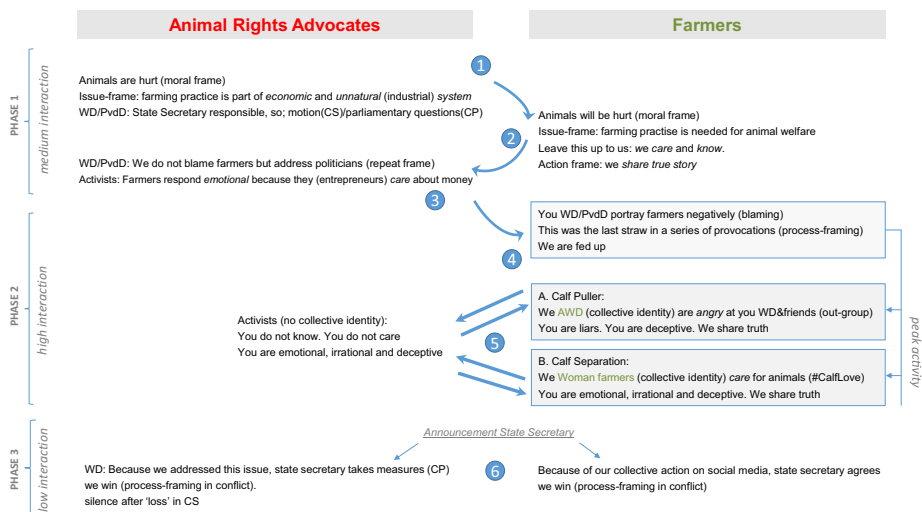


Figure 1. Synthesis of the discursive interactions between animal rights advocates and farmers in the calf puller (CP) and calf separation (CS) case. WD, Wakker Dier; PvdD, Political Party for Animals; AWD, Anti Wakker Dier.

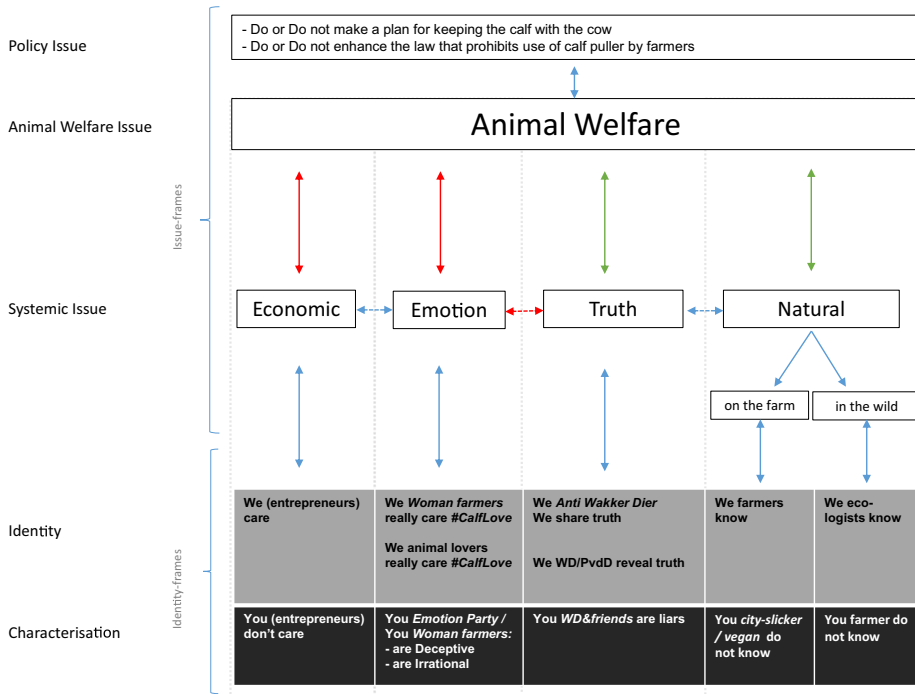


Figure 2. Conflict framing repertoire. The two parties have different ideas about the policy solution (top layer), but both parties frame this as a moral matter concerning animal welfare; policy measures should be based on what is good for animals (second layer). To evaluate what is good for animal welfare both parties make use of four frames, with issue and identity frame components. The color of arrows reflect the type of relation as contrasting (red) or corresponding (green), or more neutrally as extending (blue). Italicized words are frequently used labels of disputants to identify/characterize a group.

