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**When Frames (Don't) Matter  
Querying the Relationship between  
Ideas and Policy**

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When Frames (Don't) Matter

Querying the Relationship between Ideas and Policy

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## **Abstract**

How social phenomenon are defined – or framed – is assumed to inform subsequent policy. Yet, the actual relationship between framing and policymaking remains understudied and undertheorized. This article aims to remedy this deficit by drawing on three broad sociological and political science literatures that rarely speak to each other but which together provide insights and theoretical leverage for addressing this question. Specifically, it draws on the literature on social movements and framing, social problem construction, and political theory (on agenda setting, ideas-driven policy, and policy instruments). It presents theoretical propositions for predicting relative consistency between dominant social problem frames and subsequent public policy, in order to animate and guide subsequent research. It argues that the relationship between social problem framing and policymaking – whether seemingly consistent or inconsistent – must be systematically problematized.

Keywords: framing; social problems; policy instruments; consistency

## **Introduction**

There is growing interest in the role ideas – or frames – play in political and institutional change (Fligstein and McAdam 2011; Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Lounsbury, Ventresca and Hirsch 2003; McAdam and Scott 2005; Schmidt 2010). Research on the social construction of social problems has demonstrated that the way in which an issue is framed has important implications for the policy solutions that are subsequently devised (Gusfield 1981; Stone 1989). For instance, in his classic study, Joseph Gusfield showed that, by imposing an account of automobile accidents as caused by “drunk drivers,” the crusade against drunk driving favored policies that would penalize individuals who drive while intoxicated, rather than, say, improving automobile manufacturing (Gusfield 1981). It is indeed largely because frames are thought to shape policy action that they are at the heart of much social mobilization (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008; Snow et al. 1986).

Recent work on the framing of obesity in the United States supports the idea that frames shape policy formation.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, in the U.S., a deeply-ingrained ideology of self-reliance has favored a framing of obesity primarily in terms of personal responsibility, despite growing attention to social-structural contributors (Kersh 2009; Lawrence 2004; Saguy and Almeling 2008; Saguy and Gruys 2010; Saguy, Gruys and Gong 2010). Likewise, U.S. policy approaches to obesity, such as labeling the caloric content of foods and educating the public about the alleged risks of obesity, have been overwhelming at the individual-level. Meanwhile, those who favor more aggressive regulation of the food industry have been trying to reframe rising body mass at the

population level as a byproduct of food production and distribution (Brownell and Horgen 2003; Nestle 2002; Schlosser 2001). The more or less explicit assumption, on the part of social actors and social analysts alike, is that policy follows framing.

Yet, if we turn to France, we see quite a different picture. Here, where there is a strong political tradition of social solidarity through state-funded social programs and social security, obesity has been framed largely as an issue of corporate greed, social inequality, and the deficits of the welfare state (Bossy 2010; Saguy, Gruys and Gong 2010). However, France has adopted policies that are quite similar to those favored in the United States (Bergeron, Castel and Nouguez 2011; Bergeron, Castel and Nouguez 2013). With the exception of the removal of vending machines from schools, which had little impact on the larger soft drink and food industry, the French government – like the U.S. – has focused on non-binding ethic codes for the food industry and on educational campaigns to help individuals make better choices (Bergeron, Boubal and Castel Forthcoming; Bergeron, Castel and Dubuisson 2012). In other words, despite important differences in how obesity has been framed, both nations have adopted obesity policies that attempt to change individual-level behavior.

Curiously, there is little extant research that sheds light on this sort of disconnect between dominant social problem framing and subsequent policies. This paper seeks to fill this hole in the literature. Specifically, we ask: Under what conditions do dominant social problem frames shape policy solutions? Under what conditions may dominant frames and policies be mutually constitutive or, in contrast, mutually autonomous? This

line of questioning generates new research questions and hypotheses to test in future research.

### **Frames and Policy Instruments**

Following a large and diverse literature, we use the term *frame* broadly to refer to a public definition of a problem, which emphasizes some aspects of reality while obscuring others (Saguy 2013; Snow et al. 1986). Our use of the term *frame* encompasses similar concepts used by social scientists, such as causal story, policy image, collective definition, or public definition (Baumgartner and Jones 1991; Blumer 1971; Gusfield 1981; Stone 1989). Specific frames typically point to particular causes, ownership and responsibility, and solutions (Gusfield 1981). Frames vary in the extent to which they are grounded in well-defined theories (e.g., scientific or political) and the degree to which they imply moral judgments and other factors (Stone 1989).

