

Reframing Child Abuse and Neglect: A Practical Tool Kit

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Framing Theory Explained

Adapted from “Reframing Child Abuse & Neglect for Increased Understanding & Engagement”

By Kevin T. Kirkpatrick, (Chicago, 2004)

Strategic Frame Analysis

Founded in 1999 by Susan Nall Bales, the mission of the FrameWorks Institute is to advance the nonprofit sector’s communications capacity by identifying, translating and modeling relevant scholarly research for framing and reframing the public discourse about social problems. More specifically, FrameWorks designs, commissions, manages and publishes communications research to prepare non-profit organizations to expand their constituency base, to build public will, and to further public understanding of specific social issues.

Since 1999, its funders have included the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the W.T. Grant Foundation, Benton Foundation, David & Lucile Packard Foundation, Rockefeller Brothers Foundation, A.L. Mailman Foundation, and W.K. Kellogg Foundation, among others.

The concept of “strategic frame analysis” was developed by Susan Nall Bales in partnership with UCLA’s Center for Communications and Community. Although the concept is relatively new, Bales reports that it is grounded in theory and practice going back to the 1922 publication of Walter Lippmann’s book, Public Opinion. This book represented the first attempt to connect mass communications to public attitudes and policy preferences by recognizing that “the way in which the world is imagined determines at any particular moment what men will do.”¹ The current concept of

¹ Lippmann, Walter. Public Opinion. (New York: Macmillan), 1922.



“frames” harkens back directly to Lippmann’s definition of the “way in which the world is imagined.”²

Strategic reframing has been employed by numerous social causes in recent years. Advocates for HIV/AIDS prevention, for example, failed to galvanize widespread public support in the early years of the epidemic at least in part because of the public’s frame of reference on the issue, which was then limited to the homosexual community and intravenous drug users. It wasn’t until the issue was reframed to include children like Ryan White and women like Elizabeth Glaser that status as a public policy (and funding) priority was finally awarded.

In applying strategic frame analysis, Susan Nall Bales describes how the process employs a multidisciplinary team of researchers and practitioners to ask and answer important questions about how the public perceives a specific issue and what consequences those perceptions hold for the policies that advocates wish to promote. The initial goal of the process is to arrive at a situation analysis of what advocates are up against in advancing their issue, and which reframing strategies hold the best potential for galvanizing public support for their positions and policies.

Framing Theory

As described by Bales on the website for the FrameWorks Institute, framing refers to the construct of a communication – its language, visuals and messengers – and the way it signals to the listener or observer how to interpret and classify new information. In practice, framing recognizes that messages can be encoded with meaning associated with existing beliefs or ideas to allow for easier public comprehension of new information or ideas.³ To increase acceptance of messages and the likelihood of behavior change, reframing is sometimes necessary.

² Bales, Susan Nall.

³ Ibid.



Strategic frame analysis helps discover existing frames of reference for a variety of issues. It gets at the heart of “how” not just “what” people think about an issue by looking at how people process new information and their patterns of reasoning.

According to Bales, we process information based on our deeply held worldviews and assumptions. Framing theory recognizes that people use “mental shortcuts” to make sense of the world around them. And when presented with new information, we look for “cues” to help us connect the new information to our “stored images of the world.” Essentially, our view of the world determines our frames of reference; in other words our mindset.

Frames then become the organizing principle under which we categorize ideas. Messages and new information enter through specific frames and their meaning is interpreted later. If any information contradicts the initial value or frame conjured up, we discard the new information. Once evoked, frames provide the context in which we process information and solve problems. This processing and sorting of incoming information based on past experiences or our view of the world is called “indexing.”⁴

Susan Nall Bales reports that the frames allow us to process information more efficiently. “If people believe that kids are in trouble (and they do), they will be drawn to facts in a news story that reinforce this notion, and will disregard those that deny it,” she writes. “If the facts don’t fit the frame, it’s the facts that are rejected, not the frame.”⁵

This may help to explain why the public has never come to accept the premise that any parent could be “an abuser,” including themselves.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.



Levels of Thought

The FrameWorks Institute’s “Talking Children’s Issues,” a CD-Rom communications presentation for the Kids Count network, identifies another important element of frames. According to FrameWorks, issues and ideas come in hierarchies. These ideas direct our thinking and link specific issues to broader issue types and deeply-held, cultural values. Essentially, frames work at three levels, as shown in the chart below:

Level 1	Universal Values Examples: Fairness, Community, Freedom, Responsibility, Authority
Level 2	Issue Type Examples: Civil rights, environment, education, child welfare, law enforcement, health
Level 3	Specific Issue/Policy Examples: Voters’ rights, school readiness, rain forests, child abuse

At the highest level of frames, the Institute asserts, are universal values like community, freedom and authority that help the public understand big ideas. When people process new information and address issues and ideas that are unfamiliar, they ask “What is this about?” People will inherently link new information to level one values. It’s important to understand the universal values at level one that your messages and issue triggers, and use these to your advantage.



For example, advocates have historically communicated about child abuse starting from level three, trying to work in the idea of prevention from this level. However, most people get caught up in the horrors and sensationalism of child abuse and don't move further than level two, making prevention about law enforcement and intervention. To reframe our issue, FrameWorks researchers suggest that advocates learn to communicate messages that start with big ideas and universal values like "children are our future," and the role of community to better engage the public in understanding prevention.

	Child Abuse & Neglect (Current Frame)	Child Abuse & Neglect (Reframed)
Level 1 <i>Universal Values</i>	Justice, Protection, Authority	The Future, Community
Level 2 <i>Issue Type</i>	Law Enforcement, Child Protective Services	Child Development, Education
Level 3 <i>Specific Issue/Policy</i>	Child Abuse	Child Abuse Prevention

More information about strategic frame analysis and the work of the FrameWorks Institute is available at <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org>.



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