

# Meaning-making on the ground: an empirical study on interactional framing in environmental conflicts

Interactional  
framing

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The study aims to explain the communicative basis of conflicts in which actors stand in opposition in defining a negotiated situation and to deepen knowledge of environmental conflict development, in particular on how frames are (re)shaped through discursive choices in interaction.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study adopts an interactional approach to framing and 1) identifies the frames shaped and reshaped in four environmental debates and 2) analyzes how framing activities affect the course of the debates.

**Findings** – This study contributes to understanding 1) the interactive nature of conflicts; 2) how the reception and interpretation of issue framing depends on the surrounding identity and characterization framing and 3) how framing activities, like identity work, emotional alignment and reframing, can affect the course of environmental debates toward polarizing or bridging.

**Research limitations/implications** – On a methodological level, this study contributes to communication research by applying methodologies for investigating framing processes on a micro-level. This study investigates interactional framing, considering the perspectives of frame strategists engaging in issue arenas. The study provides an in-depth discourse analysis of the debates but lacks an overview on the entire issue arena regarding this conflict.

**Practical implications** – Skilled actors span boundaries by articulating issue frames that accommodate opponents' concerns and values while demonstrating the added value of the new frame, adjusting identity work in favor of relations with opponents. Furthermore, calibrating emotional intensity offers opportunities to mobilize support.

**Originality/value** – This research investigates which communicative competences are essential to act adequately in environmental conflicts, given their intractable nature, and suggests opportunities for cocreation by making discursive choices. This approach helps to uncover the micro-processes that escalate and de-escalate a conflict.

**Keywords** Issues management, Public relations, Framing, Conflict, Strategic communication, Relationship management, Communication practitioner, Environmental communication

**Paper type** Research paper

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## Introduction

We, as mankind, have reached the ecological limits of our habitat, planet Earth. The current decade is expected to see a rise not only in sea level and average temperatures but also in the number of environmental conflicts (Latour, 2014). Consequently, strategic communicators, such as political actors and communications practitioners, will increasingly face environmental conflicts in their work life. Strategic communicators are attributed a discerning role in issue arenas (Vos *et al.*, 2014), defined as places where stakeholders and (political) organizations discuss societal and environmental issues, focusing on the matters that connect different actors (Luoma-aho and Vos, 2010). This raises the question of which communicative competences are essential to act adequately in emerging environmental conflicts, given their generally complex and intractable nature (Lewicki *et al.*, 2003; Brummans *et al.*, 2008; Shmueli *et al.*, 2006) and given the polyphonic character of issue arenas (Vos *et al.*, 2014).

This paper explores whether strategic communicators can contribute to mitigating environmental conflict. The focus is on their expertise with regard to framing, as framing in communication practice is considered a strategic tool that influences the definition and perception of a particular issue (Hallahan, 1999). In the field of strategic communication, the majority of studies concerning framing are primarily interested in how organizations can strategically frame their perspective to persuade and gain public support (Ravazzani and Maier, 2017; Dan and Ihlen, 2011; Cacciatore *et al.*, 2016). This study, however, moves to framing processes on micro-level strategic communication: the discursive processes where negotiations over meaning take place and existing frames are reinforced or new frames are called into being (Cornelissen, 2014). The focus on negotiations and discursive processes is in line with a growing body of literature that emphasizes the cocreational nature of issues management, perceiving publics as cocreators of meaning. A central theme in this view on issues management is the belief that organizations and publics can engage each other in ways that allow for one or both parties to change (Botan and Taylor, 2004; Pang *et al.*, 2021; Kent and Taylor, 2002; Miles *et al.*, 2006).

Few studies concerning issue management have investigated what practitioners *actually do* when strategic communication is materialized, or in other words, how “meaning-making” happens when actors engage in interaction during conflicts in dynamic issue arenas (Vos *et al.*, 2014; Heide *et al.*, 2018). Among others, Cornelissen and Werner (2014) and Heide *et al.* (2018) urge for more close-up studies where observations can provide a base for fine-grained conceptualizations of frame alignment processes in order to extend knowledge on the actual practices of strategic communication. The current research aims at filling that gap by deepening the understanding of micro-level (re)framing processes – “meaning-making on the ground” – in order to replenish the toolkit of strategic communicators managing environmental conflicts in issue arenas.

Therefore, this study examines the interactional framing strategies deployed by interlocutors in environmental disputes. The specific aim of this research is to investigate how *framing in interaction* influences the course of conversations. The research data are drawn from an escalated environmental conflict that took place in the Netherlands in the autumn of 2019, known as the Farmers’ Protests. Farmers were outraged by the political call to halve the livestock population in the Netherlands because of the high nitrogen load of agriculture. Mass protests ensued, with farmers descending on The Hague in their tractors to proclaim their opposition. In the weeks that followed, the protesters’ spokesmen and several political actors participated in a series of debates concerning the environmental issue. Botan and Taylor state that when issues reach such a critical stage, there is often little time or room for negotiation (2004). Therefore, this case lends itself well to observe whether and how actors engage in interaction given the tense relations.

Analyzing these debates sheds light on the delicacy of interactional dynamics and the impact of framing activities on the course of conflictual conversations. Investigation of the

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debates takes the form of frame and interaction analyses to obtain further in-depth information on the development of the conflict and in particular how frames are (re)shaped through discursive choices in interaction (Lewicki *et al.*, 2003; Benford and Snow, 2000). The study 1) identifies the main frames that are shaped and reshaped in the debates and 2) analyzes how framing activities affect the course of the environmental debates, eventually in terms of bridging or polarizing.

