

## Frame Changes and the Management of Intractable Conflicts

DEBORAH SHMUELI

MICHAEL ELLIOTT

SANDA KAUFMAN

*Frames play an important role in intractable conflict. As lenses through which disputants interpret conflicts, divergent frames limit the clarity of communication and the quality of information and encourage escalation. These frames, embedded in personal, social, and institutional roles, are often quite stable over time. Yet in some intractable conflicts, reframing interventions have contributed to tractability.*

A riot is at bottom the language of the unheard.

*Martin Luther King Jr.,  
American civil rights  
leader, 1967*

[Rioters] are lawbreakers, destroyers of constitutional rights and liberties and ultimately destroyers of a free America.

*Lyndon Baines Johnson,  
American president, 1965*

Martin Luther King Jr. and Lyndon B. Johnson are describing the same event using different frames, or interpretive lenses, through which each individual views and makes sense of unfolding events. This article explores the nature of frames and the framing process and their consequences for intractable conflicts. We define the concept and review what is known about frames and their impact on conflict dynamics. We then discuss commonly recurring frames and offer some examples from practice. Finally, we examine the potential for, and implications of, reframing in conflict management.



## The Nature of Frames

Disputants use frames both interpretively and strategically (Kaufman and Smith, 1999). As interpretive lenses, frames help us make sense of complex situations in ways internally consistent with our worldviews, giving meaning to events in the context of life experience and understandings. As strategic tools, frames help rationalize self-interest, persuade broader audiences, build coalitions, or promote preferred outcomes. Hence, Martin Luther King's and Lyndon Johnson's statements are two-edged: they result from both internal sense making and strategic intentions.

## Frames as Sense Making

Most researchers cast frames as cognitive devices or shortcuts for making sense of complex information (Gray, 1997; Lewicki, Saunders, and Minton, 1999; Taylor, 2000; Goldratt, 1990; Kahneman and Tversky, 1979; Neale and Bazerman, 1985 and Vaughan and Seifert, 1992). We create frames to name situations in which we find ourselves, identify and interpret aspects that seem to us key in understanding the situation, and communicate that interpretation to others. These cognitive structures help reduce information overload and operate as models of reality that, by necessity, trade detail for clarity. Frames organize phenomena into coherent, understandable categories, giving meaning to some observed aspects while discounting others that appear irrelevant or counterintuitive. This selective simplification filters people's perceptions and defines their fields of vision. It can lead to sharply divergent interpretations of an event, as demonstrated by reactions to OJ Simpson's acquittal of murder charges, the riots that followed the beating of Rodney King, the reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone National Park, the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, or Elian Gonzalez's return to his father in Cuba.

As with models, what makes frames useful also makes them prone to error. Consider two environmental justice disputes. In Cleveland, neighborhood residents with a long experience of being misled by city and corporate officials frequently interpreted new officials' actions and communications as purposely misleading. In Chattanooga, residents opposed proposals to reduce hazardous air emissions because they viewed the proposed facilities as hazardous waste incinerators, with all the risks that label evokes. Residents and officials never met in dialogue because residents viewed officials as callous and manipulative, while officials considered

residents as having irrational perceptions and demands. These interpretive lenses remained remarkably stable for decades.

### Frames as Communicative Strategy

From a communicative perspective, framing is strategic, aiming to persuade others to our point of view, gain advantage in negotiations, and rally like-minded people to our causes. Disputants usually formulate frames that are consistent with their interests. For example, when people tell each other what a conflict is about, they choose terms that advantage their side. Similarly, views about what is fair in a situation are often driven by parties' assessment of which fairness measures will benefit them most.

Identification with a group straddles the interpretive and communicative frame categories. We accept a group's framing of a situation either because we recognize it as our own or because we benefit from membership in that group. For example, those who see the environment as intrinsically valuable rather than utilitarian share a frame and join groups defending that point of view. Identifying with a group amounts to recognizing group members as similar to ourselves along important dimensions and ignoring differences on dimensions of lesser importance.

