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Frames and Their Consequences

Francesca Polletta and M. Kai Ho

In 1979, the nuclear reactor at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania suffered a partial meltdown and sent hundreds of thousands of residents fleeing as radiation leaked into the atmosphere. The resulting media coverage made “Three Mile Island” into an international symbol of the dangers of nuclear energy, prompted nationwide opposition to nuclear power, and shut down the nuclear industry for more than a decade. Yet, Three Mile Island was not the first accident of its kind. In 1966, the Fermi reactor outside Chicago experienced a partial meltdown followed by a failure of the automatic shut-down system. Officials discussed evacuation plans for area residents as they tried to avert the possibility of a secondary accident.

The Fermi accident was no secret: the press was alerted as it was happening. But newspapers, including the *New York Times*, gave the episode only perfunctory coverage, mainly repeating company spokespeople’s assurances that the reactor would soon be up and running. Why did the Fermi accident not produce the public crisis that Three Mile Island did? Because it was viewed through different frames, says William Gamson (1988). At the time of the Fermi accident, nuclear power was covered by the press mainly in terms of a “faith in progress” frame that viewed nuclear power unequivocally as a boon to technological development and human progress. By Three Mile Island, however, media stories about nuclear power were less confident

about nuclear power's safety and effectiveness. The stage was already set for a critical and alarmist interpretation of the accident.

What accounts for the shift? In large part, says Gamson, the strategic framing activities of antinuclear movement groups. Between 1966 and 1979, groups like the Union for Concerned Scientists and the environmentalist Friends of the Earth energetically promoted frames that were critical of nuclear power. Protest events like the nonviolent occupation of a nuclear power plant and a celebrity-studded "No-Nukes" concert attracted media attention and provided framing opportunities for movement spokespeople. Activists' representations of nuclear power as dangerous and the nuclear power industry as unaccountable guided news coverage of Three Mile Island and of nuclear power in its aftermath—and, in turn, contributed to further antinuclear mobilization.

Frames matter. The ways in which political actors package their messages affect their ability to recruit adherents, gain favorable media coverage, demobilize antagonists, and win political victories. The ways in which ordinary citizens think about gains and losses shape their political preferences; the ways in which states do shape their international bargaining strategies. The concept of framing has been used to capture these diverse processes by scholars of the media (Gitlin 1980; Carragee and Woefs 2004), international relations (Bernstein 2002; Berejekian 1997), decisionmaking (Kahneman and Tversky 1986), policymaking (Schon and Rein 1994), and social movements.

The concept is appealing for several reasons. The term "frame" reminds us that persuasion works in part by demarcating and punctuating important aspects of reality, that is, by making events and circumstances intelligible as much as by advancing a compelling point of view. If we think of a frame as the structure of a building rather than the perimeter of a picture

(Gamson 2004), the concept also points to the deeper logics structuring political contention.

While actors instrumentally frame situations so as to press their case, their very understanding of what is instrumental is shaped by taken for granted frames. In that sense, frames are both strategic and set the terms of strategic action.

In this chapter, we focus on framing in social movements. The theoretical and empirical literature on the topic is now extensive and, in many cases, sophisticated. But it remains thin on the relations between frames and their political and cultural contexts. We do not know enough about why activists choose the frames they do, what aspects of the environment shape frames' effectiveness, and what impacts frames have on institutions outside the movement. Several factors are probably to blame. The single case orientation of much of the work on framing has made it difficult to generalize about causes and effects. A tendency to view frames as emergent, that is, as constructed in and through movement work, has been valuable in capturing the dynamic quality of frames but has discouraged attention to the environmental conditions for frames' plausibility and impact. Where scholars have sought to identify influential aspects of the environment in which framing takes place, they have concentrated more on political factors than on specifically cultural ones. Certainly, culture is notoriously difficult to study systematically. But the neglect extends also to how frames are shaped in interaction with other cultural forms, such as ideology, discourse, and institutional logics of action.

Our intention in this essay is not to engage in a critique of the framing perspective in social movements.¹ Instead, we draw on the existing literature in order to answer three questions: *What are frames--*and how are they different from ideologies, discourses, and other concepts that have been used to capture the cultural dimensions of movements? *Where do frames come from--* and why do activists choose, modify, and discard particular frames? And finally, *how important*

are frames in accounting for key movement processes such as movement emergence and impacts--and what makes for politically effective frames? Where good answers exist within the framing perspective, we synthesize empirical findings from that literature. Where the answers have been incomplete, we draw from literatures outside framing in order to flesh out alternatives. We make two main recommendations for future work on framing. One is to pay more attention to institutionalized relationships and practices as sources of meaning. Familiar relationships, routines, and associational models both provide activists resources in their framing efforts and levy important constraints on those efforts. Our other recommendation is for a more sophisticated understanding of persuasion, in which ambiguity and inconsistency are sometimes more powerful than clarity and coherence.

