Seven Models of Framing: Implications for Public Relations

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Framing is a potentially useful paradigm for examining the strategic creation of public relations messages and audience responses. Based on a literature review across disciplines, this article identifies 7 distinct types of framing applicable to public relations. These involve the framing of situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues, responsibility, and news. Potential applications for public relations practice and research are discussed.

Public relations can be examined from a variety of frameworks, including systems, critical, and rhetorical perspectives (Toth, 1992).

The rhetorical approach focuses on how public relations is engaged in the construction of messages and meanings that are intended to influence key publics important to an organization. Rhetorical theory encompasses a wide range of approaches, including argumentation, advocacy and persuasion, corporate communication, dialectics and discourse, dramatism and storytelling, information, organizing, public opinion, and reputation management. Yet, none of these approaches represents a comprehensive foundation for fully understanding the processes or consequences of public relations.

Another theoretically rich approach that offers the potential of subsuming and tying together many of these seemingly unrelated approaches involves *framing theory*. Framing has been used as a paradigm for understanding and investigating communication and related behavior in a wide range of disciplines (Rendahl, 1995). These include psychology, speech communication (especially discourse

analysis and negotiation), organizational decision making, economics, health communication, media studies, and political communication.

The premise of this article is that framing theory provides a potentially useful umbrella for examining what occurs in public relations. In addition to a rhetorical approach that focuses on how messages are created, framing is conceptually connected to the underlying psychological processes that people use to examine information, to make judgments, and to draw inferences about the world around them. This linkage is missing in many of the other rhetorical frameworks. Moreover, framing phenomena operate across levels of analysis (J. M. McLeod, Pan, & Rucinski, 1994; Pan & McLeod, 1991), making framing theory applicable at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, organizational, interorganizational, and societal levels in which public relations influence attempts operate.

This article begins by defining framing and its linkages to psychological processing. It then proceeds to identify seven distinct types or models of framing that might be applicable to public relations practice, depending on the circumstances. It concludes by suggesting some specific applications as well as directions for future research.

FRAMING DEFINED

As a foundation, it is important to recognize that public relations work fundamentally involves the *construction of social reality* (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Tuchman, 1978). The constructivist approach to communication draws on ideas from the symbolic interactionism school of sociology (Blumer, 1971). Symbolic interactionism rejects attempts to examine human behavior in terms of instinct, external forces, or the structural–functional explanations that predominated early sociological thinking. Instead, human behavior is thought to result from how people interact and their use of symbols to create meaning. Constructionists contend that representations of objects or problems in people's minds vary from the corresponding actual objects or conditions on which they are based. More important, constructionists contend that people act based on these perceptions, or what Lippmann (1922) deftly described as "the pictures inside our heads," rather than "objective reality" (p. 3).

Public relations workers have been referred to pejoratively as "imagemakers" and "spin doctors"—labels that only partially portray their important role in constructing social reality. Indeed, public relations counseling involves *defining reality* for organizations by shaping organizational perspectives about the outside world—a process also termed *enactment* (Weick, 1969). Similarly, outbound public relations communications involve attempts to define reality, at least as it relates to client organizations, for the many publics on whom the organization depends. This construction process might be dismissed as manipulation. However, because

defining reality is the very essence of communication, constructionists would argue that the process is neither inherently good nor bad.

Framing is a critical activity in the construction of social reality because it helps shape the perspectives through which people see the world. Although public relations practitioners commonly refer to framing effective messages (Duhé & Zoch, 1994) in the same way that a builder frames a house from the bottom up, the framing metaphor is better understood as a window or portrait frame drawn around information that delimits the subject matter and, thus, focuses attention on key elements within. Thus, framing involves processes of *inclusion* and *exclusion* as well as *emphasis*. Entman (1993) summarized the essence of framing processes with the following:

> Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to *select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in the communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described. Frames, then, *define* problems—determine what a causal agent is doing and costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of cultural values; *diagnose* causes—identify the forces creating the problem; *make moral judgments*—evaluate causal agents and their effects; and *suggest remedies*—offer and justify treatments for the problem and predict their likely effects. (p. 55)

Implicitly, framing plays an integral role in public relations. If public relations is defined as the process of establishing and maintaining mutually beneficial relations between an organization and publics on whom it depends (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1995), the establishment of common *frames of reference* about topics or issues of mutual concern is a necessary condition for effective relations to be established.

How Framing Works

As a property of a message, a *frame* limits or defines the message's meaning by shaping the inferences that individuals make about the message. Frames reflect judgments made by message creators or *framers*. Some frames represent alternative valencing of information (i.e., putting information in either a positive or negative light, or *valence framing*). Other frames involve the simple alternative phrasing of terms (*semantic framing*). The most complex form of framing is storytelling (*story framing*). Story framing involves (a) selecting key themes or ideas that are the focus of the message and (b) incorporating a variety of storytelling or narrative techniques that support that theme. Pan and Kosicki (1993), for example, suggested that framing can be evidenced in a series of structures within a message. These include *syntactical structures*, stable patterns of arranging words and phrases in a text (see also T. A. van Dijk, 1988); *script structures*, the orderly sequencing of events

in a text in a predictable or expected pattern; *thematic structures*, the presence of propositions or hypotheses that explain the relations between elements within a text—including the presence of words such as "because," "since," and "so"; and *rhetorical structures* that subtly suggest how a text should be interpreted. Rhetorical devices can include metaphors and similes, familiar exemplars and illustrations, provocative language and descriptors, catchphrases, and visual imagery (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

Framing operates by biasing the cognitive processing of information by individuals. At least two mechanisms to explain the process are found in the literature. One suggestion is that framing operates by providing *contextual cues* that guide decision making and inferences drawn by message audiences. Drawing on their earlier work on the concept, Kahneman and Tversky (1979) suggested that the simple positive-versus-negative framing of a decision operates as a *cognitive heuristic* or rule-of-thumb that guides decisions in situations involving uncertainty or risk. Negative reactance to losses or risks is consistent with other findings in the impression formation literature that suggest negative information is weighted more heavily than positive information (Hamilton & Zanna, 1972) and is more attention-getting (Pratto & John, 1991). It is also consistent with motivational theories that people act to protect themselves. More recent evidence for this heuristic explanation was provided by S. M. Smith and Petty (1996), who used the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) to suggest that negative framing might serve as a peripheral cue in processing. Specifically, negative framing might prompt people to think more about a message (i.e., engage in more effortful processing or message elaboration). This finding is consistent with research that suggests that message framing effects vary by level of involvement (Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy, 1990).

The second mechanism through which framing operates is *priming*. Knowledge is thought to be organized in human memory in cognitive structures or *schemas,* which operate as constraints on the arrangement and interpretation of situations and events (Bartlett, 1932; Fiske & Taylor, 1984; Markus & Zajonc, 1985; Neisser, 1967). Alternatively, schemas have been conceptualized as *categories* (hierarchial structures), as *prototypes* (idealized representations of objects within particular classes), and as *scripts* (expected scenarios for events).