The central question addressed in this study is as follows: *What frames and framing activities can be discerned in the environmental conflict and how do these discursive choices of farmers and politicians affect the course of the disputes?*

The next section provides theoretical concepts underpinning interactional framing research, leading to three sub-questions. Then, the environmental conflict case is presented, followed by a description of the methodology used. The findings are concentrated on the (re) shaping of frames and the critical factors influencing the course of the debates. The article concludes with a discussion on implications for research and the practical value of this study for communications practitioners, particularly those interested in mitigating environmental conflicts and in bridging competences in polarized contexts.

## Theoretical considerations

### *Boundary spanning in issue arenas*

Luoma-aho and Vos (2010, p. 315) suggest that “corporate communication and PR will play a key role in organizational survival in the future through the processes of finding the right issues and issue arenas for interaction, facilitating the organization-public debate.” An issue manager’s task is described as proactive identification and subsequent defusing of rising conflicts (Roper and Toledano, 2005) as well as commitment to hearing the multiple voices of the actors that are present (Luoma-aho and Vos, 2010). Cornelissen *et al.* (2006) summarize the communication role in issue arenas as a boundary spanning and interface function, in which communication practitioners contribute to the cocreation of shared social meanings in the issue arena.

However, these great sounding ideals of boundary spanning and cocreation are pursued in a competitive environment. Issue arenas are dynamic and characterized by power struggles between interlocutors with their own agendas and strategies (Ravazzani and Maier, 2017; Botan and Taylor, 2004). In the field of public relations, Jin *et al.* (2012) provide an in-depth analysis of the dynamism of conflict development in issue arenas. They elaborate on the factors and forces that undergird the stance an actor takes toward others on a continuum with advocacy at one extreme and accommodation at the other, while stressing the contextual-dependent nature and subtleties of communication management in conflictual circumstances (Pang *et al.*, 2010, 2021). The strategic communicator, representing an organization, group or movement, is only one player among others who strive for attention, influence and support. Also, to achieve their aim, actors use interactional strategies that more often than not have a polarizing effect, making cocreation or cooperation even more difficult (Aarts, 2018). In sum, boundary spanners are challenged to cope with people involved in debates, employing selective perceptions and framings.

### *Approaches to framing*

Following Entman, framing aims to “[select] some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Frames influence our reactions and decisions because, as Benford and Snow (2000, p. 614) state: “framing crafts events into meaningful wholes, and thereby organizes experience and guides action.” Framing is part and parcel of everyday conversations, and it implies both conscious and unconscious behavior (Brummans *et al.*, 2008).

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The extensive amount of framing research features two primary, complementary schools of thought: the cognitive and the interactional school (e.g. [Cornelissen and Werner, 2014](#); [Dewulf et al., 2009](#); [Aarts and van Woerkum, 2006](#)). The cognitive approach sees frames as preexisting knowledge schemes (cognitive representations) that structure people's expectations ([Dewulf et al., 2009](#)). This cognitive perspective emphasizes that people live by inference, make assumptions about unmentioned aspects and predict outcomes of conversations ([Cornelissen and Werner, 2014](#)). The interactional approach, on the other hand, centers on framing as an ongoing process in which the meaning of a conflict situation is co-developed, negotiating the relevant framing on site ([Dewulf et al., 2009](#); [Aarts and van Woerkum, 2006](#)). The latter approach has explanatory power to make clear why several conversations with disputants who hold the same issue frames run a different course because of the processes that unfold in interaction ([Brummans et al., 2008](#)).

As boundary spanners often operate in conflictual issue arenas, "the focus is on [...] how events become meaningful, on the mutual dependencies and on the process between actors from different backgrounds and interests, shaped and reshaped in interaction" ([Aarts, 2018](#), p. 92). This study therefore takes an interactional framing perspective in the wish to unravel how "meaning is created, affirmed, or refuted through communication between human agents who affect their own courses of action as well as those of others" ([Brummans et al., 2008](#), p. 26).

#### *Issues and identities in framing conflict*

A large volume of published studies describe the role of interactional framing in environmental conflicts (among others, [Donahue et al., 2011](#); [Stevens et al., 2021](#); [Reinecke and Ansari, 2021](#); [Brummans et al., 2008](#); [Lewicki et al., 2003](#), [Shmueli et al., 2006](#); [Ravazzani and Maier, 2017](#); [Dewulf and Bouwen, 2012](#)). The major sensitizing concepts deployed in this strand of research are presented in the following paragraphs and serve to formulate three sub-questions regarding frames and framing activities in the environmental conflict.

People use different selection criteria to define whether a problem exists and if so, how the problem should be assessed ([Lewicki et al., 2003](#)). This is referred to as *issue framing*: "the framing of issues allows for understanding the different interpretations of social reality and uncovering how [...] social problems and disputes are constructed in alternative or opposite terms by the different parties involved, who compete for making their preferred definition of a problem or situation prevail" ([Ravazzani and Maier, 2017](#), p. 187). The present analysis addresses the way in which issue frames are enacted in the environmental conflict about the reduction of nitrogen emissions.