Policy makers, politicians, government officials, social movements, experts, administrative elites, or journalists may formulate competing social problem frames. For instance, different claimsmakers have framed obesity as either an issue of personal responsibility, a product of socio-cultural factors, or the result of biology/genetics (Saguy 2013). In some cases, one of these competing frames or a new combination of them emerges as the *dominant* social problem frame, as measured by prevalence in the news media, legislative debates and/or policy arenas (Hilgarten and Bosk 1988). That a frame is dominant is not to say that it is monolithic or without challengers. Nonetheless, it is sometimes possible to identify a frame that is evoked more often and carries more authority than others (Baumgartner and Jones 2009; Gusfield 1981; Hall 1993; Jobert and

Müller 1987; Sabatier 1987). Thus, in the U.S. media, several studies have shown that the personal responsibility frame dominates, despite a growing focus on social-structural contributors (Kersh 2009; Lawrence 2004; Saguy and Almeling 2008; Saguy and Gruys 2010; Saguy, Gruys and Gong 2010).

*Policy instruments* is a generic term that refers to various techniques used by governing bodies to implement policy objectives (Howlett 1991). We conceptualize policy instruments as the product of political decisions and power relations that become partly autonomous technical devices with implications for subsequent political decisions and regulation (Lasalandra 1995; Lascoumes and Le Galès 2007). We use *policy instrument* broadly to speak collectively of social institutions like census taking or taxation, concrete devices like statistical nomenclature, and micro devices such as statistical categories (Bezes and Siné 2011).

To the extent that policy instruments derive from the values, norms and causal assumptions designated by a dominant social problem frame, they can be said to be *consistent* with such frames. This is analogous to the (relatively coherent) relationship that Peter Hall establishes between the different levels of his policy paradigm and that Paul Sabatier describes between the different levels of his policy belief system (Hall 1993; Hall 1997; Sabatier 1987; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). While there can be varying levels of consistency, we focus on clear cases of each. While determining consistency inevitably involves subjective assessment, we maintain that this can nonetheless be empirically established.

Our article speaks to a central debate in the social movement literature about the extent to which social movements are able to shape policy decisions. While some scholars contend that social movements are generally successful at shaping policy decisions (Baumgartner and Mahoney 2005; Nathanson 2007; Nathanson 2005), others have argued that they are rarely influential compared to other political actors, institutions and processes (for an excellent review, see Amenta et al. 2010; Giugni 2007). Yet, we do not limit our focus to social movements. Rather we are interested in collective action more broadly, on the part of a variety of social actors – including interest groups, experts, policy entrepreneurs, administrative officials, media, or a combination of them, as well as what several scholars have labeled “advocacy coalitions” (Sabatier 1987; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993), policy communities, or policy networks (see, for instance, Hecl and Wildavsky 1974; Jordan 1990; Le Galès and Thatcher 1995; Marsh and Rhodes 1992).

We do not aim to assess the multiple factors that shape the agenda setting process that has been examined elsewhere (see Amenta et al. 2010; Gamson 1990; Piven and Cloward 1978). Rather, we limit our attention to the more specific question of how and why dominant social problem frames are consistent (or not) with subsequent policy instruments. What interests us is the extent to which the policy instrumentation faithfully reflects dominant social problem framing of the issue. In other words, we probe the specific role played by ideas in public policy.

## **Major Theoretical Perspectives**

We draw upon three broad literatures in sociological and political science – which do not typically speak to each other – that theorize the link between social problem framing (or ideas, more generally) and policy solutions. These include the literatures on 1) framing and social movements; 2) social problem construction; and 3) political theory on agenda setting, ideas-driven policy, and policy instruments. While there are important differences across (and within) these literatures, there are also important commonalities. Namely, each of these literatures tends to assume a high degree of coherence between social problem frames (or ideas) and policy approaches. This coherence is most typically explained by the influence that frames have on policy approaches, although some scholars assert either that policy instruments shape social problem framing or that policy approaches *constitute* social problem framing. Notably, none of these literatures explicitly considers the possibility that a dominant frame will be *inconsistent* with subsequent policies (see Table 1). Yet, together these literatures provide insights and theoretical leverage for addressing this possibility.

### **INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE**

#### *Framing and Social Movements*

Scholars of framing and collective action examine the process through which people and groups “frame, or assign meaning to and interpret, relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and demobilize antagonists” (Snow and Benford 1988: 198). Their key puzzle is typically to understand how collective mobilization emerges and

forms, not how these frames subsequently shape policy decisions. For instance, in her examination of the success of frames in raising awareness and generating support for public funding of breast cancer research, Emily Kolker notes that her “study makes no claims as to whether or not the frames themselves caused increases in funding” (Kolker 2004: 836).

In a rare study, of homeless mobilization, that examines how frames shape policy decisions, Cress and Snow argue that social movements are more likely to be successful – defined as obtaining rights, representation within municipalities, and gaining resources and services – when they articulate specific and clear prognostic and diagnostic frames (Cress and Snow 2000). Yet, they do not specifically examine whether policy outcomes faithfully translate the social movement frames.

While often left implicit, the framing and social movement literature typically implies that frames shape the policy solutions that are ultimately adopted (Williams 1995). For instance, Snow and colleagues write: “Interpretive frames [...] not only inspire and justify collective action, but also give meaning to and legitimate the tactics that evolve” (Snow et al. 1986: 477). Specifically, Snow and colleagues argue that *diagnostic frames* identify problems and attribute responsibility whereas *prognostic frames* propose problem solutions. In attributing responsibility for a social problem, diagnostic frames, in effect, identify the locus of policy action, while prognostic frames imply actual policy solutions.

