The political process promise of policy framing

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One has to get inside the defining process of the actor in order to understand his action.

-- Herbert Blumer (1969:16)

The need for new frames arises frequently in the policy world when old frames seem to have lost their utility and having moved out of good currency, no longer seem to provide a consensual basis for action. This situation may happen because standards of explanation shift, so that old frames no longer seem to explain events as well as they once did; or because situations change, so that earlier ways of framing come to seem unacceptable as explanations or as normative guides for action.

-- Martin Rein and Donald Schön (1977: 240)

Policy frames can be seen as a type of story that is told by various political actors, and these narrative policy stories, including the use of symbols and synecdoches to tell them, help explain why some controversies are more wicked than others.

-- Nie (2003: 321)
The concept of frames or framing, especially cast as ‘frame analysis,’ has a long history in the political sciences. Originally coined in other fields (Bateson 1955/1972, Goffman 1974), the term had, by the latter part of the 1970s, been taken up in a wide range of academic disciplines, from artificial intelligence and linguistics (e.g., Minsky 1975; Fillmore 1982, Lakoff 1987; Cienki 2007) to music (Cone 1968), from public policy analysis (e.g., Rein and Schön 1977, 1994, 1996; Schön 1979, 1983, 1987; Rein 1983a, 1983b) to social movement studies (e.g., Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1988; Gamson 1992; essays in Morris and Mueller 1992, Klandermans 1997; for an overview, see Benford and Snow 2000).¹ We are concerned in this paper primarily with framing as it appears in policy analysis. To sharpen our understanding of the concept as developed there, we draw on discussions in the social movement literature as our main foil.

Both of these approaches trace their use of the idea to Gregory Bateson’s (1955/1972) introduction of the concept, and so we begin with his treatment. While social movement theorizing, developed largely in political sociology and social psychology, took its idea of frames from Goffman (1974), who in his turn worked with Bateson’s ideas, in public policy analysis the notion of framing went directly from Bateson to Donald Schön, who, although engaging it in his own independent scholarship on metaphors (1979) and reflective practice (1983, 1987), also developed groundbreaking policy research with his colleague Martin Rein, leading to their Frame Reflection (1994), an ambitious effort to work towards what they called the ‘resolution of intractable policy controversies’.

These two frame-theoretical descendants of Bateson can be grouped, broadly speaking, in two camps: there are those who treat frames as nouns and those who treat the concept more as a verb (in a move parallel to Karl Weick’s urging that we should look more to organizing than to organization [1979]). The distinction is more important than a matter of parts of speech: ‘frame’ emphasizes a more definitional,
static, and potentially taxonomizing approach to the subject; ‘framing’ offers a more process-oriented and, in our view, political engagement.

Although, in our view, the two treatments are not necessarily mutually exclusive, each highlights different features. Our interest is in the second of these two; and our aim is to strengthen what we see as the promise of this approach to yield a more dynamic understanding of framing processes than what is offered in the work of its leading proponents, policy analysts Donald Schön and Martin Rein (e.g., Rein and Schön 1977; Schön 1979; Schön and Rein 1994). We also draw inspiration for this approach from the work of sociologist Herbert Blumer (1969) and organizational theorist-social psychologist Karl Weick (1995).

We advance the argument that a dynamic, process approach needs to engage the interrelationships between the different ‘things’ that get framed. Moreover, this dynamism needs to apply both to the human interactions in which framing takes place and to the interaction between or among the different ‘things’ (issues, relations/identities, and processes) that are under construction.

We also turn to the work of Donald Schön (1979, 1983, 1987), because it, more than others, can be understood, at least in part, as a struggle with the different dimensions of framing. Although his work has cognitive aspects (Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith 2004: 33; Yanow and Tsoukas 2009) and falls short of analyzing identities and relations, in it we find the basic elements of a dynamic approach. The argument we advance also has methodological implications, which we briefly touch on at the end of the paper.

I. From biting monkeys to quarreling humans

We begin with Bateson, not only because his work appears to be the ur-text for frame analysis, but because the observational base for his ideas is accessible to someone not enmeshed in the debates among his descendants and is not already embroiled in the distinctions they draw.
Observing monkeys biting each other, Bateson (1955/1972) remarked that what seem to an observer the same actions could be taken by the monkeys either as serious fighting or as play. He fathomed that monkeys must have some way of signaling one another – some ‘meta-communication’ – so that each party to the interaction knew which mode of action was afoot. The actions were, in other words, ‘framed’ to signal either fight-biting or play-biting.

Erving Goffman picked up on Bateson’s notion of framing and developed it in his 1974 book. There, Goffman builds on the symbolic interactionism that characterizes his approach to the social construction of the self, focusing on the “definition of the situation” that transpires as people negotiate the meaning of their interaction: “…definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principals of organization which govern events…and our subjective involvement in them; frame is the word I use to refer to such of these basic elements as I am able to identify” (Goffman 1974: 10 ff.). Frames, in other words, guide the ways situational participants perceive their social reality and (re)present it to themselves and to others; they structure the ways in which segments of social reality are attended to. One important feature—for distinguishing between policy analytic approaches and social movement ones, overall—is that in Goffman’s treatment, frames are not consciously created. Instead, they are unconsciously adopted and/or developed by parties to an interaction during their communications. Goffman’s work was taken up in the 1980s by sociologists and social psychologists who saw it as a way to explain the development of social movements, and in particular to understand how it was that some were more successful than others in recruiting – mobilizing – people to join (Snow et al. 1986; Gamson 1992; Snow and Benford 1988). In brief, they argued that groups developed different frames on issues of concern to them. Of greater interest to them was what happened in situations of conflict. Then, they argued, groups would strategically alter their positions and definitions of the situation in order to enhance the possibility
of alliances or coalitions. Many of those approaching frames from this perspective have sought to develop a taxonomy of frames. This loses two elements central to Goffman’s theorizing: first, that frames are on the whole not intentionally created, but rather develop through interactional processes of communication that are highly situated; and related to this, that situated frames do not lend themselves well to universalizing, something that relies on a kind of ‘trait list’ approach that ends up both essentializing specific frames and reifying their identities (for a critical summary of what is now an enormous literature, see Benford 1997; see also De Wulf et al. 2009, whose argument we take up further below, for an analytic overview of framing in conflict resolution).