Although the schematic organization of memory has been challenged (Alba & Hasher, 1983), the notion jibes with at least three of the major models that describe memory in terms of associative networks (Anderson, 1976), storage bins (Wyer & Srull, 1986), and distributed memory models (McClelland & Rummelhart, 1985). Regardless of the specific model, researchers agree that schematic processing entails people using *association* and *expectation* to make inferences about events and to impute meaning not manifested in the message itself. Significantly, some researchers use "frame" synonymously with schema to delimit which memory nodes are associated with a particular topic in memory (see Barsalou, 1992; Biocca, 1991; Lawson, 1998).

Framing affects cognitive processing by selectively influencing which memory nodes, or sets of memory traces organized as schemas, are activated to interpret a particular message. Priming effects can be conscious, such as when a person purposefully uses message cues to attempt to retrieve stored knowledge from memory. Priming effects also can be unconscious or automatic, such as when a person categorizes a topic or message during the pre-attention phase of processing and then processes information using rules that are considered appropriate in the situation (Bargh, 1988; Higgins, Bargh, & Lombardi, 1985).

SEVEN MODELS OF FRAMING

Although a theoretically rich and useful concept, framing suffers from a lack of coherent definition. An exhaustive literature search suggests the existence of more than 1,000 citations about framing in the academic literature. Framing has been adopted as a textual, psychological, and socio-political construct. Depending on the circumstances, the meaning of framing varies based on the research question, the level of analysis, or the underlying psychological process of interest. Entman (1993) characterized framing as a "fractured" paradigm that lacks clear conceptual definitions and a comprehensive statement to guide research. Other researchers have called for developing a more integrated approach that clarifies the framing concept within various domains (e.g., Brosius & Eps, 1995; Levin, Schneider, & Gaeth, 1998; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Scheufele, 1999; Yows, 1995). Thus, to use the construct in research requires careful explication (Chaffee, 1991).

Framing's ostensible weakness also is one of the concept's inherent strengths. Framing's emphasis on *providing context* within which information is presented and processed allows framing to be applied across a broad spectrum of communication situations. An examination of the literature across disciplines suggests at least seven models of framing that have potential application to public relations. By examining these alternative conceptualizations, it is possible for researchers and practitioners to understand the usefulness of the framing concept, to apply it in practice, and to pursue a systematic research agenda about framing as it might be applied to public relations. This article is a small step toward that goal. The seven models involve the framing of situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues, responsibility, and news. Each of the seven models are summarized in Table 1 and discussed next.

FRAMING OF SITUATIONS

Researchers from anthropology and sociology were the first to examine communication using a framing paradigm. Their legacy of using framing to describe how re-

TABLE 1
Typology of Seven Models of Framing Applicable to Public Relations

What is Framed	Description	Key Sources
Situations	Relationships between individuals in situations found in everyday living and literature. Framing of situations provides structure for examining communication. Applies to discourse analysis, negotiation, and other interactions.	Bateson (1972), Goffman (1974), Putnam & Holmer (1992), Tannen (1993)
Attributes	Characteristics of objects and people are accentuated, whereas others are ignored, thus biasing processing of information in terms of focal attributes.	Ghanem (1997), Levin, Schneider, & Gaeth (1998), McCombs & Ghanem (1998), Ries & Trout (1981), Wright & Lutz (1993)
Choices	Posing alternative decisions in either negative (loss) or positive (gain) terms can bias choices in situations involving uncertainty. Prospect theory suggests people will take greater risks to avoid losses than to obtain gains.	Bell, Raiffa, & Tversky (1988), Kahneman & Tverksy (1979, 1984), Levin, Schneider, & Gaeth (1998)
Actions	In persuasive contexts, the probability that a person will act to attain a desired goal is influenced by whether alternatives are stated in positive or negative terms.	Maheswaran & Meyers-Levy (1990), Smith & Petty (1996)
Issues	Social problems and disputes can be explained in alternative terms by different parties who vie for their preferred definition a problem or situation to prevail.	Best (1995), Gamson & Modigliani (1989), Snow & Benford (1988, 1992)
Responsibility	Individuals tend to attribute cause of events to either internal or external factors, based on levels of stability and control. People portray their role in events consistent with their self-image in ways that maximize benefits and minimize culpability. People attribute causes to personal actions rather than systemic problems in society.	Iyengar (1991), Iyengar & Kinder (1987), Kelley (1967, 1972a), Protess et al.(1991), Wallack, Dorfman, Jernigan, & Themba (1993)
News	Media reports use familiar, culturally resonating themes to relay information about events. Sources vie for their preferred framing to be featured through frame enterprise and frame sponsorship.	Gamson (1984), Gamson et al. (1992), Ryan (1991)

ality is constructed through language and the structure of interactions among people can be labeled as *relational* or *situational framing*.

Anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1972) is credited as the originator of situational framing theory. He defined a psychological frame as "a spatial and temporal bounding of a set of interactive messages" (p. 191). According to Bateson, the participants' understanding of the interaction in which they engage—including their roles and the rules to be followed—operate as a form of *metacommunication* (i.e., communication about communication that guides the process). Sociologist Erving

Goffman (1974) later expanded the notion and described framing as "the definition of a situation … built up in accordance with principles of organization that govern events—at least social ones—and our subjective involvement in them" (p. 10). Goffman defined a *frame* as a "schemata of interpretation" that provides a context for understanding information and enables individuals to "locate, perceive, identify and label" (p. 21). In his classic work on frame analysis, Goffman identified various processes involved. Of these, three of the most important were *keying*, bringing into focus particular aspects of everyday life by recreating past interactions; *anchoring*, the rooting of ideas in deeper frames of meaning; and *fabrication*, the recasting of certain dimensions of experience so they are made salient within a situation or interaction. Linguists and others in related disciplines have drawn on Bateson and Goffman and have applied frame analysis to studies that analyze discourse (e.g., Tannen, 1986, 1993), language (Hofling, 1987), and literary storytelling (Hufford, 1995).

Two of the most important research domains relevant to public relations in which situation framing has been investigated involve organizational behavior and negotiation. Culbert and McDonough (1990), for example, described (situational) framing as the process by which managers at all levels attempt to impose their version of reality on situations. Hirsch (1986) argued that *normative framing* has facilitated acceptance of once-disdained business practices, such as hostile takeovers. In the same way, *organizational framing* (i.e., the use of frames by organizations in its discourse) has been used to examine contemporary problems. Examples include sexual exploitation (Mills, 1997) and concealment of sexual harassment (Clair, 1993). Economists similarly have employed framing concepts. Elliott and Hayward (1998) suggested that social norms, or unconscious rules of social exchange behavior, have been used to contrast actions in different types of economic systems. They suggested the business contexts in which individuals work provide important cues that frame understanding of problems and lead to distinct behaviors. In the negotiation arena, Putnam and Holmer (1992) argued that bargaining is defined through the processes of framing and reframing that occur throughout the deliberations. Other researchers have examined the linguistic patterns used by bargainers to frame negotiations (Gray, 1997) and the critical role of mediators as framers and reframers of issues (Bodtker & Jameson, 1997).

FRAMING OF ATTRIBUTES

Separate from defining and describing overall situations found in everyday life and literature, a second and distinct form of framing involves the *framing of attributes* (i.e., the characterization of objects, events, and people). When used in this context, semantic framing is used to focus on particular attributes that might be flattering or

derogatory and, thus, be advantageous or disadvantageous to message sponsors in persuasive communications.