I. What Are Frames? And How Are They Different from Other Cultural Concepts Such as Ideology and Discourse?

The concepts of “frame” and “framing” entered the sociology of social movements in the 1980s, largely in response to the neglect of social psychological processes by the resource mobilization models that then dominated the field. Resource mobilization theorists had downplayed grievances relative to resources and political opportunities in accounting for protest since grievances were assumed to be ubiquitous (see, for representative treatments, Jenkins and Perrow 1977; McCarthy and Zald 1977). Framing theorists like William Gamson (Gamson et al. 1982; 1988) and David Snow and colleagues (Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1988; see also Klandermans 1988) countered that how people *interpreted* their grievances was critical to

whether they participated. Indeed, much of the work of movements involved various “frame alignment” processes aimed at linking individual interests, values, and beliefs to those of the movement (Snow et al. 1986; Gamson 1988).

Snow and his colleagues and Gamson drew their conception of framing from Erving Goffman (1974) and they adopted Goffman’s interactionist perspective: frames are jointly and continuously constructed and reconstructed by movement actors and their audiences. This contrasts with a view of frames as fixed rather than dynamic and as the property of individuals rather than groups. The latter view has characterized work on framing in other fields, for example, in the psychology of decisionmaking, where frames have been defined both as the manner in which a choice problem is presented and the “norms, habits, and expectancies of the decision maker” that operate in conditions of bounded rationality (Kahneman and Tversky 1986: 257). On the other hand, even within the field of social movements, an interactionist perspective has not been inconsistent with an instrumentalist one. Frames have generally been conceptualized as the interpretive packages that activists develop to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, appeal to authorities, and demobilize antagonists (Snow et al. 1986; Gamson 1988; Snow and Benford 1988; Tarrow 1998). Frames combine a *diagnosis* of the social condition in need of remedy, a *prognosis* for how to effect such a remedy, and a *rationale* for action, a “call to arms” (Snow and Benford 1988; Benford and Hunt 1992).

In effective frames, the diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational components are clearly specified, richly developed, and well-integrated (Snow and Benford 1988; Stoecker 1995). Effective frames also make a compelling case for the "injustice" of a targeted condition and the likely effectiveness of collective "agency" in changing that condition. They make clear the "identities" of the contenders, distinguishing "us" from "them" and depicting antagonists as

human decision makers rather than impersonal forces such as industrialization or the demands of the market (Gamson 1988; 1992; also, Hunt and Benford 1994; Hunt et al. 1994; Klandermans 1997). Along with those formal features, finally, frames' resonance with their audiences is crucial to their success. Effective frames accord with available evidence, with people's experiences, and with familiar stories, values, and belief systems (Gamson 1988). That is, they are at once empirically credible, experientially commensurable, and narratively faithful (Snow and Benford 1988; 1992).

Frames are produced in and through movements' signifying practices but they are also often drawn from larger "master frames," common to a cluster of movements or "cycle of protest" (Snow and Benford 1992; Tarrow 1998; Osa 2003). For example, an "equal rights" frame that became prominent in the southern black freedom movement in the 1950s went on to orient the women's movement and disability activism. The "psychosalvational" frame of Scientology was shared with transcendental meditation and est. (Snow and Benford 1992). Master frames not only provide activists with ideological resources, but they also shape activists' tactical choices. For example, groups adhering to a nonviolent master frame have found it difficult to adopt violent tactics. Whether members find violence personally repugnant, adopting it would diminish the group's credibility in the eyes of the public (Snow and Benford 1992).

The concept of frames in movements has proven enormously productive, generating scores of theoretical elaborations, empirical applications, critiques and defenses (for good recent overviews of the literature, see Benford and Snow 2000; Snow 2004). In the political process models of mobilization that largely eclipsed resource mobilization models, mobilizing frames are, along with political opportunities and indigenous networks, a precondition for mass mobilization (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001). Framing

has also come to be seen as central in other movement processes, including activists' selection of strategies and tactics (Snow and Benford 1992), their choice of organizational form (Clemens 1996), movement competition and alliance-building (Carroll and Ratner 1996), movement success (Diani 1996; Cress and Snow 2000), and movement collapse (Voss 1996).

The popularity of the concept has been a double-edged sword. Frames have been conceptualized in diverse and often ambiguous ways even within the subfield of social movements: as beliefs (Klandermans 1992), rhetoric (Diani 1992; Berbrier 1998), and symbolizing actions (McAdam 1996); they have also been treated as particular to individuals (Klandermans et al. 2001; Snow et al. 1986; Johnston 2002), organizations (Tarrow 1998; Gerhards and Rucht 1992), and the political discourse that spans movements, opponents, and authorities (McCarthy 1995). The problem is not just one of specificity. Treating frames as the properties both of individuals and of groups may obscure the question of just how a frame is shared by members of a group: do people have identical conceptions or do they share rules for linking idea elements? In other words, is a shared frame more like a shared mental schema or more like a shared language?

