Framing; Recognition and Application as a Guiding Concept in the Social and Political Sciences

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Abstract

Framing is a familiar concept but with a scattered history in several fields of the humanities and social sciences, which seems can be widely used in socio-political studies in the case of a conceptual-operational revision. In this paper, after conceptual rethinking of the term in several theoretical contexts, and especially in the media domain, the author strived to present a consistent and uniform understanding of it to the reader and provide it at the level of a powerful guide concept for social and political research by reviewing the types, strategies, models, and consequences of the framing.

Keywords

Framing, Communication Theories, Election and Voting Behavior, Social Movements, Cyberspace.

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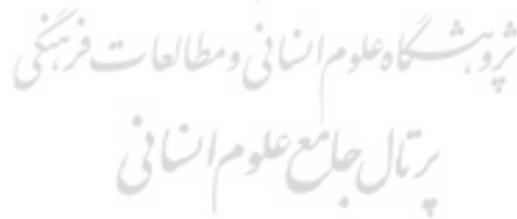
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Introduction

Glossary of Communications has defined "Framing" as "Selecting an angle to record and display a subject or present a subject, which may lead to some kind of interference with the subject" (Shokrkhah, 2010:85). This concept seems to have psychological and sociological roots and has led to the knowledge of communication and political studies as well from Irving Goffman's theory of symbolic interactionism and his discussion on the face management and perception. In his view, humans give meaning to their life experiences based on a series of interpretive schemes.

These fundamental cognitive frameworks are effective on our understanding of the facts surrounding us and the decisions we make since the frameworks are able to introduce meaningful or meaningless elements and provide the contexts to understanding the events (Goffman, 1974: 21-22). Thus, framing is a process of "making meaning" or "giving meaning". On one hand, the internal structures of our minds that are the result of our lived experience and mental and personality transformations build some frameworks and, on the other hand, man knows himself in exchanging ideas and concepts with others and realizes his meaning. In this context, benefiting from the perspective of Charles Horton Cooley, Goffman introduces the concept of "looking glass self", which is the idea that our understanding of ourselves forms by using others and their reactions as a mirror to evaluate our identity and essence (Ritzer, 2010: 508). However, all people somehow believe that they have their own working framework that they use for looking at everything in the world and interpreting the data. According to Goffman, these frameworks are in a sense of a pre-existing context and model that the events are incorporated in its form. But in the continuation of framing research area, the concept was gradually used in referring to subsequent and extrinsic models forming in the interaction with others and the process of transferring meaning, as through a variety of media messages.

1. Conceptual Recognition

Today, "framing" is discussed and studied as an interdisciplinary concept in several research areas, which have significant similarities in addition to differences in the perspective.

1-1. Applied Linguistics

Linguistic studies from twentieth century have led to the formation of broader attitudes in the field of philosophy and epistemology and also overshadowed many interdisciplinary studies in the 21st century by turning into one of the richest fields of humanities and social sciences. One of the

theories put forward to understand how mental knowledge is organized that have been welcomed by many of the thinkers in the field of mind study is the "Theory of Frameworks" in the domain of applied linguistics, which was called by Charles Filmore "Framework Semantics".

What I mean by the term "Framework" is a system of concepts in which the mode of communication is such that we must understand the whole structure that a concept is within to understand one of the concepts; when one of the items in a structure is discussed in a context, all items become automatically available (Filmore, 1982: 111).

From his point of view, the meaning of words cannot be understood independently of the framework associated with it. With each word used in the language, a framework (schema) is triggered, which remains in our long-term mind and memory. In fact, the meaning of a word depends on the type of framework where we conceptualize that word within. In addition, frameworks provide a particular angle of vision for understanding the terms, which plays an important role in making mental representations of the situation in which the word is used. Frameworks encompass a large and complex knowledge system about the world around us, a network of which, is activated in the mind while thinking and talking. Yet, the frameworks are, in this sense, "Specific Cultures"; i.e., they are the product of a collective mind and cultural constructs. Most of our understanding of the world comes through the frameworks in which the categories are included (Ardebili, 2016).

