

Information Leakage from Logically Equivalent Frames

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Abstract

While the standard characterization of framing effects refers to *equivalent* frames leading to different choices, the equivalence in question has been incompletely conceptualized. We complete the conceptualization by introducing the notion of *information equivalence*, and we show that, to support the normative implications traditionally attributed to framing effects, frames must be equivalent in this sense. However, much of the framing literature has been concerned with information non-equivalent frames. First, we present new evidence for McKenzie and Nelson's (in press) reference point hypothesis, according to which choice-relevant inferences about relative abundance can be drawn from the speaker's choice of attribute frame. This leaked information can explain the most robust finding in the attribute framing literature – the valence-consistency of preference shifts. We then generalize the reference point hypothesis, arguing that the speaker's choice of frame leaks information about what is noteworthy or essential about the thing being described. Normative and psychological implications of the information leakage framework are considered.

Information Leakage from Logically Equivalent Frames

A framing effect is said to occur when equivalent descriptions of a decision problem lead to systematically different decisions. Framing effects thus purportedly violate a bedrock principle of “description invariance,” “[a]n essential condition for a theory of choice that claims normative status...so basic that it is tacitly assumed in the characterization of options rather than explicitly stated as a testable axiom” (Tversky & Kahneman 1986, p. S253). It is largely from the robust existence of framing effects that Tversky and Kahneman (1986) conclude that “no theory of choice can be both normatively adequate and descriptively accurate.” (p. S251)

This paper raises a basic question about the basic principle of description invariance and about the standard definition of “framing effect”. The standard characterization of framing effects refers, as above, to “equivalent descriptions of a decision problem” – but what does it mean for a pair of descriptions to be “equivalent”? And what *must* it mean for a pair of descriptions to be equivalent if equivalent descriptions leading to different decisions is to raise normative eyebrows? That is, just what is the *invariance* in “description invariance”? To our knowledge, these elementary questions have not been satisfactorily addressed in the literature on framing effects and description invariance. In what follows, we propose an explicit characterization of the normatively relevant equivalence – “information equivalence” – and present experimental results which suggest that much of the framing literature has been concerned with information *non*-equivalent descriptions.

Much of the time, the questions posed above are not even implicitly addressed. Furthermore, when “equivalence” is explicated, the explication typically proceeds via appendage of a single, unexplicated adjective: for example, equivalence may be fleshed out as “objective

equivalence” (Levin, Schneider, & Gaeth, 1998; Dunegan, 1996) or “formal equivalence” (Frisch, 1993; Kuhberger, 1998). In our view, such adjectives add little more than emphasis.

A handful of researchers have been explicit about the sort of equivalence they have in mind – namely, logical equivalence (see, e.g., Johnson-Laird and Shafir, 1993; Rubinstein, 1998; Shafir, 1993). This explication is substantive: logical equivalence is well-defined (a pair of statements is logically equivalent if each member of the pair necessarily entails the other) and, provided some care is taken in translating between logical connectives and natural language connectives, straightforward to diagnose. However, there is no general normative problem with *logically* equivalent descriptions of a choice problem leading to different choices.¹

To see this, let A and B be a pair of logically equivalent statements about a choice problem. Suppose in addition that speakers’ conversational behavior exhibits the following regularity: speakers, choosing between uttering “A” and uttering “B”, are more likely to utter “A” when some background condition C (not explicitly specified in the statements A and B) holds than when C fails. In that case, a listener who hears a speaker say “A” can safely infer a higher probability of C being true than if the speaker had said “B” (that is, $p(C|\text{speaker says “A”}) > p(C|\text{speaker says “B”})$). If knowledge about the background condition C is relevant to the choice at hand, then the speaker’s (e.g., experimenter’s) utterance of the two logically equivalent statements A and B may with impunity lead to different decisions.

When there is no choice-relevant background condition C about whose probability a listener can draw inferences from the speaker’s choice between frames A and B, we say that A and B are “information equivalent.” Otherwise, we say that there has been information leakage from the speaker’s choice of frame, and that the frames are therefore information non-equivalent.

The simple argument from the previous paragraph shows that, for description invariance to carry any weight as a normative principle, the invariance in question must be *information invariance*.

It may seem paradoxical that different inferences can be drawn from different but logically equivalent frames, A and B. Indeed, there is no statement S that can be inferred from A but not from B (even if S is a statement about the probability of certain background conditions C obtaining), because, if one knows that B, one can also know that A, and hence draw whatever inferences one would draw knowing that A. However, when one encounters a frame A in a framing problem (or in a natural conversational environment), one is not merely endowed with knowledge that A. Instead, one is endowed with knowledge that the speaker said “A” (and not “B”). Information non-equivalence stems *not* from those inferences which can be drawn from A but not from B (there are none), but instead from those inferences which can be drawn from the fact that the speaker said “A” rather than “B” (there are many).²

Information non-equivalence of logically equivalent descriptions has been demonstrated in many other contexts. For example, Johnson-Laird (1968a, 1968b) argued that passive-form sentences and their logically equivalent active-form counterparts convey different information about the relative prominence of the logical subject and the logical object of the sentences (e.g., in “The man was kissed by the woman”, the man is intended and interpreted to be more prominent than in “The woman kissed the man”). Similarly, transposing the subject and object around a symmetrical action verb leaves logical content undisturbed, but nonetheless conveys information about causal agency: the subject of a symmetrical action predicate (e.g., the man in “The man danced with the woman”) is typically the causal initiator of the described action (Semin & De Poot, 1997; for a general analysis of “the asymmetrical behavior of symmetrical predicates”, see Gleitman, Gleitman, Miller, & Ostrin, 1996). That is, different perceptions (of

relative prominence, causal agency, etc.) lead speakers to choose different sentence forms, and listeners are able to draw corresponding conclusions from the speaker's choice of sentence form. In the above cases, two logically equivalent sentences are information non-equivalent, because information (about relative prominence, causal agency, etc.) "leaks out" from the speaker's choice of sentence form. (For additional examples, see Moxey and Sanford, 2000.)

A skeptic might agree with our conceptualizations of "equivalence" and "invariance", and concede the inadequacy of the standard characterization, but nonetheless maintain that the logically equivalent frames used in actual framing studies in the literature are in fact information equivalent – or at least that any information non-equivalence is too marginal to account for major shifts in preference. In the remainder of this paper, we attempt to satisfy the skeptic by documenting actual instances, of direct relevance to the framing literature, in which logically equivalent frames are demonstrably information non-equivalent. We begin by presenting new evidence for McKenzie and Nelson's (in press) reference point hypothesis, according to which information about relative state is systematically leaked from the kinds of descriptions studied in the attribute framing literature. Furthermore, we show how the reference point hypothesis naturally accounts for the most robust finding in the attribute framing literature – the valence-consistency of shifts in preference. We then propose a generalization of the reference point hypothesis, which makes predictions about how frames leak information, not only about relative state, but also about what is *remarkable* or *essential* about the thing being described. In short, we show that, in many framing experiments, choice-relevant information does in fact leak out from the experimenter's choice among logically equivalent frames. Finally, we distinguish between information leakage as a normative analysis of framing problems and information

leakage as a psychological hypothesis about why some framing effects occur, and consider our evidence from both angles.

How Reference Points Influence Frame Selection

McKenzie and Nelson (in press) argue that reference point information is leaked from speakers' choices among logically equivalent descriptions of proportion, and that listeners absorb this leaked information. Specifically, consider, for $0 \leq p \leq 1$, domains D in which *the proportion of D which is X_1 is p* if and only if *the proportion of D which is X_2 is $1-p$* . For example, in describing people undergoing a medical treatment (D), “ X_1 ” may refer to those who die within five years of undergoing the treatment and “ X_2 ” may refer to those who are still alive five years after undergoing the treatment; in descriptions of ground beef (D), X_1 may be “lean” and X_2 may be “fat”; and, in descriptions of a cup of water (D), X_1 may be “full” and X_2 may be “empty”. Much of the framing literature is concerned with just this variety of framing problem. Indeed, in a recent review, Levin et al. (1998) proposed a taxonomy of the framing literature into attribute framing, risky choice framing, and goal framing: the first of these categories is concerned with framing effects involving logically equivalent descriptions of a single proportion.

McKenzie and Nelson (in press) hypothesized the following regularity in linguistic behavior: (1) In describing a fixed state of proportionate affairs, speakers are more likely to describe the proportion in terms of “ X_1 ” when X_1 has *increased* relative to the reference point proportion (the norm, or what one would have expected) than when X_1 has *decreased* relative to the reference point. (2) Listeners are sensitive to this regularity – that is, listeners are capable of correctly inferring the reference point proportion from the speaker's choice of proportion-frame.

