



## **A FrameWorks Institute eZine**

### **Framing Lessons from the Social Movements Literature**

This eZine, the 29<sup>th</sup> in a series of brief, occasional and topical essays on framing, brings to bear social movements theory and scholarship on the question of how to frame early child development. Specifically, we use the lens of this body of work to explore a series of questions that present themselves to the conscientious child advocate at a period in time when pre-K legislation is on the ascendancy, Medicaid and child health programs are under attack, and important issues from affordable housing to turnover rates among preschool teachers remain relatively invisible in public discourse. These questions include but are not limited to the following:

- ⌚ Is there a tactical advantage or disadvantage to seeing pre-K as the “low hanging fruit” of legislative advocacy for children?
- ⌚ What are the consequences of framing early child development as early education?
- ⌚ Can the pre-K frame expand beyond universal pre-K; is it elaborative or restrictive?

By asking these questions in this way, and resorting to a field of scholarship that compares and contrasts the rise and fall of collective movements in America, FrameWorks researchers believe we can better evaluate the likely outcomes of various strategies currently in use and under discussion in child advocacy circles. That is the goal of this eZine, supported by a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

### **What the Social Movements Literature Tells Us**

While the concept of framing occurs across a number of disciplines, making possible a dialogue about the contributions of each toward our understanding of this phenomenon, most disciplines include important distinctions in the way they approach this central idea. In this literature, framing refers to “the conscious, strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action.”<sup>1</sup>

To oversimplify, while the cognitive sciences have focused on the impact of frames on minds, the social sciences have been more concerned with the impact of frames on

movements. In the one instance, the focus is on the impact of a particular signification on an individual's understanding of an issue, or preference for a policy. In the latter instance, the ability of messages to move masses to contest existing policies and/or embrace alternative policies has been the subject of theorizing and research. The work of Shanto Iyengar<sup>2</sup>, drawing from both psychology and political science, has attempted to straddle the bridge – using an experimental design to determine whether certain kinds of frames can be demonstrated to incline individuals toward collective action and policy preference.

But the literature of Social Movements holds other important lessons for advocates, beyond its utility in “collectivizing” or politicizing individual frame effects. First, this arena of scholarship appropriately consigns messaging to its rightful position as a tool to be leveraged toward larger goals. Frames are not ends in themselves, but rather catalysts to larger social change. Doug McAdam identifies six strategic hurdles that movements must be able to surmount if they are to achieve change: “(1) attract new recruits, (2) sustain the morale and commitment of current adherents, (3) generate media coverage, (4) mobilize the support of ‘bystander publics’, (5) constrain the social control options of its opponents, and (6) ultimately shape public policy and state action.”<sup>3</sup> In our opinion, issues advocates are often focused primarily upon goals 2 and 3, ignoring the importance of 1, 4 and 5 to the achievement of the primary goal of 6. Put another way, when advocates focus narrowly on the care and feeding of their direct mail lists and core believers, they lose the ability to expand their constituency by engaging and enlisting others in the society who share values and goals consonant with their objectives. For example, while extreme environmentalism may engage the base, it does not enlist conservation-minded sportsmen, leaving the movement open to charges that nothing short of radical limits will appease the movement. In this way, environmentalists lose objective 5 to the opposition, which effectively paints them in a corner, and takes over the position of reasonableness. McAdam reminds us that framing, in a movement context, is about building a big enough idea to attract a big enough constituency to win the battle of ideas.

Second, this literature serves as a useful corrective to a tendency among advocates to confuse marketing with movement-building. FrameWorks’ contributors have written elsewhere<sup>4</sup> about the dangers inherent in confusing consumers with citizens, or assuming that ideas and policies can be marketed like soap. We assert again that advocates make a fatal error when they adapt commercial notions of messaging, branding and market segmentation to the task of movement building. We have often observed in FrameWorks trainings that advocates are inclined to approach message development as an exercise in differentiation between disparate groups, and not as identifying a cultural construct consistent with the use of mass media. Put another way, the desire to identify messages and mediums for Left-Handed Lithuanians in Louisiana is seen as a more legitimate focus for advocacy than is the task of finding a broad set of values to connect Louisianans of multiple ethnicities and political orientations.

Scholars refer to framing strategies as “a kind of cultural learning.”<sup>5</sup> The idea of culture is of paramount importance here. The literature of Social Movements directs our

attention to meta-frames, or master frames, big ideas that connect policies and tell larger stories about collective worldview across the culture. “Master frames are generic; specific collective action frames are derivative... Master frames can be construed as functioning in a manner analogous to linguistic codes in that they provide a grammar that punctuates and syntactically connects patterns or happenings in the world.”<sup>6</sup> For example, framing social security as part of an “ownership society” could be thought of as a collective action frame that connects to the master frame of Individualism. Importantly, “once a movement’s collective action frame has become established as the master frame, efforts to extend its ideational scope may encounter resistance from its progenitors and guardians, as well as from external supporters,” note Snow and Benford.<sup>7</sup> If privatization were allowed to become the master frame for Social Security reform, then proposals that do not include privatization will be judged “off frame,” and tend to be rejected by movement sponsors.

