

# Competing claims on public space: the construction of frames in interaction

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## Introduction

Today, in the Netherlands, the relationship between citizens and government is undergoing great change. As the European Union gains stature, Dutch traditional politics, with its mandates, prohibitions, and policy of tolerance, is coming under pressure. We are dealing with a situation that is decreasingly determined by rules emanating from The Hague, and more and more by interventions from Brussels, but which also offers more freedom and more room for private initiatives. Furthermore the idea of a manageable society has turned out to be untenable. As a result new thoughts about public administration exist. We can speak of a process of administrative change from government to governance; from policy that is centrally developed and implemented to policy which is accomplished in networks of interested parties.

Governance, in the Netherlands, has become the norm for public administration: the Dutch government imposes the norm of governance on itself and this is supported by management science literature. In order to design a more globalized society comprised of individually-minded citizens and a non-interventionist national government, new concepts are required which allow more room for civil initiatives. It is in this atmosphere of social and administrative change that this paper is written.

In the research which forms the base for this paper we studied practices in which governance is formed. The topic of this study is conflict in public space. More specifically, we looked at conflicts and negotiations about or in public spaces that originate from the fact that the accessibility of those spaces is limited in one way or another. The utilization of the space is determined by formal or informal rules, which only allow selective use. For example the prohibition of skate-boarding on a square, because neighbours were bothered by that.

Public space forms an interesting background to study the practices in which governance is formed, since first of all these spaces are important for many citizens and secondly how these spaces are used and by whom is not necessarily determined by formal rules and laws (Van Lieshout and Aarts, 2005). Moreover this is determined by self-organization of citizens. However since public spaces are *public*, Dutch government, through the traditional government paradigm, is held and feels responsible for tackling problems in public spaces.

In the research we studied how frames of a conflict on a square in a large city and the different stakeholders involved are constructed in interaction by looking at:

- 1) conversations with individual representatives of the different parties involved;
- 2) interactions within we-groups (groups consisting of members of one of the parties); and
- 3) interactions between the different parties involved.

By studying the frames of citizens, the role and acting of government becomes clear.

This paper presents the analytical framework, the research method and the main results.

### **Analytical framework**

The basis for our analytical framework is found in theories on framing and re-framing. One starting-point of this study was the idea that people show their involvement with and perceptions of conflicts in public space by means of certain perspectives or frames. By using theories about framing (Gray, 2003; Schön & Rein, 1994; Goffman, 1974; Bateson, 1972; 1979) perspectives that people put forward with regard to conflicts about public space in interactions, are learned and explained. Most definitions of frames share the idea that frames help us to organize our knowledge and experiences and to sort and predict the meaning of new information (Tannen, 1979). Frames and framing are therefore part of a representational process, in which we show or express how we internalize events and phenomena (Gray, 2003).

We create frames “by sorting and categorizing our experiences - weighing new information against our previous interpretations” (Gray, 2003, p. 12), in order to obtain certain goals. Through this process we focus our attention on an event or issue by “imparting meaning and significance to elements within the frame and setting them apart from what is outside the frame” (Buechler, 2000, p. 41). The opposite is also true: the frame that we construct while interacting depends on the context in which we find ourselves. In this study the relational context which other actors attend the conversation, is of special importance.

An important aspect of frames is the fact that these are not static, but are continuously (re)constructed. The choice for a certain frame depends not only on the goals of the people in the interaction, but also on the cues given by others involved in the interaction just as the repertoire of frames that is already present (Bateson, 1972; Gray, 2003). Therefore, frames are used strategically, be it consciously or not. Frames are iterative: they determine the interaction and are formed *in* the interaction by experiences, expectancies, goals and interests of the people at that moment (Aarts & Van Woerkum, this volume).

Gray (2003) distinguishes different frames, which help to shape the dynamics in conflicts. These include amongst others: identity frames, characterization frames and power frames. Identity frames give an answer to the question: Who am I? Answers to this question can vary, depending on the individuals' membership of social groups and how they understand themselves to be (Gray, 2003). Characterization frames are statements made by individuals or groups of how they understand someone else to be: Who are they? (Gray, 2003). So identity and characterization frames are created to place oneself or the group in a larger social context. These frames define how an individual or group sees itself in relation to others. Gray's power frames “emerged from the way various stakeholders talked about power in the dispute” (Gray, 2003). The power frames in our research are based on how people talk about power and our own analysis of power relations in the conflict. Besides we also discuss problem frames, which reflect how the different stakeholders frame the problem, cause and solution.