1-2. Politics and Sociology

1-2-1. New Social Movements

The topic of modern social movements, for several and varied reasons, has been one of the highly controversial concepts since the 1990s onward in the area of political studies, and especially political sociology. From the end of the last century and the early years of the 21st century, the emergence of social movements and their new nature and demands in different countries have strengthened and promoted the research in this field. Concentrating on how the collective identity of the actors in these movements is constructed is one of the key perspectives in the studies of this field that most of them are also driven by identity orientation and not class-based interests. It appears to be crucial to know that how the identity of the supporters of a movement is built through membership in the group and how it is being redefined in the light of new experiences. Hence, a question arises as to how a movement forms the identity of its body through framing and presenting interpretive schemes and moving them toward its goals.

From the perspective of David Snow et al., the framework refers to a set of interpretive plans and schemes, which presents a compact image of the whole environment to the actors and gives a meaning to it by selecting and delimiting the objects, situations, experiences, and the sequence of events within the range of the people's present and past times. It also includes recommendations to achieve the desired status. These researchers have studied the design of cognitive structures that can guide the collective action (especially in the social movement) and identified three identity fields among its "Movement Supporters", "Opponents", and "Audiences" and shown the framing process in each. For example, they show that how social movements represent themselves in the field of identity of the supporters as a group claiming righteousness who are probably oppressed and yet have the majority and are backed by the popular and celebrities. When we combine these items with the boundaries of these movements with "others", some sort of identification process emerges through the construction of subjective-practical frameworks.

An important part of Benford and Snow's research also addresses the role of the framework in interpreting, suggesting solutions, and motivating members of the movement to take action to achieve the goal. From their point of view, the process of framing is done in three stages and in the form of three types of framework designing:

1. Cognitive Framework: It identifies troublesome and problematic events or conditions that require improvement and correction and determines the culprits and delinquents. The specific work of "recognition or diagnostic design" is to make accusation and attribute features and motivations to those introduced as responsible ones for making the problems or exacerbating them. In other words, this specific work involves identifying others in the form of identities who play the role of a criminal, a sinner, or an enemy.

2. Solution-Finding Framework: It outlines and develops a comprehensive compensation plan. This plan specifies who should do what and also includes expanding and explaining of specific goals, strategies, and tactics.

3. Motivational Framework: Although the two preceding steps are indispensable for the mobilization of the public, but agreeing on these definitions of the situations does not automatically give rise to the collective action. "Motivational framework" fulfills this need with axial referring to words of reasoning and appropriate motivation or the rational basis for action against the perpetrator or perpetrators. Therefore, the motivational framework provides the logic and incentive to make action in a direction that the framework of solution-finding has arrived at and leads the individual to

act in that direction. These shared motives are considered in turn a very suitable stimulus for the collective action (Snow et al., 2008: 220 & 221).

1-2-2. Elections and Voting Behavior

Some scholars, inspired by the interpretive schemes and framing paradigm presented by Snow et al., have employed the concept of decision-making framework to understand the voting behavior of the citizens. For example, an Iranian researcher has addressed why Mr. Ahmadinejad was elected by the majority of voters in the ninth Iranian presidential election (2005). In his view, Iranian voters, like their counterparts around the world, act rationally; however, in frameworks built under certain conditions, the electoral matters and the advantages or disadvantages of candidates or parties in the electoral contest are conceptualized for the voters, making them decide to vote for this or that party, group, or candidate. On the 2005 Iran's Presidential Elections, those Iranian citizens who voted for the victorious candidate had been convinced that he is sincerely committed to restore values, social justice, and the fight against corruption. He also has a modest living and will follow an approach to manage the country, which can be helpful in addressing the situation of the deprived (Seyed-Emami, 2006). Seyed Emami believes that, by adapting the framework for voting behavior, we can find out how the citizens use the frameworks to define their preferences, impersonate the collective identity, and interpret the statements and actions of the candidates. In his case study, this decision-making framework, have been constructed under the influence of Iranian mass media, voters' social networks, and the candidates' persuasive discourse.

1-3. Communication Behavior and Media Theories

Framing in communication studies is discussed in the form of a theory, which includes the debates on news gatekeeper to the media philosophy. The fundamental question here is "How the media constructs our social world? or "How do we, as the audience, shape the interpretation and use of the media?" Here, the "Framing" is a communication theory that examines the major contribution of the media in shaping the audience's interpretive schemes. In many communication texts, framing has been studied under the title of psychological topics of the media effects or the user-media relationship and, of course, it has been used today in the field of political communication since it is seen as a powerful tool for directing public opinions, particularly in the area of political beliefs and tendencies (Iyengar, 1991).