different opinions about the policy solution and responsibilities concerning the calf puller and calf separation; animal right advocates call for governmental intervention, while farmers want to maintain their autonomy. The common care for animals (common value) does not result in a dialogue in search for the best policy solution, but in a conflict in which frames are used to create a difference between the groups. Since both parties claim to know what is best for animal welfare but have distinct opinions about the policy solution, the discussion gets focussed on who knows best (expertise/knowledge), and who cares most for these animals (trustworthiness and moral superiority). Hence, the parties agree about the generic issue at stake, but argue that their group is more knowledgeable and trustworthy to judge about what is good for the animals. In order to build credibility of the in-group and/or to undermine the credibility of the out-group, each of the issue frames that is used by the parties implicates a corresponding identity frame and thus establishes the binary opposition of the conflict framing repertoire.

### Issue and Identity Frames

We identified four frames that create a difference out of the common care for animals: the economic frame, the natural frame, the emotion frame and the truth frame, each implicating specific identity frames. These four frames constitute moral, issue, and identityframe components and reflect a similar line of reasoning: (a) Animal welfare is opposed to economic interest, and because you are an entrepreneur, you are wrong; (b) animal welfare is opposed to emotion, and because you are emotional, you are

wrong; (c) animal welfare is about what is true, and because we are farmers and see our animals every day, we know and we are right; (d) animal welfare is about what is natural, and because we are nature-lovers, we know and we are right. Each of these lines of reasoning has a binary opposite expressed by the other party.

As one cannot be against animal welfare, animal welfare is contrasted with other categories as the negative side of a binary opposition (signified by the red lines from animal welfare to *economic* and *emotion* in Figure 2), which is linked to the out-group (signified by the identity frames in the same vertical line). Animal welfare is frequently contrasted with economic interest throughout both cases. Farmers are portrayed as entrepreneurs (stereotype), primarily interested in money (attribute) to undermine their credibility. On the other hand, farmers counter argue that animal welfare does not conflict but corresponds with economic interest and that they thus do care for their animals. Moreover, they counter the policy solution of Wakker Dier/Party for the Animals which bypasses farmers, by presenting themselves as independent, knowledgeable and caring (attributes) entrepreneurs (identity) that do not need governmental interference.

Animal welfare is also contrasted with emotion. In the calf separation case, animal welfare is explicitly opposed to emotions (“it is about animal welfare or emotions, we go for the first”), and emotions are explicitly opposed to facts (“this is about emotions vs. facts”). In both cases, this frame is mostly used by farmers in phase 2 and is part of a larger frame in which animal welfare advocates are portrayed as emotional and sentimental. Emotions are explicitly used to frame the other as deceptive (“you make use of emotions”) and irrational (“you react out of emotion”), and to stereotype the out-group: “Political Party of Emotions.” In addition, in both cases, but more prominent in the calf puller case, farmers “share the true story” and blame animal welfare advocates for telling lies, framing the issue as a matter of truth. In this line, farmers present themselves as experienced and empirical experts. Hence, more generally, truth, facts, and objectivity are contrasted with emotion, sentiment, and subjectivity (indicated by the dotted red line between the issue frames in Figure 2). The emotion and truth frames are introduced by farmers in response to the frames of animal right advocates (economic and natural frame) but gets employed on both sides, particularly in phase 2.