Consumer behavior researchers are the most active in attribute framing research and use the term in at least four distinct ways (see A. A. Wright & Lutz, 1993). *Picture framing* describes ads in which captions accompany a photo and are used to prime the cognitive processing of visuals by calling attention to particular attributes depicted (Edell & Staelin, 1983; Kamins & Marks, 1987). *Problem framing* refers to the deliberations used by decision makers, particularly novices, to structure a preference judgment task. Advertising has been shown to influence judgments by altering key aspects of the decision process by refocusing consumer attention away from certain attributes or choice rules in favor of others, thus defining (framing) the criteria on which decisions should be made and the schema that should be used (Chebat, Limoges, & Gelinas-Chebat, 1998; Ganzach, Weber, & Or, 1997; Hoch & Ha, 1986; Homer & Yoon, 1992; Schul & Ganzach, 1995; Shah, 1996; G. E. Smith & Berger, 1996; P. Wright, 1977; P. Wright & Barbour, 1975; P. Wright & Rip, 1980). *Advertising framing of product experience,* drawing on William D. Wells's (Puto & Wells, 1984) notion of transformational advertising, suggests that promotional messages transform how the consumer perceives and judges the subsequent consumption of a product (Deighton, 1988; Deighton & Schindler, 1988; Fazio & Zanna, 1981; Levin & Gaeth 1988; Marks & Kamins, 1988; Olson & Dover, 1976). Finally, *experience-frames-advertising* effects have been identified. These involve how a consumer's prior experiences and satisfaction using a particular product bias the salience of particular product attributes in a commercial message and, thus, influence the criteria used to judge messages and featured products (A. A. Wright & Lutz, 1993).

Product positioning is another term commonly used by marketers to describe attribute framing. Kotler (1995) defined positioning as the "act of designing a company's offerings and image so they occupy a meaningful and distinctive competitive position in the customer's mind" (p. 295). Ries and Trout (1981; Trout, 1996) suggested that positioning heightens product expectations and enables consumers to differentiate people, objects, and brands. Although they do not use the term "schema," Ries and Trout (1981) contended that people rank products and brands using "little ladders" in their heads; the ladders are product categories, and the ladder rungs represent brands.

Framing also has been used to describe alternative presentation of *product claims* or attributes. Alternatives examined include whether the product is described (framed) based on price versus benefits (G. E. Smith & Wortzel, 1997), product connections to political concerns (pro-environmental "green marketing") versus instrumental qualities (Green & Blair, 1995), and the alternate anchoring (framing) of price references (Gourville, 1998; Harlam, Krishna, Lehmann, & Mela, 1995; Tom & Ruiz, 1997). Finally, framing also is central to research about comparative advertising that examines claims made about a particular product's

attributes relative to others in the same category (Bettman & Sujan, 1987; Miniard, Rose, Manning, & Barone, 1998).

Attribute framing has received increased attention in media studies from Maxwell McCombs and his colleagues (Ghanem, 1997; McCombs, 1997; McCombs & Ghanem, 1998). They argued that media are effective in not only raising the salience of particular topics, issues, or objects but also can create specific knowledge of attributes related to issues and people, such as political candidates. The media's ability to create general top-of-mind salience about a topic is known as *agenda-setting* (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, 1993). McCombs labeled the media's ability also to frame attributes as *second-order agenda setting* or *frame setting*. The extension of the familiar description of agenda-setting thus suggests, although media are not necessarily effective in telling people what to think, media can be strikingly effective in telling people what to think about —and how to think about it.

Beyond marketing and communications, attribute framing has been used by economists to explain economic behaviors (for review, see Elliott & Hayward, 1998). The theory of *institutional framing* (Frey & Bohnet, 1995; Isaac, Mathieu, & Zajac, 1991; Lindenberg, 1992; Zajac, 1995) suggests that perceptions of fairness (i.e., an attribute of an institution involving whether it deals fairly with others) accounts for aberrations not explained by standard economic models that emphasize self-interest. Other economists reject classical notions of economics that presume people use a single absolute zero-base as the starting point for making economic decisions. Instead, people are thought to use multiple reference points in decision making; each of these reference points represents a distinct frame of reference that is used to assess attributes or values when making comparisons. Finally, still other neoclassical economists reject the notion that people are rational in making decisions and only seek economic benefits (utilities). These economists contend that nonrational economic behavior can be explained by the fact that individuals seek a variety of different benefits (utilities) and that any of these can dominate decision making at a given time and can thus focus judgments on different attributes.

In examining research in psychology related to decision making, Levin et al. (1998) stressed that attribute framing involves individuals making evaluations of particular attributes of an object. They assume no risk is involved. In general, attribute framing relies on semantic differences related to making what is fundamentally the same choice, such as a describing beef as "75% lean" or "25% fat" (Levin, 1987). Attribute framing also can involve effects from alternative descriptions of the success–failure rate of a particular procedure (i.e., whether results emphasize a 60% success rate or a 40% failure rate), or win–loss rates (i.e., whether a team won 30 games or lost 20 games). Significantly, Levin and his colleagues reported that positive framing of attributes consistently leads to more favorable evaluations of objects and attributes than negative framing.

FRAMING OF RISKY CHOICES

A third important area of framing for public relations involves the *framing of risky choices,* wherein individuals must not merely evaluate attributes but must make a choice between two independent options when some level of uncertainty or risk is present. (The framing of risky choices can be distinguished from framing where no independent choice is at issue and only one course of action is involved. This latter case is labeled *framing of actions* and is described in the next section.)

The framing of choices is one of the most extensively researched areas of framing, based on the classical work of psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (1979, 1984, 1987; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981, 1987). Kahneman and Tversky (1979) defined a frame as a decision maker's perception of "the acts, outcomes, and contingencies associated with a particular choice" (p. 263). In particular, they argued that human decision making is inherently nonrationale because the prospect of a loss has a far greater impact on decision making than does the prospect of an equivalent gain.

In developing their *prospect theory* of decision making, the psychologists began with an expected-value model wherein it was assumed, in a linear fashion, that an individual who finds $1 would happy and that a person who finds $100 should be 100 times happier. Conversely, they theorized that a person who loses $100 should be proportionately more distressed than a person who loses only $1. Instead, the researchers discovered an S-shaped curve of responses wherein the prospect of greater gains was perceived as less valuable but that the prospect of even a modest loss far outweighed the prospect of a comparable modest gain. The researchers concluded that people tend to avoid risks when a choice is stated in terms of gains but will take greater risks when choices are stated in terms of losses.

Prospect theory's revelations about the predominant influence of loss-prevention has been a topic of ongoing interest among researchers. Although a variety of moderating factors have been suggested, Kahneman and Tversky's (1979) framing effect has largely withstood testing (for discussions, see D. E. Bell, Raiffa, & Tversky, 1988; Brendl, Higgins, & Lemm, 1995; Dunegan, 1993; E. J. Johnson & Tversky, 1983; Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1987; Levin, 1986, 1987; Levy, 1992; Quattrone & Tversky, 1988; von Furstenberg, 1990).