For example, McKenzie and Nelson presented some subjects with the following scenario in a “speaker study”:

Imagine a 4-ounce measuring cup in front of you that is completely filled with water up to the 4-ounce line. You then leave the room briefly and come back to find that the water is now at the 2-ounce line. What is the most natural way to describe the cup now?

Other subjects encountered an otherwise identical scenario in which the cup was originally empty rather than originally full. Subjects could then select either “The cup is 1/2 full” or “The cup is 1/2 empty.” The reference point hypothesis predicts that subjects will be more likely to describe the cup as “1/2 full” when it was previously empty (fullness having increased relative to the reference point) than when it was previously full (fullness having decreased relative to the reference point). Similar pairs of conditions were run for a cup that “is now at the 1-ounce line” and for a cup that “is now at the 3-ounce line,” with similar findings: In all cases ($p=1/4, 1/2, 3/4$), subjects were more likely to describe the cup as “p full” when it was previously empty than when it was previously full.

In the corresponding “listener study,” also reported in McKenzie and Nelson (in press), some subjects were presented with the following scenario:

Imagine that Mary was sitting at her kitchen table with a glass in front of her. She left the room briefly and came back to find that the contents of the glass had changed. When asked to describe the glass now, Mary said, “The glass is 1/2 full.” Given how Mary chose to describe the glass after its contents had changed, please choose the statement below in terms of what you think was most likely true about the glass before its contents changed.

Other subjects encountered the same scenario, except with Mary describing the cup as “1/2 empty” rather than “1/2 full.” Subjects then selected either “The glass was full before its contents changed” or “The glass was empty before its contents changed.” Similar pairs of conditions were run for a 1/4 full-3/4 empty cup and for a 3/4 full-1/4 empty cup. The authors found that, for each current state of the cup, subjects were more likely to infer that the cup was

previously full when it was described as “p empty” than when it was described as “1-p full.” In essence, subjects in the listener study correctly absorbed the information that subjects in the speaker study leaked. McKenzie and Nelson (in press) replicated both the speaker and listener studies in the domain of medical treatments, with subjects describing treatments in terms of mortality or survival rate.

As is discussed in more detail later, McKenzie and Nelson’s (in press) reference point hypothesis provides a natural, and rational, account for the most robust generalization falling out of the attribute framing literature – framing-induced preference shifts are almost always “valence-consistent” (Levin et al., 1989).

However, as the authors themselves noted, one potential shortcoming of the experiments described above is their artificiality. Specifically, participants in those studies may have felt compelled to hypothesize a relationship between the prior state of the cup and its current description. Because the relationship hypothesized by McKenzie and Nelson (in press) was intuitively generated, it is possible that subjects, acting as folk psychologists rather than spontaneous conversationalists, intuited the same relationship. The reference point hypothesis, however, concerns people’s *actual* speaking and listening behavior, not their *beliefs* about actual speaking and listening behavior. To certify the McKenzie and Nelson (in press) experiments as reflecting regularities inherent in actual discourse, Experiments 1-3 recast those experiments in a more naturalistic setting with opaque manipulations. How can we determine whether, in ordinary conversational life, a person spontaneously thinks of “half-empty” cups as previously full? One way is to give her a completely full cup and a completely empty cup, ask her for a “half-empty” cup, and see what she does.

Experiment 1

Method

Participants were 99 UC San Diego (UCSD) undergraduates who received partial course credit for their participation. Four subjects did not provide useable data (three due to misunderstanding of the instructions, one due to experimenter error) and were excluded from the analysis. Data were analyzed for the remaining 95 subjects.

Subjects, tested individually, were seated at a desk in one of two small rooms. At the left edge of the desk, two apparently identical transparent plastic cups stood side-by-side. One was full of water, the other empty. (Order of the cups – whether the full or empty cup was closest to the subject – was varied between the rooms.) Indicating the right edge of the desk, the experimenter said to about half of the subjects in each room:

“Just to get things started, could you pour water from one cup to the other and set a half-full cup at the edge of the desk.”

The remaining subjects were asked for “a half-empty cup.” (Note the use of the indefinite article. Use of the definite article might have implied that the experimenter had a specific cup in mind.) After issuing this request, the experimenter left the room, giving the subject enough time to pour the water and set a cup at the edge of the desk. When the experimenter returned, the subject was given other tasks not involving the cups.

The bottom surface of each cup was imperceptibly marked by a manufacturer’s number. The even-numbered cup was always initially full, the odd-numbered cup always initially empty. Therefore, once the subject had left the room, the experimenter could determine, by reading off the number, whether the initially full or initially empty cup had been furnished.

Results and Discussion

Note that, after pouring, a subject would possess two cups with water up to the halfway point, one of which was initially full, the other initially empty. In line with McKenzie and Nelson's (in press) paper-and-pencil task findings, we predicted that subjects would be more likely to provide the initially full cup when "a half-empty cup" was requested than when "a half-full cup" was requested.

The results are shown by the two columns on the left side of Figure 1. The predictions were borne out: 69% of subjects furnished the initially full cup when "a half-empty cup" was requested, whereas only 46% of subjects furnished the initially full cup when "a half-full" cup was requested ($p=.023$, 2-tailed Fisher's exact test).

These results are not susceptible to the demand characteristics objection outlined above. The dependent variable in this experiment was people's behavior in a conversational environment, and not their beliefs about such behavior. Furthermore, both the experimental manipulation ("half-full" versus "half-empty" requests) and the purpose of the experiment (surveying frame interpretation) were hidden in the between-subjects, "just to get things started" design. Indeed, occasional, informal debriefings exposed a uniform mystification about the purpose of the experiment (with many subjects speculating that we were interested in measurement or speed). Subjects who were queried also indicated that they felt free to furnish either cup.

Extending Experiment 1, Experiments 2 and 3 below employ different proportions, thereby advancing the naturalistic re-examination of the McKenzie and Nelson (in press) paper-and-pencil studies summarized above. They also include written questionnaires rather than

spoken instructions (thus ruling out the possibility of experimenter bias), and systematic checks on the opaqueness of the experimental design.

Experiments 2 and 3

Method

There were 112 participants in Experiment 2, and 178 participants in Experiment 3, drawn from the same population as those in Experiment 1. Five subjects were excluded from Experiment 2 and 14 were excluded from Experiment 3.³

As in Experiment 1, subjects were seated at a desk in one of two small rooms. Transparent cups, one full and one empty, stood side-by-side at the left edge of the desk. (Again, order of the cups was varied between rooms.)

A square, slightly larger than the base of a single cup, was marked on the desk. Subjects were given a one-page instruction sheet, which, for half of the Experiment 2 subjects, read:

In front of you on the table you're sitting at, there should be two cups and a square. To get things started, please pour water from one cup to the other and set a 3/4-empty cup in the square. Please go tell the experimenter when you've finished, and he will tell you what to do next.

The remaining subjects in Experiment 2 were asked for "a 1/4-full cup" instead of "a 3/4-empty cup".

In Experiment 3, the instruction sheet, otherwise identical to that used in Experiment 2, requested either "a 1/4-empty cup" or "a 3/4-full cup."

In both cases, after completing a series of seemingly unrelated tasks (which, for some subjects, included Experiment 5 below), subjects were given follow-up questionnaires, asking them (in Experiment 2) what they had thought the purpose of the water-pouring experiment was while participating in it, or (in Experiment 3) whether they had realized that there were two ways

of pouring the water to comply with the instructions, and, if so, what they thought about at the time in deciding how to pour.

Results and Discussion

As in Experiment 1, the reference point hypothesis predicts that subjects will be more likely to furnish the initially full cup when “a p-empty cup” is requested than when “a (1-p)-full cup” is requested ($p = 3/4$ in Experiment 2, $1/4$ in Experiment 3).

The middle and rightmost pairs of columns in Figure 1 depict the results of Experiments 2 and 3, respectively. In Experiment 2, 29% of subjects selected the initially full cup when “a $3/4$ -empty cup” was requested, whereas only 7% of subjects selected the initially full cup when “a $1/4$ -full cup” was requested ($p = .005$, 2-tailed Fisher’s exact test). In Experiment 3, the results were weaker (and not significant) but once again pointed in the predicted direction: 70% of subjects furnished the initially full cup when “a $1/4$ -empty cup” was requested, whereas only 60% of subjects furnished the initially full cup when “a $3/4$ -full cup” was requested ($\chi^2 [1, N=164] = 1.9, p = .17$).⁴

A glance at Figure 1 reveals a striking difference between Experiments 2 and 3. In Experiment 2, a majority of subjects furnished the initially empty cup, while, in Experiment 3, most subjects furnished the initially full cup. This discrepancy arises from a subtle but important property of the task structure in Experiments 2 and 3. In these experiments, subjects had to *choose among two ways of pouring* (a little bit or a lot out of the initially full cup), while, after pouring, only one cup was appropriate for selection. (In this respect, they differ from Experiment 1, in which subjects could only pour in one way, and had to choose between two equivalent cups.) Because, in Experiments 2 and 3, most subjects would presumably find it easier to pour a little rather than a lot from the initially full cup, one would predict (and we

found) a marked bias in favor of that pouring method. In Experiment 2, pouring a little entails selection of the initially empty cup, which, after pouring, is 1/4-full. In Experiment 3, pouring a little entails selection of the initially full cup, which, after pouring, is 1/4-empty.