The natural frame functions as a heuristic that articulates opposed worldviews. To evaluate what is good for the animal in regard to the use of the calf puller and the separation of calves, discussants evaluate what is “natural”: what’s natural is good for the animal. Naturalness seems to own the two important features that can make an argument hard to challenge: It is rather vague and it appeals to a kind of common sense logic shared by members of the culture. The parties have two contrasting notions about what is natural: farmers look at nature on the farm (the domesticated animal within the current farming system), while animal right advocates and ecologists look at animals in wildlife or on ecological farms (alternative systems) and make comparisons with humans. This frame is mostly used by animal right advocates but farmers also use this frame and characterize the out-group as “city-slickers” and “vegans,” who logically do not know anything about animals on the farm. Moreover, they refer to these statements as sentimental and irrational, and stress their knowledge and access to an objective truth (employing the emotion–truth frame in response).

Although animal right advocates mainly use the economic and natural frame and farmers respond with the emotion and truth frame, each issue frame is ultimately used by both sides as disputants counter each other through reciprocated accusations (using similar frames, but opposing positions)—reflecting an antagonistic interaction. Hence, although the two groups frame farmers and animal rights advocates differently, they frame themselves and the others (the in-group and out-group) similarly. What is unity or frame similarity at a generic level (e.g., both employ the emotion frame) is polarity at a specific level (e.g., Woman Farmers as emotional vs. the PvdD as “emotion party”). We refer to this as symmetric frames. Hence, the issue and identity frames comprise a system of interaction that constitutes the symmetric conflict framing repertoire.

## The Discursive Use of Emotion in Issue and Identity Framing

We identified four key discursive strategies in which emotion is explicitly/implicitly employed to frame issues/identities:

- (1) Emotion is *explicitly* used as an *issue frame* (“it is a choice between emotion or animal welfare”)
- (2) Emotion is *explicitly* used; (a) to frame the *other (group)* as deceptive (*you make use of emotion*) and irrational (*you react out of emotion*), and; (b) to stereotype/characterize the out-group (“Political Party of Emotions”/“Emotion Party”)
- (3) Emotions are *implicitly* used; (a) to frame *oneself* as loving/caring (*I/We care for animals*), and; (b) to frame the *in-group* as caring (*We “Woman Farmers” care for/love our calves*).
- (4) Emotions are *implicitly* used to frame (binary) relationships through punctuation in process framing;
  - (a) the actions of the out-group have emotional impact on, and justify the actions of the *in-group* (because you did this, we are *angry* and attack you)—blaming and justification
  - (b) the emotions expressed by the *out-group* are framed as a result of hidden interests/values (you are *sad/angry* because you care about money)—framing the other as deceptive
  - (c) the reactions of the out-group are framed as outrageous and out of place (we are surprised about your *outrageous* reaction)—framing the other as irrational

These discursive strategies are used by both parties throughout the different phases, but some strategies become frequently employed by one of the parties at a particular moment, after which the conversation takes a turn (see discursive steps in Figure 1). In the first phase, farmers stress their care and love for animals in response to the critique on their farming practice, to defend their credibility (which is supportive to their main frame: leave this up to us, because we care and know; step 2, discursive strategy 3). Animal right advocates frame this response of farmers as emotional and unreasonable (step 3, discursive strategy 2a). Moreover, these emotions are said to result from their interest in money, not their care for animals (step 3, discursive strategy 4b + 4c), implying that farmers are deceptive and thus not trustworthy, which again triggers a defensive response of farmers. In the calf separation case, we found a more offensive response of farmers right from the start, in which they also undermined the credibility of the Party for the Animals and animal rights advocates, by accusing them for being emotional (irrational) and for making use of emotion (being deceptive; discursive strategy 2a). However, in both cases there is little blaming and justification (4a), characterization (2b), and collective identity framing (3b) in this first phase.

