A FrameWorks Institute eZine

Movement Building Not Marketing:
Framing Lessons from the Social Movements Literature

In this eZine, I highlight some of the lessons on framing from the wide body of research on social movements. Researchers who study social movements typically focus on when, why, and how ordinary people act collectively to change something about their communities and societies more generally. These scholars pay a lot of attention to why and how individuals shift their thinking about a social problem and take action to change their circumstances. They also study when these movements become professionalized organizations, charged with the responsibility of communicating to the public their values and goals while attempting to gain popular support and recruit new constituents. Why some social movements succeed and others fail has also been a central focus of research (for more on this topic, see FrameWorks eZine #29). What researchers have discovered about successful social movements and the way they use framing strategies provides very important lessons to issue advocates.

On the face of it, the analytic focus of this body of literature might appear similar to a marketing campaign. The goals are indeed similar: making new information available to the public in order to get people to think about things in new ways that will impact future decisions. Issue advocates might easily confuse framing with branding a consumer product.

The research on social movements, however, provides a very different model for developing communication strategies than a marketing approach. This model is at the core of how *FrameWorks* envisions successful strategies. More specifically, based on the lessons from scholarship in the social movements, we believe issue advocates should conceive of their communication strategies as:

1. Coalition building rather than developing a market niche
2. Focused on systems of injustice rather than personal failings
3. Involving collective agency rather than individual choices

This eZine explores these three lessons and shows how scholarship on social movements contributes to our understanding of framing processes. This literatures shows

issue advocates how they can build movements, not market products. Before discussing these lessons, I begin with a brief definition of social movements and an explanation of why scholars are interested in studying them. More specifically, I talk about how social movement scholars study *framing*. This approach is distinct from how researchers in other academic disciplines, such as psychologists and cognitive scientists, have dealt with this concept. This eZine will hopefully give collaborators a sense of the scholarship on social movements in general and where it fits in *FrameWorks'* approach to developing communication strategies.

Scientific Study of Social Movements

   Sociologist Charles Tilly (2004) defines social movements as contentious campaigns by which ordinary people make claims on other, often more powerful, people. According to Tilly and other scholars, social movements are a significant way that ordinary people participate in political action even before most people could engage in formal electoral politics. Sociologists and political scientists study a wide variety of social movements during many different historical periods. They study the most famous popular movements like the French Revolution, the civil rights movement or Indian decolonization. They not only focus on these well-known national or even global social movements, but social scientists have also studied smaller, community oriented movements. Scholars have also studied movements from all parts of the political and ideological spectrum from radical environmentalism, to the Moral Majority, to women of the Ku Klux Klan. Recently, social movement researchers have studied movements whose primary goal is to affirm cultural identities. Rupp and Taylor's (2003) research on a group of drag queens in Key West is one such study. The scope of what counts as a social movement is considerably broad -- as long as people are working together or collectively to impact change. This body of scholarship therefore can provide lessons to all kinds of advocacy groups with a wide range of goals and potential constituents.

   Contemporary scholarship on social movements grew out of intellectual dissatisfaction with nineteenth and early twentieth century theories of collective action. Frustrated by the portrayal of protestors, activists and people dissatisfied with the status quo as motivated by mob contagion and part of an irrational crowd, scholars began to focus on the political structures, social institutions and the internal organization of social movements to study their emergence, process and outcomes. By the mid 1980s, the focus on structural arrangements seemed somewhat anemic. The exclusive focus on political and institutional structure could not explain why people joined social movements and why they continued to participate. In short, these approaches left out the cultural and cognitive aspects of movement participation. The concept of *framing* became a central theoretical tool that social movement scholars identified to understand how, why and when people become part of collective movements and organize for social change. Because of this analytic focus, social movement work on framing is particularly pertinent to issue advocates.