### The Impact of Frames on the Intractability of Conflict

Frame divergence often contributes to the intractability of conflicts. Disputants differ not only in interests, beliefs, and values but also in how they perceive the situation at the conscious and preconscious levels. These differences engender divergent interpretations of events, paint parties into negative characters, yield mutually incompatible issues, and focus attention on specific outcomes that impede exploration of alternatives.

As conflicts become intractable, frame differences often exacerbate communication difficulties, polarize parties, and escalate strife. In turn, polarization is reflected in the parties' frames, feeding stakeholders' sense that they are in the right and should not compromise. Divergent frames are self-reinforcing because they filter parties' subsequent information intake and color interpretation and because disputants strategically communicate through these frames to strengthen their positions and persuade opponents.

Linked as they are to information processing, message patterns, linguistic cues, and socially constructed meanings, framing and reframing are vital to the communications underlying negotiations (Putnam and Holmer, 1992; Elliott, Gray, and Lewicki, 2003). While intractability is unlikely to hinge on frames alone—so reframing alone is unlikely to eliminate intractability—awareness of frame differences can help stakeholders and interveners in managing conflicts. Knowing the frames in use and how they were constructed helps us understand and influence conflict dynamics. With framing insight and through reframing, stakeholders may find new ways out of impasse. Intervenors can use expressed frames to understand the situation and design interventions. At times, a stakeholder's awareness of others' frames can assist in mutual understanding and reframing of proposals in terms that might be more acceptable to the others.

### Sources and Categories of Frames

What shapes our frames? Disputes are associated with complex and mutually reinforcing frames about oneself, the others, how decisions should be made, risks, and what information should apply to the situation. In what follows, we describe these frames, illustrating them with three cases of environmental conflict. We note that while framing is present in all conflicts, it is particularly prominent when conflicts are long lasting and alienation and escalation drive disputants apart. Therefore, frame insights may be especially useful for understanding, managing, and intervening in intractable conflicts. A brief overview of the three cases follows:

- Cleveland's air, while a far cry from steel mill days, remains in nonattainment for ozone and particulates. In 2000, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency initiated and financed a pilot project to reduce air toxins through voluntary action in two Cleveland neighborhoods. The group convened to select toxin reduction projects was diverse in interests, knowledge, experience, and ability to implement changes.
- The Dudaim dispute revolved around the opposition of local and district authorities and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to the siting of a national landfill in Israel. The overriding concern was fear of environmental damage to future development and the quality of life in metropolitan Beer Sheva, located in the Negev, Israel's southern periphery.
- Since the 1970s, Chattanooga, Tennessee, has moved from a declining economy based in heavy industry to an urban renaissance rooted in

civic engagement and sustainable redevelopment. However, its remarkable success was not uniform. Old industry left a legacy of significant contamination in the Alton Park and Piney Woods neighborhoods. The mostly African American residents, who lived adjacent to environmentally degraded land and faced poverty and disinvestment, persistently conflicted with industries and public agencies over environmental cleanup.

Using these cases, we illustrate several types of frames, how they operate, and how they can contribute to intractability.

### *Identity Frames*

Parties in conflict take on identities derived from the interplay between their self-conception and interests, and their group affiliations (Rothman, 1997). Challenges to one's sense of self trigger opposition and may even deflect attention from issues and toward protection of one's identity. Typical responses to identity challenges—ignoring information and perspectives that threaten it, reinforcing affiliations with like-minded groups, and negatively characterizing outsiders—impede subsequent agreements.

Opposing a national landfill that would primarily serve the Tel Aviv metropolis, Dudaïm residents announced that they—the nation's southern periphery—were not the nation's garbage dump. History- and geography-driven identity frames set the country's periphery against its center. The Negev's hinterland status and its struggle against unfair central government decisions and for a more autonomous regional identity became central.