In other words, this literature recognizes that frames are important not only in so far as they can help mobilize movement support and garner resources but also in that they

favor the development of specific policy solutions. By extension, internal social movement disputes over specific problem frames are not only about maximizing resources and support but are also centrally disputes about which policy solutions to pursue. Emblematic of this implicit position, Kolker's three competing breast cancer frames all seek to obtain a specific form of government action: public financing of cancer research (Kolker 2004).

The social movement literature has generally assumed that the same factors that favor social mobilization – including framing strategies – would favor political influence (Amenta et al. 2010). Yet, others have shown that some of the conditions that produce mobilization can, in fact, hinder influence at later stages in the policy process (Amenta et al. 2010). For instance, whereas having a large movement may help to get an issue on the public agenda, it may subsequently make it more difficult for the movement to formulate and rally around specific policy recommendations (Amenta 2006; Amenta et al. 2010; Noy 2009). This opens the possibility that there may be a disconnect between the social movement frames that propel an issue onto the public agenda and the policy instruments that ultimately emerge. As Polletta and Ho (2006: 197) have noted, “It is surprising, given the theoretical attestations to frames' importance, that studies systematically assessing frames' impacts remain relatively few” (see also Contamin 2010).

### *Social Problem Construction*

Over forty years ago, Herbert Blumer wrote that the career and fate of social problems is the result of an ongoing “process of collective definition” from an “initial point of their appearance” to whatever may be the end point” (Blumer 1971: 301). He

identified five stages of collective definition, including: 1) the emergence of social problems; 2) the legitimation of social problems; 3) the mobilization of action with regard to specific problems; 4) the formation of policy instruments (what he calls “an official plan of action”), and 5) the implementation of the policy instruments. Work in the social problem construction literature – as is also true for work on social movement framing discussed above – has focused mostly on #1, 2, and 3, while assuming that #4 follows automatically from #3. As we discuss below, other research has examined possible disconnect between #4 (policy instruments) and #5 (implementation). Building on these literatures, we propose to systematically problematize the link between #3 (the mobilization of action with regard to specific problems) and #4 (policy instruments).

A subset of the literature on social problem construction, research on medicalization assumes that adopting a medical frame results in policy solutions that subject new areas of social life to medical authority (Conrad 1992; Conrad and Schneider 1992; Pfohl 1977). For instance, an extremely well-cited article (Summerfield 1999) argues the imposition of Western medical frames of posttraumatic stress syndrome has directly facilitated the massive development of programs addressing “posttraumatic stress” in war zones abroad, which have become an increasingly prominent part of humanitarian aid operations backed by UNICEF, WHO, European Commission Humanitarian Office and many nongovernmental organizations.

To take another example, in her examination of the politics of menopause, Frances McCrea concludes that the medicalization of menopause automatically leads to an individualization of the issue. As a result, “the physician turns attention away from

any social structural interpretations of women conditions” and the “*locus of the solution then becomes* the doctor-patient interaction in which the physician is active, instrumental, and authoritative while the patient is passive and dependent” (McCrea 1983: 113, emphasis added).

Likewise, a wide literature on public health and preventive policies emphasizes how framing consumption of alcohol, tobacco, or “junk food” in terms of individual responsibility contributes to the development of policies that ignore underlying structural and social determinants (Armstrong 1995; Tesh 1988). As noted by Moore and Frazer (2006: 3036), the dominance of personal responsibility frames means that individual citizens are increasingly held responsible for improving their health by quitting smoking, eating less fat, drinking less alcohol, or exercising more. There has been a shift away from collective solidarity toward low-cost solutions and “a de-institutionalisation of health care, and promotion of more active forms of citizenship.” We build on and deepen the insights of this literature by addressing an issue that this literature has not specifically addressed: the conditions under which a dominant social problem frame will be either consistent or inconsistent with subsequent policy decisions.

### *Political Science Theory*

While not always using the term *frame*, several political scientists have also taken up the question of how problem definitions, “causal stories,” or “ideas,” shape policy formation and outcomes (Baumgartner 2012; Hall 1993; Schmidt 2010). In discussing “causal stories,” political scientist Deborah Stone asserts: “competition to control causal stories does not stop once an issue reaches either the systemic or formal agenda. Causal

stories continue to be important in the formulation and selection of alternative policy responses, because they locate the burdens of reform differently” (Stone 1989: 283).