Most studies of prospect theory have involved hypothetical, experimental situations, such as Kahneman and Tversky's (1979) original question involving how people would respond to an Asian disease. However, research about the framing of choices has been conducted in a wide range of applied domains as well. For example, health communicators have found patients are willing to select greater risks if the decision means saving a life or reducing suffering (for a recent review, see Rothman & Salovey, 1997; also see Burger, 1984; McNeil, Pauker, Sox, & Tversky, 1982; Rosenberg, 1989; T. L. Thompson & Cusella, 1991). The same

phenomenon has been observed among health care professionals (Christensen, Heckerling, Mackesy, & Bernstein, 1991; Marteau, 1989).

Findings consistent with prospect theory are reported in the negotiation literature. Mediators have been found to favor bargainers who frame issues in terms of losses rather than gains. Mediators also propose settlements of higher value when both parties frame decisions in loss terms (Lim & Carnevale, 1995). A program of research on the effects of framing on negotiations spearheaded by Margaret Neale (see Neale & Bazerman, 1999) suggested that how a negotiator's role is framed influences the negotiator's task orientation to seek the greatest possible concessions (Neale, Huber, & Northcroft, 1987), that positive framing of a negotiator's self-confidence leads to more concessions (Neale & Bazerman, 1985), and that framing can moderate the effectiveness of even expert negotiators (Neale & Northcroft, 1986).

Organizational behavior researchers have found that individuals in businesses are willing to take greater risks to avoid losses rather than to seek gains (Bailey & Alexander, 1993; Bateman & Zeithaml, 1989; Bazerman, 1984; Beach, 1997; Devine, 1990; Fagley & Miller, 1987; Frisch, 1993; McDaniel & Sistrunk, 1991; Pease, Bieser, & Tubbs, 1993). Marketers similarly have used prospect theory to examine purchasing risk behavior (Puto, 1987; Qualls & Puto, 1989). Finally, economists have examined the influence of framing on the risk tolerances among auditors (P. E. Johnson, Jamal, & Berryman, 1991) and financial planners (Roszkowski & Snelbecker, 1990) and the effect of framing persuasive messages related to taxpayer compliance (Hasseldine, 1997). However, the effect varies by the domain of the choice. For example, Wang (1996) found that people are more willing to take risks to save human lives than to preserve public property or save personal money. This is consistent with research in health communication that suggests that the context of the decision influences willingness to take risks (Rothman & Salovey, 1997).

FRAMING OF ACTIONS

Closely aligned to prospect theory's emphasis on the influence of framing gains versus losses, other research related to decision making has focused on the best way to describe action that might be undertaken by individuals to achieve a desired goal. This idea can be labeled *framing of actions*.

Whereas the framing of attributes involves focusing attention on inherent qualities of an object, and whereas the framing of risky choices focuses on willingness of individuals to take risks, framing of actions focuses on persuasive attempts to maximize cooperation in which no independent options or choices are involved. For persuasive communicators, the concern is how to frame actions necessary to achieve compliance with a desired goal.

A familiar example illustrates the idea: Some universities allow students to pay tuition early in a lump sum or to pay a slightly higher amount in installments. Assuming that a university wanted to improve its cash flow, the desired action of paying money earlier can be framed as a discount (a gain), whereas the installment plan might be framed as a surcharge (a loss). The two explanations are different semantically, but the options are the same.

Framing of actions is similar to *pure-valence framing* as used by economists (Elliott & Hayward, 1998) and to *goal framing* as suggested by Levin, Schneider, and Gaeth (1998). The latter researchers explain that positive action (goal) framing involves focusing attention on obtaining a positive consequence (gain), whereas the negative frame focuses attention on avoiding the negative consequence (loss) resulting from not taking a particular action.

A specific applied domain in which action framing is especially pertinent is in the effort by health practitioners to promote healthy behaviors and communicate the dangers of risky behaviors (see Burger, 1984; Travis, Phillippi, & Tonn, 1989; Wilson, Purdon, & Wallston, 1988). Framing studies have been conducted in the context of preventing automobile accidents, cancer, Downs syndrome, HIV, sexually transmitted diseases, and weight control problems, among others. People's willingness to engage in particular health-related actions have been shown to be influenced by how risks and alternatives are framed, although various moderating factors have also been suggested. Research in economic psychology similarly suggests that individuals differentially will make choices about the same personal benefits derived from society as a whole, based on whether the issue was framed as an action involving a social dilemma or a public goods problem (Brewer & Kramer, 1986).

Findings from research involving the framing of actions is somewhat similar to the results obtained in research obtained in the framing of risky choices but differs from findings pertaining to the framing of attributes. Framing of actions in terms of negative consequences appears to have greater persuasive impact than framing that emphasizes positive consequences or gains (e.g., Block & Keller, 1995; Ganzach & Karsahi, 1995; Grewal, Gotlieb, & Marmorstein, 1994; Homer & Yoon, 1992; Meyerowitz & Chaiken, 1987; Shiv, Edell, & Payne, 1997). However, Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy (1990) found that positively framed messages might be more persuasive when people engage in little detailed processing of messages and that negative framing of actions only applies when people engage in higher levels of cognitive elaboration. S. M. Smith and Petty (1996) suggested that, although the presence of negatively framed arguments might prompt more elaborate message processing, the effects also might be moderated by an individual's expectations about the type of framing found in a persuasive message. However, Block and Keller argued that the effect is also moderated by an individual's perception of *self-efficacy* (i.e., whether a person believes that following a particular action will lead to the desired outcome). Individuals with high levels of self-ef-

ficacy are less inclined to engage in effortful processing, in which case positive and negative frames are equally persuasive. Other factors that influence the framing of actions include the level of consumer expertise (G. E. Smith, 1996) and the presence or absence of social interaction (Woodside & Singer, 1994).

FRAMING OF ISSUES

Framing has received increased attention among sociologists and others as a way to examine alternative interpretations of social reality. This approach can be labeled the *framing of issues*.

An issue is a dispute between two or more parties, usually over the allocation of resources or the treatment or portrayal of groups in society. Issues frequently result in extensive public discussion and frequently require resolution within a public policy forum, such as a legislature or the courts. Issues are the bases around which publics are organized and public opinion is formed (J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Issues can be constructed by as few as two individuals but also can emerge at the group, organization, interorganizational, or societal levels. At the heart of most issues is the question of interpretation (i.e., how a particular problem or concern should be understood or explained). Disputants involved in an issue often vie to have their preferred interpretation predominate so that others will see the dispute from a perspective similar to their own (i.e., using similar schemas).

Framing has been employed as a tool for analyzing public debates on issues (Murphy, 1998; Murphy & Maynard, 1998; Skillington, 1997) and as the focus of still other research in the arenas of negotiation and bargaining (Putnam & Holmer, 1992; Scharpf, 1990). Legal theorists also have recognized the importance of effective issue framing as a key strategy in persuasively communicating with jurors (B. E. Bell, 1989; Garner, 1997; McCaffery, Kahneman, & Spitzer, 1995).