Framing also enables people to locate themselves with respect to the issues or to other parties; it reflects how one sees oneself and others implicated in what is happening and one's role in the group or conflict ([Lewicki et al., 2003](#)). This is referred to as *identity framing*. Identity frames are about "the meanings about oneself and others, and are inherently relational in intergroup conflicts" ([Stevens, 2021](#), p. 77). When one's identity frame is challenged, it generally produces defensive reactions and can easily trigger emotional arousal because it is felt as an attack on the core of one's self-image ([Stevens et al., 2021](#)).

The framing of other persons' identities is called *characterization*. Characterization frames can be positive or negative. For example, showing affiliation in negotiations reinforces the building of relational consensus ([Dewulf et al., 2009](#)). In cases of conflict, characterization frames are often less favorable. Previous research on intergroup conflict suggests that interlocutors' negative characterizations of others often form the basis of coalition formation and lead to the creation of boundaries between groups, thereby fueling the intractability of a conflict ([Van Herzele et al., 2015](#); [Brummans et al., 2008](#)). Discursive activities, like social comparison, play an important role in the solidification of the in-group identity ([Lewicki et al.,](#)

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2003). Therefore, characterization frames and identity frames are oftentimes linked. As we frame opponents as our opposite, we simultaneously strengthen our own identity while justifying actions toward the other (Shmueli *et al.*, 2006). In view of these aspects of identity work, this analysis addresses characterization and identity framing. This leads to the first sub-question:

*RQ1.* What issue, identity and characterization frames can be identified in the environmental conflict regarding nitrogen emissions?

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#### *Discursive use of emotions in conflict*

Conflict research suggests that most conflicts are emotionally created and driven processes (Stevens *et al.*, 2021). There has been rich literature in public relations and conflict communication on emotions. Jin *et al.* propose an emotion-based conceptualization in crisis communication. They detail how in circumstances of labor unrest and protest, anger may be fueled, holding the (political) organization responsible. Simultaneously, actors may feel anxious when they deem the other party is not doing enough to avert the crisis that occurred (Jin *et al.*, 2012).

In interaction, intense emotional communication may act as a source of contagion. Expressing negative emotions could create an escalatory dynamic while positive emotions can de-escalate conflicts (Jones, 2001). However, interlocutors tend to differ in openness about expressing and articulating emotions in interactions. Buijs and Lawrence (2013) state that certain professional stakeholders are likely to invalidate or delegitimize emotions in conflicts, as a part of the governance literature suggests that valid decisions are based on rational rather than emotional arguments. The implication is that for some interlocutors, reacting emotionally might be considered an invalid or unprofessional behavior. For the case at hand, where politicians with a background in governance engage in interaction, it is interesting to compare how disputants deal with (the expression of) emotions in the debates.

Social movements are known to see emotions as a motivating power that fuels collective action, based on “a jointly constructed group account of an injustice or common grievance, which identifies targets for blame” (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014, p. 185). Reinecke and Ansari (2021) explain that social movements problematize issues spontaneously in interactions as they engage in framing contests. The researchers propose to interpret these spontaneous actions (often labeled by bystanders as irrational, emotional outbursts) as situational but purposeful wayfinding, whereby actors improvise on the spot. Therefore, they mark “discursive use of emotions” as an important theme in conflict dynamics concerning social movements. As the current study examines the course of a conflict between politics and a social movement, the second sub-question addresses the expression of emotions:

*RQ2.* In what way do the disputants express emotions in the debates, and what are the differences between farmers and politicians in terms of discursive use of emotions?

With regard to the operationalization of the concept “discursive use of emotions”, we follow Stevens’ research on emotional communication (2021). In the section “data analysis,” one can find a further elaboration on how this method is employed.

#### *Reframing*

Both framing and reframing are strongly linked to message patterns, linguistic cues and socially constructed meanings. The third sub-question will focus on reframing as vital to the communications underlying negotiations (Shmueli *et al.*, 2006). Reframing takes place when interlocutors revise their frames, in other words, when they “develop a new way of interpreting or understanding the issues in the dispute” (Lewicki *et al.*, 2003, p. 32) or when

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they reevaluate one or more other parties in the conflict. In particular, Benford and Snow's research (2000) has been influential in showing how reframing processes such as "articulation" play a significant role in interaction dynamics. Articulation consists in discursively selecting and assembling frame elements to make them acquire sense in an attractive and coherent manner. The reframing derives from the new perspective or interpretation provided (Ravazzani and Maier, 2017). Reinecke and Ansari's (2021) concept of "keying" resembles articulation: keying captures the moment when a frame is presented in a different way, so that it casts a new light on a given activity or subject. It is a suggested transformation of perception in such a way that participants might change their view on the subject. When reframing happens, "interactants may try to restore the interaction order and uphold extant frames, or modified or new emergent frames may find traction" (Reinecke and Ansari, 2021, p. 10). This leads to the third sub-question:

RQ3. What reframing activities can be identified in the debates and how do they affect the course of the conflict?

## Methods

### *The research setting*

As already outlined, the case at hand is an environmental conflict about nitrogen emissions in the Netherlands, which led to huge Farmers' Protests on 1 and 16 October 2019 (see Plate 1). The conflict was triggered by a statement of a politician belonging to the ruling coalition, who argued that halving the country's livestock population would solve the nitrogen problem. In the months preceding the Farmers' Protests, the Netherlands had become embroiled in the so-called nitrogen crisis, forcing the government to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The agricultural sector feared the consequences of this crisis, and thus the politician's statement about livestock reduction added fuel to the fire. This caused the establishment of a social movement, which mobilized the agricultural sector to take a clear stand against the Dutch government's policymaking. The conflict escalated and furious farmers blocked the routes to the Dutch political capital The Hague, aiming to call the Parliament to account. One of the protesters, a sheep farmer, stated in his speech that lawmakers "lack the common sense – farmers' sense – that nature and animals teach us."