In the second phase, emotion discourse is employed for blaming, characterization, and collective identity framing: Farmers stress that they are fed up by the actions of animal rights advocates (*their use of emotions/their lies*); that these actions affect them emotionally (*we are hurt/we are angry*), and that these emotions justify and explain their collective action (*Woman Farmers Love/ Anti Wakker Dier attacks*). Hence, animal right advocates are blamed for making use of emotions and for telling lies (step 4 + 5, discursive strategy 2a) and are accused to have caused emotions among farmers, which justifies and casts their collective emotive action (step 4 + 5, discursive strategy 4a). Moreover, while farmers implicitly use emotion to frame and justify their collective action, animal right advocates, in turn, explicitly use emotion to frame their reaction as irrational and deceptive. These self-reinforcing patterns of emotional communication also increase the affordance of emotion as explicit issue and identity frame (discursive strategy 1 and 2). Although emotion is used as a framing device by both parties throughout the conflict, farmers increasingly use emotion discourse for collective identity framing in this phase: framing the in-group as loving/caring (*Woman farmers as caring and loving*), and framing the out-group explicitly in terms of emotions (*The Emotion party; Political Party of Emotions*). In the third phase, when the state secretary announced his/her decision, farmers and animal right advocates barely interact, as they do not respond to each other but to the policy statement, framing the decision as a victory/success for their in-

group or the general public. Hence, after the political announcement the emotional recriminations between the groups dissolve and the conflict returns dormant.

**Discursive Interactions**

Taken together, the discursive uses of emotion reinforce each other and shape conflict dynamics in two ways: First, the implicit use of emotional language and the explicit condemnation supports a cyclical contestation of credibility (left side of Figure 3). On the one hand, emotions are *implicitly* used to frame oneself as caring, loving, and sensitive (*we love/care for animals*)—to build credibility. On the other hand, emotion is *explicitly* used to frame the other as deceptive (*you make use of emotion*) and irrational (*you react out of emotion*)—to undermine their credibility. These discursive acts reinforce each other: As credibility is at stake, emotions are implicitly used to frame oneself as caring and trustworthy, but as these emotions are explicated and condemned by the other party, credibility is again contested.

Second, disputants express collective emotions as a response to the other group’s offensive actions (blaming) and as a justification of one’s own actions directed against the other party, which drives recriminations (right side of Figure 3). Besides the general emotional aggravation that tends to go with reciprocal accusations, blaming plays a crucial role in the discursive shifts in these conflicts. In both cases, the conflict escalates when an action that is directed to politicians (the public campaign #CalfLove of farmers, and the open letter of Wakker Dier to the state secretary) is responded to and condemned by the other group. Hence, blaming shifts the attention from the issue to the other group and sets in motion