At the same time that Goffman was developing his thinking on the topic, and apparently independently of his work, Donald Schön, also partly drawing on Bateson and his notion of schismogenesis, began to develop a theory of framing in the context of diffusion of innovation theories and organizational studies (e.g., Schön 1963, 1979; Argyris and Schön 1974). Joining forces with his MIT colleague Martin Rein, Schön added another dimension to this work: the context of public policy studies and what he and Rein would call ‘intractable policy issues’ – those entailing incommensurable views and values, such that analysis could not usefully focus on clarifying solutions to policy problems (e.g., in their implementation), but instead needed to shift backwards and engage the very definition of the policy issue as ‘problematic.’ A policy analyst needed, in other words, to attend to the very framing of the issue (e.g., Rein and Schön 1977, Schön and Rein 1994).

In the policy sciences, frame analysis as sketched out by Schön, Rein, and others has been applied to several empirical settings. Swaffield (1998) drew on policy frames to analyze the meaning of ‘landscape’ in debates over New Zealand natural resource policies. Dudley (1999) studied the way frames and reframing played a role in the relationships between the British Steel Corporation and the British government. Drawing on ‘value-critical analysis’ (Rein’s other term for frame analysis),
Schmidt (2000) explored the meaning of language in the ‘English-only’ political movement in the US. Investigating policy meetings at the US Federal Reserve Bank, Abolafia (2004) showed how ‘frame moves’ are used in bureaucratic politics in the midst of a major policy change. Other recent examples of the use of frame analysis include Nie’s (2003) analysis of natural resource policy, Scholten and Van Nispen’s work (2008) on immigrant integration policies in the Netherlands, and Daviter’s (2007) exploration, using the more mainstream agenda-setting literature together with Schön and Rein’s ideas, of how a ‘procedural, policy-centred approach of policy framing’ could be used in studying EU politics.

The promise of frame analysis conceptualization for mediating policy controversies, a possibility suggested by interpretive policy analysis (e.g., Fischer 2003; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003; Yanow 2000, 2007), has simultaneously been developed by those working in the fields of dispute resolution and negotiation, in particular within the area of environmental policy. A stream of theoretical and empirical research has emerged from this scholarly community (see, e.g., Gray and Putnam 2003; Kaufman and Smith 1999; Putnam and Holmer 1992), seemingly amalgamating social movement and policy approaches – the former, given the desire to identify collectivities and their propensity to organize oppositional forces; the latter, in light of researchers’ desires to bridge differences and bring about effective policies (an orientation related in part to an impulse within the interpretive policy analysis school of thought; see Yanow 2003).

In addition, International Relations scholars are increasingly turning to theories of frames and framing in their research (e.g., Payne 2001; Fumagalli 2007). Moreover, ‘frame analysis’ intertwines an analytic approach with a research method; and as such, it has been elaborated upon as a particular form of interpretive research method (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006). Schmidt (2006), for example, drawing on his empirical research on the ‘English-only’ movement in the United States, details the steps involved in conducting such an analysis in a public policy context.
Importantly, frame analysis does not have to be, and often is not, limited to the study of the content of frames regarding a particular issue, since framing itself takes place in socio-political processes. Seen within the perspective of interpretive approaches to policy analysis (e.g., Fischer 2003; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003; Yanow 1996, 2000), frame analysis joins a large, and still growing, group of methods exploring sense-making in empirical studies of public policies and other aspects of political life, as well as political and social life more broadly (e.g., Prasad 2005, Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006). In this view, ‘interpretive politics is a contest over the framing of ideas’ that shifts attention ‘from the contest over individual preferences to the contest over shared meaning’ (Abolafia 2004: 349; see also Stone 1988/2002, on politics as the struggle over ideas).

That said, this ‘policy framing’ approach has its own shortcomings: the promise that it holds out of a more political, or power-sensitive, and more process-oriented approach needs further theorizing for its realization. This is where we hope the rest of this paper makes its contribution.

II. A Dynamic Approach to Framing

By contrast with an approach to frames that focuses on building taxonomies of frame types across settings, a more dynamic approach focuses on the process of framing, i.e., frame-as-verb (Yanow 2000: 13), and takes into account both social and political aspects of this process. Given our own empirical research background, we focus on framing in policy making, although we suspect that this theory-building will be applicable to other settings as well, including social movements, environmental dispute resolution, and perhaps linguistics as well – a question we look forward to discussing in the workshop.

We anticipate the discussion in this section by providing a more formal definition here:
1) **The Work of Meaning-making.** Framing in policy making is a process in which actors simultaneously create meanings of events and situations in the world and publicly apply these meanings to what they are confronted with. Framing in policy making involves (re)constructing issues and problems by selecting, categorizing and naming some things and ignoring others. As a consequence of this, it also lays the conceptual groundwork for possible future courses of action.

2) **Storytelling.** Since policy making involves collective action, actors have to persuade relevant others of their interpretations. The effort to persuade can be found in the act of storytelling. And, since various actors bring or develop different and conflicting experiences, expectations, desires and fears to the process, conflicts over the interpretation(s) and meaning(s) of these narrated stories can be expected and negotiations over meaning may take place.