The literature on agenda setting, while not speaking specifically of frames nor citing the framing literature, is centrally concerned with how an issue is defined as a public problem. Like the sociological literature reviewed above, this literature points to cases in which the way an issue is defined shapes policy outcomes (e.g., Baumgartner and Jones 2009). For instance, Baumgartner and Jones (1991: 1044-45) argue that “a single process can explain both periods of extreme stability and short bursts of rapid change.” This process is the interaction of existing set of political institutions, which they call “venues,” and “beliefs and values concerning a particular policy,” which they term “policy image,” and which is very close to our understanding of frame (Baumgartner and Jones 1991: 1044-45). They suggest a strong and unquestioned link between framing and venue, the latter of which encompasses the notions of responsibility and ownership of a problem: “As venues change, images may change as well; as the image of a policy changes, venue changes become more likely” (Baumgartner and Jones 1991: 1047; see also Gilbert and Henry 2009). Some of this work recognizes that problem definitions can also be tinkered with, so as to fit existing policy solutions (Béland 2005; Kingdon 1984). Both cases, however, imply consistency between policy solutions and social problem frames.

Another strand of political science research – on “ideas-driven policy” – asserts that ideas play a crucial role in policy formation, elaboration and change (Hall 1993; Jobert and Muller 1987; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). While several of these

authors acknowledge that policy instruments can ultimately drift away from the ideas that provided their original justification, they nonetheless suggest that policy changes initially follow changes in the construction of social reality. For instance, according to Peter Hall “policymakers customarily work within a framework of ideas and standards that specify not only the goals of policy and the kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing” (1993: 279). Specifically, Hall showed how neoliberal financial instruments emerged as a response to shifting ideas about the causes of and solutions for economic crises (Hall 1993). Similarly, Pierre Muller has argued that “in doing public policy one does not ‘resolve’ a problem as much as construct a new representation of problems that puts in place sociopolitical conditions of their treatment by society and, *through the same action, structures the State*” (Muller and Surel 1998: 31, emphasis added). Pierre Muller’s phrase “ideas in action” clearly expresses the agentic power of ideas in his theory (Muller 1990: 71).

As has been noted elsewhere (Surel 2000), much of Sabatier’s more recent book chapters (Sabatier 1999) tend to assume that when a belief system, or, to put it differently, a frame of reference, or a paradigm, has won the (cognitive) competition, the choice of policy instruments and alternatives is more or less automatic. Yet, no-one has yet offered a model that can address the issue of possible inconsistency between frames and policy instruments. We need a better theoretical model to make sense of the articulation between ideas and policy-making outcomes (e.g. policy program, law, plans, etc.) (Campbell 2002). Our efforts to respond to this hole in the literature are consistent

with the move towards discursive institutionalism (DI), which aims to “show empirically how, when, where, and why ideas and discourse matter for institutional change, and when they do not” (Schmidt 2010: 21).

A recent study makes an important effort to systematically examine the impact of news media framing on policy (Rose and Baumgartner 2013). It shows that U.S. government policy towards the poor has become more stingy and punitive in the wake of a shift in news media framings that view the poor as victims of structural factors to those that cast them as lazy and as cheaters (Rose and Baumgartner 2013). Yet, this study leaves unanswered whether the rise in specific sorts of news media frames lead to policies that are informed by a similar frame. While this may not be of primary concern in poverty relief (i.e., what is important is whether the poor receive financial support, regardless of the justification given), it may be important in other situations. For instance, “obesity prevention” policies that seek to reduce the level of obesity by charging heavier patients more for health insurance may be considered very different than “obesity prevention” policies that seek to reduce population weights by subsidizing fresh fruits and vegetables in low-income communities.

In contrast to the literatures that view frames as shaping policy approaches, the literature on policy instruments considers that instruments, in the words of two French scholars, “drive forward a certain representation of the problem” (Lascoumes and Le Galès 2007: 9). Or, in the words of Miller and Rose, “the activity of problematizing is intrinsically linked to devising ways to seek to remedy it. So, if a particular diagnosis or tool appears to fit a particular ‘problem’, this is because they have been made so that they

fit each other” (Miller and Rose 2008: 15). According to this formulation, policy instruments themselves constitute frames.

### **Propositions**

The literatures on social problem construction and framing and idea-driven political scientific models draw our attention to the central role frames play in social problem definition. Complementary to this, work by political scientists draws our attention to how policy evolves over time, as it moves through different stages and across distinct arenas. Drawing on the scattered insights from these broad traditions and bringing them together into a common theoretical framework, we propose a more systematic examination of the articulation between social problem definition and policy instrumentation.

We extend Spector and Kitsuse’s insight that a social problem may be reconceptualized during the policy making process (Spector and Kitsuse 1973). Following Blumer, as well, we are interested in how “the plan as put into action” is “modified, twisted and reshaped, and takes unforeseen accretions,” as those who stand to benefit or, alternatively, to risk losing advantages attempt to shape the emerging policies to their advantage (Blumer 1971: 304). However, contrary to Blumer, we are interested in how the modifications, twists, and reshaping are produced when policy instruments are designed, rather than when they are implemented. In other words, we examine a stage over which Blumer and others have glossed: the development of policy instruments and the rank ordering among them (a very politicized hierarchy). In sum, we systematically

link the stages of the design and implementation of policy instruments, which, until now, have been examined in relative isolation.