The media are involved in defining the political reality. With news gathering and production processes, finally, a "prepared and ready"

statement is provided to the audience about what "really" matters in the political theorems and affairs at any given time. In fact, journalists transfer the "concept and content" of politics and political affairs and issues to us. They put current and ongoing events and issues in the political life within "narrative frameworks" that makes it possible to transmit these events as news reports. However, these frameworks do not entirely come from the words of journalists. Rather, the report is formed over time and due to the interplay and competition between various news media and actors with diverse sources. Over time, the existing "competing frameworks" are limited and eliminated as much until a "dominant framework" will finally remain. Although these dominant frameworks are themselves a subject to be challenged and revised, but they do provide structures that their subsequent events will derive their news value from them and will be reported and received via them (Macknair, 2013: 99 &100).

The definition of Media Studies and Communication Encyclopedia on the "Media Frame" refers to it as the organizer of news content to illustrate the nature of a subject (Denz Bauer, 2011: 444). Robert Entman has also defined framing as follows: "Framing is to choose some aspects of the perceived reality and highlight them in a communicative text in such a way it expands a specific definition of the problem, causal interpretation, ethical evaluation, and suggested solutions for that subject (Entman, 2008: 390). Somewhere else, Entman has defined the determining of framework as "The process of selecting and emphasizing certain specific aspects of events or topics as well as relating them in a way that promote interpretation, evaluation, or a specific solution (Entman, 2004: 5).

There are many scattered opinions and definitions on "What is the framing process?" and "How is it done?". Some scholars believe that the concept of framing cannot be substantially represented in a fixed theoretical model. Entman believes that framing only leads to case studies and gives us some kind of "scattered conceptualization" (Zabolizadeh, 2014: 118). Although many scholars consider the framing in analyzing the collective actions of large groups of individuals, but some others also believe that the issue should be studied on an individual level and, ultimately, its result will lead to a broad and comprehensive definition of framework (Iyengar & Scheufele, 2012).

2. Types of Framing

According to different criteria, different categories of framing can be presented. Here are some examples that are more effective on our

understanding of the whole concept of framing or have a greater consequence on the operationalization of the framing process:

2-1. General Framing and Special Framing

Some scholars have distinguished between the two functions of the media in the context of framing, emphasizing its ownership. In their view, sometimes the framing of the media is general and includes components that are not specific to a particular subject or time domain. For example, the media may always consider the simplicity feature and the capability of receiving quickly by the audience in their framing. But in some cases, the media framing focuses on a particular issue or is applied at a specific time interval. For example, a media may pursue a form of framing or emphasize a particular aspect of framing about a particular election period or even a subject or an election candidate (Zabolizadeh, 2014).

2-2. Rational Framing and Emotional Framing

Although the framing theory is examined under the general approach of "rational choice", however, this does not mean that framing is a process purely based on rational computations or it consists only of a series of rational propositions. Many researchers working in the field of decision making point to this issue:

If you like something, you see its risks less and see its benefits more than what actually exists. If you don't like something, the opposite would be true… We are willingly or unwillingly played by our emotions. We make complex decisions by consulting with our emotions, not our thinking. Contrary to our own intention, we shift the question "How do I think about this?" with "How do I feel about this?" (Dobelli, 2016: 210& 211).

This has resulted in allocating a contribution to the emotional and sentimental frameworks in framing related research. For example, the results of a research on the effects of emotional framing shows that "fear and anger can have a significant impact on access to information, searching for intended information, and political preferences" (Nabi, 2003: 224).

2-3. Media Framing and Actor Framing

Although the media make frameworks for their audience with different models but what ultimately relates to the actor's "decision-making" and forms his subsequent behavior is not necessarily equivalent to the message received from the media. Apart from the subjective and interpretive processing of the audience on the media message, the integration of the received framework with the individual's characteristics, experiences and preferences should be considered. Thus, instead of a presenting a macro-

theory about framing, some believe that it is better to rely on smaller theoretical pieces. For example, in framing in the context of elections, factors such as age, gender, education, party loyalty rate, incentive to pursue election campaigns, the media acceptance rate as a reliable intermediary, and the time spent for watching, listening, and reading any electoral message or program are effective. Also, the political information of the audience and their prioritization on various topics, audiences' perceptions of the ability or inability of politicians to lead and guide the society, and the attitudes of each one to the strengths and weaknesses of various parties are influential in this process (Chalabi, 1996). Moreover, other factors such as one's lived experience, the individual's communicative interaction with others in different types of social networks (real) and his preferences of interest in the public sphere can result in different mental and practical outputs in combining with the framing by the media. Therefore, the actor's final framing of the total components received in the context of the framework has to be considered.