Source(s): By Steven Lek - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=82771222>

**Plate 1.**  
Farmers' protest in the Hague over halving livestock numbers

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### Data collection

The research data comprise four face-to-face debates concerning the environmental conflict about nitrogen. The disputes between politicians and farmers center on the Farmers' Protests and the statement about halving the number of livestock in order to reduce nitrogen emissions. The separate debates are recorded live television broadcasted debates, which took place on the same day as the protests. The selected debates are a revealing case for three reasons. First, selecting these live debates, which were conducted in the heat of the moment, made it possible to observe the conversations in real time and to capture interpretative processes as they occurred. This selection thereby helped to avoid biases from knowing the conflict development beforehand, which is considered a risk of retrospective interaction analysis (Reinecke and Ansari, 2021). Second, studying a series of observable interactions in four comparable settings with the same parties at the table (represented by different actors) enabled us to map the various unfolding framing dynamics and to compare the different ways in which framing was enacted by the interlocutors, impacting the courses of the four debates. Third, the environmental conflict and the newly established social movement provided an opportunity to observe encounters in an issue arena suitable for interactional theory building.

Of the live television debates, three were held on the first day of the protests (1 October 2019), hosted by talk shows of the Dutch public broadcasters, namely, Pauw, Nieuwsuur and De Wereld Draait Door. The fourth live debate was recorded on the second day of the protests (16 October 2019) and was hosted again by Pauw. All four debates involved different representatives of the two most prominent parties in this conflict, farmers and politicians. The debates were mediated by talk-show hosts, who played their part in intervening in the interaction, but still they gave the disputants a considerable amount of speaking time to make their case and to discuss the matter at hand.

The different debates were transcribed according to conversation analytic conventions, yielding approximately 85 double-spaced pages of transcript. Additionally, archival data (news bulletins, media articles and technical reports) were collected and analyzed to provide background information on the actors and the conflict.

### Data analysis

In this study, we relied on guidelines for discourse analysis of Wood and Kroger (2000, p. 193) who outlined the method as follows: "a field that focuses heavily on issues of meaning and context in interaction". Methods associated with symbolic interactionism – such as the interaction analyses performed in this study – allow researchers "to draw out the dynamics of framing [...] rather than obliging them to commit themselves to the assumption that frames exist in discourse as separate and coherently bounded symbols or thoughts" (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014, p. 220). The framing concept was chosen as the basis for this study's analytical framework (Lewicki *et al.*, 2003; Donahue *et al.*, 2011; Reinecke and Ansari, 2021).

The data analysis entailed four steps. We went through multiple coding rounds, using the above-mentioned sensitizing concepts (see literature review), working up from the data to clustering into themes.

First, the occurring issues were identified, after which *issue frames*, *identity frames* and *characterization frames* that disputants deployed in the debates were studied. In total, three main issues were found throughout all three debates, namely "valuation of farmers", "reduction of livestock" and "condition of nature". Frame analysis was deployed to reveal how these three issues were framed by the two parties and how identities of self and others were framed. The Results section details the several framings by illustrating quotes of farmers and politicians.

In the second phase, all sequences in the debates were analyzed in terms of the discursive use of emotions. We follow Stevens *et al.* who identify emotional utterances as a discursive

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category that contains emotion words (“I feel I got stuck”). These words “refer to or imply specific emotions as distinct discursive devices (e.g. anger, love, sadness)” (Stevens, 2021, p. 78). In order to get a picture of the density of the discursive use of emotions in the separate debates (low, medium or high), the frequency of occurring emotion words was inventoried for each of the farmers and politicians.

Third, the junctures at which reframing took place were investigated, in terms of articulation or keying.

Ultimately, a closer look was taken at the interplay between the deployed frames, the discursive use of emotions and the occurred reframing to conclude whether and how framing activities affected the course of the debates, eventually in terms of polarizing or bridging. In this case, “polarizing” is defined as framing activities that enlarge the divide between the two opposing groups. “Bridging” on the other hand concerns framing activities that result in rapprochement and convergence.

## Results

The results reveal how frames regarding the environmental conflict at stake were constructed and reshaped in interaction and furthermore the framing activities that were deployed in the four debates.

### *Issue frames*

Three issues underpinning the farmers’ collective action frame were extensively discussed in all four debates, namely, *valuation of farmers*, *livestock reduction* and *condition of nature*. The valuation of farmers concerned the question whether the farmers receive enough appreciation of the work being done by the agricultural sector. The issue of livestock reduction, as outlined before, gave rise to the Dutch farming protests; therefore, this issue was central to the debates. The condition of nature was discussed thoroughly as well: how weak is the situation of nature really? As can be seen in Table 1, both politicians and farmers framed these issues in their own way. Regarding *valuation of farmers* and *livestock reduction*: whereas the farmers unanimously felt depicted as some sort of redundant disrespected polluters, politicians stressed that it was not the farmers who were the problem, but the nitrogen situation in the Netherlands consequent to many years of intensified agriculture. Interestingly, all politicians in the four debates enacted the same issue frame (“the system is broken”), but their discursive choices evoked different responses from the farmers. In Debate 1, the politician accentuated the uselessness of the farmers’ refusal to change, and he expressed pity because they would not be able to retain the status quo because the system was broken. This brought about an angry reaction, whereas in Debate 2 the same issue framing was received calmly. An observable difference was the wording and approach chosen by the politician in Debate 2: he explicitly confirmed farmers’ expertise and their added value for the country. At the same time, he stated that reduction was necessary, without evoking anger. An explanation for this difference between the debates may lie in the distinct differences in identity work deployed by the politicians in addressing the issues; this is elaborated on later in this section.