The follow-up question data in Experiments 2 and 3 confirm the opaqueness of the design. There was no indication that subjects felt compelled to intuit the reference point regularity. A closer look at the Experiment 3 responses sheds some light on underlying cognitive processes. After reading that, “[t]o comply with the instructions you were given in that experiment, you could have either poured 1/4 of the water out of the full cup and placed the initially full cup in the square or poured 3/4 of the water out of the full cup and placed the initially empty cup in the square,” subjects were asked: “*At the time* you participated in the experiment in the small room, did you realize that you could have poured the water in either of the two ways described above?” The “framing effect” in Experiment 3 stems from subjects who reported *not* having considered both pouring methods. Among subjects who reported having done so, there was no significant difference between the proportions selecting the initially full cup in the “3/4 full” and “1/4 empty” conditions (77% and 74%, respectively). Irrespective of condition, most subjects in Experiment 3 chose the more efficient pouring method when both methods were contemplated. However, among subjects who reported *not* having considered both methods, 59% (13 of 22) furnished the initially full cup when a “1/4-empty” cup was requested, while only 16% (4 of 25) furnished the initially full cup when a “3/4-full” cup was requested ($p = .002$, 2-tailed Fisher’s exact test). Apparently, subjects who automatically “saw” a single pouring method exhibited the reference point regularity, while those who deliberated over two possibilities were guided by deliberate (e.g., efficiency) considerations. (This surmise may not generalize to Experiment 1, since, after pouring, subjects in that experiment possessed two

obviously suitable cups, and it is not clear what, if any, efficiency motives would apply.) Since subjects who only considered one pouring method could not have felt compelled to intuit a relationship between pouring method and the prior state of the cup, demand characteristics could not have driven the results of Experiment 3.

In summary, in Experiments 1-3, subjects encountered one of two logically equivalent requests for a cup. Two methods of compliance differed with respect to one background condition – the prior state of the furnished cup – not explicitly specified in either frame. The reference point hypothesis states that the experimenter’s choice of frame conveys information about this background condition. Subjects reacted accordingly, providing the initially empty cup more often when a “p-full” cup was requested than when a “(1-p)-empty” cup was requested.

Experiment 4

The preceding experiments were all concerned with *frame interpretation*: the subject was presented with a description and had to act accordingly. The remaining experiments in this paper look at *frame selection*. The simplest approach to studying frame selection involves presenting subjects with a pair of prefabricated frames, and explicitly instructing them to select one (Blount and Larrick, 2000; McKenzie and Nelson, in press). However, concerns about transparency and artificiality argue against sole reliance on this methodology. First, as noted above, frame selection tasks which are too transparent may merely measure subjects’ *beliefs* about framing behavior. Second, such artificial tasks may be too far removed from normal conversational environments, where productions are created rather than chosen. Therefore, the remaining experiments employ a paradigm of *embedded creativity*: subjects have to construct an utterance, rather than merely choose from a set of prefabricated utterances; however, this act of construction is embedded in a highly structured task environment which (a) is in effect as

restrictive as a prefabricated choice set, and (b) presumably obscures the true purpose of the experiment. Experiment 4 employs this paradigm to provide another test of the reference point hypothesis, in a new setting: describing the outcome of a sequence of independent random trials.

Imagine repeatedly rolling a die, some of whose sides are black and some white. If most of the sides on the die are black, you would expect the die to land black more than half of the time. If most of the sides on the die are white, you would expect the die to land black less than half of the time. According to the reference point hypothesis, then, you should be more likely to describe a sequence of rolls in which black comes up exactly half of the time as “half black” when the die is mostly white than when it is mostly black.

Method

Participants were 243 UCSD students, who took part immediately after having participated in Experiment 1 or in another similar water-pouring experiment. Thirteen subjects completed both parts of the questionnaire incorrectly, thus providing no useable data. Of the remaining 230 subjects, data from 3 subjects in the die-rolling component and from 5 subjects in the coin-tossing component (described below) was unuseable.

Subjects remained in the small room in which they had just completed a water-pouring task, and were given a shoebox containing a penny and a six-sided die, and a questionnaire. The first page of the questionnaire contained instructions, which the experimenter usually reiterated verbally, describing the two tasks the subject was about to complete.

The first task involved one of four black-and-white colored dice. Two of the dice were painted black on five sides and painted white on one side (i.e., black was the majority color on the die). Two of the dice were white on five sides and black on one side (i.e., black was the minority color on the die). The dice were “loaded”, although subjects were not informed of this.⁵

For each coloring of the die, one die was loaded to usually fall on the minority-color side, while the other die was loaded to usually fall on a majority-color side (specifically, on one of the four majority-color sides adjacent to the minority-color side). Each subject saw and rolled only one of the dice.

Subjects filled out a form which read as follows:

Please roll the die 6 times. Record the outcome by completing the sentence below. You may use the bottom half of this page as scratch paper if you wish.

	<u>circle one</u>	<u>circle one</u>	
		0	
		1	
The die came up	white	2	out of 6 times.
	black	3	
		4	
		5	
		6	

Color order (“white” on top, “black” on top) and number order (ascending, descending) were varied orthogonally with respect to one another and the type of die used. Note that, for a fixed outcome of n times black/ $6-n$ times white, the subject, in completing the questionnaire, had to effectively choose between two logically equivalent descriptions of the outcome: “The die came up black n out of 6 times” or “The die came up white $6-n$ out of 6 times.” Because of the die weighting, we could therefore examine subjects’ frame selection in describing sequences in which the minority-color side came up rarely as well as sequences in which the minority-color side came up often.

Assuming that the reference point proportion for the minority color on the die is $1/6$ and that the reference point proportion for the majority color is $5/6$, the reference point hypothesis

makes a non-obvious prediction about how subjects will frame their descriptions. Specifically, for a fixed outcome of n times black/ $6-n$ times white, where $1 \leq n \leq 5$, subjects should be more likely to use the “ n times black” description when black is the minority color (in which case the actual proportion for black is higher than the reference point proportion for black) than when black is the majority color (in which case the actual proportion for black is lower than the reference point proportion for black).

The next part of the experiment required subjects to flip a penny seven times. Subjects described the sequence by filling out a form much like the one above, in terms of either how many heads or how many tails came up in 7 flips. Again, the subject had to effectively choose between two logically equivalent descriptions of the sequence: “The coin came up heads n out of 7 times” or “The coin came up tails $7-n$ out of 7 times.”

As presented above, the reference point hypothesis does not, strictly speaking, make predictions about the coin-flipping component of the experiment, because the reference point is fixed at .5 in all cases. However, assuming that there is a basic symmetry between “heads” and “tails” descriptions (i.e., there is never a reference-point-independent bias in favor of one kind of description or the other), the reference point hypothesis leads us to expect that subjects will tend to describe outcome sequences in terms of the majority event (whose frequency is greater than the .5 reference point frequency) rather than the minority event (whose frequency is less than the reference point frequency). That is, all else being equal, a tendency to describe things in terms of what has increased relative to the reference point should, when the reference point is parity, favor majority descriptions.

Results and discussion

We begin with the second, coin-tossing component of the experiment. As was predicted, in describing strings of coin tosses, for each possible outcome, subjects were more likely to describe outcomes in terms of the face coming up a majority of times than in terms of the face coming up a minority of times. Pooling all of the data, 76% of subjects described their sequence in terms of the majority outcome ($p < .001$, binomial test).

This finding could be explained by a general, reference-point-independent tendency to cast descriptions of proportion in terms of the majority constituent (McKenzie, Ferreira, Mikkelsen, McDermott, & Skrable, 2001). However, such generic majority preference could not explain the predicted results of the die-rolling component of the experiment.