3) **Framing the framing.** To add to the complexity, we note that identities, relations and framing processes themselves often become the object of framing. Framing analysis itself offers a way of framing socio-political realities.

In the next sections of the paper we will elaborate on this definition, but we begin with some discussion to situate it within the existing literature.

Many of the elements in this definition can be found in the way Rein and Schön (e.g., Schön 1979; Rein and Schön 1986, 1996) looked at framing (for their definition, see Rein and Schön 1993: 153). Although we think that in their early work (Rein and Schön 1977; Schön 1979), one can find the promise of a strong theory of policy framing, in the end their approach was not dynamic enough (Van Hulst and Yanow 2008).

Our approach overlaps to some extent the interactional paradigm as Dewulf et al. (2009) have recently advanced it for the study of conflicts and negotiations. They pictured an interactional paradigm as one in which framing is a real-time, on the spot practice of meaning alignment between
two or more human actors. They subdivided the interactional approach into three distinctive areas of research, on the basis of ‘what gets framed’: in their view, issues, identities/relationships or interaction processes.

Our approach seeks to go beyond this. First, it asks for more explicit attention to the political aspects of processes in which framing takes place (Abolafia 2004: 351), not only the social ones. By ‘political’ we mean the fact that framing involves ignoring some realities, thereby seeking to gain support for a certain way of dealing with the world. Second, while some (including Dewulf et al. 2009, implicitly) might argue that an interactional approach ignores existing ‘frames’ –attending to ‘framing’ only in the here and now - we also wish to take into account the stabilizing elements of framing practices that are enabled by their non-human and historical dimensions (such as Schön’s engagement with materials [1983, 1987], and Schatzki’s [2005] critique of social theorizing that omits consideration of the material world). This further complicates the assessment of framing. Lastly, although Dewulf and his co-authors make a useful theoretical distinction between the different things that get framed, in complex situations the framing of issues, identities/relations, and interaction processes are often interrelated in ways that should not be ignored. ³

1. The Work of Meaning-making

As we noted above, framing is a process in which actors simultaneously create meanings of events and situations in the world and publicly apply these meanings to what they are confronted with. In policy making processes, framing involves (re)constructing issues and problems by selecting, categorizing and naming some things and ignoring others. As a consequence, framing also shapes possible future courses of action. When actors are confronted with the world, especially when what confronts them appears uncertain or ambiguous, they explicitly or tacitly ask the basic framing question (Goffman 1974: 8): ‘What is it that’s going
on here?" Answering this question prepares actors for further, possibly collective, action.

Framing then is, in the first place, about two acts: organizing experience and guiding action (Snow et al. 1986; cf. Rein and Schön 1977, on diagnoses that contain prescriptions for action). Although for analytical purposes it is interesting to separate these two acts, they work simultaneously. What gets produced in the framing process is both a model of the world and a model for action in that world (Geertz 1973/1993: 93; Yanow 2008). Actors construct the socio-political world in and on which they act, in the process selecting some things as relevant or important and discarding or ignoring others. As Rein and Schön (1977: 239) remarked, ‘Whatever is said of a thing, denies something else of it.’ In doing so, they typically engage in what Rein and Schön (1977: 240) labeled a normative leap from what is to what ought to be. It is their sense making work (Schön 1983: 40; Benford 1997: 416) that enables this leap. Although early on, Schön (1979) stressed the cognitive character of this work, we think more than that is involved, as sense-making also draws upon direct or indirect social and material interaction with other actors and non-human materials (as Schön himself theorized in the context of his reflective practice work; Schön 1983, 1987).

An important part of the meanings of the things actors are confronted with – from more concrete objects like chairs and cats on mats to more abstract constructs like governments and protest marches – does not reside in the things themselves, but rather arises out of our interaction with them. A dynamic understanding of framing as process rests on the assumption that actors act towards things on the basis of the meanings things acquire for them in that process. This harkens back to Herbert Blumer’s (1969) three premises of symbolic interactionism:

1) human beings act towards things on the basis of the meaning those things have for them;
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2) the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction one has with one’s fellows; and
3) meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he [or she] encounters.\textsuperscript{8}

We draw some differences, however, between Blumer’s account of sense making and ours. First, the interactions that actors can engage in do not have to involve human actors as such (Schatzki 2005), as when the architect Quist, one of Schön’s reflective practitioners (1983), engages in what Schön calls “a conversation with his materials,” in reference to the non-human elements present in his design setting. This is a central point in (cultural and historical) activity theory (see, e.g., Engeström and Miettinen 1999). In addition, human actors themselves might construe their interaction with other human actors in non-human terms, as in the phrase ‘fighting the system’.\textsuperscript{9} And finally, we wonder whether the three symbolic interactionist premises take the possibility of strategic action sufficiently into account. That is to say, actors might also act towards things on the basis of the meanings they want them to have or on the basis of the meanings they want others to accord to those things.

Following a Schönian (1983, 1987) line of thought, then, we see actors as engaging in ‘a conversation with the situation’. The act of framing involves selecting a few cues about what is going on and attending to those carefully (Weick 1995). In policy settings, this selecting is a contingent, political act. It is always a selecting of some particular thing when other selections might have been possible. But, even if contingent, selecting is also a practical necessity. To be able to make sense, actors have to start somewhere – a key point in hermeneutic philosophy. They have to discover the character of the thing they are confronted with. What is selected has to be named and categorized, e.g., ‘an attack on freedom’, ‘a crisis’. Naming and categorizing establish differences between, for instance, victims and perpetrators, friends and enemies, natives and foreigners, normal and abnormal, old and new, work and pleasure, fight and play, or what is locally significant. They also
distinguish between who is in and who is out and differentiate between acts and words\textsuperscript{10}, facts and opinions, description and prescription. [\textit{to be added: brief note on 2 modes of categorizing – binaries, and prototype/fuzzy sets.}]\textsuperscript{11} Pointing out what is different about what is going on clears the way for change to take place (Abolofia 2004): if nothing is seen to be different, there is little reason to act on the situation. In this respect, Bateson (1972) talked about ‘a difference which makes a difference’.\textsuperscript{12}

