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TOWARD A PSYCHOLOGY OF FRAMING EFFECTS

Thomas E. Nelson, Zoe M. Oxley, and
Rosalee A. Clawson

Framing is the process by which a communication source constructs and defines a social or political issue for its audience. While many observers of political communication and the mass media have discussed framing, few have explicitly described how framing affects public opinion. In this paper we offer a theory of framing effects, with a specific focus on the psychological mechanisms by which framing influences political attitudes. We discuss important conceptual differences between framing and traditional theories of persuasion that focus on belief change. We outline a set of hypotheses about the interaction between framing and audience sophistication, and test these in an experiment. The results support our argument that framing is not merely persuasion, as it is traditionally conceived. We close by reflecting on the various routes by which political communications can influence attitudes.

From the proverbial chat over a cup of coffee to the full-scale multimedia hammering that is today's presidential campaign, much of political life revolves around the transmission of ideas and information. Research on political communication covers an impressively broad swath of this territory, enlightening us on phenomena as varied as media agenda-setting (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Rogers and Dearing, 1994) and facial mimicry (McHugo et al., 1985). Rightly or not, the mass media have been the subject of most empirical work in political communication. Perhaps because of the minuscule effects uncovered in early studies of media influence (Klapper, 1960; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, 1944; McGuire, 1985; Zajonc, 1980), and the norm of ideological neutrality that governs most major news organizations (Beck, Dalton, and Huckfeldt, 1995; Bennett, 1988),¹ much recent research has concentrated on the effects of the mere *presence* of mass media coverage of a particular issue, rather than the direction or content of that coverage (Mutz, 1992). Although it is a bit of an oversimplifica-

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tion, one may describe the now familiar phenomena of agenda-setting (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; McCombs and Shaw, 1972) and priming (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Krosnick and Brannon, 1993; Krosnick and Kinder, 1990) as examples of how media coverage of an issue per se can influence opinion. As important as this research is, it still leaves us with the impression that the *content* of media coverage has no impact on opinion.

Research on issue *frames* represents a potentially important recent return to the study of the effects of communication content on opinion (Dorman and Livingston, 1994; Gamson, 1992; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Gitlin, 1980; Iyengar, 1991; Iyengar and Simon, 1994; Kinder and Herzog, 1993; Kinder and Sanders, 1990; Nelson and Kinder, 1996; Pan and Kosicki, 1993; Patterson, 1993). The framing concept has been applied widely by scholars in psychology, political science, and communications studies. In political communications research, framing typically has been depicted as the process by which a source (a newspaper or television news story, or perhaps a single individual) defines the essential problem underlying a particular social or political issue, and outlines a set of considerations purportedly relevant to that issue. Gamson and Modigliani, for example, state that: "A frame is a central organizing idea for making sense of relevant events and *suggesting what is at issue*" (1989, p. 57, emphasis added); while Entman writes that "To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a 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" (1993, p. 52, emphasis in original).

Examples of frames abound. To cite just one recent case, the conflict in the former Yugoslavia has been framed both as a genocidal war of imperialism between a powerful and bloodthirsty invader and its helpless neighbor *and* as a centuries-old ethnic and religious dispute that has only recently flared up after communist domination of the region vanished. Frames like these serve their employer by helping to make sense of a broad array of information and events while suggesting a suitable course of action. The "genocide" frame recommends immediate and decisive international intervention in the conflict, while the "lingering dispute" frame counsels restraint, as nothing can be done about the situation anyway.

FRAMING EFFECTS

The heightened interest in frames in both the scholarly and popular literature (see, for example, Leo, 1994/95) conceals a lack of conceptual clarity and consistency about what exactly frames are and how they influence public opinion (Entman, 1993). Those who examine framing effects within the decision-making rubric established by Kahneman and Tversky (1984) have embedded their work within clearly specified psychological theory about the

subjective utility of gains and losses. There is less agreement about basic concepts and processes among those who focus on framing as symbolic communication (Gamson, 1992; Gitlin, 1980; Goffman, 1974; Nelson and Kinder, 1996). Outside of Iyengar's research on framing and attribution processes (Iyengar 1991), and Nelson and Kinder's studies of framing and attitude expression (1996), few others have examined directly the psychological impact of framing.

The danger in neglecting the psychology of framing effects is that we cannot be sure that there is anything truly "unique" about this phenomenon; that framing cannot be subsumed under some other generally understood concept, such as persuasion. This uncertainty is reminiscent of the controversy surrounding the application of the schema concept in public opinion and political psychology. Advocates of the schema concept (e.g., Conover and Feldman, 1984; Lodge and Hamill, 1986; Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk, 1986) have credited it with providing fresh insights into how individuals organize and use political information. Critics have charged that schemas have been poorly defined and inadequately operationalized in most empirical applications (Kuklinski, Lusk, and Bolland, 1991). Because of these conceptual and methodological ambiguities, the critics argued, we cannot be sure that the schema concept has provided any comparative intellectual advantage over a conventional concept such as "attitude." Indeed, why invent a new term when something tried and true works just as well?

One goal of the present paper is to prevent the marginalization of the framing concept by demonstrating how it differs both theoretically and empirically from a close conceptual cousin in communications and attitude research, namely *persuasion via belief change*. A second, more affirmative goal is to provide further evidence that framing represents another subtle, yet important, manner in which political communication shapes popular thinking about politics. We believe that frames are distinct not only at the message level but at the psychological level as well; that frames differ from other message forms not just in their overt structure and substance but also in the way they affect popular thinking about public affairs.