2-4. Inland Framing and Overseas Framing

This classification is based on targeting and accessibility of the media engaged in framing for the audience. As the communication tools improve more, their effectiveness range will broaden and practically push the physical boundaries aside. Especially in the age of globalization and the compactness of time and space by new communication tools, this feature of the media has become more prominent. Radio and satellite broadcasts and waves and beyond them, the World Wide Web, have transcended the official geographical boundaries of the countries and have linked people from all over the world.

The geography of cyberspace is much more evolving than other spaces. Moving mountains and oceans is difficult, while the segments of cyberspace can be activated or stopped only by pushing a button (Nye, 2014: 170 & 171).

The outcome of this situation has been the erosion of the national sovereignty of countries and the formation of the phenomenon of "virtual citizenship". Thus, when the media is framing, they may consider the intra-border area or target the citizens beyond the borders of the message's production and distribution.

3. Framing Strategies

Despite the importance of framing topic in political and communications studies, the strategies and methods used in this area have received little attention. Instead, concepts and categories are often introduced in parallel or

similar to the framing issue. For example, the topic of agenda setting (highlighting) has a lot of alignment with framing, and one can even say that it has been studied and addresses by communication and media theories more than the topic of framing. Some scholars consider these two concepts equivalent by ignoring some details. For example, Entman believes that framing is nothing but selection and agenda setting (highlighting) (Entman, 1993). However, some others define framing as the second stage or level of agenda setting; i.e., a subject or some subjects are initially selected and emphasized to draw the attention of the public, and then, a framework for thinking about them will be provided (Scheufele, 1999: 103). Some other topics, such as "priming", are although not significant as much as framing but are often discussed in parallel. In total, one can argue that the disputes over the relevance of these categories are still ongoing in the area of communication theory; but if we focus on the issue from a political perspective - such as the social movements or voting behavior studies area - all other issues have some relevant features to be defined under the general concept of framing. Hence, given the conceptual-operational capacities of framing, we can discuss parallel issues as framing strategies:

3-1. Agenda Setting

We know that if an issues is more emphasized and addressed by media news, it will become more important in the audiences' minds. This often involves a kind of "selectivity" since every event does not fall within every framework. Framing, therefore, involves further selecting, emphasizing, excluding, and explaining some themes. Bernard Cohen believed that the media might not tell us how to think but they are surprisingly successful at telling us what to think about. McCombs and Shaw are the ones who introduce framing as the second level of agenda setting and one of its effects and implications. According to them, the audiences' subjective preferences are influenced by the news and contents featured in the media or resulting from them.

Hence, we can consider some kind of convergence between framing and agenda setting despite the difference between their origins since both emphasize the perceptual and understanding process, which begin as a result of contact with the media agent in the mind of the audiences not just the direct and immediate impact of the media on their behavioral and perceptual outputs. However, the difference between these two lies in the questions they answer.

Agenda setting answers the following question:

• What are the issues of the day and what are the priorities?

But framing focuses on the following question:

• From what angles should we look at the issues and priorities?
However, framing inevitability (that is, agenda setting and priority) covers the highlighting (agenda setting) as well. Framing can then be considered the dominant concept that agenda setting is one of its pillars.

3-2. Priming

An important part of the framing process takes place through preparing the minds of the audiences to consider some issues important in the future and how to think about them. In this case, a kind of association is assumed as such that:
The elements of thought, feelings, or memories are network components that are interconnected in the associative pathways. When an element of thought is activated, this activation extends to other parts of the network along the routes. Therefore, for a while after the activation of a concept, it is more likely that concept and other intercurrent components of the network are remembered again and create the priming effect (Wimmer and Dominic, 2005: 691).
Therefore, people interpret the data presented on a background basis that the mentioned data is represented in its frame, while the same data may have a different meaning and concept in different contexts and formats. However, the effects of this strategy are not usually long-term.