At a certain point in the process, actors attribute some initial meaning to the situation at hand and look to see what happens as a result. Schön (1983) calls such a practice ‘seeing-moving-seeing’. Particularities, details, are matched with a more general idea of what is going on, often through a metaphoric process (Schön 1979; see also Yanow 2008). In an interactive and iterative process, both details and generalities inform one another, and a clearer idea of what is going on develops. As Weick (1995: 31) tells us, actors ‘create their own environments and these environments then [constrain] their actions’. Especially for practitioners – whether policy makers, politicians or public managers/administrators – working in real-world and often polarized environments, framing moves have ‘real’ consequences. For the initial moves to benefit the actors who make them, those moves should enable other actors involved to make their own moves. Initial moves should offer possibilities to proceed in different directions. Some actors master this conversation with the situation better than others.\textsuperscript{13}

In the domain of policy analysis, calling an event or situation ‘problematic’ is a major framing move: it draws attention to the hitherto unnamed referent. The importance of this initial framing of a situation points at the importance of problem setting. Practitioners – again, we have in mind policy-makers as well as public administrators charged with implementing policies – are not always cognizant that problem definitions are not given (Rein and Schön 1977; Schön 1979: 143-144; Fisher and Forester 1993: 5-6). When it comes to policy making, Hajer and Laws
(2006: 253) tell us that... '[i]f a situation is unclear and imbued with ambivalence, the [policy-making] task is seen to be creating order. But if policy makers have the key task of choosing between alternative trajectories of action, then acknowledging and, subsequently, handling ambivalence is essential for prudent action'. According to Schön (1983), some practitioners, whom he calls 'reflective practitioners', have developed this ability to cope with uncertainty and ambiguity in their practice. They are even be capable of up setting complex problems in ways that permit of solution. This is what we mean when we say that framing is a way of creating a world one can act upon (although we certainly do not mean to suggest that actors have the socio-political and/or physical powers to create and change their worlds at will). Framing is a way of world-making, to use Nelson Goodman’s (1978) phrase; and it is a way of knowing that world that one has made.

In this process of world-making, actors often reify the constructs in them, losing sight of the fact that they have created them. As proper realists (Weick 1995: 35) they treat things ‘as if’ they have particular, stable characteristics, an ‘objectification’ process (Berger and Luckmann 1966) which lends a clarity to the situation and enables interaction with and concerning those things. This enables actors to initiate and engage with framing moves. In systems language, one would say that actors construct their environments, send signals and monitor feedback from the environment, akin to what Schön called backtalk from one’s materials (1983). Social movement theory talks about frame resonance (Snow and Benford 1988), although that suggests a more passive engagement with the made world and its elements than what we have in mind.

At the same time actors can only engage what makes sense to them, which builds a conservatism and stability into the action undertaken. If, for example, elected officials expect the civil servants working for them never to follow their orders in the way they want them to, they may not recognize it if those employees do carry out directives precisely as they were asked to. Every time officials look at the work of
the civil servants, their expectations and - more generally - their beliefs are likely to be confirmed. Argyris and Schön (1974: 63-84) described the self-sealing circle that ensues, as these expectations for employee behavior are conveyed through the officials’ actions and the civil servants, seeing the ways their supervisors treat them, act in ways that meet their bosses’ expectations, without leading to feedback on either the work or the interactions. Through a reframing process, these kind of situations might change over time or through an event that (radically) does not match with the expectations of actors involved.

2. Storytelling

Since policy making involves collective action and actors often do not agree on what is going on and what should be done, they have to persuade others of their interpretations. The concrete manifestation of the effort to persuade can be found in the act of storytelling. This is also where the substance of framing comes into play. According to Rein and Schön, framing is not just about selecting some elements and ignoring others; it is also about ‘bind[ing] together the salient features of the situation [...] into a pattern that is coherent and graspable’ (Rein and Schön 1977: 239; cf. ‘frame resonance’ [Snow and Benford 1988] in social movement theory). That is, what is paramount is that framing produces a depiction of reality that ‘rings true’ and enables actors to engage in action. As Weick (1995: 55-61) puts it, when it comes to acting in practice, plausibility serves the purpose; accuracy is hardly aimed for. Such persuading depictions are communicated through storytelling (Rein and Schön 1977; see also Throgmorton 1992 in the context of planning practice).

The telling of ‘good’ stories is, or can be, persuasive because ‘a good story holds disparate elements together long enough to energize and guide action’ (Weick 1995: 61). Stories help framing do ‘a certain kind of work’ (Schön 1983: 40; Forester 1999: 29). They recount events and connect them through a plot (Czarniawska 1998: 2), sketching the
situation in which actors find themselves, establishing a scenario’s beginning, and drawing out its middle and a possible end. They tell us about those actors, whether human or non-human, implicitly or explicitly attributing to them blame or praise and suggesting causes of harmful events or situations. In terms of problem setting, they set ‘out a view of what is wrong and what needs fixing’ (Schön 1979: 144).

Policy stories or ‘narrative frames’ (Rein and Schön 1996) need not only be seen as tools for framing; they could also be seen as its products. Much of the literature in frame analysis does just this: it lists and/or clusters frames that might be found (Schön and Rein 1994: 32-34) or already have been (e.g., Kaufman and Smith 1999: 170; Gray 2007: 229). Although reconstructing narrative frames in use is certainly a part of research, we do not think that, in the study of policy making, researchers should expect to find fully fletched, agreed-upon policy stories. There are several reasons for this.