The overextension of the framing concept has also been a problem. Made to stand in for a variety of cultural processes, framing has been treated in ways that neglect differences between and relations among those processes (Benford 1997; Oliver and Johnston 2000; Zald 1996; Ferree and Merrill 2000). For example, treating frames as synonymous with ideologies obscures the socialization processes through which movement participants become steeped in an ideological tradition—but not in a frame (Oliver and Johnston 2000). Treating identities as constructed in and through movement framing work obscures the cultural processes that give rise to mobilizing identities before the existence of any organized movement (Polletta 1998).

How, then, should we conceptualize frames in relation to, say, ideologies, discourses, and identities—three other concepts used to capture the cultural dimensions of contentious politics? Whereas a *frame* can be seen as a delimited ideational package, *discourse* is the sum total of talk produced by an organization, institution, or society at a given point in time (Johnston 2002).² So we can talk about the “NAACP’s discourse” or “medical discourse” or “1950s gender discourse.” Discourses have a greater diversity of idea elements, more conflict, and more inconsistencies than frames (Ferree and Merrill 2000). Ideologies, on the other hand, are usually conceptualized as complex systems of belief. They are more encompassing and elaborated than frames and are explicitly normative (Oliver and Johnston 2000; Westby 2002; Ferree and Merrill 2000; Zald 1996). Frames are derived from ideologies, but they are also oriented to the strategic demands of making claims effectively (Westby 2002). So, Oliver and Johnston (2000) note that pro-life and pro-choice activists subscribe to very different ideologies but have used an identical frame of individual rights in promoting their opposing positions. Finally, collective identity is the subjective perception of a collective bond. Some minimal level of collective identity is usually necessary for the emergence of movements but once underway, movements devote considerable work to affirming, transforming, and securing recognition for collective identities (Taylor and Whittier 1992; Polletta and Jasper 2001).

These distinctions make sense, but they raise as many questions as they answer. Consider just the ideology/frame distinction. Are formal ideologies the only cultural sources of movement frames? How do we account for frames that seem to break with existing ideological traditions? Activists are undoubtedly ideological actors as well as strategic ones, as framing theorists point out. But where do activists’ notions of what is strategic come from—as well as their notions of what is moral, what is political, what is a resource, and so on? Treating activists as balancing

ideological commitments with instrumental ones in their framing efforts misses the cultural processes that shape activists' very criteria of instrumental rationality. However conceptually awkward the notion of frames as both persuasive devices and interpretive frameworks, it does alert us to the fact that such frameworks are both evolving and, at any point in time, limiting.

Finally, treating ideologies as the coherent worldviews of the audiences to whom activists' pitch their message underplays the internal contradictions in people's worldviews (Snow 2004; Billig et al 1988). That, in turn, suggests that consistency and clarity may not be necessary to effective appeals. Persuasion may work in more complex ways. We highlight these three features of framing—the diverse sources from which frames are drawn; the logics of appropriateness that govern activists' framing choices; and the complex dynamics by which frames resonate—as we discuss frames' sources and impacts.

Ii. Where Do Frames Come From? And Why Do Activists Choose, Modify and Discard Particular Frames?

With frames often treated as strategic persuasive devices (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996; Tarrow 1998), one strand of research on frames' content has focused on the organizational and political conditions that make some frames more likely to be effective than others. A second strand has treated activists as *ideological* actors as much as *instrumental* ones and has traced activists' framing choices to longstanding and more recent political traditions. After rehearsing research findings from each perspective, we identify certain cultural influences on framing choices that have been neglected by both.

Far from existing in isolation, activists operate in a “multiorganizational field” made up of allies, competitors, antagonists, authorities, and third parties (Curtis and Zurcher 1973; Klandermans 1992; Carroll and Ratner 1996; Evans 1997). They invent and modify frames to take advantage of strategic opportunities and demands created by those other actors. While *allies* may compel movement groups to adopt more encompassing, universalistic frames (Carroll and Ratner 1996; and see Ferree and Roth [1998] on how organizational insularity produces exclusivist frames), *opponents*, too, shape movement frames. Since ignoring rival frames puts a group at risk of seeming off-topic or evasive, movement groups often find themselves forced to counter, debunk, co-opt, or conform to opponents’ frames in their own public statements (Evans 1997, Esacove 2004). For example, anti-abortion activists have adopted an individual rights frame, championing the fetus’s “right to life,” even though many of them recoil at the overemphasis on rights in American society and are much more attuned to duties than rights (Williams 2004). In a common dynamic, the “we”/“they” opposition that develops as groups challenge rivals’ frames may lead to increasingly absolutist frames on both sides—which in turn may alienate potential supporters (Mansbridge 1986). In other words, the pressure to respond to opponents by no means guarantees that doing so will be without cost.

Where a challenging group’s *targets* are relatively independent of it, challengers are likely to engage in the kind of “frame extension” (Snow et al 1986) that can bring them new allies and adherents. So, the American Federation of Labor began to call for the social welfare legislation that would benefit union members and non-members alike at a time when employers were less dependent on unions for a supply of labor (Cornfield and Fletcher 1998).