In this research we studied problem, identity, characterization and power frames stakeholders bring to the fore in different conversational contexts namely: conversations between the researcher and individuals, conversations between the researcher and members of the we-group and conversations in which the opponents interact in the presence of the researchers. In this paper we answer the question: How are frames concerning conflicts in public space constructed and presented in interaction?

## **Research method**

We gathered our data by means of individual conversations and group conversations with parties involved, by attending 'information meetings' organized by the municipality and by studying policy documents and newspaper articles. Conversations offer a rich source of data, which provide the access to how people account for both their troubles and their good fortune (Silverman, 2001). The conversations were semi-structured with the help of pre-determined themes.

The results of the research are not statistically representative. We do not aim to determine how many people have certain frames and which people bring those frames to the fore. We want to gain insight into how frames concerning conflicts in public space are constructed and presented in interaction and what these frames teach us about the role and acting of government. To the role and acting of government we will not pay attention in this paper. This paper focuses on the construction of frames in different interaction situations.

## **Results and discussion: framing**

In this part we discuss the results of a study of a conflict on a square in a large city in the Netherlands. On the square a group of youngsters hangs out and causes, according to the neighbours, serious problems. In the following we describe briefly the square and the parties involved. Next we discuss the problem frames. This discussion leads on to the communication strategies stakeholders use to present and legitimize their frames in different interaction situations.

### *The square*

The square is enclosed by shops with apartments on top at one side, at another side a catholic church and a block of flats on the third side. The square actually is a lawn and on it a couch and a monument to remember the victims of the second world war can be found. Between the square and the buildings a one-way-road is situated. In front of the place the traffic situation is rather complex with separate bus lanes, traffic lights, a bus stop, zebra crossings and normal traffic lanes, sidewalks and bicycle lanes.

**Figure 1:** The Square



*Parties involved*

In this case the conflicting parties are the neighbours, who live on and around the square, and the youngsters, who hang out on the square. To solve the problem several governmental agencies are involved: the police, community and youth work and the local government.

The 'youth' consists of several different groups comprised of boys born and raised in the Netherlands, but with a Moroccan background. The boys are aged between eight and about twenty-five years old. The groups differ in their presence on the square and in how much trouble they cause. The neighbours who have problems with the behaviour of the youngsters are mainly Dutch people of whom many are retired. Most of them have lived in the neighbourhood all their lives and have been confronted with nuisance of variable extents over approximately the last ten years.

The police are in several ways involved in the conflict. For the neighbourhood two 'neighbourhood police officers' are appointed, one of them with special attention for youth. Besides these two officers, members of different police teams pay attention to the area. The special officers were only appointed in May 2005. Before that time no special officers were present for a year.

A community worker and a youth worker are available for the neighbourhood. From the municipality the responsible assistant neighbourhood manager and an employee are involved. Indirectly the responsible alderman plays a role on the administrative level.

### *Framing the problem*

In this part we show the different frames the stakeholders put forward regarding the problem, cause and solution. Several stakeholders emphasize the hanging around of youth on the square is a “multi-problem”, consisting of several problems some with causes not on a neighbourhood level, but on a higher level. One could think of general problems in working-class neighbourhoods, such as high unemployment levels and many people with different cultural backgrounds living close together in blocks of flats and small houses. Within this multi-problem frame some smaller problem frames are highlighted by the different parties.

The neighbours frame the problem as: nuisance. They talk about trash, urination, car theft, threat, burglary and so on. For some of the neighbours the underlying problem is their feeling of insecurity caused by the constant nuisance. Several neighbours are scared of the boys. They feel intimidated by the quantity of the boys hanging on the corner and the behaviour they present. A woman phrased the problem as follows:

“...the windows are spat at, the monuments are pissed on. It’s one big trouble. And if there is a wedding: the brides come out of the church and windscreens are beaten out of the cars, by boys only seven years old. And when you talk to them about their conduct, the next day you’ll have a brick through your windows...We are simply being menaced here on this square.”

