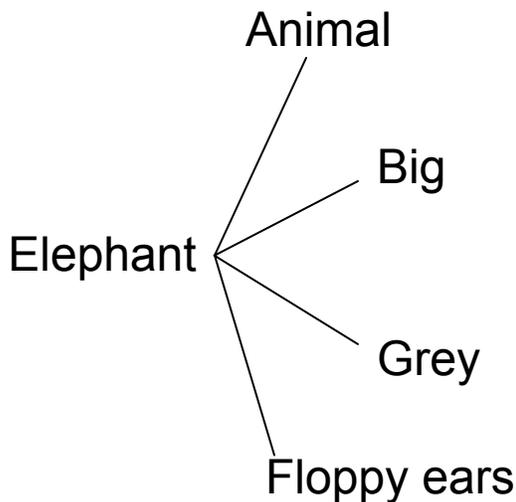


INTRODUCTION TO FRAMING
Written by Kao-Ping Chua
AMSA Jack Rutledge Fellow 2005-2006
February 10, 2006

[Author's note: The primer cites the work of cognitive scientists and framing theorists George Lakoff and Lawrence Wallack. Text that is not attributed to these experts represents the thoughts of the author, who fully acknowledges responsibility for any errors or misrepresentations in this primer].

WHAT IS FRAMING?

The term “framing” comes from cognitive science, which defines a frame as a conceptual structure involved with thinking. To paraphrase an example used by the framing expert George Lakoff, saying the word “elephant” evokes the elephant frame, which is associated with the terms “animal,” “big,” “grey,” “floppy ears”, etc.¹ The elephant frame might be depicted schematically as follows:



The above is a simplified diagram, as “animal”, “big”, “grey”, and “floppy ears” each have secondary associations of their own.

Framing can be thought of as telling a story about the world. The elephant frame tells a story about a big, grey, animal with floppy ears called “elephant.” More broadly, there is a popular American cultural narrative in which hard working people who pull themselves up by the bootstraps will succeed in life. This “hard work equals success” frame is an important way in which many Americans think about the world. Frames are fundamentally about our relationship to the world and how we view it.

WHY IS FRAMING IMPORTANT?

The essence of social change is changing perceptions, which itself is the territory of framing. George Lakoff illustrates the power of framing to effect social change by

analyzing the term "tax relief", which is an often-used term used to refer to cutting taxes. To quote Lakoff:

"The word *relief* evokes a frame in which there is a blameless Afflicted Person who we identify with and who has some Affliction, some pain or harm that is imposed by some external Cause-of-pain. Relief is the taking away of the pain or harm, and it is brought about by some Reliever-of-pain.

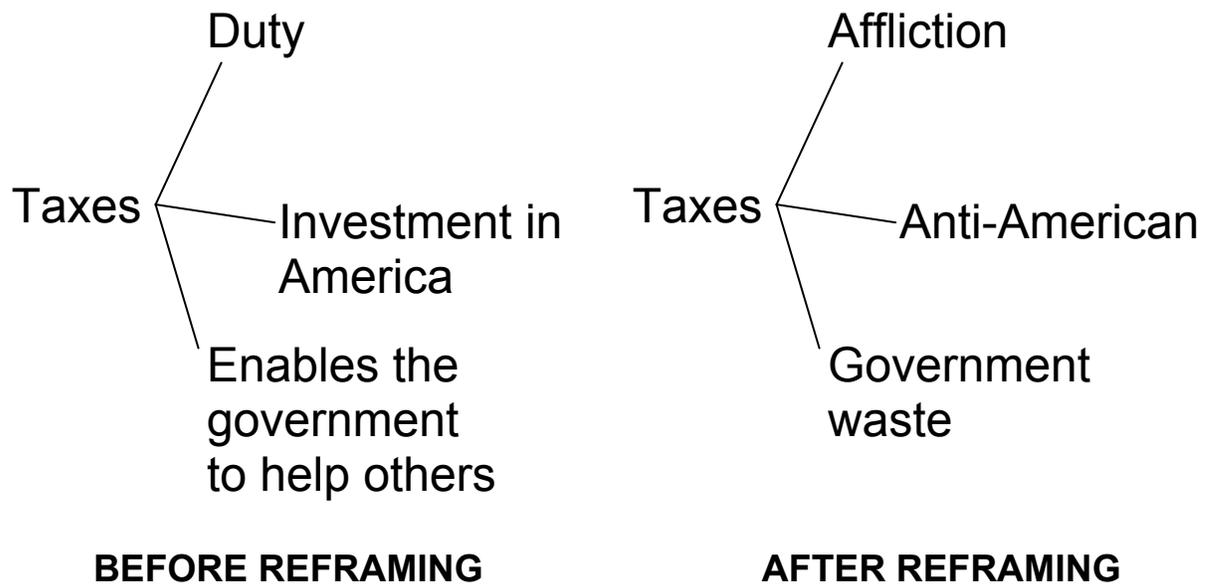
The Relief frame is an instance of a more general Rescue scenario, in which there is a Hero (The Reliever-of-pain), a Victim (the Afflicted), a Crime (the Affliction), A Villain (the Cause-of-affliction), and a Rescue (the Pain Relief). The Hero is inherently good, the Villain is evil, and the Victim after the Rescue owes gratitude to the Hero.