First, crafting a policy story that is ‘coherent and graspable’ requires working out over time. In general, people work themselves towards meaningful interpretations. Immediately after being confronted with a surprising policy-related event or situation, policy actors do not usually have a complete story ready right away. They might instantly start to talk about what is going on, but what they say is likely to be rather sketchy, displaying a fair degree of ambiguity. Although in policy making certain stories might be reified in policy documents and decision statements, over time the meanings of these texts themselves change.

Second, policy actors are not in the business of framing on their own. Sense making is social (Weick 1995: 38-43); it is also political (Abolafia 2004: 351). To base collective action, like a policy, on a certain interpretation requires that this interpretation be understood by others – here is the social part. Actors have to make sense with other actors: group of friends or colleagues, neighbours, constituencies, competitors, even their enemies. For collective action, an interpretation requires support from others – this is the political part. Some actors might seek to
make persuasive framing moves; others might make ‘countermoves’ (Abolafia 2004: 357), discrediting the policy stories and/or the storytellers who put them forward. And even if actors do not enter the framing dispute, debate, deliberation or discussion with others, they have to imagine (Mead 1934; Blumer 1969) how their audiences might interpret their stories if they want to persuade these audiences (cf. Snow et al. 1986 on ‘frame alignment’ and Snow and Benford 1988 on the need for framing to resonate).

Third, the need to gain or retain the support of various groups might be reason to tell policy stories that are ambiguous enough to allow for various interpretations (Stone 1988/2002: 157-161). When actors talk to each other, they do not necessarily spell out what they think, nor would such explicit discussion necessarily lead to one single interpretation that is completely shared by all concerned: ‘the elusiveness of meaning defies...ironclad control’ (Steinberg 1998: 862). At different times, different actors will tell policy stories that have (potentially) different meanings to their different audiences.

All and all, although actors might at some points in time tell clear and unambiguous policy stories, it is better to imagine story fragments and stories under constant construction (compare Boje 1991). There is lots of storytelling going on, but few complete and stable narrative frames. As framing involves continuous storytelling about problematic situations with simultaneous engagement in its socio-political aspects by storytellers, audiences, and storytelling itself, it is more helpful to look at the work that stories do than to try to amass a catalogue of stories or story types. Seeing framing as socio-political process entails attending to actors telling stories in new ways, combining or refuting previous stories, describing problems differently and offering different solutions, while at the same recognizing that the story itself is in progress and that there are other storytellers doing the same thing at the same time.

Some important questions remain. What is the ‘stuff’ of which narrative frames are made? Where do categories, names, and metaphors
come from? Why do actors plot their stories in one way and not another? Offering one answer to these questions, Schön and Rein (1994) noted that the narrative frames that actors construct are based on institutional frames. Since institutions ‘possess characteristic points of view, prevailing systems of belief, category schemes, images, routines, and styles of argument’ (Schön and Rein 1994: 33; compare Benford and Snow 2000: 629), the framing that gets done can be based on a certain foundation. At an even more fundamental level, Schön and Rein saw culturally shared systems of belief.

Indeed, in everyday life what happens is often perceived as consistent with expectations. In these cases actors make use of more or less developed - explicitly or tacitly known - ways of making sense. These ways of making sense take the shape of institutionalized language and institutionalized practices – e.g., meeting and reporting, law making and following standard procedures – through which meanings are partially constructed. But, there are also many cases in which there is a more complex process of comparing and matching between new events actors are confronted with and their past experiences, beliefs (including expectations), and values and more or less developed ways of making sense. Then, it becomes clearer that framing in fact involves bringing past experience to bear on a unique situation (Schön 1987: 66), e.g., drawing on the economic crisis in 1929 to frame the present one (compare Abolafia 2004).

When what one fears or what one desires suddenly draws near, framing takes on a character other than mere rule-following. It involves a more creative and strategic use of experiences, beliefs, and the like, as actors discover what is happening through the acts of selecting, naming, and categorizing. Framing might bring out the tensions in the body of what appeared to be shared values and beliefs, e.g., what seemed a matter of tolerance for all might turn out to have been a matter of indifference for some. And of course, new names and categories are invented all of the time (Weick 1995: 31), while the meanings of old ones
change or become redundant. This might also happen during the framing process itself. To some extent what happens shapes one’s view of reality, even if one’s view of reality shapes what one sees.

3. Framing the Framing

Adding to the complexity that we observed in the last paragraph, framing processes themselves are often made the object of framing. Whereas in the theoretical part of Schön and Rein’s theorizing (1986; 1993; 1994: chapter 2), the ‘what’ that gets framed (Dewulf et al. 2009) was primarily issues in society, the dynamic approach we are proposing suggests that researchers should look at other levels/arenas of framing as well. Aside from framing issues in society ‘out there’, the identities of the actors involved in framing, and their relationships, are always part of the framing effort. Conflict over the meanings of events and situations are rooted not just in different views of issues at stake; they are linked to the identities and relations that the actors involved cherish (Forester 1999). An issue and an identity or relationship can become very much intertwined, such that changing one’s public view on a certain issue might feel like giving up a part of who one is. Actors might earn their money, find their friends or partners, find their calling or be in some other way very attached to the group or organization that constructs, supports or fights a certain narrative frame, as well as to that frame itself.

The third arena in which framing can take place is actually the one from which frame analysis departed (Bateson 1955/1972): interaction between two or more beings. In looking at animals playing, Bateson asked himself how they were able to inform each other about the character of their interaction. The animals he studied were able to answer the question ‘Is this play?’ from the moves observed in their interaction. Goffman’s (1974: 8; emphasis added) framing question points in the same direction: ‘What is it that’s going on here?’ The situation in which this question is posed does not necessarily require the involvement of the person who poses the question in the situation of which the question is posed. But the
way Bateson and Goffman talked about framing involved two or more beings informing each other about the interaction they were engaging in directly. In many cases of policy making, framing processes will explicitly or implicitly be taken to this level of meta-communication (Bateson 1955/1972), in what might be called stories of governing (Van Hulst 2008).