The main cause the neighbours bring to the fore is the design of the square. The square is dark and cluttered, which, according to the neighbours, makes the square attractive for (criminal) boys to hang out and easy to flee when the police show up. This results in the solution to re-design the square. Another solution which is mentioned by the neighbours is an indoor place for the boys to hang out so they will not spend their time on the square anymore. In addition cultural differences between themselves and the boys are emphasized as a cause of the problem by the neighbours.

The youngsters do not perceive a problem on or with the square. They attribute the cause of the problem to the neighbours. The largest problem the youth has is negative stereotyping or even stigmatizing of their group: in their opinion they are always approached in a negative way. They are all seen as criminals and called to account for the criminal behaviour of only some boys:

“While most of us are in school or have a job, we gather after five or six, just catching up, and than we’re seen as criminals straightaway.”

“Because we’re standing on the corner in a group. When someone passes by he sees us directly as the others, robbers as we were called the other day. We are considered robbers, while we have jobs and are in school. Most of us are outside with friends, because we can’t go anywhere: there isn’t a community centre, there is completely nothing at all.”

The boys are, in their view, continuously excluded and discriminated in various ways: they are given fewer chances on the labour market and in society. For example the boys are refused access to discotheques, which are supposed to be public places, but not accessible to these youngsters. This leads to serious frustrations and Moroccans up to twenty-six years old hanging around on the street, whereas Dutch of that age are hanging out in clubs and pubs. This leads to reactions such as: “We are seen as criminals anyways, so lets just act like that.”

These processes refer to what is called stigmatizing: all members of the group are seen as the worst example of that group. According to Elias (in: Elias and Scotson, 1994) a group can only stigmatize another group when it has a power position, of which the other group is excluded. But those stigmatized can also uphold the stigma themselves when they start to believe they are inferior to or worse than the group who stigmatizes them: “give a group a bad name and it is likely to live up to it” (Elias en Scotson, 1994; xxviii). This is referred to as self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1948). In case of the boys of the square it is not just some neighbours who stigmatize them. Due to some major events in Dutch society in the last few years Moroccans feel stigmatized by many people and by the media.

By raising their problem, the boys bring the general problem to a higher level. From a local problem of nuisance on a square it becomes a national problem of many youngsters who do not feel accepted in Dutch society. The problem is even larger, more complicated and of a different scale than it seemed to be. The causes the boys bring up for their own problem are discrimination and cultural differences. A solution, on the scale of the square, is the establishment of contact between themselves and the neighbours. The boys, by now, understand that they are considered as the cause of the problems the neighbours perceive. The solution for that problem is, in their opinion, the establishment of a community centre or another place where they can hang out.

The youth worker and community worker frame the problem as nuisance. Besides they emphasize that both parties do not know each other. The neighbours and boys live side by side, but hardly understand anything about each other or talk to each other, leading to all sorts of stories, prejudices, but also to the attribution of incidents to the other group without any fact to prove this.

The police officers talk about “crime” and a “feeling of insecurity”. The responsible alderman also frames the problem as a “feeling of insecurity” and the “presence of criminal youth”. The assistant neighbourhood manager stresses the “combination of crime and nuisance for some time already”. More generally she talked about a mentality problem: “the way in which people treat each other and public space”. Government, police and community work stress *the* solution does not exist, because youngsters will always hang out on the square and because this problem is part of a far larger problem. The involved governmental agencies think, that instead of one complete solution, a combination of measures to control the problem is needed. They think of solutions like, for example, the establishment of a space for the youth, some small changes to the design of the square and the realization of contact between the two groups.

Thus all the parties concerned agree a community centre, or at least a physical space for the youth, should be established in the neighbourhood. The creation of such a designated place would result in less boys hanging out on the square or elsewhere and isolation of those who are engaged in criminal activities, since this faction will not come to the centre where they will have to identify themselves. Next to the establishment of a space where the boys can hang out, the agencies and the youngsters agree the youth and neighbours should talk with each other, possibly accompanied by a third party.

Summarizing we can state that the parties involved frame the problem, cause and solution different. There are similarities, but the emphasis lies on different aspects.