Organizational behavior researchers have employed issues framing as variable to understand why and how decisions are made and actions are undertaken (Bayster & Ford, 1997; J. H. Davis et al., 1997; Highouse, Pease, & Leatherberry, 1996; Nutt, 1998). Applications range from ethical decision making (Bailey & Alexander, 1993) to emergency response planning (Li & Adams, 1995) and employment practices (Friedman & Lipshitz, 1994; Huber, Neale, & Northcroft, 1987). Framing similarly has been used to examine people's judgments of the fairness of allocation of economic resources. Studies in economics have focused on issues such as income equity (Arts, Hermkens, & Van Wijck, 1991), tax equity (Kinsey, Grasmick, & Smith, 1991), willingness to pay for public goods (Guagano, Dietz, & Stern, 1994), and social conflicts pertaining to environmental and public health risks (Vaughan & Seifert, 1992).

Framing plays a pivotal role in defining social problems and the attendant moral actions in dealing with them (Gergen, 1992). Investigators outside media

studies have used a variety of methods to study the framing of controversies involving politics (Nelson, 1993), gender rights (Jenness, 1995; Williams & Williams, 1995), race (Gamson, 1995; Lake, 1991; McCants, 1990), property rights (E. van Dijk & Wilke, 1997), the threat of religious cults (Forsyth & Olivier, 1990; Pfeiffer, 1992), and the marginalization of various groups in postmodern society (Harper, 1994). In a similar vein, public health issues have been shown to be dramatically influenced by the way they are represented. For example, AIDS has been framed alternatively as a disease involving "high-risk groups" and resulting from "risky practices" (Goss & Adam-Smith, 1995; Spears, Abraham, Abrams, & Sheeran, 1992). Related research suggests that sympathy for AIDS victims varies considerably depending on whether AIDS is described as a disease affecting hemophiliacs, intravenous drug users, or homosexuals (Levin & Chapman, 1990).

Social researchers who adopt a constructionist approach argue that social problems are best understood as issues that are constructed by *claim makers* (Best, 1995; Schneider, 1985). Advocates for issues engage in a process of *agenda-building* that involves mobilizing support, building coalitions, manipulating symbols, and actively seeking publicity in public media (Cobb & Elder, 1972). Agenda-building involves pushing issues from the arenas of public discussion, onto the media agenda and ultimately to the public policy agenda, in which issues and social problems can receive official acknowledgment, validation, and the fullest possible hearing (Manheim, 1987). However, not all issues fully attain public visibility. Among factors that determine the success of issue advocates is the limited carrying capacity of the system (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988) as well as the *frame enterprise* and the effectiveness of *frame sponsorship* by issue advocates (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). This process also can be conceptualized as *frame building* (Scheufele, 1999).

Framing plays an integral part in the process of agenda-building as advocates attempt to communicate with members of affected or sympathetic groups, either directly or indirectly using the media. In the latter case, social identification theory suggests the goal is to signal uninvolved group members about how they should think or act in regard to an issue (Price, 1989; Turner, 1982). Kinder and Sanders (1990) suggested that frames operate in this definitional process as "devices embedded in political discourse, invented and employed by political elites, often with an eye toward advancing their own interests or ideologies and intended to make favorable interpretations" (p.74). In doing so, claims makers try to influence which schematic representations of issue are invoked by politicians and media workers (Fishman, 1980; Gans, 1979) and, most important, by media audiences (Graber, 1988).

Researchers concerned with social movement organizations have theorized extensively about the importance of framing (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Snow & Benford, 1992). Snow and Benford (1988), for example, suggested social movements engage in three distinct framing processes. *Diagnostic framing* involves the

identification of an event or aspect of social life as problematic or in need of alter-ation. *Prognostic framing* proposes a solution to the diagnosed problem and outlines what needs to be done. Finally, *motivational framing* represents a call to action as well as the rationale for engaging in ameliorative or corrective action. Elsewhere, the researchers define framing as a device for mobilization wherein groups attempt to create linkages (i.e., build relationships or coalitions) among otherwise disparate in-dividuals through a process of *frame alignment* (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986). Four strategies identified by the researchers are *frame bridging* (the linking of congruent with unconnected frames), *frame amplification* (clarification and crystallization of beliefs and values held by followers), *frame extension* (reach-ing out to include other constituencies), and *frame transformation* (in which frames are altered in the wake of changing conditions).

FRAMING OF RESPONSIBILITY

Beyond matters of definition, most issues and social problems entail questions of cause and responsibility (i.e., who should be credited or blamed for events). Whether because of instinct or experience or for self-protection, individuals engage in what Heider (1976) termed "intuitive factor analysis" to understand why events happen. Sillars (1982) suggested that attribution of an event to either personal or environmental factors determines the extent to which an individual is held respon-sible. However, the attribution of responsibility does not always reflect the objec-tive facts of a situation accurately and can be distorted based on how events are de-scribed. This accounts for yet another type of framing relevant to public relations, the *framing of responsibility*.

Attribution processes, or how humans explain events and human behavior, have received extensive attention from psychologists (Folkes, 1988; Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis 1965; Kelley, 1967, 1972a, 1972b; Lee & Robinson, 1998). Kelley's (1967) theory of causal attribution identified three distinct types of attributions: to an actor, to the object or entity acted on, or to the environment or circumstances in which an event occurs. When individuals have multiple opportunities to observe events, Kelley suggested that attributions are based on patterns of covariation involving three factors: *distinctiveness,* the extent to which different entities evoke similar be-havior; *consensus,* the extent to which different actors behave in a similar way; and *consistency over time and modality,* the extent to which the behavior is similar in dif-ferent contexts. In situations in which only one opportunity to observe is possible, Kelley's (1972b) *discounting principle* suggested that people will tend to give less credence to the role of a given cause if other plausible explanations are also present (see Sparkman, 1982). Similarly, his *argumentation principle* suggested that facilitative causal explanations of events are judged more plausible than inhibitory casual explanations if both are considered.

Later attribution research suggests that actions can be labeled (framed) as controlled or uncontrolled, internally or externally originated, or as a result of stable or unstable conditions within a person. Ability, for example, represents an explanation for success that combines internal and stable factors within an individual. Luck or fate, on the other hand, entails external, unstable factors.

Researchers have demonstrated that attribution processes are easily biased as a result of a variety of factors. These include a lack of effort to find the "best" explanation, the salience of alternative explanations, prior knowledge and extant schemas, and personal needs and motivations. *Fundamental attribution error* refers to the tendency to attribute other people's behavior to stable personality factors or dispositions rather than situations or external causes. *Actor–observer bias* is the tendency to attribute other people's behaviors to stable dispositions, whereas people attribute their own behavior to situational factors. *Self-serving bias* involves self-attributions of success or failure: People tend to attribute their own successes to stable dispositions and their failures to situational factors. *Personal control bias* suggests that humans assign blame for disastrous occurrences in proportion to the perceived severity of the consequences (Walster, 1966). Finally, the *just-world hypothesis* suggests evaluations of a victim's suffering become increasingly negative to the degree that the victim's suffering is seen as unjustified (Lerner et al., 1976). All these ideas suggest that the way an event is portrayed can lead to different conclusions about responsibility.