Framing at the level of relations or identities and at the level of the interaction is even more likely to occur when policy making takes interactive or deliberative forms (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003). It is also at these levels that those who intervene to try to turn conflict into some sort of consensus focus (Forester 1999; Gray 2007). We concur with Dewulf et al. (2009) that the interconnections between these different levels should be studied more, as framing takes place at various interconnected levels simultaneously. In addition, the relationships or identities of the actors involved are, or might become, part of issue framing. It is hard for actors not to become either characters or agents in framing processes: even if policy makers are not involved in the issues directly, as actors who are charged with dealing with problems, they become part of the issue as long as problems linked to it are not solved.

Moreover, as representatives of governments, policy makers are often blamed for prior failures, even when they did not contribute to them in any way. Disinclined to be held responsible for what they did not do or to take responsibility for incidents that have an ambiguous or uncertain cause, actors often do their best to point the finger at others. To take a recent example, after the bombs exploded in Madrid on 11 March 2004, the Aznar government did its best to frame the attacks in a way that would not refer back to its own decision to get involved in the war in Iraq. That policy story’s failure to convince the public led to their defeat in the elections three days later (Olmeda 2008).

Framing in policy analysis (along with social inquiry more generally) also frames (Schön 1979: 161; cf. Brown 1976). As Law and Urry (2004:
390-391) argue: ‘...social inquiry and its methods are productive: they (help to) make social realities and social worlds. They do not simply describe the world as it is, but also enact it.’ Even though a powerful discourse tells us to believe in the possibility of (almost) neutral sciences, the detachment of the social sciences from what they study becomes harder and harder to imagine. Increasingly, grant applications ask what research will contribute to society. Even if that contribution is supposed to be ‘knowledge’ alone (answering the *What is going on?* question), there is always a *So What?* or *Now What?* implication (answering the *What should we do?* question), and social scientists also tell stories. As Rein and Schön (1977: 243) put it: ‘Story telling is at once a medium for problem setting and a way of discovering the tacit frames that underlie our problem settings.’

In sum, there are various arenas of framing, which partly overlap and reinforce each other, while at the same time framing moves and discourses keep them apart. In the appendix, we illustrate some aspects of the meaning-making work and storytelling discussed above. We take an example from a much studied political topic, voting.

**III. Doing framing research**

Although Bateson (1955/1972) pointed our attention toward the way in which even animals are able to know with great accuracy when ‘play’ is different from ‘fight’, the variety and complexity of frames available to political participants may not only puzzle them (In what ways is this ‘spectacle’ real?), but may also force them to engage in explicit framing themselves. This makes framing relevant for a wide variety of political studies. Framing research claims to enable us to look inside the black box of socio-political processes. What is more, it sketches a world of nested boxes. A process approach to framing focuses first and foremost on box-making.
We do not claim that the approach we have sketched out here should be used in the study of all instances in which frame analysis could be applied. In general, our main interests are in the role of meaning in policy analysis. More particularly, we study the political practices in problem setting (Rein and Schön 1977) and policy implementation (Yanow 1996). What a dynamic approach primarily offers is a way of understanding and explaining ‘framing moves’ (Abolafia 2004) that are undertaken when groups of actors are confronted with new events and situations in the world that surrounds them. The events and situations we are talking about are moments or developments that contain ambiguity or uncertainty that actors will try to make sense of because it keeps them from acting.21

Discourse theorists, like us drawing on social constructivism, have talked about moments of ‘radical contingency’, in which the political nature of reality becomes visible (Laclau 1990: 34-35). We do not think, however, that framing starts only after something unexpected happens or an effort to change things is initiated. Actors are engaged in framing all of the time, albeit a large part of the time without awareness of it. Thus, framing never starts ‘from nowhere’. Nevertheless, we are less concerned with ‘proving’ the existence of the ultimate sources of framing, e.g., the underlying belief systems,22 that would unite a group of actors in policy making and determine their actions. We are much more interested in the ways actors actively frame what happens to them and/or initiate reframing of the status quo in an effort to change it.23

To be sure, one might argue that it is important to study moments when nothing seems to be going on and no one seems to be making a move. But if we look more closely at those moments in which our expectations of the world and what ensues do not match, we may discover that there are more of these then we had thought. Slow and fast changes are occurring all of the time. Actors have ‘to fight to remain the same’ (Schön 1971: 32). The range of events and situations that interest us, then, is as big as the variety of events and situations that matter to the studies of policy making and politics more generally: from ‘9/11’ or ‘the
economic crisis’ to ‘the riot in neighborhood X’ or even ‘our fight yesterday (about which you still say you were just playing around) with the civil servant who did not accept the photo you brought for your passport’. There are many of these moments in everyone’s life.

Certainly, many events and situations in everyday life are dealt with mindlessly, almost automatically, on the basis of rather rigid and stable ideas about the world. However, our assumption is that, at least in moments that demand some of the actor’s explicit attention, framing is rather dynamic. There is a constant comparing and matching going on between, on the one hand, past experiences, beliefs (including expectations), and values, more or less developed ways of making sense of things, and, on the other hand, surprises and new experiences. We think that studying moments in which this matching becomes most visible, in which meaning is to some extent ‘up for grabs’, also sheds light on the dominant, but often only tacitly known, discourses that seem to structure so much of our socio-political world. Moreover, we think past experiences, beliefs and values, and developed ways of making sense do not totally pre-structure framing, because they themselves or their meaning can change over time, as a result of new experiences. Although many of the ‘things’ actors are confronted with might in their view resemble closely the things they have dealt with before, the meanings-in-use still have to be applied to the ‘things’ of the new situation.