For the purpose of this paper, we focus on cases in which the policy instruments are either clearly consistent or clearly inconsistent with dominant frames. In cases of (clear) inconsistency, policy instruments do not address the main issues and causes identified by the dominant definition (Polletta and Ho 2006).

We acknowledge but bracket a large body of work showing that the organization of political systems and national institutional rules – such as fragmentation vs. centralization of the state, a more or less open democratic regime, few or numerous accesses of opportunities for social movements to shape policy making, neo-corporatism vs. pluralism, location of veto points, institutional power structures and relations, and so on – influence political behaviors and power (Amenta, Carruthers and Zylan 1992; McCann 2006). While we do not develop specific propositions based on these particular factors, we take them into account in developing several of our propositions. Future work could go farther to develop additional propositions to assess how the different factors we identify would vary in their importance by national context. However, this is beyond the scope of our paper.

We develop three broad categories of propositions, related to: 1) qualities of the social actors involved in framing; 2) qualities of the frames themselves, and 3) the ecology of social problems (Abbott 2005).

### Qualities of Social Actors Involved in Framing

As Gusfield (1981) explicitly recognizes, there can be a disjunction between what he calls ownership (the ability to create and influence a public definition of a problem), causation (an assertion about the sequence that factually accounts for the existence of a problem), and political responsibility (the office or person charged with solving the problem). In his words, “while all three may coincide in the same office or person, that is by no means necessarily the case. Quite often those who own a problem are trying to place obligations on others to behave in a “proper” fashion and thus to take political responsibility for its solution” (Gusfield 1981: 14). Stated differently, those having formulated the dominant frame are often but not always influential in the formulation of policy instruments. We expect that policy instruments are more likely to be consistent with a dominant frame when those having formulated the latter are influential in the design of the former.

Others have discussed this in terms of political opportunity (Cress and Snow 2000; Giugni 2007; Nathanson 2005). Sociologist William Gamson points to this in his concept of inclusion, in which challengers gain state positions – and thus policy influence – via election or appointment (Gamson 1990). In some cases, dominant frames are developed to appeal to a potential institutional ally, already taking political expediency into account. Skrentny (2006) implicitly evokes this argument when he urges scholars to study and understand policy-elite perceptions of social movements and the groups they represent. For others, frames may be elaborated with an eye towards the existing

institutional and “discursive opportunities” (Ferree 2003). In these cases, dominant frames are more likely to be consistent with resulting policy instruments.

For example, Korean national bankruptcy laws – passed in 2005 – were framed in ways that were very consistent with international bankruptcy regulation, or “global scripts,” in large part because one of the drafters of the national law was also a delegate to the international organization that had produced the global script the year before (Halliday and Carruthers 2009). Likewise, Indonesian bankruptcy laws, passed in 1998, had echoed global scripts because International Financial Institutions found local allies who had framed the national laws in ways that were consistent with international regulation (Halliday and Carruthers 2009).

This is supported by the observation that social mobilization is more influential in cases of a supportive political regime and domestic bureaucrats than in cases lacking a such support (Amenta et al. 2010). Similarly, it adheres to what Cress and Snow found in their study of homeless social movement organizations (SMOs); SMOs were more likely to prevail when they had either political or administrative allies in the municipality (Cress and Snow 2000). This proposition is also supported by work showing that social movements are more likely to influence policy outcomes when they have elite sponsorship (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996; Tarrow 1998). This can be stated in terms of the following proposition:

**Proposition 1a: Dominant frames and policy instruments are more likely to be consistent with each other when those having formulated the frames are also influential in the development of the policy instruments.**

In other cases, those having formulated the dominant frame are not directly involved in the development of policy instruments because they have little interest in the concrete consequences of policy instruments. This situation often leads to inconsistency between dominant frame and policy instruments. The case, of homelessness framing and policy in the early 2000s in San Francisco provides an example of this (Noy 2009). The majority of actors in the political field of debates over homelessness – who were situated primarily on the political left and center – ascribed to a “structural” frame of homelessness that blamed systematic factors such as lack of affordable housing, living wage jobs or health care. However, those on the political right – who framed homelessness as a problem of individual deficiencies, including mental illness, substance abuse, and lifestyle choices, as well as a problem of inefficient bureaucracy – were able to use their greater economic resources to propose ballot initiatives consistent with that framing (Noy 2009). Lack of cooperation and bitter fighting between the political left and political center, despite their shared framing of the issue, further weakened them in relation to the political right (Noy 2009). The result was an “unremitting, stable polarized conflict, in which neither left nor right were able to win a resounding political victory, nor were they able to dominate the creation of homeless policy according to their diagnostic framing” (Noy 2009: 236). At best, each side was able to block the initiatives of the other but not pass its own preferred policies, and, as a result, the city was never able to develop a coherent homeless policy.