The third issue, *condition of nature*, led to questioning who was the most competent authority to assess the state of nature. Is it the politicians who build on measurements presented by the National Institution of Health and Environment? Or is it the farmers who “live with nature” and make a living from taking care of nature? It is apparent from the quotes in Table 1 that the farmers questioned the validity of the calculations presented, thereby stressing their expertise in “nature business”. Politicians merely repeated the measurements that outline an environment suffering from excess nitrogen emissions. In addition to the

Issues	Issue frames of farmers	Quotes of farmers	Issue frames of politicians	Quotes of politicians
Issue: Valuation of farmers	Farmers' expertise is ignored, no appreciation	<p>"Talk with us instead of about us"</p> <p>"We get labeled as polluters"</p> <p>"Let's engage in a dialogue together"</p> <p>"We are unwanted"</p> <p>"We feed The Netherlands"</p>	Not against farmers, but against this way of agriculture	<p>"Farmers who do not want to change, do not help themselves." Debate 1</p> <p>"The farmers are experts in their field and right in their complaints, but we have to change the system." Debate 2</p> <p>"We need to change farming but in a social manner." Debates 3 and 4</p> <p>"They deserve a fair price for their products." Debate 4</p>
Issue: Reduce livestock population because of excess nitrogen emissions	Agricultural sector is over-burdened, halving is not an option	<p>"It will be at our cost"</p> <p>"financially infeasible"</p> <p>"Accumulation of legislation"</p> <p>"We cannot give up the life's work of generations"</p> <p>"We have done enough, no other sector reduced 65% of emissions"</p> <p>"We need long-term political vision and economic provisions"</p> <p>"Start by selling Dutch meat in The Netherlands instead of South American meat."</p>	The intensive livestock production system is broken, all sectors will have to deliver reduction	<p>"This problem has been neglected for too long." Debate 1</p> <p>"We are trapped in a system where unfair prices are paid." Debate 2</p> <p>"It's about road traffic: we'll have to drive more slowly. It's about air traffic: we'll have to fly less. But at the same time, agriculture has to contribute." Debate 2</p> <p>"75% of the meat goes abroad." Debate 3</p> <p>"We need to reduce, but farmers must be compensated." Debate 4</p>
Issue: The condition of nature	Nature is fine and we are the experts	<p>"The causal link between nitrogen and the situation of nature is not clear"</p> <p>"Three years ago, we could expand 20% and now all of a sudden there's a nitrogen problem."</p> <p>"We literally have both feet in nature, politicians should come and watch the fields"</p> <p>"In the city, people do not understand what nature is like."</p>	Nature is in bad condition, as the calculations show	<p>"The situation of our Dutch nature is the worst in Europe." Debate 1</p> <p>"Livestock production is efficient but bad for the climate." "It's about health, we need future prospect." Debate 2</p> <p>"We need to build houses for youngsters." Debates 3 and 4</p> <p>"It's the scientific institutions that know the situation of nature." Debate 4</p> <p>"We have 20,000 measurement points." "we have adequate models and reliable scientists." Debate 4</p>

## Interactional framing

**Table 1.**  
Farmers' and politicians' three main issues and the framing of these issues in the debates

authority contest, parties debated the main source of pollution: is it the farmers or the cities (construction, transport)? A striking observation emerging from the data is that neither party addressed the condition of nature itself, in terms of the meaning or consequences of environmental degradation. Hence, the focal points in the debates regarding this issue were 1) claiming authority to assess the state of nature and 2) discussing each party's ecological debt (which has consequences when the polluter-pays principle is applied).

### *Identity and characterization frames*

*Identity framing* reflects how we see ourselves and others implicated in what is happening (Lewicki *et al.*, 2003). The farmers participating in the debates, as already noted, felt undervalued. Closer inspection of Table 2 shows that farmers extensively depicted their identity in terms of value, expertise and favorable character traits, like climate-friendliness, cleanliness and flexibility. Also, all farmers stressed the unicity of their way of living: farming is not just a job, it is a deep-felt pride in maintaining a family farm on ground passed down for generations. The politicians' identity framing differed by debate. In Debates 1, 3, and 4, as illustrated in Table 2, politicians were observed to highlight their reliability and their attachment to honesty. Surprisingly, Politician 2 showed a somewhat counterintuitive result: he framed himself as a family man. Also, he expressed understanding about being shouted at and jeered during his speech on the protest stage earlier that day. Furthermore, he took the blame for the longstanding inconsistent policymaking on agriculture.