The die-rolling results are displayed in Figure 2. As predicted, for each black proportion between $1/6$ and $5/6$, subjects were more likely to describe the outcome in “black” terms when black was the minority color on the die (and therefore the black proportion was above reference point) than when black was the majority color on the die (and therefore the black proportion was below reference point). For example, consider those sequences in which black and white each came up three times out of six (3 on the x-axis in Figure 2). When black was the majority color on the die, the black proportion was below reference point (because $3/6 < 5/6$), and only 36% of subjects described the sequence by saying, “The die came up black 3 out of 6 times.” However, when black was the minority color on the die, the black proportion was above reference point (because $3/6 > 1/6$), and 83% of subjects described the sequence in terms of black outcomes.

While, for each $1 \leq n \leq 5$, the “n times black” description was chosen more often when black was the minority color than when black was the majority color, in only two cases – $n = 3$ and 4 – was the comparison significant ($p < .05$, 2-tailed Fisher’s exact tests), presumably owing

to small N's in the remaining cases. Aggregating the data from all heterogeneous sequences, 60% of subjects used “black” descriptions when black was the minority color on the die, while only 31% of subjects used “black” descriptions when black was the majority color on the die ($\chi^2 [1, N=145] = 12.3, p < .001$). These results provide additional support for the reference point hypothesis, again with opaque manipulations. In choosing between logically equivalent descriptions of a sequence of independent random trials, subjects tend to couch descriptions in terms of what has increased relative to the reference point. Therefore, subjects' frame selection leaks reference point information, and the frames, while logically equivalent, are not information equivalent.

The Reference Point Hypothesis and the Valence-Consistent Shift

Experiments 1-4 above provide strong new experimental support for McKenzie and Nelson's (in press) reference point hypothesis, according to which reference point information is leaked by speakers and absorbed by listeners in descriptions of frequency, proportion, and probability – the basic ingredients of attribute framing experiments. However, to establish the information non-equivalence of a pair of frames, more is required than demonstrating that information is leaked in frame selection. What is needed is a demonstration that *choice-relevant* information is leaked. The following questions thus arise: Is reference point information choice-relevant in the typical attribute framing experiment? And, if so, is observed choice behavior consistent with the rational use of leaked reference point information?

As Levin et al. (1998) observe, the most ubiquitous phenomenon in attribute framing is the “valence-consistent shift.” In the above terminology, if the statements *X1 has proportion p* and *X2 has proportion 1-p* are logically equivalent, and if X1 has positive valence (e.g.,

“survival”, “success”) and X2 has negative valence (e.g., “mortality”, “failure”), then saying “X1 has proportion p ” leads to more favorable evaluations and more sympathetic choices than saying “X2 has proportion $1-p$ ”. For example, Levin and Gaeth (1988) found that beef described as “75% lean” was more favorably evaluated than beef described as “25% fat.” Evaluations and choices shift in the direction of increasing valence.

Levin et al. (1998), extending previous work (Levin, 1987; Levin & Gaeth, 1988), advanced an associationist explanation for the valence-consistent shift: positively valenced descriptions evoke positive associations, which in turn spawn more positive evaluations. Note that such an associationist account makes no predictions about the reference point phenomena presented above, which deal with valence-neutral descriptions and non-evaluative behaviors.

However, while the associationist explanation does not account for the reference point hypothesis predictions verified above, the reference point hypothesis straightforwardly explains the ubiquitous valence-consistent shift. Specifically, the reference point hypothesis maintains that describing a proportion in terms of “X1” signals to listeners that the proportion of X1 has increased relative the reference point – e.g., that X1 is relatively abundant. Since it is generally good to have more of a good thing, and bad to have more of a bad thing, the reference point hypothesis predicts that proportions couched in terms of good things will lead to more favorable evaluations than proportions couched in terms of bad things (and, furthermore, the hypothesis entails that such divergence does not violate any normative principle of description invariance). That is, the reference point hypothesis indeed predicts that valenced frames will (and sometimes *should*) produce valence-consistent shifts.

However, as we argue below, this is not the whole story. In fact, it is possible to generalize the reference point hypothesis beyond descriptions of proportion and beyond specific

inferences about relative state. When this generalization is carried through, the explanatory scope of the information leakage framework is widened, the hypothesized reference point regularity is itself explained as a special case of a more general linguistic phenomenon, and the reference point explanation for the valence-consistent shift is broadened and strengthened.

The Economy of Positive Description: A Generalization of the Reference Point Hypothesis

The reference point hypothesis states that, in descriptions of proportion, things which are *relatively* X1 tend to be described in terms of “X1”. McKenzie and Nelson (in press) noted that this regularity seems consistent with more general properties of (English) discourse: “For example, a person whose height has increased is usually referred to as taller, not less short, whereas a person whose height has decreased (i.e., ‘shortness’ is increasing) is usually referred to as shorter, not less tall. Note further that there is no morpheme in English that is analogous to the suffix -er to indicate that a dimension has decreased, which also seems to imply that increasing labels or poles have special status.” Note that these comments also cover the suffix -est, and the adverb “relatively” itself: there is no comparable all-purpose “less than usual” adverb.

We believe that all of these phenomena are special instances of a more general linguistic economy, in which *objects are described in terms of the properties that they are noteworthy in possessing*, and not in terms of the properties that they are noteworthy in lacking. The simplest reflection of this economy is a property of language so fundamental as to almost escape notice as a property of language: Namely, attaching an adjective to a noun indicates that the noun’s referent is appropriately described by the adjective. Adjectives added to nouns denote properties possessed, not properties lacked. Thus we use “large dog” to refer to a dog which possesses the

property of largeness. This is not necessary: it is perfectly possible to construct a language in which attaching an adjective to a noun indicates that the noun's referent is appropriately described by the adjective's negation, in which case "large dog" would refer to a dog which lacks the property of largeness.⁶ Perfectly possible, without any sacrifice in expressive capacity, but perfectly cumbersome and inelegant, too.

This simple economy may likewise explain why there is a *more-than* suffix ("-er"), but not a *less-than* suffix; why there is a *most* suffix ("-est"), but not a *least* suffix; and why there is a *more-than-usual* adverb ("relatively"), but not a *less-than-usual* adverb. According to this hypothesis, we speak of "Joe being shorter than Stan" (and not of "Joe being less tall than Stan") because, compared with Stan, Joe is notable for *possessing* the property of shortness and for *lacking* the property of tallness. Since we describe things in terms of properties they are notable in possessing rather than in terms of properties they are notable in lacking, this leads us, when drawing comparisons to Stan, to speak of Joe in terms of his shortness rather than his tallness. More generally, in comparing an object A with an object B, we tend to describe A in terms of properties it possesses more than B rather than in terms of properties it lacks more than B. A *more-than* suffix, by this account, exists because there are plenty of occasions for its use; a *less-than* suffix does not exist because there would be relatively few occasions for its use. Similar explanations cover "-est" and "relatively".

The basic linguistic economy we are describing has the functionally convenient property of *keeping statements which are inferentially close linguistically close*. Pick an adjective "X1", and consider linguistically similar (i.e., "close") expressions such as "this thing is X1," "this thing is relatively X1," "this thing is X1-er than that thing," and "of all things, this is X1-est." All of these statements are *inferentially close* to one another, in the sense that, under commonly

occurring background conditions, each statement can imply or be implied by the others. This correspondence between linguistic distance and inferential distance is laid out in Figure 3, which shows how, when “X1” is “short”, a statement will commonly imply a linguistically similar statement but will rarely imply a linguistically dissimilar statement. For example, saying “Joe is short” is often tantamount to saying “Joe is relatively short” (but saying “Joe is short” is *never* tantamount to saying “Joe is relatively tall”). Similarly, *Joe is shorter than Stan* can often imply or be implied by *Joe is short*, depending upon one’s background knowledge about Stan’s height: If one knows that Stan is short, then *Joe is shorter than Stan* implies *Joe is short*; if one knows that Stan is tall, then *Joe is short* implies *Joe is shorter than Stan*. However, knowing how tall Stan is never justifies inferring *Joe is tall* from *Joe is shorter than Stan*, or inferring *Joe is shorter than Stan* from *Joe is tall*. More generally, an object being *notable in possessing* an attribute will sometimes imply and sometimes be implied by the object *categorically* possessing that attribute, but, in everyday discourse, will typically neither imply nor be implied by the object *categorically lacking* that attribute. In this sense, by virtue of the simple economy of language described above, inferentially related statements are linguistically similar. Note that, without the linguistic economy, this correspondence between linguistic and inferential closeness would crumble. For example, if, instead of the greater-than suffix “-er”, there was a less-than suffix (say, “-eb”), then the statements “Joe is short” and “Joe is shorteb than Stan” would be linguistically similar but inferentially distant.