This insight dovetails with research documenting the ways in which political staff and bureaucrats often end up distorting the content of social demands in ways that serve

their own professional interests (Immergut 1992; Skocpol 1993), while further specifying the *conditions under which* such a distortion is likely. These examples lead to the following proposition:

**Proposition 1b: Dominant frames and policy instruments are less likely to be consistent with each other when sponsors of a competing frame are more influential, than the sponsors of the dominant frame, in the design of policy instruments.**

### Qualities of Frames

We can develop a further set of propositions based on the characteristics of the frames themselves. Just as Amenta and colleagues have shown that social movement's influence over the public agenda is likely to be limited for policies "for which high levels of political or material resources are at stake," such as military matters, so we predict that frames will be less likely to be consistent with policy instruments when the social problem definition implies a need for major institutional restructuring (Amenta et al. 2010: 295; See also Ferree 2003). As a subset of this, a dominant frame that threatens existing policies, especially those that serve powerful constituencies or constitute established entitlement programs, is less likely to prevail (Baumgartner and Jones 2009; Hacker 1998). For instance, in times of fiscal hardship, expensive policy solutions face an uphill battle, regardless of how consistent they are with dominant framing. Stated as a proposition:

**Proposition 2a. Dominant frames are less likely to be consistent with policy instruments when they imply a need for major institutional or political restructuring or redistribution.**

The corollary of proposition 2a is that dominant frames are more likely to be consistent with policy instruments when they do not require major institutional or political restructuring or redistribution. One scenario involves cases in which a social problem frame is developed in order to be consistent with a popular solution (Baumgartner and Jones 1991; Stone 1989). In this case, political entrepreneurs frame a public problem in such a way as to be fixable with an existing policy solution that has wide public support and which they champion and thus to build alliances “between groups who have problems and groups who have solutions” (Stone 1989: 298).

To take a different example, if American feminist lawyers came to frame sexual harassment as a form of sex-based discrimination in employment in the late 1970s, it was because they were trying to frame this issue in such a way that it would fall under the jurisdiction of an existing statute, specifically Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which made it illegal for employers to discriminate on the basis of sex (Saguy 2003). Likewise, one key to SMO success is to adopt, and even sometimes alter, their mobilization frames to appeal to political decision makers or courts (Amenta 2006; Amenta, Carruthers and Zylan 1992; Soule and King 2006). Similarly, social movements are more likely to be successful when their frames do not challenge basic power structures, such as, for instance, traditional gender roles (McCammon et al. 2001).

A study of bureaucracy in Lesotho, a small landlocked African country completely surrounded by South Africa, provides an excellent illustration of this (Ferguson 1994). It shows that, if poverty has been framed in terms of technical problems – such as isolation and lack of markets, credit, education, fertilizer and tractors – it is

because these are the sorts of problems that agencies in charge of designing anti-poverty policy can address by spending the money that has been entrusted to them. In contrast, because they are ill equipped to address more fundamental problems – such as unemployment, low wages, political subjugation by South Africa, or entrenched bureaucratic elites – they have not framed poverty policy in these terms (Ferguson 1994).

These expectations can be reformulated in the terms of path dependency (Orloff and Skocpol 1984; Pierson 2000). This perspective maintains that policies, once enacted, constrain those that are likely to pass in the future by establishing public expectations and networks of vested interests. Consequently, policy entrepreneurs are more effective when they frame a problem so that it points to solutions that do not threaten the interests of those networks or violate the expectations of the general public (see, for instance, Hacker 1998). Stated as a proposition:

**Proposition 2b. Dominant frames are more likely to be consistent with policy instruments when they involve no major institutional or political restructuring or redistribution.**

Our final proposition deals with frames those are purposely *vague*, internally *contradictory*, *comprehensive* (in the sense that they address all possible dimensions of a public problem) or highly *complex* (i.e., involve many interrelated causal paths). Those frame qualities – that we collectively term ambiguity – often help mobilize adherents to a cause but do not dictate an obvious policy path (Polletta and Ho 2006) or a clear hierarchy of policy instruments.

In the case of obesity, a shared but *vague* framing of higher body weight as medically pathological has allowed, in the US, a wide range of social actors to gloss over different views regarding the causes of weight gain and appropriate public health responses to it (Saguy 2013). In other words, diverse commentators disagree about why people are getting fatter and how to reverse trends in “obesity,” while concurring that higher body weights represent a pressing medical and public health problem. Such vague framing helps mobilizes wide public support, since concern over a given issue is more likely to spread when there are multiple causal frames available and when it is possible to gloss over disagreements regarding these frames, so long as the issue itself is generally acknowledged to be a problem (Strang and Meyer 1993). However, this vagueness, while helpful in mobilizing diverse stakeholders, becomes a liability when it comes to policy instrumentation, as it designates no clear policy path.

To take another example, the Townsend Plan, a very successful organization for organizing the elderly, gained a million members very quickly in 1934 but was subsequently unable to present coherent testimony in Congress (Amenta 2006). In sum, vague policy or legal requirements open a space for precision via policy instruments (Carpenter 2010; Edelman, Abraham and Erlanger 1992; Edelman, Uggen and Erlanger 1999).