Identity frames of F	Characterization frames of F about P	Identity frames of P	Characterization frames of P about F and other P
<i>Valuable</i> : "We feed the country" <i>Family firm</i> : "Our farm is the life's work of many generations" <i>Flexible</i> : "We are willing to make concessions" <i>Expertise</i> : "We are agricultural experts" "My cows are happy" <i>Clean</i> : "The cities are filthy, we are clean" <i>United</i> : "We stood shoulder-to-shoulder" <i>Climate friendly</i> : "Most climate friendly in Europe" <i>No trust</i> : "We do not trust politicians"	<i>Inconsistent</i> : "Ever-changing regulatory" <i>Dishonest</i> : "Figures and calculations are wrong" <i>Unreliable</i> : "Deprivation of all prospects" "When you try to meet their demands, they change the rules." "Not keeping promises" "Politicians widen the urban-rural gap on purpose" (Debate 3) <i>Incompetent</i> : "Lost their touch with, and expertise in, agriculture" F <i>Expectant</i> to P: "If you stop free trade agreements, I will shake your hand"	<b>Debate 1</b> <i>Honesty</i> : "I do not help you if I keep hiding the facts" <i>Reliable</i> : "What I say is proved decennia ago" <i>Helping</i> : "I stop the international free trade agreements" <b>Debate 2</b> <i>Family man</i> : "I took my children to school" <i>Self-accusation</i> : "We politicians let this happen" <i>understanding</i> why farmers turned their back on him <b>Debates 3 and 4</b> <i>Honesty</i> : "We politicians have to speak frankly about the problems"	<b>Debate 1</b> "We are against this way of agriculture, not against farmers" "Politicians who say you're right will never give clarity to you" "These protests will not help the farmers." <b>Debate 2</b> "Farmers are hurt, their soul has been battered" "They get too low a price" "You are right: not only you will pay" "Farmers are frightened" "Farmers are right, they did a great job in reduction" "You are experts" "Farmers deserve a fair price" "we could come far together" <b>Debates 3 and 4</b> "You farmers must tell the true story"

**Table 2.**

Main identity frames and characterization frames of farmers (F) and politicians (P)

Regarding the *characterization frames*, which are expected to be less favorable in cases of conflict, [Table 2](#) shows that farmers characterized politicians as dishonest and unreliable. Whereas the farmers were unanimous in this matter, the politicians differed in their characterizations. In the first debate, the politician used merely negations: “we are not against farmers” and “there’s no point in protesting.” In Debates 3 and 4, the farmers’ honesty was at stake: “you must tell the real story.” In Debate 2, the politician again took a remarkable perspective in this conflict: he articulated time and again the farmers’ grievances. His recurrent, positive characterization was: the hard-hit farmers have legitimate concerns.

### *Discursive use of emotions*

[Table 3](#) compares the density (low, medium or high) of discursive use of emotions by both parties and shows quotes that refer to, or imply, specific emotions. The farmers’ expression of emotions, as was to be expected from a social movement, was high. They articulated despair, frustration, shame and fear about their situation, but also pride about their way of life and about the appreciation they received from the Dutch people during the protests. In Debate 1, farmers reacted furiously to the politician’s issue frame because he characterized the protests as “useless, because the system is broken”, and this was conceived as delegitimizing farmers’ actions (implying anger). Whereas the farmers in all four debates used emotional wording, the politicians’ emotional intensity was low in three of the four debates. Most politicians took a rational stance, except for Politician 2 who communicated his emotions more explicitly. He expressed worry, empathy and a sense of guilt. He also showed more positive emotions: solidarity with, and pride in, the farmers and cheerfulness accompanied by jokes and laughs.

Discursive use of emotions by farmers	Discursive use of emotions by politicians	
<b>All debates HIGH</b>	<b>Debate 1</b>	
<b>Debates 1, 2, 4</b>	LOW	
<i>Anger: It’s enough, we did enough, “we are the drain of society”</i>	<b>Debate 2</b>	
<i>Shame: No appreciation, label of polluter</i>	HIGH	
<i>Pride: “We feed the country, the people are behind us”</i>	Laughs along with farmers’ remarks	
<i>Frustration: Unfair battle, feeling stuck, the city is the problem, not the countryside</i>	“We hurt the farmers”	
<i>Despair: Inconsistent regulatory, financially unfeasible, disappointing my family, the weight of legislation</i>	“I am worried for the farmers”	
<i>Fear: “We will suffer”</i>	“I would be scared too”	
<b>Debate 3</b>	“It would shock me too”	
<i>Disgust/aversion</i>	“It is painful”	
“I blame P3”	<b>Debate 3</b>	
<i>Disdain/distrust</i>	LOW	
“P3 knows that very well” (but he does not say it) (3 times)	“It is a painful choice”	
<i>Pain: “It hurts that P3 says . . .” “his conduct hurts me”</i>	<b>Debate 4</b>	
	LOW	

**Table 3.** Density of farmers’ and politicians’ discursive use of emotions (low, medium or high)

### *Reframing*

In one of four debates, a reframing occurred. It took place in the second debate, the same debate that previously has shown a few nonstandard results. Whereas in Debates 1, 3 and 4, the politicians underlined the livestock reduction frame; Politician 2 *rekeyed* the frame, “the system is broken”, positioning it in a new light. Politician 2 stated that “the system” does not refer to the agricultural sector (as everybody hitherto assumed, in this debate as well as in the others). He explained that he sees the system as the international system of food production,