An object may be notable in possessing a property simply because it possesses the property to a larger degree than comparable objects. Thus, the simple economy of describing things in terms of properties which they are notable in possessing has the following straightforward application: We tend to describe *relatively* full things in terms of how full they

are, and we tend to describe *relatively* fatty things in terms of how fatty they are. That is, the reference point hypothesis, in this view, is just a special case of this more general economy. And it is functional in much the way the more general economy is functional. For example, the reference point regularity keeps the linguistically close descriptions “fatty” and “25% fat” inferentially close, and keeps the linguistically distant descriptions “fatty” and “75% lean” inferentially distant. 25% fat-75% lean beef is more likely to be described in terms of its *fat* content when *fattiness* is implied by the description than when *leanness* is implied by the description. This functionality is illustrated in Figure 4.⁷

However, the linguistic economy hypothesis does more than just illuminate the reference point regularity’s *raison d’etre*. It suggests that the choice of proportion-frame will generally support inferences about more than just reference point. In general, an object may be notable in possessing a constituent or property X1 for one of at least three reasons. First, the object’s being relatively X1 may make it notably X1 (this is the reference point hypothesis). For example, we may be prone to speak of the loss rate of a football team with unusually many losses on its record. Second, the remarkableness of X1 in the object may make the object notably X1. For example, a team with an average record, but with remarkably abysmal losses in high-stakes games, may be more likely than the average team to be described in terms of its loss rate. Finally, X1 being a notable property in general may make the object (and all other objects) notable for the degree to which X1 is possessed. For example, a man who gets paid a handsome sum every time any football team loses may come to speak habitually about loss rates. Putting the proposed economy in different terms, what stands out in one’s thoughts stands out in one’s words. A property of an object may stand out (1) relative to a reference class, (2) by virtue of the

way in which it is manifested in the object, or (3) as a property of general significance to the speaker.

The reference point hypothesis carries the specific implication that we tend to describe *relatively* positive things in terms of how positive they are. This implication was of special importance as it provided an account for the valence-consistency of preference shifts in attribute framing experiments. The generalization of the reference point hypothesis carries a more general implication, which in turn provides a more general account for valence-consistent shifts. The more general implication is this: We tend to describe not just *relatively* positive things, but, more generally, *remarkably* or *essentially* positive things in terms of how positive they are. Put simply, we describe positive things in positive terms. Hence we should infer positive things from positive terms.

Experiment 5

To illustrate concretely how the general framework presented here accounts for actual findings in the attribute framing literature, consider the study by Duchon, Dunegan, and Barton (1989), in which subjects were told to imagine that they were research-and-development supervisors at a high-tech firm. After reading a brief description of a particular R&D team, subjects had to decide whether to raise the team's budget. As part of the description, subjects were either told that 30 of the team's last 50 projects were successful or that 20 were unsuccessful.⁸ Duchon et al. (1989) found a typical valence-consistent shift: Subjects who read of the team's success rate were more generous in their funding decisions than subjects who read of the team's failure rate.

Our remarks about linguistic economy suggest that people tend to describe generally *successful* teams in terms of their *success* rates. More precisely, for a fixed success rate, we

predict that people will be more likely to describe a successful team than a failing team in terms of its successes. We tested this prediction by presenting subjects with a caricature description of either a breathtakingly good R&D team or a catastrophically bad R&D team, and then asking them to describe the team's record to a supervisor.

Method

Subjects were 161 UCSD students, tested in groups of up to five. Subjects were given a questionnaire in an experimental session in which they had previously completed a number of tasks, including in many cases Experiment 2 or 3. Data from three subjects who completed the questionnaire inappropriately was excluded from the analyses.

Half of the subjects in the “good team” condition were presented with the following passage:

Please imagine a research-and-development project team at an international high-tech firm. This team consists of 18 people, all of whom have Ph.D.'s in Engineering. 10 of them received their Ph.D.'s at Harvard, 5 of them received their Ph.D.'s at Princeton, and the remaining 3 received their Ph.D.'s at Stanford. Three of the team members have received Nobel Prizes in chemistry and medicine for work related to their current company projects. The team generally undertakes bold and challenging problems – thus most of the team's failures have been valiant and groundbreaking attempts at seemingly unsolvable problems, while the team's successes have been truly extraordinary, sometimes revolutionary.

Of the last 50 projects undertaken by the team, 20 have been failures and 30 have been successes. The team has won the Best R&D Team Award from the International Conference of High-Tech Businesses 8 years in a row.

(The remaining half of subjects in this condition were presented with the same passage, except that *20 failures/30 successes* was replaced with *25 failures/25 successes*.)

Subjects in the “bad team” condition were presented with this passage:

Please imagine a research-and-development project team at an international high-tech firm. This team consists of 18 people, only 2 of whom have undergraduate degrees (one from a community college which is no longer in existence). One of the team members is currently working, with

or “Of the last 50 projects . . . , 50-n were failures” (where, depending upon the condition, $n = 25$ or 30).⁹ We predicted that the probability of describing the team in terms of its “failures” proportion would be higher in the bad team condition than in the good team condition – that is, $p(\text{“failure”}|\text{bad team}) > p(\text{“failure”}|\text{good team})$.

Results and Discussion

The experimental predictions were borne out: When the team’s record was 20 failures/30 successes, $p(\text{“failure”}|\text{bad team}) = 24\% > 3\% = p(\text{“failure”}|\text{good team})$ ($p = .007$, 2-tailed Fisher’s exact test). When the record was 25 failures/25 successes, $p(\text{“failure”}|\text{bad team}) = 34\% > 5\% = p(\text{“failure”}|\text{good team})$ ($p = .002$, 2-tailed Fisher’s exact test). That is, in choosing among logically equivalent descriptions of the team, subjects were significantly more likely to use bad terms to describe the bad team than to describe the good team.

Note that, whatever the base rates for good and bad teams, this implies that $p(\text{bad team}|\text{“failure”}) > p(\text{bad team}|\text{“success”})$. For example, with equal base rates, when the team’s record is 20 failures/30 successes, in Experiment 5 $p(\text{bad team}|\text{“failure”}) = 89\%$ whereas $p(\text{bad team}|\text{“success”}) = 44\%$. Therefore, in evaluating a message about team performance (the task in Duchon et al., 1989), a listener may be justified in inferring that a team described in terms of its “failure” rate is less promising than a team described in terms of its “success” rate. This finding thus directly questions the normative interpretation Duchon et al. (1989) applied to their results, and, more generally, questions the interpretation applied to the prototypical valence-consistent shift.

Observe that many different sorts of inference can flow, under different conditions, from a positive description – the hypothesized linguistic economy only constrains these inferences to be themselves positive. A speaker’s choice of frame can convey information concerning an

opinionated speaker's *attitude* towards the thing described (e.g., can convey a kind of implicit recommendation) but can also convey information concerning a neutral speaker's *beliefs* about the thing described. In the latter case, these beliefs can concern how the thing described compares with expectation, or they can concern its perceived essence. Typically, these various kinds of information will converge at a higher level of generality. Thus, in Experiment 5, speakers could have chosen the success rate description for the good team because (a) they inferred that the team's success rate must have been above average (and hence behaved in accord with the reference point regularity), (b) the team's "extraordinary, sometimes revolutionary" successes stood out as noteworthy, or (c) the subject simply thought this was a generally, essentially *successful team*. Without additional information, a listener cannot know which of these specific background beliefs conditioned the speaker's choice of frame. However, they are all special cases of the general background belief that the team is notable for its successes, and thus the listener can, without further ado, infer a higher probability of this general background condition holding. Our evidence (McKenzie and Nelson's (in press) "listener studies" and Experiments 1-3 above) does suggest that, in structured tasks, listeners are capable of drawing refined task-specific inferences from speakers' frame selection. However, in the generic conversational case, without task-specific information structuring relevant inferences, it is generally rational, in light of the proposed linguistic economy, to form generally more positive impressions from descriptions cast in generally positive terms.