A frame may also be internally contradictory so that it is potentially consistent with two or more competing – or complementary – problem definitions and favored solutions. Precisely because such frames do not clearly designate a specific policy

solution, it is difficult to determine the extent to which they are consistent with the policy solutions that are finally decided upon.

Frames can also be complex. According to Stone, complex frames “are not very useful in politics, precisely because they do not offer a single locus of control, a plausible candidate to take responsibility for a problem, or a point of leverage to fix a problem” (Stone, 1998, 289). Yet, in some situations, a complex frame might mean that those responsible for the instrumentation process have greater room for maneuver through which they can favor the policy options (or the hierarchy of policy options) that best serve their interest. For instance, the growing emphasis in France on obesity as caused by sedentary lifestyle points to so many factors and responsible parties (e.g., car manufacturers, city planners and authorities, sport facilities, elevators, escalators, air conditioners, heating systems of buildings, and gender equality) that it ultimately holds no one responsible (Olivier et al. 2013). This situation offers opportunities for certain groups to push for their preferred policy solutions.

Finally, frames can be comprehensive in the sense that they address all possible dimensions of a public problem, including all possible sources of responsibility, ownership and causality without establishing any hierarchy among them. This was the case of the heterogeneous movement in favor of promoting the diversity of patient groups in clinical trials in the U.S. (Epstein 2007). Many different kinds of actors rallied behind a social problem that addressed four different versions of representation, including in the statistical sense, in the sense of social visibility, in the sense of political voice and in the symbolic sense. At the end of the day, the legislature and governmental agencies

interpreted representation in the narrow, statistical sense. Not surprisingly, this elicited some discord.

More generally, those who feel that their initial formulation of a problem is not reflected in the ultimate policy instrumentation process are likely to criticize what they see as a denaturation of their cause and attempt to redefine a problem, similar to Halliday and Carruthers' recursivity process (Halliday and Carruthers 2009). In contrast, those benefiting from the final set of policy options are likely to stress the continuity that they see between frame and instruments. Stated as a proposition:

**Proposition 2c: When dominant frames are intentionally ambiguous (i.e., vague, complex, internally contradictory or comprehensive), the extent of consistency with subsequent policy instruments is difficult to determine.**

#### Ecology of social problems

Of course, social problem frames and policy instruments do not operate in a vacuum. Rather, both are developed within specific policy arenas (Hilgarten and Bosk 1988) or ecologies (Abbott 2005) that influence the extent to which social problem frames and policy instruments are consistent with each other. Specifically, policy instruments are expected to be inconsistent with frames when there has been a change to an institutional context that is characterized by a logic undermining the dominant frame. For instance, while Austria adopted the U.S. definition of sexual harassment in its own laws, differences in these countries legal institutions led to very different policy instrumentation (Cahill 2001).

Moreover, once a problem is on the agenda with a stabilized definition, the

development of consistent policy instruments may be impeded because such instruments would threaten the resolution of other social problems. For instance, environmental and health policy frames may emphasize corporate responsibility. While these frames are consistent with the goals of the environment and health agencies in which they are being developed, they may nonetheless meet resistance – even within these same agencies – because of their perceived negative implications for employment and the perceived debt crisis. To put it more crudely, these frames point to solutions that may be seen as threatening the objectives of another ecology: the financial and budgetary governmental bodies.

**Proposition 3a: Policy instruments are likely to be inconsistent with dominant frames when they have been designed within an ecology that is organized around a different logic.**

The corollary of Proposition 3a follows:

**Proposition 3b: Policy instruments are likely to be consistent with dominant frames when both have been designed within the same ecology or in ecologies that are organized around a consistent logic.**

For analytical purposes, we have treated each of these propositions separately, but we, of course, recognize that there are interactions across these different factors. For instance, it has been shown that, compared to those with access to decision makers, social actors who lack access or prefer to remain independent from public authorities are more likely to formulate radical frames (Bernstein 1997; Epstein 1996; Ferree 2003). Radical

frames, in turn, are more likely to challenge existing policy instruments – or interests in different ecologies – and therefore to be inconsistent with subsequent policy.

In contrast, actors who are more integrated into the power structure may be more likely to develop frames that are designed to be consistent with existing policy instruments or, at least, do not challenge other policy priorities (Kingdon 1984). Insiders are likely to face more resistance when they develop more radical frames that threaten powerful interests, although if they have enough power and influence, they may be able to prevail (Nathanson 2005). To take another example, some policy instruments are likely to find strong support because of how they are located within broader policy ecology. For instance, European activists, who defined bike paths as a solution to various urban environmental problems, have built close relationships with municipalities, some even being recruited by city-level administration. These privileged relationships helped activists define bike paths as a solution that fit several different institutional logics, thus facilitating the support of numerous constituencies inside cities' administration, including transportation, urban renewal and road safety. Finally, the private investment in these bike paths made this solution economically viable for cities (Huré 2013).