Identity frames are often salient and part of the polarized discourse in intractable conflicts. They rarely shift dramatically in the short range. Moreover, it seems that such a change, although helpful, is not necessary for managing conflicts or reaching agreements. Instead, interveners and stakeholders are better off focusing on reframing characterization frames.

### *Characterization Frames*

Characterization frames are reductionist labels, associating positive or negative characteristics with individuals or groups. The strength of these frames lies in their being shared, so people can communicate them to others who understand them in the same way. In intractable conflicts, characterization frames may undermine opponents' legitimacy, cast doubt on their motivations, or exploit their sensitivity. Characterization and identity

frames are at times linked, strengthening one's own identity while justifying actions toward the other, as we frame opponents as our opposite.

In Cleveland, neighborhood residents initially held firm negative characterization frames: all businesses were polluters, and all city officials were unreliable and misleading. Although ostensibly engaged in a collaborative dialogue, residents took six months to reframe business representatives as project partners. In protracted conflicts, negative characterizations can linger for years, leading to few or no positive joint experiences, which reinforce the negativity.

Interveners can and should address and diffuse such mutual characterizations. As with identity frames, the more intractable the conflict is, the more salient mutual negative characterizations are. Unlike identity frames, characterization frames lend themselves to reframing with the assistance of a skillful intervener who creates opportunities for positive direct interactions.

#### *Power, Social Control, and Conflict Management Frames*

Intractable conflicts are often embedded in struggles to alter existing institutions or decision-making procedures. Disputants' conceptions of power (the basis on which social decisions are or should be made), social control (whether disputants feel they can influence their future as individuals or as part of groups), and conflict management (the legitimacy of particular approaches to resolving differences) are important in conflict dynamics. These frames shape disputants' assessment of which forms of power are legitimate and which are likely to advance their own position. The more intractable the conflict is, the more stakeholders are likely to interpret events as mutually exclusive power struggles, resulting in polarization. Traditional decision-making processes give way not to dialogic forms of dispute management (perceived as reinforcing existing power imbalances) but rather to adjudicatory, civil, or violent confrontations (legitimated by the perceived power imbalance).

Although altering such frames takes time, they are amenable to shifts as stakeholders experience the failure of unilateral, power-based approaches and the potential of collaborative ones. Constituting only 20 percent of the Chattanooga electorate, African Americans held little effective power. Alton Park residents in particular felt disempowered and alienated. Civil disobedience (for example, catching rats in public housing buildings and releasing them at city hall public hearings) constituted a relatively restrained resistance to the elite who "lived up on the mountain." This frame remained stable for

decades. Even as the city engaged in extensive, participatory visioning processes that initiated and legitimized civic dialogue, these residents remained on the outside. Only after a decade of witnessing the impact of dialogues on other neighborhoods did Alton Park residents claim a voice in the process. Passive resistance slowly gave way to active engagement.

#### *Risk and Information Frames*

Intractable disputes often revolve around events with risky or uncertain consequences. Disputants' risk frames may yield drastically diverging assessments of level and extent of risk. In addition, disputants develop frames regarding the reliability of information and its sources. Risk and information frames depend not only on the disputants' interests, but also on their expertise, level of exposure to, and familiarity with, the risk, the extent of dread evoked by the risk, its potential for catastrophic impacts, and whether the risk is a personal choice or imposed.

In Dudaim, national government agents and waste disposal operators were certain that the advanced technology planned for the landfill posed no environmental risk. Local residents, however, feared uncertain threats to their quality of life and environment, while accepting known risks from existing large petrochemical industries and an army camp. In Cleveland, a resident, while smoking, asked the transit authority to convert all its buses to low sulfur diesel because he worried about the health risks. He framed his exposure to bus exhaust while riding the bus to work (a social risk factor beyond his control) as riskier than his chain smoking (a personal risk factor under his control), although smoking is, by far, the higher health threat.

#### *Loss and Gain Frames*

People tend to perceive as more salient and work harder to prevent a loss than to capture a commensurate gain (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). This perceptual asymmetry is manipulable, as the expected consequences of risky choices can often be framed as either a potential loss or a potential gain.