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in which agriculture is only one link in a chain. He said that the farmers were forced into intensification by other parties in the chain, like multinationals, and just had no choice than to increase the livestock population in order to earn a decent income. This articulation removes the blame from the farmers (“you polluters”), pointing to an overarching system with other dominant actors that harms nature, citizens and farmers alike. The politician added that this system must be replaced, giving impetus to sustainable farming and ensuring that farmers have a fair income. Although the farmers said that could be too good to be true (“is this man trustworthy?”), they also admitted that a lot of farmers would opt for restructuring and would reduce livestock numbers if meat and milk prices rose. This was the only time in the debates that a frame was reframed in an overarching new frame. But in Debate 4, the interlocutors came close to a reframing of the “no halving” frame of the farmers. When the fair price issue is discussed, the farmer eventually says: “I would love to have fewer sheep, if I could make a living out of it; then I would not have to get out of bed at night that often.” These findings indicate that, although the farmers organized the largest Dutch Farmers’ Protests ever, their firm “no halving” issue frame became more fluid in Debates 2 and 4, providing opportunities for reframing and for bridging.

#### *The course of the debates*

The analysis of the four comparable debates enabled the observation of different ways in which framing was enacted by the interlocutors, impacting the courses of the debates. In terms of bridging or polarizing, the findings lead to the following. In Debate 1, where farmers were approached as pitiful people (“refusal will not help you”), this characterization evoked anger: the farmers fought back discursively to manifest that “politics” should take a different view. In Debate 3 (as shown in [Table 2](#)), the farmer used disparaging expressions, while accusing the politician of enlarging the urban–rural gap on purpose. The hostile characterizations made the politician defend and justify himself: this interaction fueled polarization. In Debate 4, the debaters remained opposed regarding the “condition of nature issue” and the associated authority. However, regarding *livestock reduction*, they reached mutual agreement: fewer livestock are acceptable if prices rise. In Debate 2, the politician provided a stage for the farmers’ grievances and at the same time presented his perspective in a captivating manner, by four observable framing activities:

- (1) specific blame-free discursive choices in his framing of the *valuation* and *reduction* issues (see [Table 1](#)),
- (2) identity work, particularly in expressing his own identity as a father and a fallible politician and in positively characterizing the farmers (see [Table 2](#)),
- (3) alignment with the intensity of the expressed emotions of the farmers (see [Table 3](#)) and
- (4) rekeying the extant the-system-is-broken frame (see the results on “reframing”).

The cocktail of these framing activities created bridging opportunities (although the farmers started this conversation with anger and firmness), as highlighted in several utterances in this conversation, for example: “I think we can come close”, “we make significant progress” and “it seems we are negotiating now” (instead of debating).

#### **Discussion**

As the empirical evidence shows, interlocutors negotiate frame alignments in interactions. This provides insight into the communicative basis of environmental conflict development in issue arenas. The findings reveal how several conversations with disputants who hold the same issue frames run a different course because of the processes that unfold in interaction.

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The most obvious conclusion to emerge from this study is that framing activities can lead to significant variations in the course of a conflict. In all debates, farmers started with the same issue framing and identity work, but the variation in farmers' stances increased over the course of the debates. The farmers who felt heard in their grievances opened up for negotiation. On the other hand, farmers who felt threatened or undervalued by politicians reacted furiously or resentfully, leading to politicians defending and justifying themselves: an interaction dynamic that deepened divides. Opportunities for bridging occurred when one of the politicians aligned his issue framing, identity work and discursive use of emotions with the farmers' utterances. As outlined in the results, five interactional framing activities can be identified that are likely to offer opportunities for mitigating conflict or bridging:

- (1) carefully relating the wording of an issue frame to the adversary's issue frame, accommodating the other concerns;
- (2) functionally using identity frames to bond instead of to defend or justify;
- (3) aligning with the other party in the way of expressing emotions, however choosing to express primarily positive emotions;
- (4) choosing blame-free, positive characterizations even when this is not reciprocated and
- (5) reframing an extant frame by articulating an overarching frame that resonates with both parties.

When these framing activities are combined, they seem to reinforce one another and offer opportunities for building common ground.

Another major finding is that the identity work and the framing of issues are intertwined in the sense that, without accurate identity and characterization framing, the intended issue framing may not come across. In other words, the issue framing has to be accompanied by the identity work, as interpreted by the conversation partner. This interpretation is key for agreement or disagreement about the issue frame. For example, one of the politicians used negatively interpreted characterization framing, whereby his efforts to offer solutions (by issue framing) were not recognized as helpful. In framing literature, this interconnectedness between issue framing, identity framing and characterization framing has not yet been acknowledged in terms of interpreting the credibility of the conversation partner. In theory about interactional framing and bridging, this notion might be a relevant complement.

With respect to the condition-of-nature issue – the very reason for this environmental conflict – the debates remarkably enough did not cover the content or the consequences of the nitrogen crisis itself. Former research shows that people tend to construct frames that fit their own context and interests, making the condition-of-nature issue a weapon in the fight instead of a common problem to explore together. As [Van Herzele et al. \(2015, p. 540\)](#) concluded in their study of dynamics in public debates on wildlife issues, “views on nature are entangled with highly diverse political responses to and engagements with nature.” [Lewicki et al. \(2003\)](#) state that environmental conflicts revolve around notions of justice that carry entitlement claims rather than handling the environmental condition itself. This corresponds with the notion of [Shmueli et al. \(2006, p. 210\)](#) that “challenges to one's sense of self trigger opposition and may even deflect attention from issues and toward protection of one's identity.” This former research helps to understand why the current findings reveal that both parties barely address the consequences of the condition of nature for the Dutch people as a whole (including farmers and politicians) but instead attempt to connect the issue to their own groups' frame of reference, thereby constructing alternative versions of the condition of nature.