The term *tax relief* evokes all of this and more. Taxes, in this phrase, are the Affliction (the Crime), proponents of taxes are the Causes-of Affliction (the Villains), the taxpayer is the Afflicted Victim, and the proponents of "tax relief" are the Heroes who deserve the taxpayers' gratitude."²

The point is not at all here that proponents of tax cuts have been able to come up with a clever phrase. Rather, the point is that they have been able to *reframe taxes as an affliction* in part by using the term "tax relief" over and over – on radio, in newspapers, on TV, in Congress, everywhere. The popularization of the term has made it more difficult for opponents of tax cuts to articulate their case for taxation. "Tax cuts" is an emotionally neutral term, but "tax relief" engenders a much more visceral response – a story about an oppressive government burdening people with heavy taxes. It is one thing to be against "tax cuts", but it is more difficult to be against "tax relief", even though they amount to the same thing.

Proponents of tax cuts did not just stop by framing taxes as an affliction. They were also able to successfully reframe taxes as enabling government to be wasteful and as being anti-American. Thus, any discussion of the taxes that evoked the "tax" frame also evoked "government waste", "anti-American", and "affliction." The way people think about taxes has been fundamentally changed. In a sense, people's brains were literally rewired.

The following schematic, used purely for the purposes of illustration, represents how the tax frame may have changed over the past few decades.



FACTS VERSUS FRAME

A central tenet of frame theory is that when facts do not fit a person's frame, the fact is not internalized. As Lakoff writes, "If the truth doesn't fit the existing frame, the frame will stay in place and the truth will dissipate."² If a person believes that taxes are an affliction, he or she might be less inclined to believe a report about how tax cuts can actually hurt the economy. Conversely, someone who believes that taxes are an investment in America is more likely to believe the report. In both cases, there is often a lack of critical questioning: if the fact doesn't fit the frame, it's ignored, and if the fact does fit the frame, it's accepted. This is not an indictment of human thought so much as it is a fact of how humans think.

There is a common myth that people, once faced with the bare facts, will be persuaded to side with the truth. In reality, the truth does not always set one free; rather, the truth matters most when it fits pre-existing worldviews and frames. This suggests that a persuasive tactic would be to change people's frames rather than present facts that conflict with their frames.

REFRAMING VS. MESSAGING

There is often confusion between the concepts of reframing and messaging:

- Reframing (changing frames) – The process of reframing is difficult and requires a considerable investment of time. However, social change ultimately does not occur without it, as the root of social change is a change in worldview. For example, reframing taxes so that it seen as a duty rather than an affliction requires clear and repeated articulation of the moral basis for taxation. The rewiring process will take a long time, but it needs to occur if one is interested in maintaining government programs.