General Discussion

To recapitulate, we first argued that "framing effect" and "description invariance" are incompletely conceptualized, and completed the conceptualization with an explicit

characterization of *information equivalence*: A pair of frames is information equivalent if no choice-relevant inferences can be drawn from the speaker's choice among them. We presented new evidence for McKenzie and Nelson's (in press) reference point hypothesis, which posits a tendency to cast descriptions in terms of what has increased relative to a relevant reference point. This new evidence overcomes methodological limitations of McKenzie and Nelson's (in press) work by measuring people's behavior (rather than their beliefs about behavior) in more naturalistic conversational settings, keeping manipulations opaque, and (in Experiments 4-5) employing a frame-selection paradigm of embedded creativity. We then generalized the reference point hypothesis to a basic claim about linguistic economy: people tend to describe things in terms of properties which they are notable in possessing rather than in terms of properties which they are notable in lacking. This linguistic economy entails that people tend to describe an object in terms of "X1" when it is *relatively* X1 (the reference point hypothesis), and, more generally, when it is *notably* X1 or *essentially* X1. Therefore, when X1 carries positive valence and X2 carries negative valence, listeners can infer from a speaker's describing an object in terms of "X1" that the object is more likely to be relatively, notably, essentially positive than if the speaker had described the object in terms of "X2". That is, our hypothesis not only entails that, throughout the attribute framing literature, choice-relevant information is leaked from the experimenter's choice of frame, but it also accounts for that literature's most robust finding – the valence-consistency of shifts in preference. In a nutshell, when asked to furnish a half-*full* cup, budget for a team with specified *success* rate, or imagine a treatment's *survival* rate, people look to the cup which is relatively full, appraise a team notable for its successes, and imagine the promise of a cure.

The information leakage framework can support two kinds of analysis of a framing finding. A normative analysis asks whether the observed behavior is, or can naturally be, justified. A psychological analysis asks about the mechanisms underlying the observed behavior. When people do the right things for the right reasons, the appropriate psychological analysis dovetails with the appropriate normative analysis. When, as sometimes happens, people do defensible things for indefensible reasons, the normative analysis has little psychological value. To be sure, matters are rarely so black-and-white: the psychological analysis may form a more or less sophisticated approximation to the normative analysis. In the framing literature, normative analysis has traditionally played a more important role than psychological analysis. As Kahneman (2000) noted, “Framing effects are less significant for their contribution to psychology than for their importance in the real world....and for the challenge they raise to the foundations of a rational model of decision making.” However, our normative analysis – attribute framing effects are naturally justified by sound choice-relevant inferences from the speaker’s choice of frame – suggests a psychological analysis – subjects are, at some level, actually drawing such inferences. It is worth considering each analysis in isolation.

In the present case, the normative analysis boils down to the following question: *Is the information leaked?* That is, do the frames in actual framing experiments leak enough information to plausibly justify observed preference shifts? We think that, at least with regard to much of the attribute framing literature, our findings resolve this question in the affirmative. There is no reason to expect that a population of rational actors, drawing sound inferences from observed acts of frame selection, would behave any differently from the populations of undergraduates studied in typical attribute framing experiments. Put differently, attribute

framing, at least, does not raise a “challenge....to the foundations of a rational model of decision making.”

The psychological analysis boils down to the companion question: *Is the leaked information absorbed, and, if so, how?* Experiments 1-3 point towards an affirmative answer to the absorption question, suggesting that subjects’ behavior in attribute framing experiments is driven by a general sensitivity to subtle linguistic cues. However, whether such sensitivity is appropriately conceived as *inferential* in nature remains an open, probably ill-posed question. Whatever inferences are involved are surely *implicit* – i.e., drawn below conscious awareness. Otherwise, the non-equivalence of attribute frames would have been self-evident prior to our analysis, and no disturbing conclusions about human rationality would have been drawn from attribute framing effects. Whether such implicit inferences, if they exist, can be rationally combined with explicit knowledge is another open question. If subjects *know* that a computer is randomly generating frames (cf. Schwarz, Strack, Hilton, & Naderer, 1991), will they still be sensitive to the subtle cues those frames typically convey? There is, perhaps, an analogy with sensitivity to subtle shifts in facial expression. If Bob knows that the almost imperceptible upward curls at the corners of Sue’s mouth are due to a congenital nervous disorder, does this knowledge suppress Bob’s impression, otherwise justified, that Sue is happy? In short, rational-seeming behavior arises from a generally functional sensitivity to subtle linguistic cues; however, the inferential malleability of this sensitivity remains undisclosed.

It is important to note that the general information leakage framework presented here is not restricted to the particular kinds of information leakage documented here. Other instances are easily recruited from our rich store of linguistic intuition. Consider, for example, the following between-subjects thought experiment:

Please imagine that you have been diagnosed with a very serious illness. This illness has a standard treatment, which leads to fatalities in a significant minority of cases. However, there is also a new treatment.

The hypothetical subject then encounters one of the following four new treatment descriptions:

- (1a) The new treatment has strong negative side effects *but* leads to 80% survival/20% mortality.
- (1b) The new treatment has strong negative side effects *and* leads to 80% survival/20% mortality.
- (2a) The new treatment has no negative side effects *but* leads to 80% survival/20% mortality.
- (2b) The new treatment has no negative side effects *and* leads to 80% survival/20% mortality.

The hypothetical subject is asked which treatment she would choose – the standard treatment or the new treatment? Presumably (1a) and (1b) would meet typical standards of equivalence (e.g., logical equivalence), if those standards are applied mechanically, because the side-effects quote and the survival rate estimate are fixed across frames; likewise for (2a) and (2b). However, we strongly suspect that (1a) will be viewed more favorably than (1b), and that (2b) will be better received than (2a). And justifiably so: the opening passage greatly underspecifies the scenario – how serious is the “serious illness,” and, more to the point, what is “a significant minority of cases”? The rhetorical choices of “but” (which suggests that the second property has valence opposite that of the first property) and “and” (which carries no such suggestion) partially resolve this ambiguity, but they resolve it differently. Since “strong negative side effects” has negative valence, “but” in (1) suggests that the quoted survival rate has positive valence (e.g., is an improvement over the standard treatment), and therefore favors (1a) over (1b). However, since “no negative side effects” has positive valence, “but” in (2) suggests that the quoted survival rate has negative valence, and therefore favors (2b) over (2a). Indeed, we would not be surprised to find rational actors favoring (1a) to (2a) in a between-subjects reification of this thought experiment.

On the other hand, while information leakage explanations are not confined to the reference point hypothesis and the proposed linguistic economy, they do not cover the framing literature exhaustively. For example, Kahneman and Tversky (1979) asked some subjects, told to imagine having been given \$1000, to choose between a 50% chance of gaining \$1000 and a sure gain of \$500. A large majority of subjects preferred the sure gain. Other subjects were told to imagine having been given \$2000, and asked to choose between a 50% chance of losing \$1000 and a sure loss of \$500. A large majority of subjects preferred the gamble. This despite the fact that, in both cases, the gamble leads, with equal probability, to a net gain of \$1000 or \$2000, while, in both cases, the sure thing ensures a net \$1500 gain. Though the two frames are not logically equivalent, we believe that they are, under usual conceptions of choice-relevance, information equivalent. Hence both the normative and psychological explanations of this phenomenon will have to be found elsewhere.¹⁰

The typical laboratory setting has two properties which, we speculate, tend to exaggerate the power of information leakage in experimental findings. (1) Most experiments in judgment and decision making place the subject within an informationally impoverished environment. The less information there is, the greater the significance of new information generally, and hence of information leakage specifically. (2) In many experiments in judgment and decision making, subjects have to make a rather extraordinary sort of inference – one might call them *creative inferences*. In particular, subjects are presented with the skeleton of a scenario and their hypothetical reactions are essayed. However, because the skeleton vastly underdetermines the scenario, and hence the essayed reaction, subjects have to flesh out the skeleton with details in order to make the problem intelligible.¹¹ In short, the task is one of *construction* as much as of true inference, with quite often a lot to construct. Because of (1), subtle informational cues in

phrasing will play a major role in the inferences the subject must draw, and, because of (2), the subject must draw many and important inferences. Therefore, it is not surprising that a little information leakage goes a long way in typical experiments in judgment and decision making.

Though our analysis questions the normative implications traditionally drawn from attribute framing effects, other implications remain undisturbed. In our view, framing effects are best understood, not as paradoxes of rationality, but as paradoxes of measurement. That is, framing effects generally raise questions about whether elicitation of preferences really measures deep underlying preferences (cf. Payne, Bettman, & Johnson, 1992; Slovic, 1995). It is important to emphasize that our account does not deny that attribute framing effects have troubling implications for preference measurement. Therefore, the implications of attribute framing for the meaningfulness of public opinion surveys, contingent valuation measures, and, for that matter, elicited preferences in psychology experiments are untouched by the present development. However, our analysis and the traditional analysis locate the measurement problem in different places. Whereas framing effects *with information equivalence* raise questions about whether preferences can be said to exist at all (that is, there's nothing to measure), framing effects *without information equivalence* raise the question of whether the analysis of preferences is being undertaken at sufficiently high resolution (that is, the measurement apparatus is not sensitive enough to detect subtly leaked information that is affecting the object of measurement; Schwarz, 1999). In either case, we may safely conclude that different frames are not eliciting dependable measures of a single thing, either because, in the case of information equivalence, preferences only exist *at lower resolution than the analysis* (nothing is being measured), or because, in the case of information non-equivalence, preferences only exist *at higher resolution than the analysis* (more than one thing is being measured). In

short, it is the *theoretical* (i.e., relating to the existence and rationality of preferences) and not the *practical* (i.e., relating to the reliability of preference measurement) implications of attribute framing effects that we are calling into question.