*Practical implications*

Although the current study is based on a small sample of participants, the findings suggest that disputants' framings may well be changeable under the right circumstances; this can be of practical value for strategic communicators, like issue managers. They are operating in various and fast developing issue arenas with multiple interdependencies. Therefore, alliances may be sought and negotiations initiated (Vos *et al.*, 2014).

Skilled communicators can bridge differences by articulating issue frames that accommodate the concerns and values of opponents while demonstrating and justifying the added value of the new frame (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014). Reframing can create opportunities for trade-offs when interlocutors are able to articulate an overarching frame that resonates with both parties, thereby carefully relating the phrasing of the overarching frame to the adversary's issue frame. The reframing of "the system is broken" as reported in "Results" is an excellent example hereof.

Especially in environmental conflicts where identities are challenged – as occurred regarding the condition of nature – not only the issue (re)framing but also the identity work is crucial in order to find common ground. Issue managers should know that agreements are impeded by typical responses to identity challenges, like ignoring information and perspectives that threaten the groups' identity (Shmueli *et al.*, 2006). In order to span boundaries, it pays off to adjust the identity work in favor of the relation with opponents. For example, the identity framing of the politician who referred to himself as a father, a family man, resonated with the farmers who consider their farm a family business.

This study has also found that calibrating expression of emotions offers opportunities to mobilize support. "Taking negative emotions such as grievances seriously, including when uttered in an emotional manner, may open up the debate" (Buijs and Lawrence, 2013, p. 110). Moreover, adapting adequately to others' concerns, not only in wording but also in emotional expression, is also essential for the art of reframing. When interacting with interlocutors who have a different style of expressing emotions, it would be helpful to adjust to the others' level of emotional intensity. So-called "style-flexibility" with regard to emotions could foster mutual understanding.

This does not mean, however, that reframing is easy or predictable. All stakeholders in the issue arena are active agents, making framing and meaning construction a joint activity (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014). This implies that viewing interactional framing as a merely strategic tool, tactic or trick neglects the interdependent nature of cocreation. To be able to articulate frames with a bridging character, boundary spanners need, in addition to discursive abilities, connecting competences, such as empathy, respectful inquiry and perspective taking (Lewicki *et al.*, 2003; Van Quaquebeke and Felps, 2018).

*Contributions and limitations*

This study contributes to the understanding of 1) the complexity and interactive nature of conflicts; 2) how the reception and interpretation of issue framing depends on the surrounding identity and characterization framing; 3) how environmental conflicts revolve around discrepant environmental values, which define the condition-of-nature framing, and 4) how framing activities like identity work, emotional alignment and reframing can affect the course of environmental debates toward polarizing or bridging. On a methodological level, this study contributes to communication research concerning "meaning making on the ground", applying methodologies for investigating framing processes to get "a bit closer to discourse in frame analysis" (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014, p. 220). Thus, this study proposed the adoption of an interactional approach to framing, considering the perspectives of both political organizations and social movements as frame strategists engaging in issue arenas (Luoma and Vos, 2010).

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The current study is limited by the lack of overview on the entire issue arena regarding this conflict. Future researchers may integrate the present results by considering conversations that took place behind the scenes and the discussions on social media, as both probably influenced the course of the investigated debates (and vice versa). Furthermore, the examined debates took place in a mediatized setting whose program format thrives on heated debates and polarization. A more collaboration-minded context could have yielded different results. Therefore, it is all the more remarkable that, in two of the four debates, adversaries reached a certain level of agreement. Additional interactional framing processes may be explored through a comparison of this media context with settings aimed at conflict resolution or policymaking.

Further research is also needed on how environmental conflicts whereby the content of the issue itself is not addressed, revolve around discrepant values or entitlement claims and how this tendency affects the conflict development in issue arenas. In spite of its limitations, the study adds to the understanding of the actual processes and dynamics of framing and meaning construction in real time.

## Conclusion

Using a framing lens to grasp how people deal with conflicts can facilitate the crafting of “constructive processes in which disputants can explore the frames in operation, and, if they are inclined to do so, choose pathways that may make their conflicts more open to resolution” (Lewicki *et al.*, 2003, p. 435).

This empirical study elaborates on the communicative basis of environmental conflict development in issue arenas, in particular on how frames are (re)shaped through discursive choices in interaction. The study shows how framing activities can lead to variations in the course of a conflict. This approach helps to uncover the micro-processes that escalate and de-escalate a conflict. Framing activities like identity work, emotional alignment and reframing seem to affect the course of environmental debates toward polarizing or bridging.

Another major finding is that the identity work and the framing of issues are intertwined in the sense that, without accurate identity and characterization framing, the intended issue framing may not come across. It can be concluded that the reception and interpretation of issue framing depends on the surrounding identity framing and characterization framing. In order to span boundaries, it pays off to adjust the identity work in favor of the relation with opponents.

Furthermore, the research shows how environmental conflicts, whereby the content of the environmental issue itself is not addressed, presumably revolve around discrepant values or entitlement claims. This tendency affects the conflict development in issue arenas because disputants attempt to connect the issue to their own groups’ frame of reference, thereby constructing alternative versions of the environmental issue.

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