FRAMING AND MASS POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Since much of the public's knowledge and information about public affairs is mediated rather than direct, popular understanding of, and even opinions about, political issues may be substantially shaped by the selection and presentation of information (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). Communication sources such as the news media frequently rely on frames to organize the presentation of messages. For example, the "strategic" or "game" frame dominates contemporary campaign coverage (Patterson, 1993). In the strategic frame, a

candidate's policy pronouncements are analyzed with respect to their impact on his or her electoral prospects, rather than for their potential value as solutions to the nation's problems. Similarly, the words and deeds of elected officials are frequently portrayed as schemes to build or maintain popularity, embarrass the opposition, or otherwise secure power, rather than as sincere expressions of principle or duty (Kingdon, 1993). Frames figure into the media's coverage of political issues as well as players. Until recently, American media coverage of international news was dominated by a cold war frame, with the significance of overseas events evaluated largely with respect to their implications for the balance of power between the U.S. and the USSR (Entman, 1993). William Gamson and his colleagues have documented extensively the "careers" of frames shaping media coverage of such domestic controversies as welfare, affirmative action, and nuclear power (Gamson and Lasch, 1983; Gamson and Modigliani, 1987, 1989).

Frames serve as bridges between elite discourse about a problem or issue and popular comprehension of that issue. From the "spin-doctoring" that follows every televised debate to the timing and stagecrafting of press conferences, political elites devote considerable effort toward influencing not only *what* information gets on the air but *how* it is presented. The symbolic and rhetorical devices deployed by political elites help the media frame their stories (Carmines and Kuklinski, 1990; Edelman, 1964; Gamson, 1992; Gitlin, 1980; Page and Shapiro, 1989; Pan and Kosicki, 1993). Such efforts are encouraged in no small part by the symbiotic relationship between news organizations and media-relations specialists representing government, business, labor, and other organized interests (Gurevitch and Blumler, 1994; Wolfsfeld, 1991). Representatives of organized interests supply such framing devices as sound bites, slogans, analogies, and imagery to succinctly and effectively convey a specific construction of an issue—one that naturally benefits the organization's own interests. These rhetorical elements may eventually end up, in whole or in part, in news stories about the issue.

Frames can be meaningful and important determinants of public opinion. In a series of experiments, Nelson and Kinder (1996) showed that alternative frames for welfare, affirmative action, and AIDS policy influenced the relative importance of certain predictors of opinion toward these issues. Specifically, frames that focused on the beneficiaries of a given policy (e.g., homosexual men, in the case of AIDS spending) increased the overall importance of attitudes toward that group in determining opinion toward the policy. In other words, attitudes toward the *group* influenced attitudes toward the *policy* more strongly when the issue had been framed in group terms. In a different conception of framing, Iyengar (1991) showed that "episodic" media frames, which focus on individual cases, encourage viewers to make *internal* attributions for social problems (to blame poverty on a lack of motivation or ability on the part of the poor, for example). "Thematic" frames, by contrast, which

focus on broader social, political, and economic forces, encourage viewers to make *external* attributions (to blame poverty on economic problems or a lack of political will, for example).

HOW FRAMING DIFFERS FROM BELIEF CHANGE

There is no doubt that framing is a tool that persuaders use to influence opinion. When candidate Michael Dukakis framed the election of 1988 as about "competence, not ideology," he surely hoped to shape the public's perception of its electoral decision to his benefit. But there are important psychological differences between a frame and a standard persuasive argument. Although there are many ways in which attitudes and opinions may be altered, from classical conditioning and mood manipulation to subliminal suggestion, the standard model of communication-based persuasion typically involves a *source* who presents a *message* about an *attitude object* to an *audience* (Hovland, Janis, and Kelley, 1953; Jaccard, 1981; Lasswell, 1948; McGuire, 1985). If the audience member both understands and believes the message, and if the message is discrepant from his or her prior attitude, then the attitude should change in the direction implied by the message (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; Zaller, 1992, 1994). By this account, the goal for communicators is to change the audience's *beliefs* about the attitude object. That is, the communicator must convince the audience that the object (a policy like welfare, for example) possesses certain good or bad attributes. If the audience is convinced, their general attitude about the wisdom or advisability of this policy should change in the direction of this new belief.

Implicit in this relatively straightforward model of communication effects is the assumption that the information conveyed by the message is new to its audience. In other words, the message affects opinion because it contains positive or negative information about the attitude object *not already part of the recipients' knowledge or belief structure*. By contrast, we argue that framing effects are not reducible to the new information that the framed message provides. Instead, frames operate by activating information *already at the recipients' disposal*, stored in long-term memory.

To see this distinction more clearly, it is perhaps useful to describe it in terms of classic algebraic or expectancy value models of attitudes (Anderson, 1981; Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). Such models portray attitudes as summary evaluations based on a weighted average of a sample of beliefs about the attitude object (see also Zaller and Feldman, 1992). In simple equation form:

$$A = \sum v_i w_i \quad (1)$$

where A represents the summary attitude, v_i represents the value of attribute i (broadly speaking, the individual's *belief* about the attitude object), and w_i

represents the subjective *weight* of that belief. Such models imply two possible procedures to effect a change in attitude: change the individual's beliefs or cognitions about the attitude object (traditional persuasion) or change how the individual weights that information (framing).²

The weight parameter w_i may be conceptualized in different ways. In Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) theory of reasoned action, the weight parameter corresponds to the subjective probability of a particular outcome i if one behaves in a certain way toward the attitude object (e.g., the perceived likelihood of decreased unemployment if one votes Democratic). By contrast, Anderson (1981) defined subjective weighting as the perceived *relevance* or *importance* of a specific belief for an attitude (e.g., the personal importance or relevance of a candidate's stand on abortion in determining one's overall attitude toward the candidate). Van der Pligt and Eiser (1984) have argued that differences in opinion on such controversial issues as nuclear power may be traced not only to differences in beliefs about the issue but also to differences in the personal *importance* of separate dimensions of the issue, such as the potential safety risks versus economic benefits of nuclear power (see also Jaccard, 1981; Jaccard and Becker, 1985). In other words, both supporters and opponents of nuclear power may agree on the potential economic benefits of nuclear energy, but they may disagree strongly on the importance of such benefits relative to the risks of a major accident involving a nuclear power plant.