- Messaging – messaging is about generating a way to convey a particular idea. In its most shallow form, messaging is simply advertising or marketing, the domain of PR firms.

Unfortunately, some believe that framing is solely about messaging – coming up with the catchy vehicle for delivering a message. As the cognitive scientist and framing expert Lawrence Wallack notes about the fight over Social Security, “I frequently hear people talk about framing Social Security when they are simply coming up with a clever message and suggesting some numbers that might ‘convince’ people. The real issue is not about Social Security but the role of government and the relationship we have with it. A message won’t work when the larger frame has been set and is in opposition to the message.”³

LAKOFF'S LEVELS OF ANALYSIS

How can you frames be used to achieve social change? To answer this question, consider George Lakoff’s three levels of analysis³:

Level 1: Values and principles: like equity, justice, fairness, prosperity, etc.

Level 2: Issue categories: environmental issues, human rights issues, moral issues, etc.

Level 3: Programs and policies: housing, education, health care, etc.

Welfare Reform Illustration

Level 1: Values and Principles	
Conservative	Liberal/Progressive
Self-discipline, Reward for work, self-determination, rugged individualism, personal responsibility, government hurts	Obligation to the collective good, shared responsibility, unequal starting places need remedies, government helps
Level 2: Issue Categories	
Moral behavior, taxes, education	Poverty, social welfare, inequality
Level 3: Programs and Policies	
Tax cuts, business incentives to create opportunity, short term “boot strap” help for individuals, medical savings accounts	Child care, universal access to health care, housing, educational assistance so people can take advantage of opportunity
Basic Argument	
Welfare hurts rather than helps by undermining the very attributes that people need to be successful (hard work, self-discipline etc). It makes people dependent rather than independent. It rewards immoral behavior by giving people something that they have not earned, thus worsening the problem.	Welfare helps by giving people the basic necessities they need to be successful. It makes people independent by providing a helping hand. It encourages moral behavior of the society by sharing with those who are disadvantaged. It is a manifestation of our obligation to the collective good.

It is a common mistake to try to communicate to people on Level 3 (programs and policies) instead of Level 1 (values and principles, which are themselves frames). As many observers have noted, people don’t necessarily vote according to their economic self-interest; rather, they tend to vote according to their values.¹ The Level 3 technical

details of an issue are important for policy makers, but for the average person, it is much more important to appeal to and activate values frames.

Talking to people about an issue on the level of values activates values frames, and the process of activating this frame in relation to a particular issue associates that value with the issue, thus changing the frame of the issue. Welfare can be reframed as a natural extension of the value of shared responsibility if advocates consistently talk about welfare in those terms. The task before those who wish to use framing to achieve social change is not to find a clever message, but rather to insure that the way in which they talk about their cause links to positive values, thus changing the frame of the issue.

CONCLUSION

The importance of framing cannot be underemphasized in the fight for social change. Changing worldviews - the territory of framing - is an essential ingredient for reform. Yet, it must be emphasized here that framing is not the only ingredient; it must be accompanied by sound policy, grassroots support, and electoral politics that put people in power who are amenable to the desired change.

It must be further emphasized that framing has its limitations. As some have pointed out, no matter how much reframing is done, people will never *like* paying taxes.⁴ They may, however, see it as something that is more a part of being a dutiful American who cares about investing in the country, and less as an affliction by government bureaucrats who will fritter taxpayer dollars away on ineffective social programs. In the end, those who are interested in effecting social change must thoroughly understand both the power and limitations of framing.

REFERENCES

1. Lakoff, G. Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate. Chelsea Green: White River Junction, 2004.
2. Lakoff, G. "Simple Framing." Available online at http://www.rockridgeinstitute.org/projects/strategic/simple_framing, accessed January 2006.
3. Wallack, L. "Framing: More than a Message." Available online at <http://www.longviewinstitute.org/research/wallack/levels>, accessed January 2006.
4. Bai, M. "The Framing Wars." *New York Times*, July 17, 2005.