### **Communication strategies**

In this part we show the different communication strategies the parties involved used to present and legitimize their frames. We make a distinction between the strategies used in interactions within the 'we-groups' and interactions between youth and neighbours. The we-groups, in this study, are the groups consisting of only youth or only neighbours.

#### *We against them*

In the conversations within the we-groups we discovered the parties involved use six different communication strategies to legitimize and present frames. With the use of these strategies people try to create credibility for what they say. We distinguished: personal experiences, stereotyping and stigmatizing, the use of certain identity frames, cynical remarks and exacerbation, citing examples of other places, and looking for confirmation by others attending the conversation.

The first strategy is found in telling personal experiences:

- A "Saturday night we had a bingo night. The woman walks out of the porch, she is over 80 years old. One boy of the square comes and pulls her down stretched out on the street. I had this experience some three weeks ago: [...] I walk home with a bag with my laptop and my normal bag. We talked a little more on the corner, a scooter comes, I was so lucky, I wore my bag like this over my shoulder. I think they knew, because they came real close, but I turned away, so the bag was gone, they drove by and then they looked. I was lucky, because they were about to pull that bag out of my hands."
- B "Yes in front of this door!"
- C "I had the same experience last year or the year before. I was riding my bicycle carrying my bag. They were just acquaintances, who "
- A "Yes they don't care a hood about that."
- B "But they didn't see it was me. I thought: gosh he's touching my bag. They drove by and I had my bag, but they couldn't get it, but I arrived and there they stood. I got off my bike and said: what did you intend? No ma'am truly not. You were touching my bag, weren't you? No I hit it by accident. I said: you better be careful. You shouldn't have tried that on me, because I would have fallen off my bike. I said: you could have tried, but I wouldn't leave it like that."

This part of the conversation shows that stories evoke other stories, strengthening the existing, presented frame within the group. These other stories demonstrate that the participants in the conversation recognize the presented frame. In the social process of stereotyping and gossip, persons within the we-group legitimize each other's frames. In this process, groups empower themselves by repeating, strengthening and adding to each other's frames.

The second strategy has to do with prejudices, stereotypes and stigmas. Within the we-group people frequently talk in terms of 'we' and 'them'. If we speak in terms of frames, people in we-groups construct identity frames of themselves and characterization frames of the others. By using these frames people position themselves against others or in the larger social context. This strategy follows from the first, since certain personal experiences have been repeated within the group and in the end are internalised by the whole group, resulting in shared frozen (group) frames. Frozen frames are frames which are repeatedly constructed in an interaction. Frozen frames are expressed by a lot of stereotyping or even stigmatizing and literally repeating arguments in different situations (Aarts and Van Woerkum, this volume). The boys on the square use stereotypes to indicate how they think others frame them:

“According to *those people*<sup>#</sup> we are one big bunch of criminals: *we all* steal, *we all* rob. While *all of us* have to get up at seven to earn our living.”

About the neighbours they state the following:

- A “... ah *man* what bothers *them*? *They* live three blocks away from the square! If you live on the square, surely you have some nuisance.”
- B “But *those people* are already annoyed when *they* look out their window and see three boys than it's nuisance straight away. While the boys are only talking.”
- A “With *Dutch people* it's like this, that's my experience: what the neighbour says, I will repeat. That is the way it is with *Dutch people*.”

This quote also shows people within the we-group are supporting and strengthening each other's frames. Since A states that not only the people who live on the square complain, but even the people living further away. B reacts to that by uttering that the people living on the square already start to complain as they see the boys appearing on the square. This evokes the reaction of A that all Dutch people repeat their neighbours.

One of the neighbours frames the boys as follows:

“Things go wrong with *the Moroccans* as soon as *they* leave primary school. You just see it. *They* go to high school and if there's less supervision or something, but then you see *they* really start with crime.”

The construction of a strong shared stereotype image, we can also refer to this as a frozen frame, empowers the we-group, because the people within the we-group all agree with each other. This agreement can result in a collective fantasy about the others. Group fantasizing allows the group to develop a shared understanding and a basis for reasoning and action; fantasies serve as a socially constructed group reality (Pepper, 1995). The collective fantasy about the others legitimizes their aversion of the others and serves as a powerful weapon within the we-group (Elias and Scotson, 1994; Pepper, 1995).