If relations among movement groups’ allies, opponents, and targets shape frames’ content, so too should other features of the political context in which they operate. Shrewd

activists will match their rhetoric to the kinds of political opportunities that are available. Mario Diani (1992) draws on variables commonly associated with a “political opportunity structure” to argue that where traditional political alignments are in crisis and the political system has openings for independent citizen action, activists can afford to adopt a “realignment frame” that calls for a restructuring of the polity without completely rejecting existing polity members and procedures. By contrast, where political alignments are stable and the system is closed to outsiders (the worst case scenario for activists) challengers are limited to “revitalization” frames, in which they call for changes from within the system. In between those two poles, challengers do best using “antisystem” frames during a period of elite crisis, since there is some prospect for an overhaul of the whole system, and “inclusion” frames emphasizing continuity with existing procedures where existing alignments are stable but there are also conspicuous opportunities for independent challenge.

While acknowledging the importance of the institutional political context in shaping activists’ strategic framing choices, other researchers have pointed both to additional variables in defining that context and to greater flexibility in how activists respond to it. For example, when movement groups are largely shut out of positions of power, they may respond not by adopting the revitalization frame that Diani describes, but by targeting their framing to a narrower constituency, seeking to sustain the cause until a more favorable period. This is what Mary Bernstein (1997) found in her analysis of campaigns for local gay rights ordinances. The frames that gay and lesbian activists adopted when they faced a closed political system were highly critical of dominant normative values and celebrated their differences from heterosexuals rather than their similarities. When activists target non-state institutions such as medicine, art, or the educational system, they may tailor their frames to the values and beliefs of institutional insiders

rather than the public simply because the public has relatively little influence on policy decisions (Binder 2004). The Afrocentrists and Creationists who challenged American school curricula in the 1980s downplayed radical critiques of American culture as, respectively, racist and godless, instead advancing pluralistic arguments about the importance of ensuring that no student felt culturally marginalized (Binder 2004). These arguments were not expected to resonate especially with the public but they were expected to play well with the school officials who were in charge of setting curricula, largely independent of public opinion.

Where activists operate in political regimes that strictly control their access to the public, they may frame their messages in “disguised, coded, implied” ways, Maryjane Osa argues (2003: 18). The artists, writers, and actors who have often led the opposition in contexts like these have the discursive skills to frame dissent in indirect ways, using irony, satire, subtexts, and ellipses to convey messages to the potential supporters that are counterhegemonic but difficult for authorities to suppress.³

Finally, Ferree et al. (2002) identify factors such as the status of religion in society, the particular cleavages around which injustice claims tend to be organized, and media reporting practices all contributing to a “discursive opportunity structure” that activists seek to exploit in their framing efforts. That structure includes, in addition to the political components that Diani stresses, socio-cultural and mass media components: party, state, and judicial structures; public beliefs about politics and contention; and routine news reporting practices. So, comparing abortion discourse in Germany and the United States, Ferree et al found that Americans’ wariness of the state was responsible for the prominence of an anti-state interventionist frame among pro-choice activists, a frame largely absent among their German counterparts. The discursive opportunity structure also influenced what ideas were considered radical: with

individual privacy arguments advantaged in the United States, arguments for abortion cast in terms of the moral obligation of the state were considered radical; precisely the opposite was the case in Germany (Ferree 2003).

In sum, research points to the openness of the political system to challengers, the degree to which public discourse is controlled by the regime, the media practices that favor some themes and actors over others, the extent to which targets are dependent on the challenging group or insulated from public criticism, and the political clout of allies and opponents as key factors to which activists must attend in their framing efforts. They make for frames that are more or less extensive in the issues they address, more or less elaborated in their normative vision, and more or less critical of the current regime.

While activists are strategic in their framing choices, they are also committed to certain normative values. In a second vein of research on the content of movements' frames, scholars have traced activists' frames to prior ideological traditions, often, those associated with other movements in a cycle of protest (Snow and Benford 1992; Valocchi 1994; Babb 1996). For example, gay liberationists in the 1960s took from the radical feminist and black power movements an orientation to transforming cultural perceptions of a stigmatized self and crafted a "gay is good" frame (Valocchi 1994). Frames may also come from longer-standing traditions of dissent. A nonviolence frame migrated from Gandhian direct action in pre-independence India to the post-WWII American pacifist movement, the 1960s civil rights movement, and the 1970s and '80s antinuclear movements (Chabot and Duyvendak 2002).

Frames' indebtedness to political traditions does not mean that such traditions are unchanging, with later movements simply reproducing the claims and rhetoric of earlier ones. To the contrary, the influence is often reciprocal. Moreover, frames derived from preexisting

ideologies are invariably modified in the light of participants' experiences (although Steinberg [1999] and Gamson and Meyer [1996] criticize a tendency in the framing literature to see frames as fixed rather than evolving). In her study of the pre- and post-civil war labor movement's support for labor greenbackism, a soft-currency scheme, Sarah Babb (1996) argues that labor activists could sustain for only so long the contradictions that existed between the producerist ideology underpinning the greenback frame and workers' experience of employers as antagonists rather than as fellow toilers. Eventually, the frame and then the ideology was abandoned.⁴ Similar dynamics of selective appropriation and adaptation operate across movements separated by geography rather than time. Along with targets and tactics, frames diffuse across national boundaries. Here, too, the influence is reciprocal, and ideas, images, and claims made in one context are altered as they are imported into another context.