In the turbulent world of politics, one's determination of the relevance or importance of a particular consideration can produce great uncertainty and ambivalence (Hochschild, 1981, 1993). How does one, for example, assess the relative importance of "the right to life" and "freedom of choice" when contemplating the abortion question (Luker, 1984)? Similarly, how does one balance concerns over the spread of hate groups and respect for the right to free speech in civil liberties controversies (Chong, 1993; Hanson, 1993; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley, n.d.)? Much like a consumer trying to strike a balance between price and quality or between reliability and convenience, the ordinary citizen must deliberate competing values, beliefs, and emotional attachments to make the "right choice" on divisive political issues (Feldman and Zaller, 1992; Tetlock, 1986). Such judgments as these can be difficult, yet the public is regularly called upon to make them, not just by pesky survey researchers, but by candidates for public office, ballot initiatives, and so forth. This is the setting in which frames operate. Frames tell people how to weight the often conflicting considerations that enter into everyday political deliberations. Frames may supply no new information about an issue, yet their influence on our opinions may be decisive through their effect on the perceived relevance of alternative considerations.

Our task is to demonstrate that framing really differs from the traditional

model of persuasion through belief change in these ways. Fortunately, the distinction between traditional persuasion as new information and framing as information weighting yields a number of testable implications. One we address here concerns the moderating impact of prior knowledge or sophistication on the effects of framing versus belief change. Other things being equal, greater knowledge or sophistication about an issue inhibits attitude change via belief change (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993; McGuire, 1968, 1985; Zaller, 1992, 1994). That is, assuming a message is received and understood equally well by both sophisticated and unsophisticated audiences, the more sophisticated are less likely to "yield to" or be persuaded by that message, because (a) they are likely to be already familiar with the argument; (b) the additional information, even if novel, will be trivial compared to their existing mental stockpile of information; and (c) greater knowledge enables the recipient to more easily dismantle and dismiss counterattitudinal arguments. Indeed, because knowledgeable individuals are more likely to have prior exposure to counterattitudinal arguments, they are likely to be "inoculated" against attitude change through preparing counterarguments and generating additional pro-attitudinal cognitions (McGuire, 1964).

Zaller (1992) has shown, across a wide spectrum of public issues, that more sophisticated respondents are less likely to change their opinions in the face of counterattitudinal mass media messages,³ while Hurwitz (1989) showed in a survey-based experiment that more sophisticated respondents were less willing to change their opinions on a variety of issues if they learned that the president held the opposing view. Generally speaking, the effect of sophistication on the entire attitude change process is more complex than its effect on yielding alone. While it is true that more sophisticated and knowledgeable respondents are less likely to yield to a counterattitudinal message, they may be more likely to both *receive* and *comprehend* the message in the first place (Eagly and Warren, 1976; McGuire, 1968; Zaller, 1992). Thus, moderately sophisticated individuals are often the most susceptible to persuasion, since they are capable of receiving and understanding a message, yet are not so sophisticated to refute the message. The above prediction about the effects of sophistication on yielding therefore assumes that comprehension is held constant. As we shall see, it becomes critical for our experiment to establish that more- and less-sophisticated subjects do not differ in their comprehension of the framed messages.

Assuming that a message is easily comprehended, therefore, more sophisticated people are, in general, less likely to change their beliefs than less sophisticated people. We do *not* expect sophistication to dampen framing effects. If it is true, as we assert, that framing operates by making particular considerations more salient, then more sophisticated recipients should be just as susceptible to framing effects as less sophisticated recipients, if not more

so. This is precisely because more sophisticated individuals are by definition more likely to have such information already stockpiled in long-term memory. Indeed, one could argue that holding such beliefs in memory is necessary for framing to have any impact at all. Furthermore, unlike standard persuasion models, framing effects do not depend upon the recipient's acceptance of the message's assertions. For example, even if one disagrees completely with a frame's assertion that welfare is unacceptable because the poor are lazy and irresponsible, the frame may still make salient one's beliefs about the poor, positive or negative. Such an effect again stands in contrast to traditional persuasion theory, which holds that one is unlikely to be persuaded by arguments with which one disagrees. For all these reasons, therefore, we do not expect sophistication to limit framing effects, as it typically does belief change.

EXPERIMENT

To test these claims about the differences between framing and belief change, we conducted an experiment on the effects of framing on opinions toward welfare policy, to see if sophistication about the welfare debate would moderate the impact of framing. Drawing in part on Gamson and Lasch's (1983) analysis, we framed welfare as either a give-away program for people who do not deserve the help, or as an excessively expensive program that poses a serious threat to the health of the economy. We expected the former frame (the "recipient" frame, as we shall call it), with its thinly veiled moral condemnation of welfare recipients, to focus subjects' attention on their own beliefs about poor people, particularly their beliefs about why people become poor. In effect, we expected subjects in this frame to adopt a "group-centric" view toward welfare, expressing negative opinions if they believed that the poor were largely to blame for their own poverty, and positive opinions if they blamed macro-social forces for poverty (Kluegel and Smith, 1986; Nelson and Kinder, 1996; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, 1991). This change in the relationship between welfare opinions and beliefs about poverty across the two framing conditions is what we call the *framing effect*.