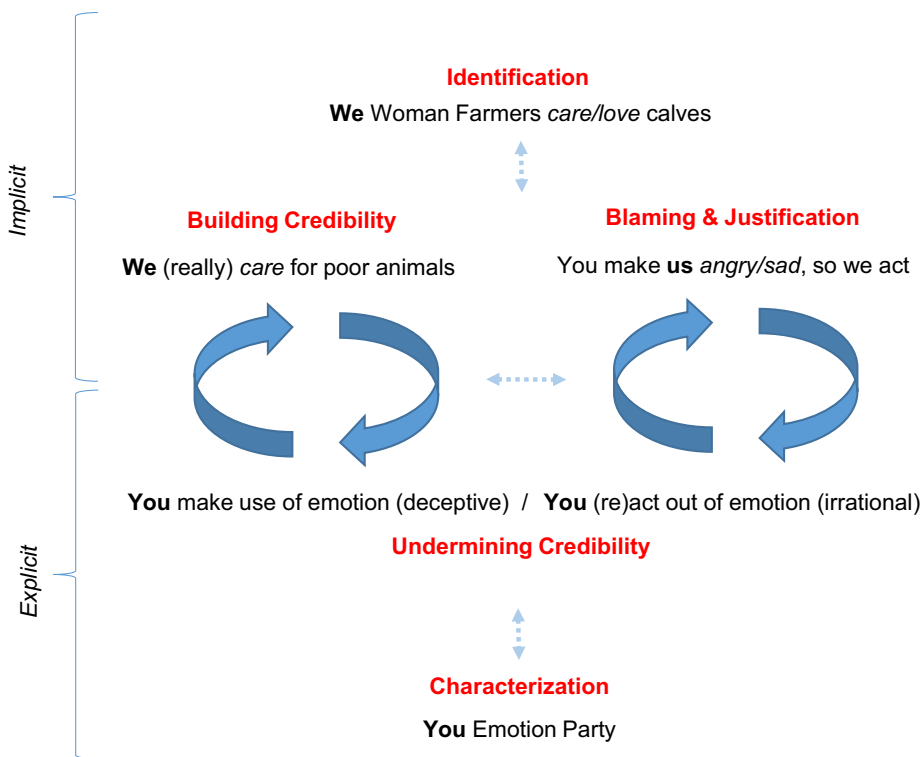


Figure 3. The discursive use of emotions in interactions. It shows (1) the use of emotion in the cyclical contestation of credibility (left side), (2) how emotion is used in process framing; blaming and justification (right side), (3) how emotion is implicitly use to build credibility and frame one’s own identity (upper), and how emotions is explicitly condemned and used to characterize the out-group (lower).

the recriminations. Moreover, when the state secretary makes a public announcement about the policy decision at the start of phase 3, the groups respond to this statement instead of each other, which ends the antagonistic intergroup interactions (de-escalation; the conflict returns dormant).

## Discussion

In contrast to previous studies that have pointed out that conflicts ensue from differences between disputant's framings (De Dreu & McCusker, 1997; Pinkley & Northcraft, 2018; Vaughan & Seifert, 1992), this study found that two groups used the same set of issue and identity frames to directly oppose each other. Many researchers have pointed out the binary opposition at the root of conflicts in terms of a polarization along fault lines (Van Herzele et al., 2015), contradiction in communication systems (Bösch, 2017), a dance of opposites (Cloke, 2013), or a dialectic that holds opposite poles together (Putnam, 2005). However, in framing literature this has not yet been acknowledged in terms of a direct opposition within a shared set of frames. Although frames come in hierarchies (unity at the generic level can be contrasted at the specific level), we assert that our findings reflect an empirical—not an analytical—difference in comparison with other studies: the groups not only presented a similar view on the generic issue at stake (*viz.* animal welfare) but also used the same set of issue frames to make sense of animal welfare (*i.e.*, to make a difference out of the common generic moral frame).

Moreover, except for the increased use of labels for collective identity framing and characterization in phase 2, the frames were relatively stable throughout the conflict. Although disputants frequently shifted frames in response to each other, the issue frames and identity frames interacted in ways that reinforced their stability. This resulted in a constant set of frames throughout the three conflict phases. Since the two groups used similar frames in the two cases and throughout the three phases, we identify this as a symmetric conflict framing repertoire. This repertoire is a cohesive system of interaction that can become activated when these two groups discuss the issue of animal welfare in industrial livestock farming and is thus case-specific.

However, we assert that a symmetric framing repertoire among opposing groups could be present in other conflicts. Most framing studies in conflict research have looked at interpersonal or intragroup conflicts in organizations (Coleman, 2006; Hurt & Welbourne, 2018; Pluut & Curşeu, 2013), and at multi-party conflicts in environmental governance that involve more than two parties in a professional setting and require negotiation to come to solutions (Brummans et al., 2008; Davis & Lewicki, 2003; Lewicki et al., 2003). In an identity conflict between two parties, however, opponents assign an identity to themselves and their adversaries, each side believing the fight is between "us" and "them" (Wondolleck, Gray, & Bryan, 2003), which is more likely to generate the binary opposition at the root of the symmetric conflict framing repertoire. Moreover, if these groups are not involved in a negotiation as part of a decision-making process, they are more likely to promote and strengthen their position in public rather than to engage in constructive interactions (Beierle, 2005). In these situations, social media provide a public platform for identity-based interactions, such as the use of community platforms as battlegrounds of the conflict (*e.g.*, *Anti Wakker Dier* and *Wakker Dier* Facebook pages), competition over collective action frames (*e.g.*, *#CalfLove*), and the use of various interactive functions such as addressing, replying, retweeting, commenting, and sharing for in-group and intergroup communication. Hence, to determine if, and if so under what circumstances, groups use the same set of issue and identity frames, future studies could analyze other online conflicts between two groups that recurrently clash over policy issues.