While activists often select among, combine, and adapt previous protest traditions, they sometimes invent more truly original frames. The women who launched a movement for liberation in the late 1960s could not draw on an ideological tradition of radical challenge to everyday gender norms. The dissidents who overthrew the communist regime in Poland had no obvious master frames at their disposals. How do we account for the frames they produced? One answer is that people are able to capitalize on the relative autonomy that some institutions are granted in repressive societies, developing within them insurgent ideas and networks. These are the "free spaces" that scholars have seen as seedbeds for dissent: institutions like the black church for the civil rights movement and literary circles in communist Eastern Europe for opposition to the Soviet regime (Morris 1984; Johnston and Snow 1998). What is important about such institutions, though often missed in discussions of free spaces, is not that they are somehow empty of ideas but that they enjoy relative freedom from the scrutiny and control of authorities

(Polletta 1999). So, for example, mosques played a crucial role in Kuwaiti opposition to Iraqi occupation because of their long-standing and “morally unassailable” authority to challenge the state (Tetreault 1993, 278).

This raises a larger point about the specifically *institutional* sources of movement frames. If, following Philip Selznick (1957, 6-7), we think of structures and practices as institutionalized when they are “infuse[d] with value beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand,” then we can see that myriad practices, relationships, and structures in society offer models for action and interaction. People may derive frames for attacking one institution from the operation of another institution. For example, the striking hospital workers whom Karen Brodtkin Sacks (1988) studied invoked notions of family, and specifically, the relations between parents and grown children, to describe the acknowledgment and care they expected from hospital management. A familiar associational form adapted from another institutional sphere provided an idiom for formulating opposition. Poles drew on a moral idiom from Catholicism to challenge the communist regime. Local activists in the southern civil rights movement talked frequently about their “God-given rights,” using a religious idiom where a legal one fell short (Polletta 2000).

Institutionalized routines and relationships shape frames in another sense, defining the kinds of claims that are considered feasible and legitimate to make. Charles Tilly’s notion of a “repertoire” of contentious claimsmaking is relevant here. Tilly writes, “existing repertoires incorporate collectively-learned shared understandings concerning what forms of claim-making are possible, desirable, risky, expensive, or probable, as well as what consequences different possible forms of claim-making are likely to produce. They greatly constrain the contentious claims political actors make on each other and on agents of the state” (1999).

To be sure, since anything is, in principle, thinkable, activists can break with existing repertoires. They can exploit silences and contradictions in dominant discourses and can attach new meanings to old words (Steinberg 1999). However, the risks in challenging conventions of claimsmaking are substantial and the gains uncertain. For example, feminists who challenged workplace discrimination in court in the 1980s were encouraged to supply stories of individuals unfairly barred from hiring or promotion. This was despite the fact that a few such stories could not, on their own, demonstrate *patterns* of disparate treatment. Feminists could have refused to frame their claims in terms of individuals' experience of discrimination. Those who did, however, were much more likely to lose their cases (Schultz 1990). The problem was that the same framing strategy that won the movement legal victories may also have alienated potential recruits who were unwilling to see themselves as the victims that judges required (Bumiller 1988).

So, institutional conventions shape frames' content. It is hardly surprising, moreover, that such conventions enter into activists' own tactical calculations. The animal rights activists whom Julian Groves (2001) studied discouraged women from serving in leadership positions because they believed that women were seen by the public as prone to the kind of emotionalism that would cost the movement credibility. Activists spent little time debating whether women were in fact prone to emotionalism, however, or whether emotional accounts rather than rational arguments were in fact a bad framing strategy (Jasper 1999). The logic behind activists' framing choices here is neither one of ideological consistency nor one of instrumental rationality but one of appropriateness. Ideology understood as a coherent set of normative principles held by activists does not capture this kind of cultural influence on frames' content.

Again, the frames that predominate in a movement at a particular time reflect activists' strategic bids to mobilize public opinion as well as their efforts to balance the demands of catering to public opinion with those of staying loyal to their ideological commitments. But dominant frames also reflect the institutional common sense that defines some claims and ways of making claims as feasible, appropriate, even rational.

iii. How Important Are Frames in Accounting for Key Movement Processes Such as Mobilization and Movement Outcomes (and What Makes for Politically Effective Frames)?

It is surprising, given the theoretical attestations to frames' importance, that studies systematically assessing frames' impacts remain relatively few. How influential are frames relative to other factors in accounting, in particular, for why movements emerge when they do and for how successful they are in realizing their goals? And what features of frames best predict their influence? In the following, we draw on comparative studies where they exist, along with more fragmentary evidence where they do not, in order to identify some of the conditions for frames' impact.