The crucial test for our hypothesis is a comparison of the framing effect across levels of sophistication. For our purposes, we define sophistication as prior familiarity with the content of the frame. If framing approximates a change in beliefs, then the framing effect should be strongest for those with little or no prior exposure to, or familiarity with, the frame. That is, the frame should function as a new piece of information that respondents might add to their existing knowledge about the issue. Subjects who acknowledge prior familiarity with the frame's content should not be affected to such a degree, since the information is nothing new. If, by contrast, frames influence how

individuals weight specific beliefs, then framing should affect well-informed subjects, too. To test this hypothesis we assessed subjects' familiarity with the frame content *before exposing them to the frame*, and then evaluated the framing effect separately for less-informed and well-informed subjects. If there is little or no difference in the magnitude of the framing effect across these two groups, or if framing effects are larger for well-informed subjects, then the assertion that framing is something different than belief change is supported.

Method

One hundred and sixteen Ohio State University undergraduates (51 women, 63 men, 2 unspecified) enrolled in political science courses participated in the experiment. Subjects received extra course credit for their participation. The experiment was conducted in two parts, each consisting of a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. For most of the subjects, parts one and two of the experiment were separated by two days. Five days separated the two waves for 17 subjects. Approximately one-quarter of the surveys were administered in May 1993, one-half in July 1993, and one-quarter in January 1994. The first part of the experiment consisted of a questionnaire assessing subjects' familiarity with arguments about welfare policy as well as their political values and predispositions, including their attitudes toward poor people. The second part of the experiment consisted of a single question that measured respondents' opinions toward welfare, framed as either a giveaway to the undeserving or as a harmful drain on the economy. This separation of the familiarity items from the framing manipulation was essential to establish subjects' knowledge of different arguments about welfare *before* they were exposed to one or another particular frame.

Familiarity Items

At the beginning of the initial questionnaire, we asked subjects about their familiarity with nine positive and negative statements concerning welfare (see Table 1 for specific wording). Some of the items focused on people that receive welfare payments, stating either that welfare recipients are lazy or that they can get along without the payments. Other items focused on the perceived need for welfare given current economic conditions, the impact of welfare payments on the work ethic, society's moral obligation to care for the poor, and so on. Subjects indicated for each argument whether or not they had ever heard anyone make such a claim about welfare, either in person or in the news media. Respondents checked each of the arguments that they had heard, *even if they did not agree with the argument*. The instructions stressed

TABLE 1. Familiarity with Arguments About Welfare Policy

Welfare Argument	Percentage of Subjects Familiar with Argument
People on welfare are mostly lazy.*	94.0
People on welfare could probably get along without the help.*	43.1
Excessive welfare payments are seriously threatening the American economy.	72.4
Welfare is needed because the bad U.S. economy has put many people out of work.	42.2
Most people on welfare truly need the help because they can't work, or they can't find decent work.	68.1
Welfare destroys the motivation to work.	89.7
Welfare is necessary because we are morally obligated to help those who are less fortunate than ourselves.	57.8
Welfare costs add considerably to the nation's budget deficit.	73.3
Welfare provides a necessary second chance for many poor people.	55.2

Note: The *N* for all of these items was 116. Responses to the two asterisked items (*) were combined to form our measure of familiarity with the substance of the welfare recipient frame.

our interest in familiarity, not agreement, to ensure that the subjects would check all the items they had heard and would not be reluctant to check those with which they disagreed.

Independent Variables

Drawing upon previous work by Feagin (1975) and Kluegel (1987), we asked subjects to rate the importance (on a five-point scale) of various explanations for "why there are poor people in this country" (see Appendix A). These explanations were essentially attributions people might make about poverty. We combined five items that cited social-structural reasons for poverty, such as low wages and lack of jobs, to form an *external* attribution scale. Four items that point to individual causes of poverty, such as a lack of effort or thrift, were used to create an *internal* attribution scale. We also assessed the subjects' affect toward welfare recipients with a 0-10 "feeling thermometer."

In addition to beliefs about poverty and affect toward welfare recipients, we examined respondents' perceptions about the state of the national economy. We asked two questions—one retrospective and one prospective. Subjects indicated (on a five-point scale) if they thought the economy had improved, remained the same, or worsened over the preceding year. We then

asked, using the same response options, what subjects thought the condition of the economy would be over the upcoming 12 months. Their answers to these two questions were combined into one scale.

Framing Manipulation

All subjects were asked their opinions on welfare during the second part of the experiment. Subjects were randomly assigned to receive one of two different versions of the question (see Appendix B for specific wording). These alternative question constructions constituted our framing manipulation. The *recipient* frame emphasized beliefs about poverty by stressing that people on welfare “don’t deserve the special treatment.” The *economy* frame, by contrast, emphasized the possible economic threat posed by “excessive” welfare spending. After reading one of these two frames, subjects were asked in an open-ended question what they thought the key framing phrase—either special treatment or economic threat—meant. This descriptive task served two important functions: first, it implicitly encouraged respondents to pay attention to the framing stimulus; second, and more importantly, it permitted us to examine subjects’ *comprehension* of the message. Any assertions we make about differences in framing effects across levels of sophistication would be compromised if more sophisticated subjects simply understood the message better. Finally, subjects were asked (on a seven-point scale) if they supported or opposed welfare policy.

Results

Framing Effect

Our first step in the data analysis was to see if the framing manipulation influenced opinion on welfare. To test the hypothesis that framing would affect subjects’ weighting of beliefs about the poor, we regressed subjects’ welfare opinions on their affect toward poor people, their attributions for poverty (specifically, the extent to which they believe that poverty is due to external forces⁴), and their opinions about the health of the American economy.⁵ The equation also included three interaction terms representing the change in the relationship between the respective predictors and support for welfare spending for subjects in the recipient frame. The results of the regression appear in Table 2.

