

Key Concepts in Processes of Sustainability Transformation

FRAMING

Authors: Sadhbh Juárez-Bourke **Contributors:** Charlott Hübel, Maike Buhr, Ulli Vilsmaier, Gustavo Rodriguez Aboytes, Stefan Hilser, Karoline Pöggel, Julius Rathgens, Felix Beyers, Lisa Keßler, Faculty of Sustainability, Leuphana University of Lüneburg

DEFINITION

Framing can be defined as an act of abstraction in which we select what parts of reality to focus on in order to create meaning. Over the past four decades, this word has been conceptualised and theorised thoroughly across disciplines (Cornelissen & Werner 2014). From a linguistic perspective, a frame defines boundaries in which a discourse is constructed. The very linguistic act, involves framing. In journalism for example, the way a story is framed, will influence how it is perceived by its audience. At a fundamental level, the brain itself can be considered as a framing apparatus, with social conditioning and past experience acting as the blueprints from which we creates frameworks to filter our lived experience in a way that we can make sense of it.

CONTEXT

Framing is an important concept in the social and communication sciences, politics, economics and linguistics. Kahneman and Tversky (1979) coined the "framing effect" as the effect that problem formulation has on our decision-making, presenting framing as a major cognitive bias within rational-choice theory. Lakoff (2004) provides us a fascinating study on how the language that we chose to use will draw others into seeing reality from our worldview, and how this phenomena plays out in the political arena. In media studies, Goffman's frame analysis (1974) has had a major influence on how the term is used in the field.

In research practice, the act of framing is usually associated to the researcher locating her or his work within specific theories and schools of thought. Two aspects can be differentiated here: on the one hand, how the pre-existing beliefs, assumptions and values of the researcher will influence the framing of research. In this sense, one may want to critically asses the use of context in the framing of a piece of research, as the context is inevitably simplified in the act of framing. On the other hand, the act of framing is a way of fulfilling the purpose of reaching a specific audience. Following

the latter, framing is particularly challenging in inter- and transdisciplinary research, when trying to reach different communities of practice. However, its inter-disciplinary nature also represents a great opportunity to create concepts that can be made understandable across disciplinary boundaries. Here the concept of framing can be conceptualised as an artefact that mediates boundaries (Vilsmaier & Lang 2015).

RELEVANCE

Processes of sustainability transformation are inherently inter- and/or transdisciplinary. In bringing together several disciplinary perspectives and approaches to knowledge (bridging from tacit to academic), the act of framing becomes a key component of the research process. Because a certain way of framing reflects a specific point of view, with underlying values and belief systems, the process which is used for framing the research problem is a reflection of the power relations present in the research, and how they are being approached. Particularly researchers in the field of sustainability increasingly need to pay attention to project and problem framing, which raises questions about how to design collaborative processes in order to be both socially relevant and scientifically robust (Wuelser & Pohl 2016).

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