Looking more closely at the basic elements of the repertoire, we can identify different opinions about a contingent policy issue (that can make a conflict salient if the policy issue is on the agenda, or latent when the policy issue is off the agenda), an overarching shared dominant moral frame and a set of issue frames and identity frames that correspond, extend or contrast each other and together comprise a self-reinforcing system of interactions. This study indicates that a shared dominant moral frame combined with opposed ideas about the solutions can generate interactions that revolve around the contestation of credibility,

particularly when the proposed policy solution limits the autonomy of one of the parties. Credibility is the perceived expertise and trustworthiness of an actor in a specific context, usually as the source of a message (Rieh & Danielson, 2007). Credibility is sought not so much by the other party in the conflict, but by “the audience” as a third party in this public intergroup conflict. After all, the parties do not consider themselves to be a part of negotiation or deliberative process that asks for an agreement, but consider themselves to be part of a zero-sum game with the decision-makers as final adjudicators. The assumption that underlies the contestation of credibility is that only one of the parties can be right (which reflects the perceived “goal incompatibility” and zero-sum situation at the root of a conflict frame), and that considering the fact that the two parties express the same moral perspective, the one who is most knowledgeable and trustworthy must be right. This line of reasoning is reflected in the four frames of the repertoire that constitute moral, issue, and identity frame components. Hence, in order to build credibility of the in-group and/or undermine the credibility of the out-group, each of the issue frames employed by the parties implicates a corresponding identity frame. In contrast to credibility, identity refers to the inherent, more dispositional, characteristics that mark a person or group (Fiol, Pratt, & O’Connor, 2009; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). If disputants strongly identify with a social group that is made salient in the context, such as the Dutch farmers in this case (De Weerd & Klandermans, 1999; Klandermans, Sabucedo, & Rodriguez, 2002), the contestation of credibility is more likely to generate an identity conflict (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). We speak of an identity conflict when the attention for the issue (in this case the calf puller and calf separation) moves to the background, and identity itself becomes at stake (Bösch, 2017; Wondolleck et al., 2003). Although we did find an increase of characterization and collective identity framing in the second phase, we do not claim that the contestation of credibility or the use of specific issue frames *led to* an identity conflict. Instead, we consider the symmetric conflict framing repertoire to be a system of interaction (Bösch, 2017; Coleman, 2006; Coleman et al., 2005) constituted by binary opposites at the heart of an identity conflict. This opposition is reflected in the symmetric issue frames and identity frames of the repertoire.

To understand the conflict dynamics, we looked more specifically at the discursive shifts in these cases and the way emotion discourse was used in interaction. We found that the conflict escalated through the use of emotion discourse in labeling and blaming groups. Emotions comprise a wide range of sentiments from positive to negative, each with unique characteristics and discursive affordances (Edwards, 1999; Potter & Hepburn, 2007). The emotions most referred to in these cases are *anger*, *sadness*, and *love*. Moreover, disputants used a range of discursive devices to imply specific emotions, such as emphasizing their *care* for animals and caring character (e.g., as *mother*, or *farmer woman*), and to imply their altruistic or emphatic affection for animals (Taggart, 2011; Weicht, 2008) in combination with expressions of love (e.g., *CalfLove*). In our analysis, however, we simply distinguished the explicit use of emotion as discursive category, and various emotion words (psychological thesaurus) that refer to or imply specific emotions as the implicit use of emotion discourse. Based on this rudimentary distinction, we found that disputants generally imply emotions to build credibility and that disputants tended to respond to and define this discourse explicitly in terms of *emotion*—not in terms of the *anger*, *sadness*, *love* or *care* expressed by the other party—to undermine their credibility. The use of emotion discourse for building credibility has been reported in earlier research (Edwards, 1999; Locke & Edwards, 2003; Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014) as well as the use of emotion as a negative frame in conflicts (Jones, 2001). However, to our knowledge this is the first study to indicate that these two form an interactive mechanism in conflict escalation. Second, the role of blaming and justification in conflict is reported in other studies (Fuller & Putnam, 2018; Idrissou et al., 2011), as well as the use of emotion discourse in blaming and justification (Buijs & Lawrence, 2013; Ransan-Cooper, Ercan, & Duus, 2018). However, to our knowledge this study is the first to indicate that the discursive use of collective emotions in blaming and justification can both trigger and aggravate an intergroup conflict.