Average level of support for welfare policy did not vary across the two issue frames. This was not surprising, as both frames suggest reasons why someone might oppose welfare. In fact, none of the variables in the analysis differed significantly in mean level across the two framing conditions. The regression analysis showed that beliefs and feelings about the poor did indeed influence

TABLE 2. Regression Equation Predicting Support for Welfare

	<i>b</i>	S.E.	<i>p</i>
Age	-.06	.02	<.001*
External attribution for poverty	.15	.17	.19
Affect toward poor people	.44	.08	<.001
Concerns about the economy	-.29	.20	.15*
Framing condition	.08	.19	.68*
Attribution * framing condition	.37	.24	.06
Affect * framing condition	-.08	.10	.45*
Economic concerns * framing condition	-.12	.30	.69*
Constant	5.54	.43	<.001
<i>N</i>		113	
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²		.57	
S.E. of Regression		1.00	

Note: Entries in the *b* column are unstandardized regression coefficients. *p* values are one-tail unless indicated by an asterisk (*). The dependent variable, *welfare opinion*, was coded such that higher values indicate greater opposition to welfare spending; *external attribution for poverty* was coded such that higher values indicate disagreement that external factors are responsible for poverty; *affect toward poor people* was coded such that higher values indicate more negative affect toward the poor; *economic concerns* was coded such that higher values indicate greater optimism about the state of the economy; *framing condition* was dummy coded such that a 1 represents the "recipient" condition and 0 represents the "economy" condition.

support for welfare spending: those who were more inclined to blame poverty on external forces showed greater support for welfare spending, while those who expressed more positive affect for the poor were also more likely to support welfare spending. Consistent with our prediction, however, the link between external attributions for poverty and support for welfare depended upon the issue frame: the effect of such beliefs about the poor on welfare attitudes was stronger in the recipient frame than in the economy frame, as indicated by the attribution * framing condition interaction term. While this framing effect does not quite reach conventional levels of statistical significance ($t = 1.53$, $p = .06$), it represents more than a threefold increase in the influence of beliefs about the poor on welfare opinion.⁶ The frame appeared to operate specifically on *beliefs* about poverty, rather than on attitudes toward the poor in general. The impact of affect toward the poor on welfare opinion did not significantly differ between the two conditions.

Subjects who were optimistic about the American economy were somewhat more favorable toward welfare spending than pessimistic subjects, and this relationship was slightly (although not significantly) stronger in the recipient frame condition. After puzzling over this effect for a while (we had anticipated a stronger relationship under the economy frame), we now believe that we measured the wrong variable to test the hypothesis that the economy

frame would strengthen the effects of economic beliefs on welfare opinion. The predictor, beliefs about the economy, is a measure of subjects' perceptions of the current and future health of the American economy (see Appendix A). The economy frame makes no claim about the overall health of the economy, but rather asserts that welfare spending threatens the economy. In retrospect, it is not clear how this frame should affect the relationship between economic optimism and support for welfare spending. Some optimistic subjects might advocate increased welfare spending, reasoning that the nation can afford to spend more on the poor during prosperous times. On the other hand, the claim that welfare spending jeopardizes the economy might well make optimists reluctant to support such spending. A normally positive relationship between optimism about the economy and support for welfare spending would therefore be *weakened* by the economy frame, rather than strengthened. The measure of economic beliefs should have directly assessed subjects' beliefs about the effect of welfare spending on the American economy, rather than subjects' general optimism or pessimism about the economy.

Familiarity with Arguments About Welfare Recipients

We have argued that framing effects result not because the framed message presents new information about the issue, but rather because the frame emphasizes a certain aspect of the issue, and that aspect is accorded greater weight in the individual's attitude. Since framing effects derive not from the presentation of new information but from the activation of portions of recipients' existing knowledge structures, these effects should be as powerful, if not more powerful, among subjects who are familiar with welfare arguments as among less informed subjects. To test this hypothesis, we repeated the foregoing analyses for less informed and well-informed subjects, splitting the sample by their familiarity with the substance of the recipient frame.

In part 1 of the study, subjects were asked to indicate their familiarity with various arguments about welfare spending. Table 1 shows the percentage of subjects who professed some prior exposure to each argument. We selected the two that most closely resembled the welfare recipient frame (*People on welfare are mostly lazy* and *People on welfare could probably get along without the help*) to divide the sample into a "more informed" group and a "less informed" group. Subjects who were familiar with one argument at the most were categorized as "less informed" ($N = 66$), while subjects who were familiar with both arguments were categorized as "more informed" ($N = 47$).

The results of the regression analysis run by level of familiarity are displayed in Table 3. If framing simply resulted in belief change, we would expect less informed subjects to be more susceptible to framing effects than well-informed subjects. Practically speaking, the coefficient for the attribution

* frame interaction should be larger among the less informed group than among the well-informed group. We found just the opposite: the interaction between framing and beliefs about the poor was actually greater (by a magnitude of more than 3) for subjects who were *more* familiar with arguments about welfare recipients. The interaction between framing condition and attributions for poverty, marginally significant for the full sample ($p = .06$), is comfortably significant among more informed subjects ($b = .54$, S.E. = .28, $t = 1.92$, $p = .03$). Among less informed subjects, the interaction was far from significant ($b = .16$, S.E. = .27, $t = .40$). These results suggest that the recipient frame encouraged well-informed respondents to lend greater weight to their beliefs about the causes of poverty as they considered the issue of welfare, while the same frame amounted to relatively novel information for less informed subjects, and thus had less impact on their thoughts about welfare.⁷ Further, these results cannot be attributed to superior comprehension of the frames among more knowledgeable respondents. Examination of respondents' open-ended descriptions of the frame content indicated that only 3 out of the 116 respondents failed to grasp the essential message of their frame.