Some have argued that crises offer the best opportunity to learn about the normal way of making sense of things. Ethnomethodologists have even argued that to be able to find out about stable ideas, one has to destabilize the normal state of affairs. This, along with our discussion in this paper, has specific implications for the study of framing processes. Participant observation, ethnography, and interpretive case study get close to actors and their ways of knowing and seeing, as they enable the analysis of materials produced in field settings and of talk by actors engaged with these materials (Yanow 2000; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006; Van Hulst 2009). But using these strategies and techniques is not
enough. Research also needs to be reflexive; and reflexive researchers need to study the work that theories, strategies, and methods do, how they frame the issues, settings, actors, and so forth under study. In the end researchers must take responsibility for the realities they bring to life or strengthen (Law and Urry 2004: 396). According to Law and Urry (2004: 403), current methods deal poorly with the fleeting, the distributed, the multiple, the sensory, the emotional and the kinaesthetic. Addressing these issues requires research strategies and researchers who are prepared to innovate in order to see new things or see things in new ways.

In sum, frame analysis in a dynamic mode looks at framing moves and at the ways events and situations are turned into narratives. Interpreting framing as a political and social process in which meaning constructed, it looks for ways in which what happens is ‘processed’ -- the sense making work that turns events and situations into categories and names. It wants to show how certain ways of looking at the world are constructed or sustained in the process. It is interested in the way different levels at which framing takes place might overlap and reinforce each other. At the same researchers using this approach might run into many instances in which discourses or framing moves keep framing levels apart. What this reminds us of is the idea that in the end, framing does not create a socio-political world to act upon; it also creates a socio-political world to live in.
Appendix

Voting for a Mayor, Utrecht 2007, an illustration

In October 2007, a referendum took place for the election of a new mayor of the city of Utrecht, the Netherlands. The referendum was announced on billboards all over town, through which a commission of city council members of Utrecht proposed two candidates for the vacant post. The billboards showed a picture of each candidates, their names and the words ‘referendum burgemeester’ (‘referendum mayor’). It also said, ‘Utrecht kiest 10 oktober 2007’ (‘Utrecht chooses/votes 10 October 2007’), and it displayed the address of the website for the referendum and the logo of the city of Utrecht (see Picture 1).

Picture 1: Billboard for referendum in Utrecht
(Photograph by Merlijn van Hulst)

As a whole, the billboard imparted meaning to what would be going on within the coming weeks: a public election in the form of a referendum. It also included a course of action: Utrecht, that to say, the citizens of
Utrecht, would choose one of the two gentlemen depicted on the billboard. But on the flyer depicted in this photograph, a new way of framing the event is proposed. Someone wrote the words ‘lood’ and ‘oud ijzer’ on this and many other billboards throughout the city. The graffiti invoked the saying ‘het is lood om oud ijzer’ (‘it is six of one and half a dozen of the other’). This referred most probably to the fact that both candidates were members of the same political party: Labor. In addition, it might have been intended to refer to other characteristics the two candidates on the billboard shared: both were white, middle-aged, male, dressed in suits and striped ties. In the eyes of the person who wrote on the posters, the choice that was offered was not really a choice.

The referendum in this way became ‘meaningless’ to those who think a referendum is about choosing between different candidates with different identities and different ideas about the way the city should be governed. While election campaigns are envisaged as telling a policy story about two distinctive candidates competing in a race for a high leadership position in the city government, in which politics was supposed to be about choosing among different options, the words ‘lood’ and ‘oud ijzer’ invoke a policy story of an election contest that is no competition at all, with two candidates who were offering identical ‘options’. These policy stories were not spelled out on the billboard, but this was hardly necessary. Having been acculturated to a story of voting, mayors, and government more generally, having quite likely participated in various votes before, and having been socialized to the general culture in which the saying evoked by those two phrases was commonplace, those who saw the billboard were able to fill in those elements of the stories that were not there.

The specifics of the election support the idea that the second interpretation was widespread among the voters. A little less than 10 percent of voters turned up, far below the threshold of 30 percent that the municipal council had stipulated in order to make the referendum valid. The non-action on the part of over 90 percent of the voters can also be
seen as the attribution of meaning to what is going on (Blumer 1969: 16). There were probably various other reasons why actors did not vote; we are not voting experts. Nevertheless, newspaper reports on the referendum support the idea that the voters and other actors involved were unsatisfied with it, talking, for instance, about ‘choosing between lemon ice and lemon ice’ or ‘East-European practices’ or ‘Referendum Utrecht “een beschamende poppenkast”’ [a shameful puppet show] (Huisman 2007). The words on the poster are clearly a framing act, meaning ‘not important enough to get us to the voting booth’.

The result itself created problems of a different sort that demanded some sense-making: even if the threshold of 30 percent was far from sight and thus, strictly speaking, the referendum was invalid, ignoring those who did vote triggered other sorts of storytelling and issue framing. On election night the interpretation that the winning candidate gave of the low turnout framed it as unproblematic. In his (espoused) view the voters did not feel the need to choose. The next day the municipal council decided that it wanted to respect the voters who had turned out and decided that the candidate with the most votes would become the new mayor. This example shows the way in which meaning was created in a first instance (the initial posters), how new meaning was then attributed to both the main characters and to the referendum process itself, which was subsequently confirmed by collective (non)-action. It also illustrates how an event presented as something relevant does not become so by declamation, either with respect to the ‘contested’ election or to the low turn-out, neither of which spoke for itself. The complexity of framing processes shows that apparent meaning can be altered through strategically attributed meanings.
References


Notes

1 Later on, other fields - like communication studies (e.g. Entman 1993) - followed.

2 We also doubt that they are used in this systematic way in the literature. We have the idea that these two approaches are being blended in many accounts of framing, and sense-making, more generally. Theoretical statements stress the socially constructed character of frames, but at the same time reification takes place when frames are itemized in taxonomies (e.g., Snow and Benford 1992; cf. Benford’s critique [1997], Schön and Rein 1994).