Demonstrating the information equivalence of a pair of equivalent frames will generally be much harder than demonstrating the information non-equivalence of a pair of non-equivalent frames. The former requires ruling out all possible choice-relevant inferences, while the latter requires ruling in only one. That having been said, there are times (e.g., the Kahneman and Tversky (1979) gamble described above) when it is reasonable to view a pair of frames as presumptively information equivalent. More often, however, absent a demonstration of information non-equivalence, information equivalence will at best be tenable as a provisional default hypothesis. Conversation is a minefield of subtle contextual cues in which the framing researcher is advised to tread carefully. Everyday turns of phrase are, we suspect, typically soaked through with leaked information, perhaps in quite unexpected ways.

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APPENDIX

Experiment 5 Frame Selection Task

Please imagine that you are working in the Budget Office of the high-tech firm described on the previous page. The Budget Office needs to decide which of its R&D teams deserve increased funding and which deserve reduced funding in the next fiscal year. Accordingly, your supervisor in the Budget Office has asked you to provide some basic information about the R&D team described on the previous page, which he will consider in making funding decisions. The following are your supervisor's questions. Please provide the answers by completing the sentences in the way that seems most appropriate.

Question 1: "How educationally well-qualified are the team members?"

Your answer: The team consists of _____ researchers, of whom _____ have _____
(write #) (write #) undergraduate degrees
Ph.D.'s
(circle one)

Question 2: "What is this team's track record?"

Your answer: Of the last 50 projects undertaken by the team, _____ were _____
(write #) successes
failures
(circle one)

Question 3: "Has this team received any special commendations from the research community?"

Your answer: This team has _____ been commended by the research community for its contributions.
never
rarely
sometimes
often
(circle one)

Note: Order in Question 2 ("successes" or "failures" on top) was varied orthogonally with respect to the other manipulations in Experiment 5.

Footnotes

1. At least two other substantive explications of equivalence have been put forward in the literature, but neither is unproblematic. Tversky and Kahneman's (1986) paper appeals to both. (1) Omitting problematic reference to equivalent descriptions, they refer to different descriptions of the *same problem* leading to different decisions. However, taken literally, this characterization is inadequate. For example, if you have to choose whether to let the axe-murdering priest who wants to use your telephone into your house, it ought to make a difference to you whether you are asked whether you would be willing "to let this priest into your house to use the phone" or, alternatively, "to let this axe-murderer into your house to use the phone." The focal issue is the information contained in the description of the decision problem, and not unmentioned facts about the decision problem. Because virtually all choice-task descriptions underdetermine relevant aspects of the state of the described world, we cannot speak of whether two descriptions describe *the same problem*, but rather whether the set of problems which the descriptions truly describe is the same. That is, we are back to logical equivalence. (2) Alternatively, two descriptions of a decision problem are said to be "equivalent" if, on reflection, people would endorse their equivalence. However, no normative theory of decision making has anything to say about the correctness of people's beliefs about equivalence – which, as we argue here with reference to most framing researchers' beliefs, may after all be wrong.

2. Note that the present analysis makes no assumptions about the existence of Gricean norms, or, more generally, about the communication of informative intent (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). The analysis simply points out that, when a certain kind of regularity in speaking behavior exists, a particular kind of inference will typically be warranted, norms and intentions aside. Whether and how listeners, in drawing such inferences, consider informative intentions or

conversational norms is a question for further research to address. (For Gricean perspectives on research in judgment and decision making, see Hilton, 1995; Schwarz, 1994.)

3. Of the five unusable data points in Experiment 2, three came from subjects in the “3/4-empty” condition who gave a 3/4-*full* cup. Similarly, twelve of the fourteen unusable data points in Experiment 3 came from subjects in the “1/4-empty” condition who placed a 1/4-*full* cup in the square. The high error rate presumably resulted from the fact, documented in McKenzie and Nelson (in press), that, in describing 1/4-full and (especially) 3/4-full cups, speakers have a marked preference for “full” over “empty” descriptions. Consequently, some readers in Experiments 2 and (especially) 3 probably expected to see “full” where “empty” appeared. One Experiment 3 subject was, erroneously, not administered the follow-up questionnaire.

4. It is noteworthy that McKenzie and Nelson (in press) also obtained their weakest results in the 3/4-full/1/4-empty conditions of both their speaker and listener studies, suggesting that in such descriptions the speaker’s choice of frame may be least informative. In both of their studies, their results for this condition were in the predicted direction, but were either not at all or only marginally significant.

5. Although subtly weighted die are illegal in California, “obviously” weighted die – which fall on one side with high probability, and, on close inspection, have a distinctive roll and a very subtle indentation on the weighted side – can be sold legally. In occasional debriefings, some subjects were aware that the die they had rolled was weighted, some were unaware, and some reported vague suspicions.

6. As Vic Ferreira (personal communication) pointed out to us, one can easily construct a language in which added adjectives can regularly play both roles, for example by letting the

construction [*noun adjective*] (e.g., “dog large”) denote that the noun is appropriately described by the adjective (the dog is large) while letting the construction [*adjective noun*] (“large dog”) denote that the noun is appropriately described by the adjective’s negation (the dog is not large).

7. Information leakage from the use of marked adjectives furnishes another example of this linguistic economy. When the marked member (e.g., “short”) of a complementary adjective pair (“short”-“tall”) is used in formulating a question (“How short is Stan?”), the listener can safely surmise that the property denoted by the marked adjective is possessed, rather than lacked, by the subject (Stan is short). (Harris, 1973) Consequently, the question “How short is Stan?” is both linguistically and inferentially closer than “How tall is Stan?” to the statement “Stan is short”. However, while both are special cases of the more general economy, markedness in adjective pairs should be clearly distinguished from the hypothesized reference point regularity. The property *unmarked* attaches to one member of a complementary adjective pair *independent of context*, and markedness theories posit a *general* preference for the unmarked adjective. The reference point hypothesis, on the other hand, makes a claim about how *relative* preferences over adjective pairs are sensitive to the statistical *context*, without regard to whether the adjective pairs exhibit markedness-related asymmetries.

8. Note that, strictly speaking, 30/50 successful projects is not logically equivalent to 20/50 unsuccessful projects, unless one knows that every project is either successful or unsuccessful (e.g., there are no mixed or ambiguous accomplishments; one sometimes describes ventures as “not unsuccessful” to denote partial accomplishment). However, we doubt whether this wrinkle is essential to understanding the effect the original researchers found (e.g., we doubt whether carefully embedding this task in a context which made the equivalence explicit would alter the outcome), and so we will treat the frames as logically equivalent for present purposes.

Others, however, have argued for the general importance of similar subtle ambiguities (Jou, Shanteau, & Harris, 1996; Kuhberger, 1995).

9. Note that, whereas Duchon et al. (1989) presented their subjects with “successful” and “unsuccessful” frames, we had our speaker-subjects chose between “successes” and “failures” frames. This is because, in a pilot study anticipating Experiment 5, in which the “successful”/“unsuccessful” formulation was used (for the 30 successes/20 failures case), few subjects chose the “unsuccessful” description *irrespective of condition* (good team or bad team). We suspected that this was because people generally avoid negations when they are unnecessary. Aware that a low ceiling on the number of subjects choosing the “unsuccessful” frame could obscure the issue of what can be inferred when a speaker does choose the “unsuccessful” frame, we avoided negations in Experiment 5 by using the “successes”/“failures” formulation (although, as is reported below, aggregating the 30 successes/20 failures data across conditions, still only few subjects chose the “failures” frame).

10. Of course, Kahneman and Tversky (1979) presented this result as evidence for prospect theory, which does offer an explanatory account. We think it important, however, to call attention to the observation that *people presumably do not know their wealth level at the level of \$1000 increments*, and hence it is hard to see how their choice behavior could generally be sensitive to such changes in background wealth. That is, in order for ordinary decisions, involving relatively small changes in wealth, to be *epistemologically feasible* (i.e., possible given what you know), background wealth (everything you own) and foreground wealth (what is to be gained or lost in a particular transaction) *must* be assigned separate mental accounts.