General Political Sophistication and Framing Effects: Evidence from the National Election Study

Our experimental data support our claims about the psychological substrates of framing effects. Rather than contributing novel information, frames

TABLE 3. Regression Equation Predicting Support for Welfare by Familiarity with Arguments about Welfare Recipients

	Low Familiarity			High Familiarity		
	<i>b</i>	S.E.	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	S.E.	<i>p</i>
Age	-.08	.04	.06*	-.06	.02	<.001*
External attribution for poverty	.16	.40	.28	.10	.21	.32
Affect toward poor people	.46	.13	<.001	.45	.09	<.001
Concerns about the economy	-.47	.29	.11*	.03	.27	.91*
Framing condition	.13	.29	.65*	-.18	.26	.49*
Attribution * framing condition	.16	.27	.35	.54	.28	.03
Affect * framing condition	-.10	.16	.56*	-.12	.13	.35*
Economic concerns * framing condition	.43	.47	.36*	-.91	.41	.03*
Constant	5.88	.90	<.001	5.58	.46	<.001
<i>N</i>		66			47	
Adjusted R^2		.41			.74	
S.E. Regression		1.14			.82	

Note: Entries in the *b* column are unstandardized regression coefficients. *p* values are one-tail unless marked by an asterisk (*). Coding of variables is as described in the footnote to Table 2.

appear to activate existing beliefs among those already familiar with the frame's message. For our purposes, we have defined sophistication much more narrowly than most scholars. We have examined the effects of *domain-specific* knowledge about the arguments surrounding an issue on susceptibility to framing effects, rather than the effects of general political sophistication. Would general political sophistication similarly moderate framing effects? On the one hand, general political sophistication means, by definition, that an individual has a richer knowledge base, and hence is more likely to have some element of that base activated by an issue frame. On the other hand, domain-specific and general political sophistication may be only weakly correlated (McGraw and Pinney, 1990), and so general political knowledge may not predict familiarity with the debate concerning a specific issue. To address this question, we looked to the 1989 National Election Study (NES), which contained not only three framing experiments but also a measure of general political knowledge. Drawing on these data, Nelson and Kinder (1996) reported that "group-centered frames" (similar to the "recipient" frame in the present study) intensified the effect of group attitudes on issue attitudes—a now-familiar framing effect. We divided the NES sample into the 40% least sophisticated and 40% most sophisticated, based on Zaller's (1992) index, and reestimated the models reported by Nelson and Kinder. In two out of three experiments (concerning spending on the poor and spending on AIDS), framing effects were indeed stronger for more sophisticated respondents, while in a third experiment (affirmative action), framing effects were stronger for less sophisticated respondents. It is difficult to draw any firm conclusions from these mixed results, especially since the NES survey did not control for respondents' comprehension of the frame's message. Still, the general pattern resonates with the present study's: that political knowledge and sophistication, whether narrow or broad, do not insulate one from the effects of framing (as it might from the effects of persuasion via belief change), but rather seem to promote framing effects.

DISCUSSION

The results of this experiment support our proposed psychological model of framing effects, and help reinforce our claim that framing is a process distinct from traditional persuasion via belief change. The effect of framing on the relationship between attitudes toward the poor and opinion on welfare supports the argument that framing can affect the balance of considerations that individuals weigh when contemplating political issues. That framing effects were *stronger*, not weaker, among respondents already familiar with the frame's content sustains the idea that recipients respond quite differently to frames than to messages directed toward changing their beliefs. Frames ap-

pear to activate existing beliefs and cognitions, rather than adding something new to the individual's beliefs about the issue.

By extension, our results lend credence to the suggestion with which we began: that the mass media, and other institutions of mass political communication, can profoundly influence public opinion *even without any overt attempt at persuasion or manipulation*. The media may sincerely follow institutional norms of impartiality and neutrality, yet they cannot escape the fact that their approach to a story implicitly teaches the public how to understand the central issues. These effects may be wholly unintended, but they are real nonetheless.

Models of Political Communication Effects

Students of political communication place increasing importance on understanding the cognitive processing of messages (Beniger and Gusek, 1995). We see three main cognitive routes to political communication effects. Messages may change attitudes by *adding information* to an individual's stockpile of considerations about the issue (belief change), by making particular considerations temporarily more *accessible* (priming), or by altering the *weight* of particular considerations (framing).

We believe that the present results help validate our proposed distinction between framing and belief change. But what about priming? One could argue that frames, rather than affecting the perceived importance or relevance of certain considerations, merely alter the *accessibility* of these considerations in memory, thus acting as a kind of priming mechanism.⁸ Accessibility models enjoy great currency in contemporary public opinion research (Iyengar, 1991; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Krosnick and Kinder, 1990; Tourangeau and Rasinski, 1988; Zaller, 1992; Zaller and Feldman, 1992). According to such models, the expression of a political attitude is at least partly a constructive process of the moment (Tourangeau and Rasinski, 1988; Wyer and Hartwick, 1980; Zaller, 1992). Since individuals cannot possibly consider everything they know or believe about an issue at a given moment, their attitude will be the product of whatever ideas happen to be momentarily accessible in memory. The accessibility of the ideas may, in turn, reflect priming by the news media or some other source. Such a process might underlie framing effects. Frames that stress the alleged failings of a specific social group, for example, may affect opinions by making thoughts and feelings about that group temporarily more accessible.⁹

Despite the considerable intuitive appeal of accessibility models, they are at best incomplete representations of how individuals translate discrete pieces of information into summary attitudes.¹⁰ While it may be true that beliefs must be accessible to influence an attitude, not all accessible ideas will neces-

sarily be taken into account; furthermore, equally accessible considerations may be accorded different weights in the final attitude calculation. The individual may consider an accessible concept to be irrelevant or unimportant for the issue at hand. Framing may intervene in either of these processes. Like primes, frames may call to mind (make accessible) a specific consideration, but they also lend additional weight to an already accessible concept by influencing its perceived relevance or importance.