There are many other kinds of interaction that could be established that we hope will be pursued in subsequent research. Future research could also investigate whether there are typical patterns among these different factors that lead to consistency or inconsistency between dominant frame and policy instruments.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

We have offered a set of propositions predicting how the characteristics of frames, qualities of actors and relevant ecologies inform the relative consistency between social problem frames and policy. This is both a central research question for social movement scholars and one that has so far received surprisingly little empirical attention. To understand the effect of a social movement, it is not enough to establish a link between social activism and policy outcomes; we also need to examine the degree of conceptual consistency between the two. For instance, it is possible that a social movement is successful in getting an issue on the public agenda and getting a policy instrument implemented to address it, but that the specific policy solution only addresses part of its diagnosis or, even worse, runs counter to its objectives. Moreover, identifying the extent of consistency between frames and policy instruments provides a means to assess the relative influence of social movements relative to other factors. Such an approach therefore helps assess the net contribution of the “collective action frame variable” to the success of social movements in particular, and of collective action in general. It therefore allows a more evidence-based assessment of the extent to which public political debates matter and in which cases.

Our analysis suggests that political opportunity structure is not only relevant during the initial phase of social problem construction but also when policy instruments are designed. Stated differently, even when social movements or other actors are able to impose a given social problem frame, other groups may seize control of the problem definition at the level of policy design and implementation. Our approach provides a

theoretical framework for better understanding cases in which culturally resonant frames sometimes do not translate into policy, for structural, political or economic reasons. More broadly, our approach provides a key for identifying the conditions under which cultural schemas and material resources do or do not articulate (Sewell 1992).

If social movement research has ignored cases of inconsistency between social movement frames and policy, it may very well be due to an overreliance on the U.S. case. In the United States, there reigns both a strong ideology of individualism and also various economic and political pressures towards policies that are cheap and do not challenge structural arrangements. As a result, it is easy to overestimate either the power of individualist ideology or of economic and political structures, depending on one's focus, in that these two tendencies converge.

For example, in the case of obesity, existing theories seem to map relatively well onto the American case, in that obesity has been framed primarily in terms of personal responsibility, and policy instruments likewise focus on individual behavior. Yet, it may be that these policy approaches are responding as much to political and economic constraints as to American ideology about self-determination. As noted by Sylvia Nobel Tesh, policies that emphasize individual responsibility are much cheaper and less politically controversial than those that seek to make major changes in industrial practices, the economy, or in the government (Tesh 1988). These policies, in turn, reinforce an ideological commitment, even an unquestioned assumption, of individual responsibility. Examining countries – like France – in which the dominant ideology exists

in tension with economic and political pressures makes it more likely that we will observe inconsistency between dominant frames and policy.

An epistemological and methodological implication is that it is not only cases in which policy instruments are inconsistent with social problem frames that beg explanation. Rather, cases in which policy instruments and social problem frames are *consistent* also demand a rigorous social explanation. This consistency should not be taken for granted but rather needs to be considered an *explanandum*, or a dependent variable that requires explanation. In other words, we take a symmetrical stance, in which the same sorts of explanation are used to explain consistency and inconsistency between social problem frames and policy instruments (Bloor 1976).

Moreover, our approach examines political struggle that extend beyond the mass media and classic political venues – like Congress, Senate, Parliament, political parties, trade unions, and so on –to also examine social settings and political arenas that have attracted less attention from political scientists and sociologists, such as administrative bureaus, agencies, and so on (see also Hood 1986; Lascoumes and Le Galès 2007). These other arenas may be less visible (Gilbert and Henry 2012), but this does not mean that they are any less contentious or that they matter less.

Finally, future research should examine the consequences of implementing policy instruments that are inconsistent with social problem frames. We predict that a strong discrepancy between frames and policy instruments can create new opportunities for social actors to challenge the legitimacy of those policy instruments. In contrast, the implementation of inconsistent policy instruments might foster the diffusion of novel

understandings of the problem. This, in turn, may inform subsequent debate over the problem and potential solutions. In other words, policy instruments may contribute to the emergence of what we would call “instrument-driven frames.”

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<sup>1</sup> Note that obesity itself is a frame, in which fatness is conceptualized as a medical and/or public health problem, as opposed to, say, a positive (or negative) aesthetic or a form of body size diversity. Saguy, Abigail C. 2013. *What's wrong with fat?* New York: Oxford University Press.

**Table 1: Possible Relationships Between Frames and Policy Instruments Discussed  
in the Extant Literature**

	Literatures
Frame =>Policy instruments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Framing and Social Movement Literature</li> <li>• Social Problem Construction Literature</li> <li>• Political theory on ideas-driven policy</li> </ul>
Policy instruments => Frame	Political theory on policy instruments
Frame <=> Policy Instruments	Political theory on Agenda setting
Frame ≠ Policy Instruments	NONE