In the political process models that dominate the field, effective frames are a critical variable in accounting for movement emergence. Absent frames making obvious the necessity and viability of protest, the presence of political opportunities and powerful mobilizing networks will come to naught (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001). For example, the emergence of a northern black voting bloc to which federal officials were beholden supplied the objective

political opportunity for a postwar southern civil rights movement. Without a compelling set of arguments for the urgency of fighting jim crow, however, the movement would have remained small, elite, and probably ineffectual (McAdam 1982).

However, if effective frames depend on their ability to convey the viability of protest, that is, its likelihood of political impact, then the existence of political opportunities should be a precondition for effective frames. This is what Koopmans and Duyendak (1995) argue in their cross-national study of antinuclear mobilization. Public opinion that was opposed to nuclear power tended to follow movements' success in winning changes in nuclear energy policy rather than precede it. Even where there was little in the way of public opposition to nuclear power, if the political system was receptive to an antinuclear challenge, mobilization was likely. For these authors, then, effective frames are a consequence of political opportunities rather than a variable that exists alongside them.

In her study of American women's suffrage mobilization, Holly McCammon (2001) found something different still: resonant frames spurred protest in the absence of political opportunities. Between 1886 and 1914, some states seemed much likelier candidates for the formation of state-level suffrage associations than others. With a prior history of state suffrage legislation, influential third parties, and a reform process that was open to outsiders, they offered the political opportunities that Koopmans and Duyendak found were critical to mobilization. Yet these were not necessarily the states in which suffrage associations were formed. By contrast, the manner in which activists framed their cause did account for where such associations were formed. Where activists argued that women were citizens and therefore just as deserving as men of equal suffrage, they met with deaf ears. Where they argued that women brought special, "womanly" skills to the voting booth, including an ability to solve problems relating to women,

children, and families, they were successful in mobilizing suffrage supporters. The kind of equality argument that is familiar to us today was simply too radical to mobilize people effectively.

How, then, should we adjudicate among these possibilities: that mobilization depends on the existence of resonant frames *and* political opportunities (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly), or on the existence just of political opportunities (Koopmans and Duyvendak), or on the existence just of resonant frames (McCammon)? McCammon suggests that where women lacked the vote, the openness of the state to voters' influence had scant import for women's decision to mobilize. So frames may matter more where political opportunities are lacking. In his study of mobilization against drunk driving, John McCarthy (1994) provides another gloss on the relationship between political opportunities and frames. At a time when an "auto safety" frame was hegemonic for talking about automobile-related deaths, agencies within the government were trying to promote a "drunk driving" frame. In the latter, intoxicated drivers rather than poor automobile design was the problem. Government reformers had little luck in gaining public support for that frame, however, until citizen activists began to promote it. Activists were aided by government reformers, and they, in turn, provided the media with tragic stories of drunk drivers and unnecessary deaths. In short order, the drunk driving frame eclipsed the auto safety frame in the public consciousness. More than providing political opportunities, state actors here helped to generate challengers' frames.

Along with a better understanding of the relation between political opportunities and frames, we need a better understanding of the relation between indigenous mobilizing networks and frames. In political process accounts, such networks supply the solidary incentives that persuade people to participate. But McCammon found that mobilization occurred whether or not

local networks of dissent existed. Powerful frames may be able to substitute for indigenous networks in spurring protest. More evidence for that proposition: some of the most prominent collective actors in the postwar era—women, the elderly, gays and lesbians, and the disabled—generally had had little day-to-day contact with each other before movements got off the ground. Movement organizations framed collective identities around which people then began to create networks (Minkoff 1997). More evidence still: John Glenn (2001) found that “civil society” was essential to successful democratic transitions in Eastern Europe—but civil society not as actual institutions but as a framing strategy. Successful political challengers in Poland and Czechoslovakia invoked a civil society frame: they argued that the communist regime was violating citizens’ rights and that the solution was change through peaceful negotiation. In both cases, the pitch brought together diverse groups, including some within the government, in a coalition for effective reform.

Like the research on movement emergence, that on movement outcomes also points to the influence of framing, here independent not only of the receptiveness of the political system but also of how well-resourced and disruptive movement groups are. In their study of homeless mobilization in eight American cities, Cress and Snow (2000) found that homeless groups advancing coherent and focused frames were more likely to succeed in winning representation on city task forces, resources like office space, and new provisions for homeless people. In different combinations, activists’ use of disruptive tactics, their access to sympathetic allies, and the existence of city agencies targeting homelessness also mattered. But consistently, Cress and Snow found when groups used diagnostic and prognostic frames that focused on specific problems, for example, shelter conditions rather than “homelessness,” pinned responsibility on

specific groups rather than, say “the government,” and proposed viable solutions such as the “investigation of shelter conditions,” they were more likely to win results.