Framing and Social Movements

The concept of framing in social movements was influenced by the scholarship on frames in psychology and the cognitive sciences. However, Erving Goffman's (1974) work on framing was arguably the most influential, which has had a distinct impact on how framing is conceptualized among scholars of social movements. Goffman defined frames as "schemata of interpretation" that allow people "to locate, perceive, identify and label" what happens in their own life and the outside world (21). Frames organize experience and guide action and behavior. Goffman's work was adapted further; a now common definition of framing in the social movements literature is "the conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understanding of the world and themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action" (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996: 6). In a similar vein, Polletta and Jasper (2001) define frames as the "interpretive packages that activists develop to mobilize potential adherents and constituents" (291).

Similar to other literature on frames and framing, social movements understand frames as passive constructs on one level. People, places, situations are framed by powerful institutions like the media or powerful people like politicians. In the cognitive sciences, frames are sometimes conceptualized as structures in our mind that organize our thoughts often on an unconscious level. But, more than any other literature, social movement scholars emphasize frames as both actively and strategically used by ordinary people. Gamson and Meyer (1996) explain both the passive and strategic use of frames very well:

> Frames are, on the one hand, part of the world, passive and structured; on the other people are active in constructing them. Events are framed, but we frame events. The vulnerability of the framing process makes it a locus of potential struggle, not a leaden reality to which we all must inevitably yield (267).

Social movement scholars talk about how groups actively engage in framing processes to recruit members, to gain the support and sympathy of bystanders, to neutralize opposition, and to intervene in policy decisions. Because of this emphasis on strategy, this literature describes how movements have been able to get the general public engaged in policy matters and how they have kept them involved. It is another model that issue advocates might look to, rather than a marketing model, to achieve their own goals.

Furthermore, social movement scholars have identified core framing tasks of successful movements. The first task is *diagnostic framing* or creating frames that effectively state the problem or identify the opposition to a movement goal. The second framing task is *prognostic framing* or articulating a solution to that problem. The final framing task is what scholars call *motivational framing* or calls to action that provide "adherents compelling accounts for engaging in collective action and for sustaining their participation" (Benford and Snow 2000: 617). These three types of framing tasks have different goals from those of a marketing campaign. Successful movement building entails different strategies. I highlight these differences in the section below.

Coalition Building Rather than Developing a Market Niche

Social movement scholars have shown that effective frames resonate with large sectors of the general public. Movement participants realize the ebb and flow of public support for movement goals. Building a broad and committed base is therefore critical for a successful movement. The Civil Rights movement is a classic example of how strategic framing can build broad coalitions of people to work for social change. The movement's demands for social justice and equal rights for people of color in the United States were inextricably rooted in Christian values and ideals. This framing allowed for many segments of the US population who might have been otherwise disinterested in the rights of African Americans to vote, demonstrate and demand equal rights. Christian values such as "loving thy neighbor" and the equality of "God's kingdom" provided the diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames necessary for ordinary people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds to work for large scale social change.

Social movement scholars have studied the various techniques that movements use to appeal to large and diverse audiences and to insure that the frames they use resonate with a general public. David Snow and colleagues call the process whereby social movement organizations (SMOs) link their goals to larger pools of public sentiment to recruit potential supporters, adherents and participants as "frame alignment processes" (Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986). These processes are "individual and SMO interpretive orientations, such that some set of individual interests, values and beliefs and SMO activities, goals and ideologies are congruent and complementary" (464).

The first frame alignment process that the scholars identify is *bridging* or "linkage of two or more ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames regarding a particular issue or problem" (467). Frame bridging allows social movements to reach and potentially mobilize segments of a population who share similar grievances or outlooks but do not have an organization or a group by which to express those grievances or mobilize for action. The authors cite the example of the Moral Majority who, mostly through a vast mailing campaign, was able to link conservative religious beliefs to electoral politics and candidate support. In these mailing campaigns, the group presented information about broad religious conservative values that appealed to a large base of a general public rather than specific policy choices or candidate endorsements. This articulation of conservative and religious values appealed to potential adherents and recruited them to work for the more specific policy goals of the Moral Majority.