Although some events occur for unidentifiable reasons (so-called "acts of God"), most individuals are unwilling or unable to accept such a simple explanation. Most people seek to identify the cause and assign responsibility. Wallack, Dorfman, Jernigan, and Themba (1993; also see Wallack, 1990) observed that Americans frame issues to portray the overall social system as fundamentally sound and prefer to attribute problems to corrupt, inept, or irresponsible individuals. The result is to ignore systemic problems related to social organization or societal resources available to deal with a problem. As a result, events that might have been prevented through intervention simply are dismissed later as accidents due to human error. Various problems—AIDS, alcoholism, child abuse, cigarette addiction, drug abuse, and overeating—have been framed as problems of individuals rather than society. The solution often involves the *medicalization* of problems, wherein emphasis is placed on treatment of individuals rather than on prevention or elimination of the root causes at the societal level.

Efforts to assign responsibility for issues and social problems is referred to as *diagnostic framing*—a process that can be at work among individuals as well as groups (Snow & Benford, 1988, 1992). Protess et al. (1991) suggested that diagnostic framing plays a central role in investigative journalism. News workers often begin with a single incident and then work inductively to identify other cases or individuals who might be affected. After sensing the inherent dramatic values in a story, investigative reporters conceptualize a story by placing it within a broader

context through framing. Stories are identified as part of a particular investigative genre and typified as example of a particular well-known problem, such as political corruption, corporate exploitation, or government waste and inefficiency. As the drama unfolds further, roles inevitably are assigned to victims and villains.

Attribution processes are evident in the way that media subtly frame stories and assign responsibility. Bennett (1995), for example, criticized news workers for excessive *personalization of news*. Meanwhile, Iyengar (Iyengar, 1991, 1992; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) argued that news coverage is predominated by the *episodic framing* of stories to exclusion of *thematic framing*. Episodic framing involves storytelling from the perspective of people and individual events. Audiences are believed to be more interested in people and more responsive to portrayals involving concrete events and actions (episodes). By contrast, media engage in comparatively little thematic framing, where stories are told more broadly from a societal perspective using abstract concepts instead of case studies or exemplars. An unintended consequence of the preponderance of episodic framing is that audiences feel absolved of responsibility for social problems because responsibility is so readily attributed to the people portrayed in the news, whether or not the newsmakers depicted are culpable.

The desire to attribute responsibility has lead to an emphasis on victimization in modern society (Dershowitz, 1994), although stories about victims suffering at the hands of villains can be found in literature across cultures over the centuries. The seemingly natural tendency is for victims to attribute responsibility for their misfortunes to misdeeds of others, rather than assume any responsibility for their own plight. Shaver (1975) pointed out that, although production-of-action is one element of responsibility, *causality* and *responsibility* are distinct concepts. Responsibility can subsume causality but also can incorporate notions of *legal accountability* and *moral accountability*. Significantly, legal culpability is addressed in courts of law, whereas moral accountability is debated and framed in the court of public opinion.

FRAMING OF NEWS

The final model of framing relevant to public relations deals with *news framing* (i.e., how news stories are portrayed or framed by the media in an effort to explain complex or abstract ideas in familiar, culturally resonating terms). Significantly, news framing can incorporate many of the notions of framing discussed in the previous sections.

Framing has received considerable attention in the past decade as an approach to understanding news processes and effects, although the role of public relations as sources in news framing has been largely overlooked. Drawing on Goffman (1974), Tuchman (1978) was the first researcher to recognize the integral role that

framing plays in news gathering by media workers and news processing by audiences. She suggested news workers use frames to construct social reality for audiences and thus give meaning to words and images. Gitlin (1980) described news workers as "symbol handlers" who use *frame selectivity* to shape the way news is defined using dominant social frames. Gamson (1984, 1989, 1992, 1995; Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992; Gamson & Lasch, 1983; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Graber, 1989) contended that the ideas that appear in news are best understood as *media packages* that feature a central organizing idea for events and employ various symbolic or *framing devices* that support the main idea of the story. According to Gamson, the task of media workers thus is to arrange random events into a meaningful, organized interpretive package.

Later media theorists have paid increased attention to framing as an alternative formulation of issues such as bias and objectivity (Hackett, 1984; Parenti, 1993). Hackett observed framing is not necessarily a conscious process on the part of journalists but is the result of their unconscious assumptions about the social world. Dunwoody (1992) explained that, although frames are not unique to journalism, they are central to journalistic work and serve as "mental maps" that can be activated quickly and can reduce journalists' efforts. The ability of media to raise the salience of attributes (McCombs, 1997) and to frame values (Ball-Rokeach, Power, Gutherie, & Waring, 1990; Ball-Rokeach & Rokeach, 1987; Weaver, Graber, McCombs, & Eyal, 1981) suggests comparatively strong effects that go beyond simple agenda-setting. Separately, considerable discussion has ensued about how to measure framing effects (Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss, & Ghanem, 1991; D. R. Thompson, 1991) and role of framing as both dependent and independent variables in media research (Scheufele, 1999).

The topics of news framing studies have spanned a wide range of social problems, including abortion (Andsager, 1998), America's "drug problem" (Fan, 1996), Cold War criminals (Carmichael, 1993), child mistreatment (Hendrickson, 1994), fathers' rights (Williams & Williams, 1995), labor strikes (Martin & Oshagan, 1997), and welfare (Sotirovic, 1998). Framing also has provided a useful perspective from which to examine portrayals of occupational groups such as artists (J. Ryan & Sim, 1990), as well as ethnic minorities (Gandy, 1994; Gandy, Kopp, Hands, Frazer, & Phillips, 1997; Jackson Turner, & Allen, 1997; Platt & Fraser, 1998; Solomon, 1993). Gender-related studies have examined media framing of gay athletes (Wachs & Dworkin, 1997), affirmative action programs (Fine, 1992; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987), sexual harassment and the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court nomination (Huang, 1996; Robinson & Powell, 1996), charges of wife-beating involving boxer Sugar Ray Leonard (Messner & Solomon, 1992), and women's issues (Terkildsen & Schnell, 1997).

Deviance from norms, as represented in coverage of disputes and protests, have similarly been extensively examined (Baylor, 1996; Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993;

Gitlin, 1980; Hertog & McLeod, 1995; D. M. McLeod & Detenber, 1998; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997). International disputes and conflicts examined include the Intifada (Cohen & Wolfsfeld, 1993), the Gulf War (Kanjirathinkal & Hickey, 1992; Kelman, 1995), neo-Nazism in Germany (Boyle, 1995), and terrorist attacks on airliners (Dobkin, 1992; Entman, 1991; Paletz & Vinson, 1994).