Third, this literature underscores the importance of framing, and of getting the frame right from the beginning. Indeed, this body of scholarship cautions advocates to recognize that political moments are made, not born, and that the mobilizing frame put forward by advocates plays a critical role in the realization of political opportunity. As McAdam, McCarthy and Zald write, “Most political movements and revolutions are set in motion by social changes that render the established political order more vulnerable or receptive to change. But these ‘political opportunities’ are but a necessary prerequisite to action. In the absence of sufficient organization – whether formal or informal – such opportunities are not likely to be seized. Finally, mediating between the structural requirements of opportunity and organization are the emergent meanings and definitions – or frames – shared by the adherents of the burgeoning movement.”<sup>8</sup> In recent years, social movements theory has embraced the critical importance of frames as decisive factors in movement success or failure. “Perceptions are not only necessary for potential protesters to recognize opportunities, but in many cases perceptions can *create* opportunities.”<sup>9</sup>

Finally, the literature of social movements reminds us all to take the long view on advocacy. Movements ebb and flow, experience cycles of protest, and endure or wither. These are not “acts of nature,” these scholars believe, but rather functions of the frames used to explain their enduring appeal or grievance.

### **Examples from the Literature of Social Movements: The Nuclear Freeze**

To bring home the utility of this approach, we offer the examples of two specific movements about which scholars have speculated: (1) the nuclear freeze movement, and (2) the civil rights movement.

Writing in an important compendium of scholarship, David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford offer an analysis of “Master Frames and Cycles of Protest.” “Why,” they ask, “do citizens sometimes fail to act collectively on their shared grievances when the structural conditions appear otherwise ripe?”<sup>10</sup> Snow and Benford offer a set of 10 propositions that might be construed as critical determinants of successful social

movements. In each case, they apply the proffered proposition with respect to The Nuclear Freeze Movement and other movements. We reprise below<sup>11</sup> a selective list of the original propositions and a condensed version of the examples from the Nuclear Freeze Movement only, but commend to advocates' attention this highly readable and practical chapter.

*Proposition 1: Associated with the emergence of a cycle of protest is the development or construction of an innovative master frame.*

*“Randall Forsberg’s proposal for a freeze on the development, testing and deployment of nuclear weapons emerged, in 1980, as an innovative master frame that stimulated a dramatic upswing in peace movement activity...A bilateral, verifiable freeze provided what many felt had been the missing ingredient: a simple but concrete solution to the nuclear predicament.”*

*Proposition 2: The failure of mass mobilization when structural conditions seem otherwise ripe may be accounted for in part by the absence of a resonant master frame.*

*“The objective conditions – such as global militarism, wars, and relatively unabated increases in nuclear weapons stockpiles, as well as structural conditions including ...organizational infrastructures – do not appear to have been any less facilitative of peace movement activity in 1975 than they were in 1980. What was lacking in the 1970s, however, was a resonant master frame that was subsequently provided by the nuclear freeze campaign.”*

*Proposition 3: Movements that surface early in a cycle of protest are likely to function as progenitors of master frames that provide the ideational and interpretive anchoring for subsequent movements within the cycle.*

*“The freeze campaign framed war and peace issues in a narrow and highly compartmentalized fashion. Rather than addressing the structural roots of international conflict – superpower relations, the weaknesses of international peacekeeping institutions, and the lack of nonviolent alternatives to resolving disputes among sovereign states – the freeze defined the problem in technical terms... Most peace movement organizations followed the freeze campaign’s lead and focused attention almost exclusively on ‘stopping hardware.’”*

*Proposition 4: Movements that emerge later in the cycle will typically find their framing efforts constrained by the previously elaborated master frame.*

*“Not all peace groups went along with the freeze campaign’s narrow focus. National peace coalitions and traditionalist pacifist organizations sought to expand the boundaries of the freeze frame to encompass other peace issues and social problems...Rancorous frame disputes ensued between single-issue and multi-issue groups.”*

*Proposition 6: Movement tactics are not solely a function of environmental constraints and adaptations, but are also constrained by anchoring master frames.*

*“...the freeze constituted a highly restricted master frame. Its prognosis, a mutual, verifiable agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union, implied the use of traditional political tactics, including lobbying members of Congress to encourage them to vote for the freeze resolution and against specific weapons bills, voting in local freeze referenda, and casting votes for and contributing to pro-freeze candidates.”*