Within the we-group stereotypes and stigmas are repeated and strengthened all the time, and because there is barely any communication with the other group these frozen frames are hardly ever corrected or nuanced. The existing communication between the youngsters and neighbours is almost always conflict related. In conflict related communication the existing frames about the others are rather confirmed than invalidated (Aarts, 1998). One could think for example of the

boys who suggest the neighbours all see them as criminals. When a neighbour walks up to them to tell them he does not tolerate their behaviour, the frame of the boys is confirmed.

A specialisation of this strategy, which was mainly applied by the boys, is the use of ironic self-mockery to legitimize certain frames. As one of the boys said:

“An afterparty till three o’clock over there just hanging out in the car and around three we go home. Aimless isn’t it? The losers of society.”

By using irony and self-parody the boys emphasize a complex of identity frames: what they do not want to be themselves; the characterization they think the others have of them as the losers of society; and, as such, their characterization both confirms and rejects the frames of the others in which they are all seen as losers, as criminals.

Another strategy having to do with personal experiences is the construction of identity frames in order to legitimize frames which, for example, are not accepted in society. Examples are utterances like: I don’t discriminate, but...”, we’ll come back to this strategy when we talk about interactions between both groups.

When people are not sure about their own frames or want to have another legitimacy they start looking for confirmation by the other participants of the conversation:

A “And dealing in drugs, because they stood there on the parking lot opposite the church and they just deal drugs.”

B “And that still happens, doesn’t it C?”

For lack of personal experiences to legitimate their frames, people use examples of other neighbourhoods and cities. The boys, for example, refer to another neighbourhood in the same city where according to the boys “they have everything: they have community centres, they have soccer, they have tea houses, they have Internet, they pay for everything, but over here you don’t have anything.”

Summarizing we can state people within the we-group employ several strategies to legitimize and strengthen the characterization frames they create and put forward. In the communication within the we-group the problem is constructed with the help of stereotypes, stigmas and frozen frames.

### *We together with them*

During the research we organized direct contact between neighbours and youngsters. Observing and analyzing the interactions, several issues caught our attention. Firstly opponents in interaction (in the presence of the researchers as facilitators of the conversation), instead of attacking the other, start looking for a shared problem and enemy. Secondly the parties involved try to uphold and ‘sell’ certain frames. Examples of the construction of a shared problem frame and shared enemy are:

“And the problems lay purely, not with the boys, but with the municipality.”

And:

A “That police officer should just tell those boys: I watch you! Done.”

- B “*He* should be more clear?”
- A “*He* should be more clear, *he* should have authority, *he* should just say: I watch you!”
- C “But there is absolutely no authority.”
- A “Yes and *they* come and *they* pick them up and *they* bring them to the station: they drink coffee together, fill out a form.”
- D “And then *they*’ll bring you back.”
- A “Yes *they* return and *the police officers* think: I don’t want to have too much trouble, or I don’t know what’s going on. So *he* starts discussing with the same bunch of youngsters, *they* picked up earlier that day. Then I state: you shouldn’t ask why you don’t have any authority. When I would be a police officer, I would say to those boys: I keep my eye on you and then I drive on!”

This quote also shows us how the frame: “the police doesn’t have any authority” is constructed in interaction. This is one of the new problems constructed in interaction. The police are stereotyped in this fragment. In interaction the opponents do not stereotype or stigmatize each other but their (new) shared enemy.

Besides searching for corresponding problem and solution frames, both youth and neighbours try to maintain certain frames, which apparently are of importance to them. Though they present these frames much more carefully than they do in the we-group. They do this by continuously repeating the frame, by presenting the frame in parts and pieces, and by presenting the frame in a construction which legitimizes the use of the frame.

A couple of the neighbours and the youngsters continuously bring one of the solution frames to the fore: the creation of a space for the youth. By doing this the actors try to reach their goal in interaction independent of the interaction situation. They are of the opinion this frame is very important and by continuously repeating it they intend to make a statement, to focus the attention on this particular frame. One of the boys:

“But in the end, if there comes a space for the youth, let’s be honest, it will calm down.”