Other framing research has focused on the media's portrayal of scientific issues and processes (Nelkin, 1987), including issues such as climate change (Trumbo, 1996), cold fusion (Lewenstein, 1994), ozone depletion (Litfin, 1995), and memory recovery (Heaton & Wilson, 1998). Of particular interest has been the role of framing in the reporting about risk (Dunwoody, 1992; Dunwoody, Neuwirth, Griffin, & Long, 1992; Dunwoody & Peters, 1993; Hornig, 1992). Specific topics examined within the domain of risk communications involve environmental issues and disputes (Coleman, 1995; Corbett, 1992; J. J. Davis, 1995; Eiser, Spears, Webley, & Van der Pligt, 1988; Johnson & Tversky, 1983; Littlejohn, 1997; Maher, 1996; Stallings, 1990) as well as issues pertaining to public health and the availability of public health services (Burgoyne, 1997; Rhee, 1997a; Steele & Hallahan, 1998). Finally, framing has played an increasingly important role in the examination of political communication, both in terms of news coverage and candidate advertising (Biocca, 1991; Cappella & Jamieson, 1996; Domke, Shah, & Wackman, 1998; Entman & Rojecki, 1993; Geer & Kahn, 1993; Iorio & Huxman, 1996; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990; McGee, 1984; Millar, 1990; Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997; Noelle-Neuman & Mathes, 1987; Park & Kosicki, 1995; Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997; Rhee, 1997b; Shah, Domke, & Wackman, 1996).

Critical researchers consider media framing essentially a tool of power that can be used in the struggle to define whose view of the world will predominate. Gitlin's (1980) study, for example, documented how the framing of New Left social movements by mainstream media biased coverage of the anti-Vietnam war movement in the United States. Morley (1976) suggested that concerns such as balanced reporting have been usurped in importance by "the basic conceptual and ideological framework through which events are presented and as a result of which they come to be given one dominant/primary meaning rather than another" (p. 246). Media framing (and perhaps other forms of framing) thus are integrally involved in questions of ideology (Glasgow University Media Group, 1980; Hall 1982).

DISCUSSION

This review suggests that framing concepts have been employed in a variety of ways to explain the structuring of messages and the differential responses that can result. In some instances, framing involves defining a scene or situation in which

individuals interact. Elsewhere, framing entails messages that focus selectively on key attributes characteristics of a cause, candidate, product, or service. Framing can also be employed to structure the way that individuals think about choices and alternative courses of actions that they might use to attain goals. Similarly, framing can be used to define issues favorable to parties in disputes and to attribute responsibility for actions, issues, or social problems. Finally, news framing is a vital process used by news media to relate events in ways that have relevance and meaning for audiences.

The central idea that links each of these models of framing is *contextualization*. Framing puts information into a context and establishes frames of reference so people can evaluate information, comprehend meanings, and take action, if appropriate. Indeed, the message must be imbued with sufficient clues so that people can make sense of the message and for it to be persuasive (i.e., to have an influence on people's predispositions or overt behaviors). Framing provides those clues.

It could be argued that framing is not merely useful but is essential to public relations. In developing programs, public relations professionals fundamentally operate as *frame strategists,* who strive to determine how situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues, and responsibility should be posed to achieve favorable outcomes for clients. Framing decisions are perhaps the most important strategic choices made in a public relations effort. It is out of strategic framing that public relations communicators develop specific themes (i.e., key messages or arguments that might be considered by publics in the discussion of topics of mutual concern). Framing also provides the foundation for choosing images and other framing devices that can be used to dramatize and reinforce key ideas. Finally, framing provides the basis for how people should be asked to evaluate information, make choices, or take action. Virtually all of the specific, alternative rhetorical approaches mentioned at the beginning of this article can be subsumed within a framing model.

Applications for Public Relations

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed analysis of every circumstance in which framing might be applied in public relations, a brief discussion of applications in public relations helps to illustrate the robustness of the framing concept.

Framing of situations.   In organizing communications between an organization and key publics, a major concern in public relations should be to structure encounters in ways that will be favorably received and reinforce the intent for all parties. For example, if an exchange is truly meant to be a two-way symmetric exchange (which normative or system theorists suggest is the ideal way to conduct

public relations; J. E. Grunig, 1992; J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984), practitioners must take care to assure that the structure of the encounters themselves are framed properly to facilitate dialogue and open discussion. As has evidenced in the negotiation and bargaining literature (e.g., Putnam & Holmer, 1992), participants in exchanges use metacommunication to understand what is really meant. The situations in which the parties find themselves must be consistent with their expectations.

As another example, consider the extensive use of special events as group gatherings to mark organizational achievements—grand openings, award banquets, anniversary celebrations, and so on. Each of these communication opportunities must be staged or framed in a way that meets expectations of participants. Unmet expectations related to ritualistic staging or celebratory atmospherics might redefine the event and lead to inferences by participants that are just the opposite of the intent of event sponsors.

Framing of attributes.   Public relations practitioners routinely engage in framing of attributes by accentuating particular aspects of the causes, candidates, products, or services they represent. A classic example is Ivy Lee's work for J. D. Rockefeller in the early 20th century. Lee did little to change Rockefeller's business practices but worked ardently to make other aspects of Rockefeller's life known—including his interest in people, enthusiasm for golf, and philanthropic largess (Moyers, 1984). The same principle can be seen today at work as corporations strive to promote their various good qualities—such as community involvement, support of the arts and education, and philanthropy—which only indirectly relate to their principal business activity. Critics might suggest that such communications only serve to mask other, less-favorable aspects of the corporation's operations.

Public relations workers routinely strive to position clients and their products or services so they will be evaluated favorably and so key publics will respond in a desired way when they buy, invest, donate, work, or vote. In many cases, attribute framing involves creating *positively valenced* associations with beliefs and values, traditions and rituals, or with other cultural artifacts that people cherish. Positioning a product as being environmentally safe is a good example. On the other hand, the creation of *negatively valenced* associations is sometimes useful when messages focus on competitors. For example, negative political candidate advertising capitalizes on accentuating specific, undesirable attributes of an opponent candidate (e.g., "big government spender" or "soft on crime") that are intended to conjure up negative associations among potential voters.

Framing of choices.   For practitioners whose work involves asking people to take risks, the framing of risks provides useful insights into processes of decision making. With a preponderance of evidence suggesting that people are risk-averse and more concerned with preventing losses than achieving gains, framing provides a

valuable theoretical model in which arguments related to risk-taking might be posed (see Ferguson, Valenti, & Melwani, 1991; Heath, Seshadri, & Lee, 1998). In various contexts—such as what products to buy, where to invest, or how to vote—public relations professionals deal with individuals confronted with uncertainty.

The proper framing of propositions can be influential when the key concern is to motivate people to make decisions. Prospect theory suggests that public relations professionals face a difficult challenge when trying to encourage key publics to make choices that involve even moderate levels of risk. In attracting new customers, employees, investors, or donors, the challenge confronting message creators is to overcome the comfort afforded by the status quo and thus accentuate positive gains that can be attained by switching brands, leaving a current employer, or changing investments. Conversely, when a strong, positive relationship exists between organizations and individuals, prospect theory suggests public relations message creators might enjoy an advantage by being able to focus on potential losses that might be incurred if people already in an organization's fold seek risky alternatives. The security of the familiar thus plays to the benefit of retaining customers, employees, investors, or donors if their expectations are being met by an organization.

Framing of actions.   Similarly, when individuals are reasonably motivated to act, or when question of foregoing losses or sustaining gains is not at question, public relations routinely faces concerns about how to maximize behavioral intentions and actions by posing desired actions in the most advantageous way. As an example, consider a marketing or customer relations initiative by a utility company to prevent home fires resulting from leaking gas furnaces. Virtually all customers will recognize the value of preventing fires, thus no choice is involved. However, getting customers to conduct a once-a-year home furnace inspection can be a challenging task. The positive framing of such a message would suggest that people who do conduct home furnace inspections once a year have an increased chance of preventing trouble from gas leaks. Conversely, a negatively framed message might claim that homeowners who do not inspect their furnaces have an increased chance of fire.