*Proposition 7: The shape of a cycle of protest is in part a function of the mobilizing potency of the anchoring frame.*

*“The highly restrictive nature of the freeze master frame limited its potential for elaboration....the cycle’s eventual decline was attributable, in part, to proponents’ failure to amplify the freeze frame in more resonant and innovative ways.”*

*Proposition 9: The decline or withering of an extant cycle of protest is due in part to changes in the prevailing cultural climate that render the anchoring master frame impotent.*

*“Prior to both world wars, peace movement membership, organization, support and activity swelled to unprecedented levels....the outbreak of war reduced the movement to its pacifist core....The rise of fascism, the onset of the Holocaust, and Pearl Harbor provided most peace adherents and sympathizers with a seemingly insurmountable challenge to the credibility of the movement’s master frame.”*

*Proposition 10: The emergence of competing frames can suggest the vulnerabilities and irrelevance of the anchoring master frame, thus challenging its resonance and rendering it increasingly impotent.*

*“The gruesome effects of (World War II) and the development of the atomic bomb led many pacifists and peace adherents to the conclusion that world government offered the only hope for the survival of our species....By the early 1950s, counterframing efforts led by Senator Joseph McCarthy successfully equated world government with communism. In the face of such resonant frames, individuals and peace organizations could no longer afford to be associated with world government advocacy.”*

### **Examples from the Literature of Social Movements: The Civil Rights Movement**

In his now famous analysis of the framing of the Civil Rights Movement, Doug McAdam explores and explains the way Martin Luther King, Jr. drew upon both conventional and novel themes to construct a coherent and resonant master frame. “In his unique blending of familiar Christian themes and conventional democratic theory, King succeeded in grounding the movement in two of the ideational bedrocks of American culture. Second, the theme of Christian forgiveness that runs throughout King’s thought was deeply reassuring to a white America burdened (as it still is) by guilt and a near phobic fear of

black anger and violence. King's emphasis on Christian charity and nonviolence promised a redemptive and peaceful healing to America's long-standing racial divide. Third, King's invocation of Gandhian philosophy added an exotic intellectual patina to his thought that many in the Northern media (and Northern intellectuals in general) found appealing. Finally, while singling out this or that theme in King's thought, it should be noted that the very variety of themes granted those in the media (and the general public) multiple points of ideological contact with the movement. So, secular liberals might be unmoved by King's reading of Christian theology, but resonate with his application of democratic theory."<sup>12</sup> McAdam goes on to explore how this frame variety lent tactical innovation, as freedom rides, sit-ins and other provocative, nonviolent and highly dramatic events became part of the Civil Rights arsenal.

One proof of the durability of the Civil Rights frame has been its adaptability to such disparate movements as Women's Rights, Gay Rights, Latino Rights, etc. Advocates for all these movements have been able to draw upon the highly available signifying elements of the Civil Rights frame to explain convincingly to the American public why discrimination and segregation against these populations deserved government intervention.

A striking example of this frame flexibility and power is evident in an op/ed from U. S. Representative John Lewis in which he borrows from our library of images and values associated with the Civil Rights Movement to argue the case for immigrant rights<sup>13</sup>:

*For me and for my fellow Freedom Riders from the 1960s, the civil rights movement cannot and will not come to an end until every one in America enjoys the rights and liberties guaranteed by the founding covenants of our nation. Which brings me to the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride, a movement that carries the struggle for civil rights for all forward into the new century. Last week, in 10 cities around America, some 800 immigrant workers boarded long-distance buses and set off for New York and Washington, where they are to arrive today. On their way, they have covered 20,000 miles of American roads, stopped in more than 100 places where local communities are engaged in struggles around immigrant and worker and civil rights, and carried a message that ought to resonate with every American. "Reward work," they are saying, by enabling the millions of immigrants who are living here, working hard, paying taxes and pursuing the American dream to legalize their status. "Renew our democracy," they urge, by creating a clear and smooth path to citizenship for all immigrants who wish to pledge their allegiance to our flag. "Restore labor protections" to give all workers, regardless of immigration status, the full benefit of labor laws, including the right to form unions. "Reunite families" by streamlining outdated policies that separate immigrants to our country from their families and loved ones far longer than is necessary or right. "Respect the civil rights and civil liberties of all," so that everyone in America, regardless of our place of birth or our immigration status, enjoys equality before the law.*

*Like the Freedom Rides of 1961, Freedom Ride 2003 calls on ordinary people to do extraordinary things: to put their bodies on the line at a moment in American history when immigration is a volatile issue everywhere; to stand up for their rights and the rights of many others; to call attention to bad laws that harm good people; and to challenge the federal government to act where it seems determined not to.*

John Lewis, "Freedom Riders of 2003," Washington Post, October 1, 2003, A23.