For every issue there will certainly be some people who possess firm opinions that are unlikely to change in response to frames, primes, or persuasive arguments. Still, our experiments reveal that even relatively knowledgeable people do not necessarily have fixed opinions on matters of public debate. For most people, attitudes on most political issues are not like files in a drawer, waiting to be pulled out and consulted whenever the need arises (as in a survey interview). Rather, "attitude" should properly refer to a range of potential evaluative expressions, tied to a foundation of beliefs, emotional responses, and past behavioral episodes that combine in varying strengths to determine the precise attitude expressed at any given time (Sherif, Sherif, and Nebergall, 1965; Zaller, 1992). While accessibility or "top of the head" models of attitude expression capture an important aspect of this process, they portray the individual as rather mindless, as automatically incorporating into the final attitude whatever ideas happen to pop into mind. Clearly, all accessible ideas are not equally germane to a given issue. We contend that expressing an attitude involves a more deliberate weighing of considerations to determine their ultimate importance for the issue, and that frames influence this process.

Elites, Framing, and the Practice of Journalism

Mass media coverage of political issues is necessarily selective. Not all sources can be quoted, all angles explored, or all relevant facts cited. The media depend upon frames to help organize and lend coherence to relatively brief treatments of complex subjects. At times news framing is homogeneous, with the dimensions of mediated public debate confined within the boundaries of a single frame, as in the case of American media coverage of the Gulf War (Entman, 1993; Dorman and Livingston, 1994). At other times coverage may be organized by a handful of competing frames, as appears to be the case with affirmative action, with stories encapsulated within either the "remedial action" or "reverse discrimination" frames (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987). The coherency contributed to news coverage by frames may come at a price, however. A specific frame may narrow the range of considerations the audience member brings to bear on the issue. When certain sources are relied

upon heavily, the range of frames might also be narrow. Ultimately, public debate on the momentous issues of the day is constrained.

Elites face numerous obstacles in trying to "get their message across" to large masses of people, not the least of which is the press's cherished (though often disputed) image of neutrality (Beck, Dalton, and Huckfeldt, 1995). Few political figures besides the president can use the mass media to speak directly and at length to the general public. Most elites must hope that their juiciest sound bite may be picked up and replayed in the press with minimal contradiction (Hallin, 1992). Elites seem to have learned that it may be more profitable in such an environment to try to frame issues in advantageous ways than to try to change public beliefs by offering evidence or logical argumentation. Journalists' reliance on elite sources for material means that even if they dispute the source's assumptions or conclusions, they still construct the story in terms established by that source. This dynamic interplay between political elites and mass media practitioners is a far cry from the more simplified portrayal of source parameters in standard persuasion studies. Psychologists and political scientists alike should have an understanding of attitude formation and expression broad enough to accommodate the realities of modern political communication.

Problems and Challenges

Our method of choice for this research was the laboratory experiment, and we can claim all the advantages inherent in this method, as well as admit its shortcomings. While we have confidence in our assertions about the effects of our frames, these manipulations were purified creations of our very own, not naturally occurring phenomena. We tried to remain faithful to real-world frames, but some simplification was necessary in order to achieve a minimal level of experimental control. Having said that, it must be pointed out that our manipulations were rather mild—a simple substitution of one phrase for another. Our next goal is to step up the "mundane realism" of our experiments by using actual news items (videotaped segments of television news broadcasts) as experimental stimuli.

A second potential liability of the present research is its subject pool: a convenience sample of undergraduates. Contrary to popular myth, college students are indeed "real people," who vary widely and importantly in their knowledge about, interest in, and attitudes toward political issues (Fabrigar, Krosnick, and Miller, 1995). Yet we cannot pretend that an undergraduate sample faithfully represents the broader American population (Sears, 1986). We can take heart that other framing effects have been obtained in experiments with nationally representative populations (Kinder and Sanders, 1990; Nelson and Kinder, 1996), but these other studies did not measure respon-

dents' familiarity with, or comprehension of, the frames' content, as did the present experiment. Such measures are critical for testing our hypotheses about the psychological mediators of framing effects. Although a student sample is necessarily more homogeneous than one that accurately represents the national population, we obtained enough variation in our key independent variables (prior familiarity with framing content; attitudes toward poor people) among this group to conduct meaningful tests of our hypotheses.

Lastly, we have throughout this paper glossed over the important difference between the subjective weight of a belief and its objective weight, taking data about the latter (which we have—our regression weights) as evidence about the former (which we do not have, at least not *direct* evidence). It remains an open question whether or not the frame-induced changes in the impact of specific beliefs on attitudes is mediated by corresponding changes in the perceived importance or relevance of those beliefs. Such conscious changes need not take place for framing to have an impact—psychologists from Freud onward have repeatedly shown dramatic effects on judgment and behavior that are mediated by functions below the surface of conscious awareness. We are not always aware of what influences our opinions and activities (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977; Krosnick and Fabrigar, n.d.). Future studies should tackle the issue of the relationship between changes in subjective and objective importance.