3-3. Simplification and Giving Clues

The process of framing involves simplification of events for the actors since simpler frameworks are more accessible and more widely accepted by the general public. Basically, the way that people think about a subject is influenced by access rate to frameworks and their simplicity (Scheufele, 1999: 115). Some communication scholars have also suggested in describing this fact: People are like cognitive misers that use the "mental plan" as a simple modeling tool to engage with complex and mass information to process the data they receive from the media. The meaning of this process is "cognitive saving". Some also believe that the mass media are a major source of "giving clues" on information and the audiences use these clues as a way of dealing with complex and heavy information (Surin & Tankard, 2005: 107 & 108).

3-4. De-contextualization and Forming (Framing)

An important part of the framing process involves the "de-contextualization" of the event or phenomenon so that the media can "frame" that event or actually create a new frame for it through which the characteristic of the actors' observations about it will change. A familiar event that is provided in

the media and may be of little news value, changes in nature when it is perceived in a new context and what usually seemed familiar may seem strange and unfamiliar (Vindal et al., 2008: 258).

4. Framing Patterns (Models)

According to the literature and the topic background, the framing theory is primarily based on numerous studies made on the role of television in the U.S politics, and in particular about the scandals (Watergate, Clinton, and the like) and the representation and branding methods of electoral candidates in the US political-media studies. Media considerations are the most important factor shaping the competition atmosphere among the election candidates as far as the media presentation, being good-looking and "doing well in media events" (being telegenic) are as the most important elements in running for national or even local elections.

Today, media consultants and companies have become a powerful lobby and a major contributor to the U.S. politics since their presence is considered essential for visualizing the candidates and designing the election campaigns. Media competitions and the ability to communicate effectively with the media and the use of media events are seen as the most important components of electoral competition in the United States as well. However, some critics of the situation, like Jean Baudrillard, say:

The theme has been abandoned and the methods of representation have been highlighted; that is to say, we have reached a stage from the construction of reality by representation that there is no longer a connection between reality and representation and we deal with "Surreal" instead (Mahdizadeh, 2010).

The framing theory is discussed and addressed under the title of media effects and audience interaction process. Hence, the discussions in that field are also applicable to this theory. Thus, according to the nature of the media and the audience's position, two types of framing patterns can be distinguished, which communication studies have been focused on:

4-1. Injective Model

This model has been based more on classical studies of the effects of media by relying on the effects of radio and television. Most studies in this field point to the direct, immediate, and strong effects of the use of these media on the audience, which occur in a mass society and reproduce them. From this perspective, the media framing is a one-way stream, which results in the alienation and uniformity of the mass-like identity due to the credulousness and simple thinking of the audience. The classic work of Neil Postman, "Amusing Ourselves to Death" may be considered a classic example of this

group of works. But the problem with the injective model was not taking into account the active functionality of the media message reader. This initial pattern, which was seen as an important and assumed reality, had ignored pre-existing ideas of the reader and his orientation (Caroti & Hovins, 2012: 393).

But the criticisms and revisions in this model began to give more weight on the choice and interpretation of the audiences and their judgment on the media information.

4-2. Interactive Model

The critical attitude to the quality of audience perception and action against framing, which emphasized the active and interpretive role of the audience in this process, was strengthened with the advent and development of the Internet and the Internet-based media in recent decades. This model represents a kind of dynamism between user and media. The audience appears here in the role of a creative agent who can interpret the received messages and even resist them. In this respect, the concept of "interpretive resistance" has been formed. That is, against the power of media definition, the user can present a different or opposite definition against the message mainstream (Caroti & Hovins, 2012: 256). On the other hand, media framing always passes through filters such as knowledge, beliefs, lived experience, life style, social world, personal preferences and interests, and following the common sense by the audience and its output is not equal to the raw input. These factors determine how users face the framing and the result of framing is adjusted in the light of these components.

Since the media are generally one of the sources of political socialization and Internet, in particular, has opened up a more interactive space between the media and the user, the interactive model has become more prominent in our age. The audience here is not merely a spectator or a mere recipient of what is considered a messaging repository; rather, he is the user that interferes with the process of making, transmitting, and perceiving the message. Accordingly, and beyond that, the citizens increasingly benefit from this feature in the development path of their socio-political action.