11. Indeed, fleshing out this skeleton often requires subjects to engage in a kind of role-playing, assuming an imagined identity that requires creative construction. To pick an arbitrary

and not especially flagrant example (Thaler, 1999), subjects may be asked to: “Suppose you bought a case of a good 1982 Bordeaux in the futures market for \$20 a bottle. The wine now sells at auction for about \$75 a bottle. You have decided to drink a bottle. Which of the following best captures your feeling of the cost to you of drinking this bottle?”

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Proportion of subjects selecting the initially full cup in all conditions in Experiments

1-3. Standard error bars are shown.

Figure 2. For each possible sequence, proportion of subjects describing the sequence in terms of black when black was the minority color on the die (solid line) and when black was the minority color on the die (dashed line).

Figure 3. Correspondence between linguistic and inferential closeness.

Figure 4. Correspondence between linguistic and inferential closeness in descriptions of proportion.

Figure 1

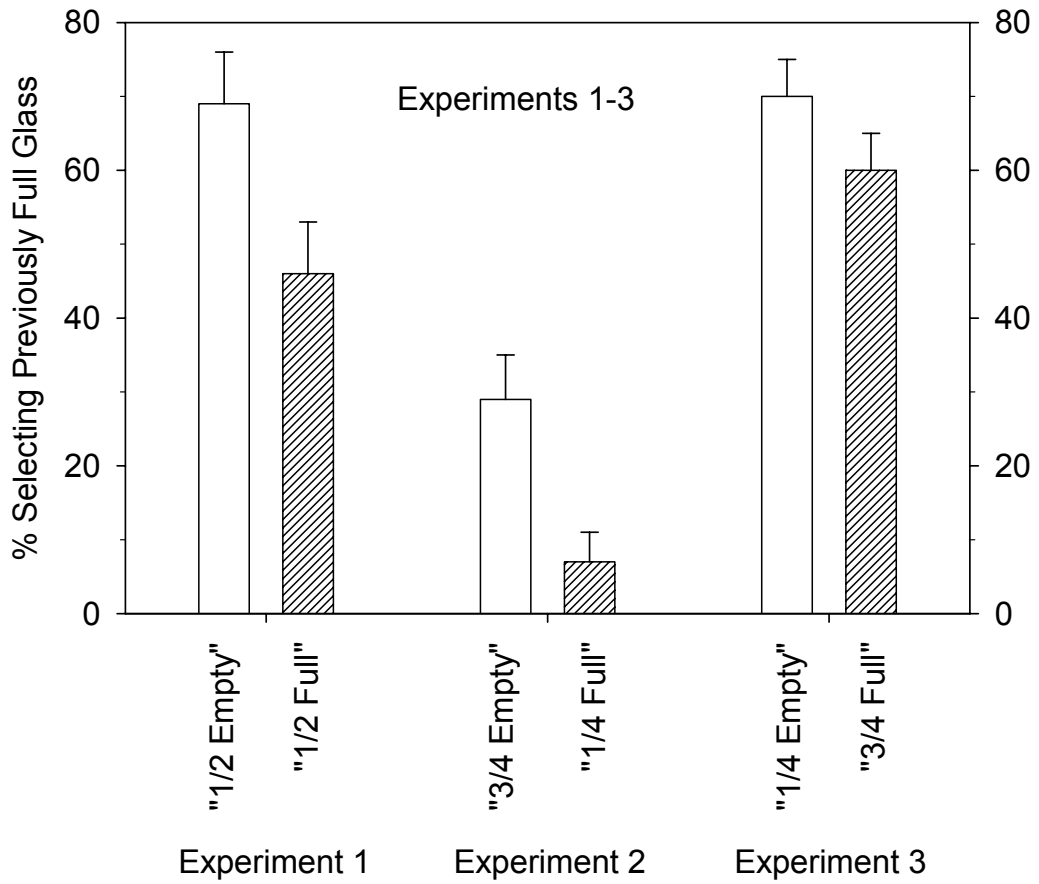


Figure 2

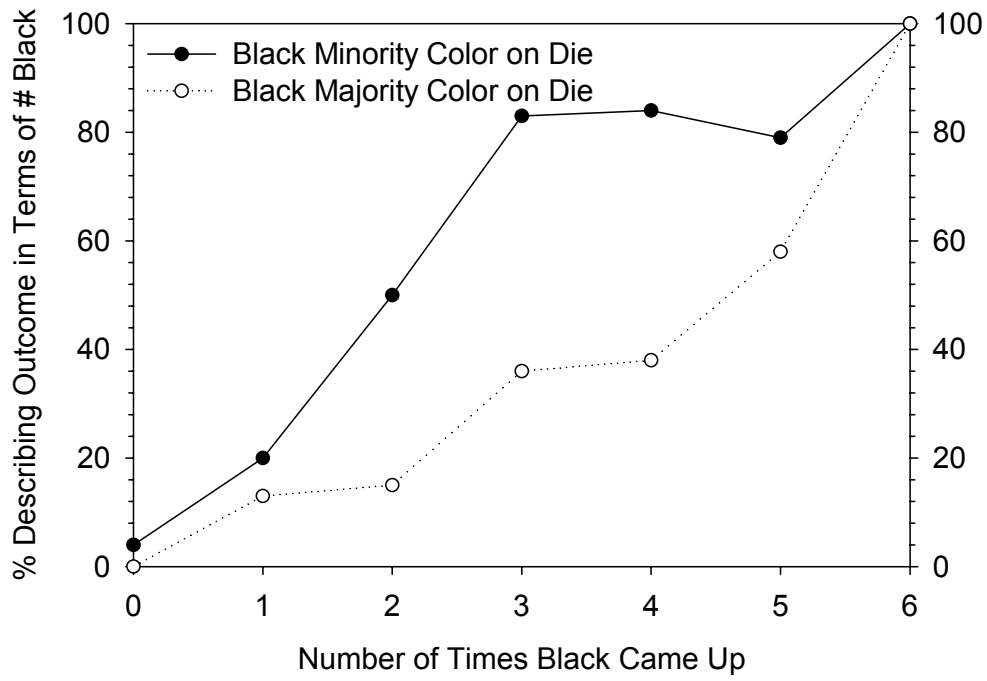


Figure 3
Correspondence between Inferential and Linguistic Closeness

	Joe is short	Joe is relatively short	Joe is shorter than Stan	Of all his friends, Joe is shortest	Joe is tall	Joe is relatively tall	Joe is taller than Stan	Of all his friends, Joe is tallest
Joe is short	Always	Almost always	Stan is tall	Joe's friends are all tall	Never	Never	Never	Never
Joe is relatively short	Almost always	Always	Stan is relatively tall	Joe's friends are all relatively tall	Never	Never	Never	Never
Joe is shorter than Stan	Stan is short	Stan is relatively short	Always	Stan is Joe's shortest friend	Never	Never	Never	Never
Of all his friends, Joe is shortest	Joe has a short friend	Joe has a relatively short friend	Stan is Joe's friend	Always	Never	Never	Never	Never
Joe is tall	Never	Never	Never	Never	Always	Almost always	Stan is short	Joe's friends are all short
Joe is relatively tall	Never	Never	Never	Never	Almost always	Always	Stan is relatively short	Joe's friends are all relatively short
Joe is taller than Stan	Never	Never	Never	Never	Stan is tall	Stan is relatively tall	Always	Stan is Joe's tallest friend
Of all his friends, Joe is tallest	Never	Never	Never	Never	Joe has a tall friend	Joe has a relatively tall friend	Stan is Joe's friend	Always

The text in each box describes ordinarily occurring conditions, if any, under which the statement on the left side implies the statement on the top. Note that the two inferentially close clusters coincide exactly with the two linguistically close clusters, the four "short" sentences forming one inferential and linguistic cluster and the four "tall" sentences forming another.

Figure 4

Correspondence between Inferential and Linguistic Closeness in Descriptions of Proportion...

...if Reference Point Hypothesis holds (things described in terms of properties they possess in relative abundance):

	The beef is fatty	The beef is lean
"The beef is 25% fat"	Implication	No implication
"The beef is 75% lean"	No implication	Implication

...if Anti- Reference Point Hypothesis holds (things described in terms of properties they possess in relative paucity):

	The beef is fatty	The beef is lean
"The beef is 25% fat"	No implication	Implication
"The beef is 75% lean"	Implication	No Implication

"Implication" means that utterance of the statement on the side will typically imply a greater likelihood of the statement on top being true. "No implication" means utterance of the statement on the side typically won't imply a greater likelihood of the statement on top being true. Note that, if the reference point hypothesis holds, linguistic and inferential closeness coincide, whereas, if the anti- reference point hypothesis holds, linguistic and inferential closeness are diametrically opposed.