

# FRAMING SOCIAL ISSUES

LYNN DAVEY, PH.D

## Our thinking is guided by schema

**Schema** are mental shortcuts of preconceived ideas, assumptions, and beliefs that help us efficiently make sense of new information and situations.

## Frames activate our schema

Our framing challenge is that the public discourse on social problems makes certain schema more accessible than others. In America, we are fed a steady diet of stories that activate **individual responsibility, privacy and personal freedoms**, and **broken government**.

These classic American storylines obscure the public and systemic dimensions of social problems.

It takes intentional framing to activate other core American ideals (that are more conducive to policy thinking!), such as **collective responsibility, community and interdependence, and government/NGOs as part of the solution**.

## KEY PRINCIPLES:

1. We often apply strategies from product marketing and electoral politics to social issue communications. This is insufficient. WHY?

Products / Elections -----> Individual Behavior

Social Issues -----> National / Regional / State / Local / Individual Solutions

2. Social issue communications should be informed by what we know about social cognition - how people reason about their social worlds. (see *left sidebar*)

3. Social issue communications should be informed by the rich science of framing – an evidence-base on frame effects from social and cognitive science.

3. According to that science, effective social issue frames have a particular structure. They:

- Explain **WHY** the issue matters – by appealing to **values** that show how the issue is a collective, not just a personal, concern .
- Explain **WHAT** the problem/challenge is and **HOW** it can be solved – by telling a **causal story** that links the problem, the consequences, and the solution(s), and broadens the attribution of responsibility.

# 7 Dos and 3 Don'ts for Issue Communications

## *DO:*

1. FIRST, explain: **Why does this matter?**
  - USE MORE OF THESE: opportunity for all, ingenuity, interdependence, future prosperity,
  - AND LESS OF THESE: sympathy, care, and charity.
2. SECOND, explain: **What is the problem and how is it solved?** Connect the dots among causes, consequences and solutions.
3. **Appeal to people's sense of community and civic responsibility.**
4. Make sure **visuals** reflect your frame; don't use a photo/image just because it's appealing.
5. Be positive and solutions-oriented in **tone**.
6. Don't lead with data/numbers, and **always interpret the meaning of the data**
7. Make sure that the **messengers** you choose will be viewed as credible but unbiased

## *DON'T*

1. Use jargon and expert-ese, such as acronyms, abbreviations, and technical language.
2. Suggest "It's a crisis!" Crisis framing disengages and makes problems seem unsolvable.
3. Use a compelling story of **an individual person** (such as a program or service recipient) if your goal is policy change. People will attribute responsibility for the cause of and solution to the problem (e.g., poverty, obesity, addiction) to that individual. Individual stories obscure the systemic/structural causes and solutions to issues, and, more often than not, trigger stereotypes about the individuals portrayed.

## MORE FRAMING RESOURCES:

My blog: [daveystrategies.com/blog](http://daveystrategies.com/blog)

Opportunity Agenda: [opportunityagenda.org](http://opportunityagenda.org)

Topos Partnership: [topospartnership.com](http://topospartnership.com)

Berkeley Media Studies Group: [bmsg.org](http://bmsg.org)

**Read:** George Lakoff (Moral Politics/Metaphors We Live By), Daniel Kahneman (Thinking Fast and Slow), Jonathan Haidt (The Righteous Mind), Deborah Tannen (Framing in Discourse)

**Binge Watch SciComm Talks on Youtube!** From this playlist of a colloquia on Science Communication. I HIGHLY recommend No. 24 Dan Kahan; and No. 7 Arthur Lupia. But watch them all:

**<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLC091F4453121622E>**