Next, Snow and colleagues discuss *amplification* as the second critical frame alignment process for building movements. Amplification involves the "clarification and invigoration of an interpretive frame that bears on a particular issue, problem or set of events" (469). The amplification process involves identification of a frame that is most likely to incite collective action and is most often obscured for potential adherents in their everyday lives. The scholars differentiate between value and belief amplification—values for the authors are the goals of the movements whereas beliefs are the ideational

and cognitive components that motivate action. Whether a value or a belief is amplified depends on the context and strategy of the movement. The authors discuss how SMOs have successfully amplified the belief among constituents that their movement can be successful by referring to older movements. For example, nuclear disarmament leaders often highlight that, at one point in time, many people believed that slavery would never be abolished. Reference to the abolitionist movement of the nineteenth century amplifies participants' sense of the efficacy of collective action and encourages supporters to keep working toward the movements goals.

Frame *extension* is the third frame alignment process that SMOs use to build coalitions and recruit adherents to their cause. This alignment process is necessary when the frame does not immediately resonate with potential adherents lived experiences and/or values and beliefs. In this case, it is essential that the movement extend the frame to other issues and values of the public. The authors give the example of the Peace movement in Austin, Texas where, by extending their core or master frame of working for peace to also working against issues of racism, sexism and economic injustice, advocates were able to appeal to more people and were also able to build coalitions with anti-racist, anti-sexist social justice organizations.

The final process that the scholars identify is frame *transformation*. This process is necessary when the frames that SMOs are using do not resonate with a general public or may be antithetical to preexisting values, beliefs and lifestyles. In this case, the authors explain that "new values may have to be planted and nurtured, old meanings or understandings jettisoned and erroneous beliefs of 'misframings' reframed" (Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986: 473). Snow and colleagues reported on their research with converts to the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist movement to illustrate frame transformation. Participation in this movement required a complete shift in converts' worldview and sense of their place and responsibility in their social surroundings.

The social movement literature provides concrete strategies that issue advocates can use to appeal to larger audiences and build long standing coalitions. The importance of this goal cannot be underestimated. Activists and movement participants understand that the goals of their movement are both long and short term and support for certain goals will increase and decrease at certain moments. Building a broad base of adherents and activists—rather than consumers— who agree with its core values and beliefs and who will support the movement over time is critical. Frame bridging, amplification, extension and transformation are processes whereby issue advocates can make sure that the values they are communicating are truly resonant with those of a general public.

Focused on Systems of Injustice Rather than Individual Failings

Social movement scholars study the conditions—political, structural, social, and cognitive—under which social movements will emerge and when they will result in a successful outcome, however that might be defined. Those scholars who focus on the cognitive and cultural aspects of social movement participation study how people think about a social problem or issue and its impact on mobilization and movement

participation. Among many other factors, they have shown that movement activity is most likely when people think of their own troubles or problems in their communities as part of a larger system. That is, rather than attributing social problems to individual failings, movement participants are able to engage in system attributions of a problem. Successful framing by SMOs then depends on their ability to link an injustice to a larger system rather than to individual shortcomings. In this respect, the social movement literature converges with other framing literature that focuses on attribution of responsibility as a critical task in re-orienting people from personal to policy solutions (Iyengar 1991).

Ross (1977), for example, discusses a "fundamental attribution error" when people explain their situations and life circumstances. People tend to talk about problems and inequalities in terms of personal deficiencies rather than link those problems to features of a system. Furthermore, individualistic explanations tend to occur when people are socially isolated rather than part of an organized community (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996). Framings that involve "systems attributions" therefore are crucial in both recruiting movement participants and keeping them involved in movement activity.

A contemporary example of framing linked to system attributions is the work of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). Rather than supplying direct relief to victims of the AIDS epidemic, ACT UP organizations and participants focused on the marginalized and stigmatized status of those most affected by the disease. They argued that the government was not giving any attention to, or working to provide treatment or care for, AIDS patients precisely because of their social status. In this case, framing of the AIDS epidemic shifted from patients' circumstances to policy decisions or a system that largely ignored the disease and its victims.