Also, consider the common situation in which a public relations department's internal communication unit is called on to encourage compliance by employees with occupational health and safety rules or equal opportunity employment laws. Again, no choice is involved because company policies dictate compliance. In the case of the occupational health and safety rules, positive framing might stress the value of a safe work environment, whereas negative framing might focus attention on the dangers of unsafe practices. In the case of affirmation action compliance, positive framing might emphasize fairness and the need to provide equity for all workers, whereas negative framing might stress the problems created by discrimination. Again, the negative frame can be nothing more than obverse of the positive frame, but evidence suggests it might be more effective.

Framing of issues.   Framing is clearly a valuable concept for issue managers. Issue management essentially involves efforts to control or contain the development, growth, and maturation of issues over the life cycle of a controversy (Downs, 1972; González-Herrero & Pratt, 1996; Kitsuse & Spector, 1987; Meng, 1992). The ultimate objective of most issues management initiatives is to seek resolution of disputes in an expedient manner that benefits all parties and avoids unnecessary conflict. However, if that is not possible, effective issues management involves controlling the prominence the issue attains in the media or the public policy agenda. Defining issues through the process of framing thus becomes a pivotal concern. Issues can be framed as significant or insignificant to the public interest but more important can be defined in terms of how people should think about an issue. Take, for example, the case of generous tax breaks sometimes given by local governments to a company as an incentive to locate a plant in a community. Some government officials might frame the grant as a necessity for economic development, whereas critics might characterize it as corporate giveaway. The way that such a question is framed is critical for the effective management of the issue for both the city and the organization.

Framing of responsibility.   Responsibility framing—acceptance or denial of being responsible for events—has particular implications for public relations. The adroit handling of negative information has been the focus of recent research, particularly in the context of crisis management (Coombs, 1995; Coombs & Holladay, 1996; Lyon & Cameron, 1998).

For organizations engaged in good works, the goal of many public relations efforts is to enhance the reputation of the organization by calling attention to the organization's role in activities such as funding a new local symphony or helping improve local schools. In such circumstances, organizations actively seek out credit for their actions. However, their efforts to gain recognition can be discounted by cynics who see such efforts as self-serving efforts to ingratiate the organization with the community. When involved in controversy, however, an organization might want to pursue a strategy of responsibility avoidance. Although many public relations advisers contend that organizations should openly accept responsibility for mistakes, many organizations find this difficult for a variety of legitimate reasons—the potential of lost business, the blemishing of their corporate reputation, investor uneasiness, and legal liability, to name just a few.

Most organizations also want to avoid appearances of *recreant behavior* (Freudenburg, 1993; Freudenburg, Coleman, Gonzales, & Helgeland, 1993), which suggests that the organization misused their authority or failed to carry out their responsibilities in ways that meet public expectations and thus violated public trust. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that, even if an organization could avoid responsibility, it is likely that other disputants in a controversy will attempt to ascribe

blame to the organization for the creation or continued existence of the issue or problem. The opposition's motivations might result from a desire to resolve the issue, to avoid tarnishing the disputant's own reputation, to advance the disputant's own definition of the problem, or to lay the groundwork for remedies or legal restitution. Even worse is the possibility of *inadvertence error,* which Goffman (1974) said occurs in situations in which people or organizations are portrayed as being involved in a blameworthy action when, in fact, no intent can be demonstrated. Effective framing can help ameliorate the probability of such situations.

Framing of news.   Finally, as suppliers of nearly half of the content found in the news media (Cutlip, 1962, 1989), public relations practitioners are extricably involved in the framing of the news. The role of sources as shapers of news content is well documented (Fishman, 1980; Gandy, 1982; Gans 1979; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Turk, 1986). Gamson described the efforts of media sources to frame information as *frame enterprise* and referred to sources themselves as *frame sponsors* (Gamson, 1984; Gamson & Lasch, 1983; C. Ryan, 1991).

In proposing a particular story to a reporter or editor, public relations professionals engage in two separate but related processes. The first is to solicit interest in the story topic in itself. The second is to assure that the story is slanted or framed in a way that is consistent with the source's *preferred framing* (i.e., how a client would like to have its story told). Exchanges between sources and journalists are essentially *frame negotiations* in which adroit sources play on journalists' schematically organized knowledge about news to propose stories that follow conventions of storytelling, fit certain formulaic categories of content, and resonate with a journalists notions of popular culture. Publicists familiar with news processes can quickly characterize a story as being of a particular type and can telegraph that characterization to their journalistic counterparts; close correspondence between a story proposal and story expectations leads to a greater probability of placement. In a similar way, when being interviewed (or training clients to be interviewed), public relations workers promote particular frames by promoting themes and deploying framing devices that help reinforce the desired framing of a story.

Because not all sources are not necessarily going to frame a story in the same way, public relations professionals often find themselves engaged in *frame contests* with other sources who are also seeking their favored treatment of a story (Gamson, 1984; C. Ryan, 1991). Client complaints about media bias or inaccuracies in coverage can often be explained in terms of framing that is inconsistent with a source's favored frame. However, almost invariably, the framing of a news story corresponds to the framing or schematic understanding of the event by at least some group. Market models of journalism suggest that journalists will purposefully strive to frame stories in ways that resonate with what journalists perceive to be the largest segment of their audience.

Conclusion

This discussion has suggested that framing is a potentially useful paradigm to examine public relations. The public relations field would benefit from additional theorizing and research that builds on and extends the typology of framing outlined here. Moreover, various aspects of framing not addressed here should be examined. For example, one of the most important questions involves the dynamic nature of framing. Frames are not static characterizations but change with time. Goffman (1974) observed that *reframing* can occur any time a situation presents incongruent information and more plausible explanations emerge for situations. Much needs to be understood about why and how public relations professionals routinely engage in processes of framing and reframing.

Similarly, the categories of framing outlined here are not mutually exclusive but are actually used in combination. A public relations worker's response to a crisis provides a case in point. Crisis managers will strive to define the situation, that is, whether the events that occurred actually constitute a crisis (situational framing). Certain attributes of a crisis might be emphasized or de-emphasized, such as the steps are being taken to correct a problem (attribute framing). Significant choices facing the organization or affected publics might be outlined in terms of gains or losses (framing of risky choices), whereas the desirable actions to be taken by affected publics can be framed in different ways to enlist cooperation from key groups (action framing). Meanwhile, a crisis manager might also have to address the underlying issues behind the crisis (issue framing) as well as the cause and potential explanations of responsibility (responsibility framing). Finally, as a media relations representative, the crisis manager must be concerned with packaging information about the event and the organization's response to it in order to shape media coverage, based on knowledge of how media cover events of this type and culturally resonating themes that will garner public favor (news framing). Although this example is intentionally contrived, it suggests that framing strategies operate simultaneously at multiple levels. This makes understanding different models of framing all the more important in a public relations context.

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