3 Dewulf et al. (2009: 181) actually argue that the interactional paradigm would be strengthened by addressing the links among the three areas.

4 As we noted above, what is ambiguous or uncertain to one actor can be unambiguous and clear to another. What comes as a total surprise for one actor was anticipated by another. But even if a situation is recognized right away as familiar or expected, that does not mean that questions of meaning are not posed, at least implicitly. One can always answer, ‘This is nothing special or new; proceed as usual.’

5 These seem to us analogous to two of the three core framing tasks that Snow and Benford (1988: 199) defined: making a diagnosis and a coming up with a solution. We leave out the third, a call to arms or a rationale for action.

6 Some would perhaps call this a Wittgensteinian view. Others go further, stating that action precedes meaning, and sense making is retrospective (Weick 1979).

7 Jackson (2008: 150) recently called the first premise the central claim of International Relations constructivism. This first premise, however, is not enough for us, since it does not point to the necessarily interactional development of meaning.

8 Blumer pointed out that in the social sciences of his time, meaning was ‘either taken for granted and thus pushed aside as unimportant of it is regarded as a mere neutral link between the factors responsible for the human behavior and this behavior as the product of such factors’ (Blumer 1969: 2).

9 Following George Herbert Mead (1934), Blumer had a keen eye for the possibility that actors interact with (‘generalized’) others who are not present.

10 There is an even more complicated play of meanings that is the result of seeing language as an act and non-verbal acts as a language (‘actions speak louder than words’).
Although often only one aspect of a situation is explicitly named, thereby framing the situation - as in identifying something as ‘an act of terrorism’ – other aspects help to establish the meaning. For example, policy makers will claim that their newly designed policy will deal with problems in a different way than earlier ones (Abolafia 2004). If previous policy making was said to lack ‘a solid foundation’, for instance, policy makers might propose using an ‘evidence-based’ approach this time. Whether or not this will solve the problem it is intended to is hard to say, but continuing in the old way had become ‘meaningless’ and impossible, at least in the eyes of those who propose change. In policy processes, when a certain way of acting loses its credibility, a new practice with a new meaning is commonly introduced to replace the old practice. In this sense framing involves strategic, political moves – an aspect of Bateson’s original concern and formulation that emerges when one shifts from monkeys to humans. And of course, if policy actors want their distinctions among different types of policy solutions to stick, they have to maintain the definitional boundaries and decide how to handle those things that do not fit their new categories.

Or as, as Tsoukas and Chia (2002: 571) – talking about Bateson - put it, ‘the undifferentiated is imperceptible’.

For instance, in the study of a political crisis in a municipality, Van Hulst (2008) observed how the interpretation of initial moves might lead to an impossible situation for the initiator of the act.

Hajer and Laws (2006: 252) use the concepts of ambivalence and ambiguity interchangeably.

As we have argued elsewhere (Van Hulst and Yanow 2008), the practitioner central to Schön’s (1983) early work on reflective practice, the architect Quist, could work in a virtual world where things could easily undone. In addition, he also had the means to control the socio-political aspect of his practice. These features make us doubt whether reflective practice in policy making could create similar results.

Schön (1987: 79) talked about a repertoire of themes and examples. In Social Movement Theory a discussion on the relation between frames and ideologies – defined as rather stable, fundamental systems of beliefs (Oliver and Johnston 2000; Snow and Benford 2000) – touched upon similar issues. Westby (2005) later argued that there are six ways in which framing and ideology might play a role. These vary between a lack of relation (framing is only strategic) to a very strong determination (framing is totally based on ideology). In addition, framing might also inform ideology.

Compare Weick (1995), who talks about a connection between a cue and a frame.

We think, for instance, of Swidler’s (1986) article on ‘culture in action’, which is also invoked in the literature on social movements (e.g., Westby 2005: 217).
The same actions, Schön and Rein (1994: 35) remind us, might be based on different beliefs and values.

Especially in *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (1987), Schön worked on the various levels of framing, and Schön and Rein (1994) argued for reflection on policy design itself. Work on conflict framing (Dewulf et al. 2009) and on framing in social movements (Benford and Snow 2000: 631-632) has focused in a more systematic way on issues of identity.

The difference between uncertainty and ambiguity is that in the first case there are no (good) interpretations around, while in the second there are too many (Weick 1995: 91). We are also well aware that the attribution of ambiguity and uncertainty itself is an act of framing. That some might find normal what is extraordinary to others is suggested in a marvelous way by A. A. Milne in *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1989: 154): “When you wake up in the morning, Pooh,” said Piglet at last, “what’s the first thing you say to yourself?”

“What’s for breakfast?” said Pooh. “What do you say, Piglet?”

“I say, I wonder what’s going to happen exciting to-day?” said Piglet.

‘Pooh nodded thoughtfully. “It’s the same thing,” he said.’

Various theorists talked about belief systems and the like. Schön and Rein (1994: 33-34), for instance, talked about metacultural frames and institutional action frames that would inform interpretation and ultimately action in policy making. Snow and Benford (1988) referred to belief systems and ideology that would constraint framing. Oliver and Johnston (2000) argued that since Snow and Benford the distinction between frames and ideology was muddled.

Both kinds of analysis might be done at the same time, for Dewulf et al. (2009) they would not be done from within one framing paradigm.