Scholarly approaches to mass communication increasingly refer to “framing” as an important function of political elites, the mass media, and other agents of political communication. Framing seems destined to take its place alongside phenomena such as priming and agenda-setting that have emerged from modern research on mass media influence. As with these other effects, framing effects reveal how the media may direct public thought and understanding about politics in the absence of crude propaganda ploys or ideological biases. Each of these phenomena carries either an explicit or implicit model of its concomitant psychological mechanics. Researchers would do well to consider carefully the presumed psychological processes by which these phenomena are realized; to the extent that these hypothesized processes may be explicitly tested, the theory as a whole prospers.

Political scientists may well ask what practical difference it makes if a message influences attitudes via framing, accessibility, or belief change. The present results help to establish that the same message may affect recipients differently, depending upon factors such as their level of familiarity with the issue. One cannot assume that knowledge and sophistication make one immune to attitude change attempts, whether mediated or direct. Political elites may fail to influence public opinion among the most knowledgeable through direct propaganda campaigns, but they may succeed in directing public debate in their favor through clever frames. It is important to remain sensitive

to the different psychological routes by which communications may affect attitudes in order to understand *who* will respond to *what* kind of message.

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APPENDIX A: ATTRIBUTION AND ECONOMY SCALE ITEMS

External Attribution Items (Cronbach's alpha = .78)

1. Failure of society to provide good schools.
2. Low wages in some businesses and industries.
3. Failure of private industry to provide enough jobs.
4. Prejudice and discrimination against blacks.
5. Being taken advantage of by rich people.
6. *Their background gives them attitudes that keeps them from improving their condition.
7. *Just bad luck.

Internal Attribution Items (Cronbach's alpha = .61)

1. Lack of thrift and proper money management skills.
2. Lack of effort by the poor themselves.
3. Lack of ability and talent.
4. Loose morals and drunkenness.
5. *Sickness and physical handicaps.

Economy Items (Pearson r = .37)

1. Would you say that, over the past year, the nation's economy has gotten better, stayed about the same, or gotten worse?
2. What about the next 12 months? Do you expect the economy to get better, get worse, or stay about the same?

APPENDIX B: FRAMING MANIPULATIONS

Recipient Frame

On Tuesday, you were asked about your familiarity with various arguments for and against welfare. As you probably know, welfare was a "hot topic" during the recent

*Excluded from analysis due to low and/or ambiguous factor loadings.

national elections. Many candidates made "welfare reform" a big part of their campaign. Many candidates criticized welfare by arguing that **most people on welfare don't deserve the special treatment.**

Economy Frame

On Tuesday, you were asked about your familiarity with various arguments for and against welfare. As you probably know, welfare was a "hot topic" during the recent national elections. Many candidates made "welfare reform" a big part of their campaign. Many candidates criticized welfare by arguing that **excessive welfare payments are seriously threatening the American economy.**

NOTES

1. Critics of the media (e.g., Parenti, 1986) would surely dispute the characterization of the mainstream media as "neutral." Still, the norm of neutrality, however impossible it may be to fully realize, pervades major news organizations and encourages them to confine overtly partisan material to their editorial pages or "commentary" segments.
2. A third possibility exists, namely *priming*, or the temporary alteration of the cognitive accessibility of certain beliefs in long-term memory. We return to this point later.
3. The exception, according to Zaller (1992), is when political elites and the mass media are unified in support of a specific position. The paradigmatic example is the early years of the Vietnam War, when leaders and the media adopted an exclusively pro-war perspective. More sophisticated "doves" supported the war to a greater extent than less sophisticated doves, in apparent violation of their anti-war values. Zaller (1992) explains this exceptional set of opinions as a case in which the effects of sophistication on reception and comprehension of the pro-war message were not balanced by enhanced resistance to the counterattitudinal message among the most sophisticated. One should bear in mind that most doves at this early stage probably did not shift from one side of the Vietnam issue to the other, but rather formulated an opinion on the war where none existed before.
4. Internal attributions for poverty, or the extent to which individuals blamed the poor themselves for their lack of achievement, did not independently predict welfare opinion. Therefore, the attribution variable includes the external dimension only.
5. A number of demographic variables (age, gender, race, year in school) were examined as possible correlates of welfare opinion. Despite its somewhat limited range among our student sample, age was strongly related to welfare support. Eighteen- and nineteen-year-old students were especially opposed to welfare, an effect that was only partly accounted for by year in school. As no other demographic variables were significantly correlated with welfare opinion, age alone was included in our regression equations as a control variable.
6. The cross-product interaction term, while appropriate for this analysis, is a notoriously weak statistical test of interaction effects (McClelland and Judd, 1993).
7. Concerns about the economy had a bigger impact on welfare opinion under the recipient frame than the economy frame for subjects who were more familiar with arguments about welfare recipients. As explained earlier, we suspect that our measure of economic concerns is inappropriate, and so we believe this result is ambiguous. When the sample was split by familiarity with economic arguments about welfare, rather than by familiarity with arguments about welfare recipients, no interaction between framing and economic concerns emerged for either the low or high familiarity groups.

8. Indeed, Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock (1991) write that, "The effect of framing is to prime values differentially," but continue in the same sentence that frames "establish the salience of the one (value) or the other" (p. 52). Thus, while Sniderman et al. equate framing with both priming and establishing salience, we see important differences between these concepts.
9. To complicate matters even further, beliefs or other "considerations" need not even be *consciously* accessible to impact upon attitudes, as a long tradition of research on nonconscious processing has shown (Bargh and Pietromonaco, 1982; Zajonc, 1968).
10. Indeed, there is scant evidence that directly supports the accessibility explanation of some of the original priming studies (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder, 1987).

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