Alton Park residents strongly opposed efforts to clean up a heavily polluted neighborhood stream. For cleanup, tons of tar-based deposit removed from the stream had to be temporarily staged at the coking plant that had produced the waste. Residents feared the wastes might be left on-site indefinitely. This potential loss (though unlikely) seemed more salient to residents than the much larger potential health gains from cleanup. Residents blocked cleanup efforts for over a year and accepted the project

only after forming a community advisory panel to conduct detailed review of procedures.

### Frame Analysis and Reframing as Conflict Management Tools

The frames described in the previous section are by no means immutable, though some are more amenable to change than others (Elliott, Gray, and Lewicki, 2003). Frame changes occur when new information or direct experience manages to overwhelm filters. For example, while characterization frames are often robust, positive interactions, particularly if they promote empathic consideration of the others' experiences, may lead to reframing.

How can a conflict practitioner analyze frames and promote reframing in an intractable conflict? We must note that while reframing is often used in dispute resolution practice, we know more about the nature of frames and their impact on conflicts than we do about practical strategies for managing frames, including their effectiveness and applicability to specific contexts. We do not know yet whether particular interventions yield specific changes in frames or how these changes, if they occur, alter the course of disputes. Yet research on frames has yielded insight into tentative strategies as well as underscored the importance of frames in conflict dynamics. With these caveats in mind, we explore the practical application of framing research to the management of conflict, particularly intractable conflict.

#### *What Can the Understanding of Frames Contribute to Conflict Management?*

Based on several observations, we argue that mediators and facilitators aware of disputants' frames are better able to intervene in intractable conflict. First, frames contribute to escalation and polarization, thereby impeding productive change. Second, when an intractable conflict changes course, it is usually accompanied by some changes in disputants' frames. Indeed, at times, parties have confronted their own frames and concluded these frames were limiting their ability to achieve their own goals. Third, in practice, the design of effective interventions requires understanding the prevailing frames held by disputants.

Within processes of reconciliation, negotiation, or joint problem solving, explicit management of frames and the framing process may lead to

shifts in the frames and their impact on conflict dynamics. Frame analysis and reframing—the purposive management of frames—aim to:

- Clarify or refresh perceptions of disputed issues, promote productive information exchange and listening, and expand the discussion framework. The Cleveland Air Toxics Pilot participants' view of themselves as passive recipients of the Environmental Protection Agency's enforcement services impeded progress until the parties saw themselves as actors with responsibilities and the means to contribute to change.
- Sharpen the parties' understanding of their own interests and how their frames and modes of action serve those interests. Alton Park residents, in focusing on potential losses and their sense of powerlessness to exercise positive control, worked against their own interests by opposing stream cleanup. Shifts in loss and gain, characterization, and power frames enabled residents to better understand their trade-offs and move from passive resistance to active problem solving.
- Identify issues that parties view differently and, based on this understanding of the divergent frames, identify opportunities for trade-offs. In the Dudaim dispute, the national authorities and waste disposal companies focused on the environmental and economic suitability of the chosen site, while local parties saw the struggle in terms of their peripheral status among national priorities. These frames are not necessarily incompatible but require creative, compensatory solutions to bridge differences effectively.
- Identify deep differences that cannot be bridged and design conflict reduction processes that do not violate these deep differences. In Chattanooga, after decades of litigation and open conflict over environmental impacts, Alton Park residents and a chemical manufacturing plant began a ten-year dialogue. During that time, stakeholders fundamentally differed in risk frames, yet they made considerable progress on increasing plant safety, improving its environmental integrity and aesthetics, and generating community benefits for the residents. Effective reduction in risk did not require a shared frame of what constituted risk.