That some organizations advanced coherent and articulate frames was no accident, say Cress and Snow. Rather, such organizations tended to have existed for some time, had met regularly, and had planned a series of protest events. Their longevity provided activists the time and space to deliberate over framing choices. This raises a larger issue. As we noted, most depictions of framing have activists seeking to effectively match their rhetoric to their political circumstances. What, then, makes activists more or less adept at doing that? As Cress and Snow suggest, features of the organizations doing the framing seem important. Although for McCammon the existence of *indigenous* organizations was not a precondition for mobilization, the existence of *national* suffrage organizations was. Such groups supplied not only funding but tactical advice and traveling speakers. McCammon does not say this, but such groups may have been better equipped to figure out what kinds of pitches would resonate with their audiences. Other research suggests that decentralized movement structures may encourage ideological experimentation as activists adapt agendas to the needs, aspirations, and skills of local people (Gerlach and Hine 1970; Polletta 2000); and that groups with more heterogeneous memberships may be less constrained by familiar claimsmaking strategies (Ganz 2000). These just hint at some of the factors involved in framing skill.

What is it about frames themselves that secure movement groups support, participation, and concessions from those in power? McCammon argues that a frame centered on women’s equality was simply out of kilter with potential supporters’ worldview. Cress and Snow found that frames that were more coherent and articulate were likely to win the movement victories. These empirical findings accord with propositions long made by framing theorists. Influential

frames are likely to be clear and coherent, with diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational elements well-integrated. Protagonists and antagonists should be sharply delineated, and the viability, moral necessity, and urgency of protest made indisputable. Frames should seem credible to audiences, as well as consonant with their experiences, and congruent with their beliefs, myths, and worldviews. Frame resonance, to continue with the scenario, leads to people's participation in and support for the movement and generates pressure on decisionmakers to make concessions to it.

These propositions are plausible. But they may miss some of the ways in which frames have political impact as well as some of the obstacles activists are likely to face. Consider, first, the argument that influential frames are clear and coherent, with a well-specified rationale for participation and a clear distinction between “we” and “they.” In her study of the 1960 black student sit-ins, Polletta (1998) found that the stories students told about the protests as they were occurring were remarkably *unclear* about the sources of the protest, vague about antagonists, and downright dismissive of students' own agency. In letters to campus newspapers, editorials, flyers, and personal correspondents, students represented the sit-ins as spontaneous and impulsive. “*No one* started it...” one insisted. And yet the stories helped to mobilize thousands of students to participate. Polletta argues that the stories' *failure* to fully explain the protest, their inability to specify the unspecifiable point at which individual action became collective and resistance became opposition, called for more stories, and for more actions to recount. That spurred students to participate. There are two ways to interpret this finding. One is that narratives may operate differently than other discursive forms. To talk about framing as a generic process may miss important differences in how stories, logical arguments, analogies, and other discursive forms work. The other possibility is that the importance of clarity in persuasion may be

overrated. We noted earlier research suggesting the internal diversity and indeed, inconsistency, in people's ideological beliefs (Billig et al 1988). It is possible that effective frames may actually combine disparate, even contradictory, ideas. They may seem, as a result, to "cover all the bases" at the same time as they seem admirably pointed in their claims. Or they may preempt criticism by incorporating what should be discrediting information. In that sense, a perception of frames' coherence may follow from their resonance rather produce it.

Frames' *credibility* may similarly be a consequence rather than a cause of their resonance. Framing theorists, recall, consider frames' empirical credibility and their congruence with familiar myths and worldviews to be independent conditions for their effectiveness (Snow and Benford 1988). Narrative theorists argue, to the contrary, that accounts are often thought to be truer the more they resemble familiar stories. That is, they have a beginning, middle, and end, a moral, and a plot derived from a canon of familiar plots (White 1980). In part, we believe particular stories because we have heard them before. If frames' ambiguity functions for activists as a persuasive resource, credible frames' dependence on canonical plots poses a real constraint. Activists' claims may be dismissed simply on account of their unfamiliarity.

There are other obstacles to activists' ability to get their message across effectively. We noted earlier that conventional assumptions about what kinds of claims are appropriate to make, what kinds of frames are persuasive, and what kinds of people are authoritative may limit political actors' ability to cast their message effectively. Even if activists manage to concoct an effective message, their ability to get that message to the public depends on the mainstream media. And, as numerous scholars have pointed out, the media are rarely cooperative. Journalists' dependence on official sources, their tendency to pin systemic problems on individuals, and their commitment to presenting "both sides" of a conflict, even when

countermovement groups are small in number and otherwise uninfluential, diminishes the persuasive power of activists' framing efforts (Gitlin 1980; Smith et al. 2001). Movement scholars have paid special attention to the media's tendency to focus on events rather than conditions (Iyengar 1994). Activists stage demonstrations in order to draw attention to broad social injustices but the press tends to concentrate on the event itself: the number of participants, the number of arrests, the presence of counterdemonstrators, and so on. The point of the demonstration gets lost (Smith et al 2001).