In this respect as well, social movements literature on framing differs markedly from the communications strategies of marketers. In the latter, the emphasis and attribution of the problem is often on personal deficiencies (i.e. smile is not bright enough, house is not clean enough). Scholars have shown that movement participation depends on people understanding that an issue is much larger than their own individual and personal failings. Rather than acting to fix that failing, when issues are framed as systemic, people will act to impact a larger structure. Furthermore, participation will not end at one purchase but will result in long term commitment to the movements' goals.

Collective Agency Rather than Individual Choices

The corollary to framing that involves "system attribution" is that, while problems may be connected to larger systems, they must also be understood as changeable through collective action. Piven and Cloward (1977) discuss an essential framing task for SMOs: "the social arrangements that are perceived as just and immutable must come to be seen as unjust and mutable" (1977: 12) for people to join and be active in social movements. That is, understanding of the problem not only must be understood as systemic, but also changeable through direct action.

This sense that one's actions have an impact on political, social and/or cultural structures typically does not involve an individual's personal choices. Rather, movement participants' sense of efficacy and ability to change things emerges in organization with others committed to the same goals. Scholars who study social movements have therefore written extensively about the role of collective identity on social movements. Polletta and Jasper (2001) define collective identity as:

> …an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community practice or institution. It is a perception of a shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly, and it is distinct from personal identities, although it may form part of a personal identity" (285).

Collective identities give movement participants a sense of "we-ness" that encourages and sustains movement participation.

Polletta and Jasper discuss how collective identities emerge in the context of social movement participation. Some collective identities such as belonging to a racial, ethnic, religious or cultural group precede movement activity. Movement participation in these cases can often be explained through loyalty to the group. In other cases, those identities do not preexist -- and these cases might be most relevant for issue advocates. In these instances, scholars have shown that a movement's strategic framing choices are crucial. Polletta and Jasper explain: "When successful, frames make a compelling case for the 'injustice' of the condition and the likely effectiveness in collective agency in changing that condition" (291). It is important to note that this does not translate literally into the recommendation that all social movements adopt a "Fairness" frame; the sense of injustice may be communicated by something as simple as a sense that a solution exists which has not been implemented in a way that would benefit the public. The actual choice of frame to communicate this goal is, in FrameWorks' opinion, an empirical question.

Contemporary environmental movements of all types engage in this process of framing a collective identity that might not have preexisted participation or support for the movement. Environmental movements attempt to get people to understand themselves as citizens of the planet first. This identity often includes an understanding that humankind is not privileged over non-human life, has not been granted dominion over nonhuman life, and has moral commitments to other species and the planet in general. Invoking this identity and relationship to the planet relates directly to actions that consider what is best for the environment and protecting eco-systems and biodiversity. Again, this is framed not as an individual identity, but an understanding that in order to avoid environmental catastrophe, all of humankind collectively must embrace this sense of obligation and relationship to the planet.

Research on framing in the context of social movements might, on first approach, appear similar to marketing techniques. In both cases, strategic choices are made to gain

the support of the general public, to influence people's actions, to convince them to make specific choices, and to encourage them to act in specific ways. But these are where the similarities end. In this eZine, I have argued that scholarship on social movements provides much more important tools for issue advocates developing communications strategies than those based on marketing models. First, the social movements literature shows how organizations frame issues and movement goals in order to build broad coalitions that will be committed to movement participation over time. This is quite different from developing a market niche and continuing to address those constituents. Second, the social movements literature shows that framing techniques are more successful when they are able to tell a story about the system and locate the problem within a larger social framework. In contrast, marketing techniques tend to focus on individual deficiencies and problems. This concentration on the individual and their faults might result in a sale, but may not result in a long term commitment to changing social problems and injustices. Finally, the social movements literature on framing shows that movements can attract new recruits when the issue is framed as something that is changeable. Furthermore, problems are framed not as changeable by one's heroic and superman-like actions, but in concert with others who share the same values and goals.

About FrameWorks Institute: The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute's work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

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