Think, by contrast, about drawing on the frame resonance of the Nuclear Freeze Movement to explain why: Guantanamo should be closed, American troops in Iraq should return home, the nomination of John Bolton as Ambassador to the UN should be withdrawn, or African debt should be retired. Yet, these are the modern-day outgrowth of the drive for peace that the Nuclear Freeze Movement sought to seize upon, crystallize and advance.

The following chart, drawn from the work of Snow and Benford<sup>14</sup> attempts to distill a number of key differences:

NUCLEAR FREEZE MOVEMENT	CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT
Framed war and peace narrowly	Focused on core values
Ignored structural roots of problem	Explained problem as anathema to democracy
Advanced a simple, concrete solution	Required removal of multiple barriers
Couldn't grow to embrace larger peace issues	Grew to embrace women's rights, gay rights
Sewed dissension between single, multi-issues groups	United diverse groups

### **Lessons in Frame Efficiency and Efficacy**

In this author's estimation, the above cases in particular and the social movements literature in general argue for the careful construction of master frames with an eye toward the long-term, broad agenda. Issues advocates lack the luxury of multiple media campaigns. Potential constituents lack the time or attention to consider, let alone support, every policy of the week. And mobilizing a constituency of sufficient size and clout to attract policymakers will require organizing multiple sectors behind a single recognizable idea. All of this suggests that, applied to early child development, the Early Education Frame (embracing both pre-K and school readiness) may have all the limitations of the nuclear freeze and few of the redeeming characteristics of the Civil Rights Movement.

The literature of social movements teaches that the expansiveness or constraint of the organizing principle on which the movement is grounded – the choice of master frame – is critical to its power and longevity. What does this mean on a practical level? Every day advocates make choices about the symbolism they will use to signify meaning via

short-hand to their potential constituency. When an advocate for oceans chooses to dress like a fish to lobby Congress for better marine sanctuaries, he narrowly frames his movement; more time and ingenuity should be spent in figuring out how to signal the value of Interdependence and the consequences of destruction of the food chain, allowing advocates to build a big idea over time that then serves to elevate any number of level three issues beyond the limitation of “fish.” The Civil Rights Movement framed the confrontation between peaceful resisters and police with dogs as a fight between Good and Evil. Advocates for oceans could frame their issue as a confrontation between Stewardship and Irresponsibility. But the genius of movement organizers comes in considering how to elaborate those values into a Master Frame with numerous iterations that capture the imagination and lead it in one consistent direction over time.

Applying the literature of social movements to the framing choices that now confront children’s advocates means asking and answering the following kinds of questions:

- ① Is there a master frame to which such policies as school readiness and pre-K are tied?
- ① In what bedrock of American values is the school readiness/pre-K master frame grounded?
- ① Is this choice of master frame elaborative or restrictive?
- ① Can it be amplified in multiple resonant and innovative ways over time?
- ① Is this master frame a uniting device, bringing diverse constituencies together around a common idea that is larger than any one group, or is it divisive?
- ① Is the master frame durable, resistant to assault from cultural changes, new scientific evidence, etc?
- ① Is this the best frame choice available, solidly grounded in research, or are there better ways to frame these solutions that would provide more movement resilience over time?

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

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<sup>1</sup> Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, “Introduction: Opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing processes – toward a synthetic, comparative perspective on social movements in Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, eds, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures and Cultural Framings*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> See Shanto Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991; and Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, *News that Matters: Television and American Opinion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Doug McAdam, “The Framing Function of Movement Tactics: Strategic Dramaturgy in the American Civil Rights Movement,” in Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, eds, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures and Cultural Framings*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 339-340.

<sup>4</sup> See Susan Nall Bales and Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr., “Communications for Social Good,” New York: The Foundation Center Practice Matters Series, April 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper, eds., *Rethinking Social Movements – Structure, Meaning and Emotion*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004, p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, “Master Frames and Cycles of Protest,” in Aldon D. Morris and Carol M. Mueller, eds., *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, New Haven, CT and London, UK: Yale University Press, 1992, p. 138.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 145.

<sup>8</sup> McAdam, McCarthy and Zald, “Introduction,” p.8.

<sup>9</sup> Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper, p. 28.

<sup>10</sup> David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, p. 134.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 143-150.

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<sup>12</sup> Doug McAdam, “The Framing Function of Movement Tactics: Strategic Dramaturgy in the American Civil Rights Movement,” in Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, eds, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures and Cultural Framings*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 347.

<sup>13</sup> John Lewis, Freedom Riders of 2003,” Washington Post, October 1, 2003, A23.

<sup>14</sup> David A. Snow and Robert Benford, “Master Frames and Cycles of Protest.”