On the other hand, another body of research, less frequently cited by social movement scholars, presents a more sanguine picture of activists' prospects for favorable coverage. Journalists' reliance on "exemplars" in news stories may serve movements well. Exemplars are the stories, examples, and first-hand accounts that describe an issue from the perspective of an individual (Brosius and Bathelt 1994). Experimental research shows that, when presented with exemplars and with information that contradicts the exemplars, audiences tend to see the exemplars as reflecting majority opinion. For example, if audiences are exposed to a statement in a simulated radio broadcast that, "two-thirds of Americans support the war," after they have heard a man on the street express his disapproval of the war, they tend to believe that more people oppose the war. Moreover, audiences are likely to modify their own opinions in line with those of exemplars. This is true even when the issues are controversial ones (Perry and Gonzenbach 1997). What this means for movement groups is that making movement spokespeople—and especially people affected by the issue in question-- available to reporters may get the movement's frame into the media. In this sense, personalizing the movement's cause may not undermine it.

At least, this is the case in the United States. The Ferree team (2003) found that the American media was much more likely to credit the views of grassroots groups and ordinary people than was the German media, which relied overwhelmingly on state and party representatives as sources. Activists in this country benefit from a populist wariness of experts that extends to media reporting, an attitude that stems at least in part from efforts on the part of movements in the 1960s and 1970s to challenge conventional notions of expertise.

We highlight the latter also because it suggests a way in which frames may be influential that has not been much discussed. On most accounts, frames have impact when their targets accept a frame's definition of the problem and solution. This may mean that policymakers adopt the specific solutions pressed by a movement group or that they adopt policies that are not inconsistent with the group's frame, as was the case following the successful anti-homelessness campaigns that Cress and Snow (2000) studied. Frame impact may mean, more generally, that the movement's issue is acknowledged as a significant social problem, as, for example, violence against gays and lesbians came to be recognized as a "hate crime" (Jenness 1995). It may mean that a movement is able to get its issues permanently on the table, as were women activists in the Catholic Church (Katzenstein 1998).

Frames may also have impact by redefining what counts as authoritative knowledge. Here, it is not so much the content of the frame but the manner in which the frame is advanced that is influential. In their framing efforts, movement groups may challenge who counts as a legitimate spokesperson, what issues qualify for public discussion, what kinds of evidence are authoritative. The alternatives they model may influence practices within diverse institutions. So, Ferree et al (2003) suggest that activists' commitment to the authority of personal experience in the 1960s and 1970s has filtered down to news reporting practices. Another example: in the

1980s, AIDS activists succeeded in gaining formal representation on federal research review committees. But they also gained recognition for AIDS patients' accounts as a form of authoritative knowledge in drug research (Epstein 1996). Again, it is the *how* of movement framing that is important here in altering the *how* of news reporting and the *how* of scientific research.

This returns to our point about institutional logics as both the sources and products of movement frames. In addition to gains such as formal representation and policy reform, movements may change the norms governing how organizations within an institutional sphere operate. Changing organizational culture, in this sense, means changing the rules of the game.

IV. Conclusion

Frames matter. The devil for social movement scholars is in showing how and when and how much they matter. The thinness of theory on frames' sources and impacts reflects several things: the single-case orientation of much of the research on framing; the difficulty of disentangling causal factors in processes such as movement emergence, trajectories, and impacts; and especially, the difficulty of isolating the independent force of ideas. In this essay, we have focused on the neglect of the cultural environment in accounting for frames' origins and impacts. Drawing on research from outside the framing perspective as well as from within it, we have highlighted the diverse cultural materials from which frames are drawn, materials that are not limited to ideological traditions of dissent. We have also sought to elucidate the cultural constraints on activists' framing choices as well as neglected mechanisms by which frames have

political impact. In particular, we have emphasized the role of familiar relationships, routine practices, and institutionalized rules of the game both in spawning frames and in limiting their reach. And we have drawn attention to the surprising virtues of ambiguity and inconsistency in persuasive efforts.

Much work remains to be done on these and other fronts. If several exemplary studies have recently demonstrated the independent influence of frames in triggering mobilization and in accounting for its outcomes, we still know little about how frames interact with other factors considered important in those processes. If framing theorists have advanced plausible propositions about what makes for effective frames, those propositions can only be strengthened by incorporating the sometimes counterintuitive findings from social and cognitive psychology on how ideas achieve their effects. That activists' messages work in ways unanticipated even by them is unsurprising, but also the source of important insight.

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Notes

¹ For critiques, see: Benford 1997; Steinberg 1999; Jasper 1997; Ferree and Merrill 2000; and

for good defenses, see Snow and Benford 2000; Snow 2004.

² Steinberg (1999, 743) describes it as “language in social use.”

³ See also Noonan (1995) on Chilean women’s appropriation of a hegemonic maternalist frame

to challenge the repressive Pinochet regime.

⁴ See also Snow and Benford (2000) on the “remedial work” that framing does when ideology

comes up against experience, and Ellingson (1996) on the dialectic of discourse and

events.