5. Framing Implications

The fruits and consequences of media framing have been studied by researchers from various perspectives.

From a methodological point of view and from a macro perspective, the old debate of the structure-agent in social science can also help with the problem formulation here and clarify the scope or even the quality of the effectiveness of framing. If we have some agent-oriented attitude, although

the media audience is always exposed to the framing messages but the media message is inherently perceptible and the audience's horizon is also open for interpreting the message. The audience can understand or resist the implied and additional meaning in the message. Giving meaning is basically an audience-centered action that is made by him and under the influence of factors such as gender, age, education, employment, interest, race, status, social network, etc. Some have gone even further and based on the theories of communication suggested that basically meaning belongs to the audience, not to the message (Mohsenian, 2016: 94 & 102). But from a structuralism perspective, the social position of the audience is more decisive and the message structure, which is shaped according to the recognition of audiences in public opinion by the mainstream media, overcomes the power of interpretation and the audiences' choice. Thus, some researchers believe that the most common processed image of media that fits in with the conventional values of society and has the ability to adapt to the audiences' personal preferences, will have more chance to provide a framework for the actors' decision-making. In fact, even though the audiences are active, their activity is still subject to additional structural constraints. The nature of media messages - even if they have multiple meanings, provide a possibility to make some interpretations more than others. The cultural tools used by audiences to interpret the media are not the same and different people do not have the same resources in different social positions. Therefore, the social structure will act as a constraint in constructing the meaning. Finally, some have come to the conclusion that in a mixed perspective, although the framing audiences are active interpreters but they are not completely independent. The mediators and structures limit the independence of the user and determine the extent of his / her understanding and practice (Caroti & Hovins, 2012: 479).

Beyond the methodological considerations, some of the key considerations and components in analyzing the effects of the framing are as follows:

4-3. The traditional view, which has serious supporters among scholars in the field of communication and politics, believes that the direct and major role of the framing mostly reinforce the pre-existing tendencies rather than create new trends. However, its indirect and limited role is to create or form new tendencies by the role of "opinions leaders". Paul Lazarsfeld spoke of the "two-stage flow of communication". From his point of view, the media have a direct effect on the leaders of opinions and an indirect effect on the public. In this view, media messages mostly reinforce pre-existing ideas and beliefs instead of changing them. However, some minor changes may occur. Hence, Joseph Kepler says: Persuasive mass communication are the confirmatory

factor rather than being the cause of change (Nash, 2009: 258). As in the case of elections, the floating voters who lack loyalty to a particular party or side are mostly influenced by media framing and agenda setting. Few people change their votes by the direct influence of the media and those people also experience this practical change indirectly through the leaders of opinions (Eyvazi, 2009: 162).

4-4.Another common perspective uses the triple categorization of "cognitive, attitudinal, behavioral" in understanding the effects of framing. In fact, the reflection of the media framing is studied at these three levels, which can be concurrent and overlap:

1. Cognitive: Sometimes the media framing causes issues and topics that have not been previously in the audience's recognition domain to enter his perceptual domain or create a new perspective on a subject in his mind.

2. Motivational: The effect of framing the audience can occur by stimulating emotions. In other words, human emotions also play a role in framing and the fruit of framing is sometimes seen in the emotional action.

3. Behavioral: Framing may eventually induce a particular behavior in the audience or prevent him from showing a behavior.

Conclusion

Framing can be described as a "way of evaluating the world by people", which manifests itself in "choosing different paths of action". Based on this article, an initial theoretical formulation of framing can be provided to be a conceptual guide for researcher in the social and political realm.

Table (1): An early theoretical formulation of framing

Perspective	Main Components	Sub-Main Components
Conceptual Recognition	Applied Linguistics Social Movements Voting Behavior Communication Theories	Diagnostic, Solution-Finding, and Motivational Frameworks
Types of Framework	General / Specific Rational / Emotional Media / Actor Inbound / Overseas	
Framing Strategies	Highlighting (agenda setting) Priming (Preparation) Simplification and Giving Clues Decontextualization and Forming	
Framing Models	Injective Interactive	

Framing Consequences	Agency / Structural Direct / Indirect (Through the Beliefs Leaders) Cognitive, Attitudinal, Behavioral	Audience Interpretation / Social Situation

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