And a Dutch man:

“But don’t you think, about that school building [option for a space for the youth, MvL and NA], don’t you think there will be far less crime in the neighbourhood?”

The problem is named in parts and pieces. One by one different aspects are mentioned, but the parties prefer to discuss the solution. When we asked what the problem was about, the people started to talk about a school building which the boys were allowed to use for a few weeks – that is, the solution of a physical space for the youth. But somehow, at the moment of the discussion the boys did not have access to anymore. During the discussion dirt was brought up as a problem, crime was mentioned several times, noise was called, but in the meantime over and over again people kept coming back to the solution of the school building or another place where the youth can hang out (see above). Also the boys themselves opt for this solution, because they would like to have their own place. So the problem is named, but by naming it in parts and pieces and all the

time returning to the solution (a physical place), the focus is on the solution rather than on the problem.

In interaction with their opponents people are polite, they behave themselves in a social acceptable way. People in interaction, be it consciously or not, are continually regulating the impression they make (Goffman, 1959). Most people dislike social disapproval. Irrespective of their goals, most people prefer an amiable, relaxed, and conflict-free interaction to one which is unfriendly, saturated with tension, and conflict ridden (Berger and Bradac, 1982). We came across several strategies used to act polite, to legitimize frames, that might be confronting, insulting, discriminating or in another way socially not accepted. For example strategies to accuse the other without being responsible yourself:

“...But what I hear from my *neighbours*, is that it’s actually about groups of youngsters which are too large and too loud. If someone passes by and the conversations stops, the person is stared at, people feel a particular tension. And that doesn’t only concern the Moroccans, but that counts for all youth.”

Another strategy to legitimize less polite frames, as we already saw, is the construction of certain identity frames, before one brings another (characterization) frame to the fore:

“...*well I am really good with these boys*, because I’ve never had any trouble [...] Look I just see, *and that’s not to discriminate*, but I think these boys don’t have any cosiness at home”

Also in interaction people legitimize frames by personal experiences. Both in interaction and within the we-group people make use of (small) stories; personal experiences, stories they heard, saw on television, or read in the newspaper. These stories serve several goals. The stories are used to construct problem frames, to legitimize problem and characterization frames, but stories also offer the possibility to communicate the frames.

In different interactions people use various communication strategies to present and legitimize the frames they have constructed. The research shows that opponents in interaction (in the presence of the researchers, who invited them to put forward their perspectives) start looking for a joint problem, enemy and solution. Yet the construction of shared frames does not necessarily fade out the existing frozen frames of the separate groups. People continue to bring some important frames to the fore. In interaction with the opponent people use several strategies to carefully present their frozen frames.

We showed that in the communication within the we-group the problem and the enemy is constructed with the help of stereotypes, stigmas and frozen frames, whereas in interaction with the opponent frames start to change. This shows the ambiguous role of communication in conflicts: the problem is constructed through communication and the constructed frames are legitimized through communication, but communication and interaction is also necessary to re-frame or solve the conflict.

## Conclusions

In this paper we showed the different problem frames people in a conflict about the utilization of a square put forward. The frames are all about the same square and what is happening there, however different aspects of the problem are accentuated by the various parties. Different problem frames are linked to different causes and lead to different solutions, but the parties also had some similar ideas about the solution. One could think of a designated physical space for the youth and contact between the different stakeholders which needs to be established.

In the communication within the own group and in interaction with other groups, both youngsters and neighbours use various strategies to legitimize their frames. In the we-groups several strategies were used to make the frames more plausible as well as to strengthen these, resulting in what we have called frozen frames. Striking in the interaction between the two opponents (in the presence of the researchers) was that the former enemies started looking for a common problem and new opponent, but at the same time firmly hold on to some of their frozen frames. Several strategies were used to carefully present these frames in interaction with the enemy.

This research clearly shows interaction evokes something between and amongst opponents. In interaction between opponents, at least in the presence of a third party, frames start to change or are put into new perspectives: frames, and as such the conflict, are constructed and reconstructed in interaction. This provides hope for a solution, since interaction mediated by a professional may bring the parties closer to each other, which may lead to a process of collective re-framing.

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