This study inferred the discursive interactions based on the sequence of messages and interaction indicators (replies, comments, address signs, textual references, etc.) in messages on an open online platform. Moreover, we focussed on interactions on group level, between farmers on the one hand and animal



welfare advocates on the other. This enabled us to study discursive shifts in conflict dynamics at a generic level. However, discursive interactions in conflicts can be studied in much greater detail through conversational analysis (Potter & Hepburn, 2007) and if the fluid and permeable boundaries of groups and group membership are taken into account (Halevy & Cohen, 2019; Paul et al., 2016).

## Conclusion

In this comparative case study, we analyzed two social media conflicts between farmers and animal right advocates to understand how conflicts establish, escalate, and return dormant through issue and identity framing and the discursive use of emotions. In contrast to previous framing studies in conflict research, we found that the two groups used the same set of frames and did so consistently throughout the three phases of both cases. We identify this as a symmetric conflict framing repertoire. The groups share a dominant moral frame (animal welfare is of absolute value), but have distinct views on policy solutions. The common value does not result in a dialogue in search for the best policy solution, but in a conflict in which disputants use the same set of issue and identity frames “to make a difference” between the groups, in which each of the issue frames implies a corresponding identity frame. We thus consider the conflict framing repertoire to be a system of interaction constituted by binary opposites at the heart of an identity conflict that is reflected in the issue frames and identity frames. Based on a comparison with other conflict studies, we hypothesize that a symmetric conflict framing repertoire is more likely to be present (a) if conflicts involve only two groups, (b) if the groups are not involved in a decision-making process, (c) if the decision has implications for the autonomy for at least one of these groups, (d) if disputants strongly identify with a social group that is made salient in the context, (e) if the groups can engage in identity-based interactions on a public platform, such as on social media.

To understand the conflict dynamics we looked specifically at the discursive shifts in these cases and the way emotion discourse was used in interaction. The binary opposition is initially established through issue framing but escalates into an identity conflict that involves group labeling and blaming. The discursive use of emotion reinforces this escalation in two ways. First, it reinforces a vicious cycle in the contestation of credibility: While emotions are implicitly used to frame oneself as caring and trustworthy, emotion is explicitly used to frame the other party as deceptive and irrational. Second, disputants express collective emotions as a response to the other group’s offensive actions (blaming) and as a justification of one’s own collective actions directed against them.

The frame interactions and the discursive use of emotion shape the three conflict phases that we identified in these cases. First, the conflict framing repertoire becomes activated when farmers frame a public statement of animal right advocates directed at politicians (a third party outside the conflict) as an offensive act that contests their credibility. The issue and identity frames that disputants use tend to reinforce each other and establish the conflict framing repertoire as a system of interaction. Second, the conflict escalates through blaming and labeling in characterization and collective identity framing. Emotions discourse is used to label collective agents (characterization) and their actions (blaming) which triggers recriminations and shifts attention from the policy issue to the identity conflict. Third, the announcement on the policy decision by the state secretary shifts the attention away from the identity conflict and takes the issue off the policy agenda. This ends the use of emotion discourse in recriminations and the conflict framing repertoire returns dormant.

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