#### *How Are Frames Identified and Analyzed?*

Stakeholders, interveners, and conveners can analyze frames to deepen their understanding of conflict dynamics. Frame analysis is conducted by holding in-depth conversations and interviews with stakeholders about their past experiences and current expectations from the conflict and each other. Such reflections offer lessons from the past (retrospective analysis)

and provide cues about difficulties to be expected in upcoming interactions (prospective analysis). By assessing the role of frames in the conflict, interveners can better design intervention strategies (Kaufman and Gray, 2003). Feeding back to parties information about their frames and exploring with them the meaning and impact of frames on their conflict dynamics may contribute to reframing and progress (Shmueli and Ben Gal, 2004).

In intractable conflicts, frames are often quite stable over time, even when specific individuals move in and out of the situation, because the frames are self-reinforcing, shared through community storytelling, and socially reinforced through community interaction. Yet in some intractable conflicts, frames change in time through interventions, and the frame shift helps reduce intractability (Elliott, Gray, and Lewicki, 2003). However, reframing is difficult: it requires parties to take on new perspectives and some risk. Therefore, reframing may have to be accompanied by changes in the dispute context creating incentives to consider new perspectives, or within careful, constructive dialogue focused on improving communication and building trust.

Among the strategies and techniques that use dialogue to foster reframing in intractable conflicts are these (Elliott, Gray, and Lewicki, 2003):

- Deescalatory processes, including listening projects, study circles, and some forms of mediation, seek to reduce tension through forums promoting effective communication around a set of limited objectives. Rather than seeking consensus, these forums focus on reducing escalatory cycles by empowering disputants to communicate directly without needing to defend current positions. Study circles structure small-group interactions using materials the disputants themselves design. Listening projects send disputants to interview other stakeholders about their perspectives and concerns. Such processes build on the premise that active listening around specific issues helps disputing parties move more deeply into the causes of their conflicts and builds understanding, trust, and mutual respect.

- Perspective-taking processes, including imaging of identities and characterizations, narrative forums, and story projects, help disputants understand the conflict and its dynamics from other disputants' perspectives. These approaches are particularly geared toward understanding identity and characterization frames. Through explicit identification of critical identities, role playing, the creation and listening to others' stories, and acknowledgment of past injustices, these approaches enable disputants to see the validity and credibility of other perspectives and examine the interplay between their own and other disputants' frames.

- Identification of commonalities, including search for common ground and visioning and search processes, enable reframing around a smaller number of issues than those contributing to intractability. Common ground processes are used in highly divisive issues (such as abortion rights and ethnic disputes) and explore areas of agreement and possible joint action between parties who normally focus on their differences. Search processes seek to identify desired futures to shift the focus from a short- to a long-term perspective. By shifting attention away from areas of hardened differences and onto areas of potential overlap, these processes seek to break down rigid characterization frames and promote actions that open communication and build relationships across old divides.

Other intervention approaches enhance the desirability of alternative options to parties with divergent frames. For disputants to examine options from the perspective of other parties, they must understand the others' frames and view options from other perspectives. Seeking to reframe perceptions of losses as gains can enhance the openness and creativity of disputants.

## Conclusion

Frames play an important role in intractable conflict. As lenses through which disputants interpret conflicts, divergent frames limit the clarity of communication and the quality of information, and they encourage escalation. These frames, embedded in personal, social, and institutional roles, are often stable over time, even across the ebb and flow of many dispute episodes. Yet in some intractable conflicts, frame-based interventions have led to reframing that has contributed to tractability. In addition, frame analysis can inform disputant strategies and intervention design. Research is needed to explore which energizing events move disputants to reexamine the basis of their dispute. Simpler ways must be devised for eliciting framing information during interventions to make this tool more accessible to interveners.

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**Deborah Shmueli** is senior lecturer in the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies at the University of Haifa.

**Michael Elliott** is associate professor of planning and public policy at the Georgia Institute of Technology's City and Regional Planning Program, associate with the Consortium on Negotiation and Conflict Resolution, and principal with the Southeast Negotiation Network.

**Sanda Kaufman** is professor of planning and public administration at Cleveland State University's Levin College of Urban Affairs.