

MOBILIZATION FORUM: Reply to Snow and Benford

Breaking the Frame

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The central point of our article was to call for a revitalization of the nonpejorative concept of ideology and more careful theorizing about the relation between ideology and frames. Our article makes clear this should not be construed as a comprehensive critique of the framing perspective. David Snow and Rob Benford have given us useful concepts for the cultural analysis of social movements under the rubric of the framing, as well as extensive contributions to the research and theory about mobilization processes. We view their response to our article as genuinely helping to clarify the relation between ideology and frames. Nevertheless, a few comments in reply seem in order.

Our focus on the "turn" away from ideology in the 1986 Snow et al. article, and especially the 1988 Snow and Benford chapter, does not do justice to the full corpus of their work, either in these two essays, or in the many other works they have published. But the turn is nevertheless there. They essentially say, "Ideology is important and has been neglected by resource mobilization scholars. Let's look at framing processes as a way of remedying this." Our article asserts that Snow and Benford provided "no justification for abandoning the term ideology and substituting frame *in this context*." They recast this assertion as an accusation put forward by us that they were "calling for the abandonment of the concept of ideology," a charge they deny—quite correctly—but also a charge that we never made. It goes without saying that nobody ever *called* for abandoning the concept of ideology; but it equally goes without saying that Snow and Benford moved to focus solely on frames instead of ideology. Our colleagues appear to believe sincerely that the framing approach is the best way to study those elements of ideology that are most relevant to mobilization, and thus dispute the claim that they "abandoned" ideology. We believe that what was abandoned by them—at least in those essays—and by those following them was the full *concept* of ideology. Ideology has a rich history of scholarship, research application, conceptual elaboration, debate and refinement by which its theoretical and empirical utility were grappled with by a long line of scholars. The concept of ideology embraces issues that framing does not. Although Snow and Benford themselves have been careful in the ways they use these terms, we have found that many scholars since them have been less careful. It is common to encounter "frames" and "ideology" being merged or used synonymously, for example, referring to the "liberal frame" or the "feminist frame."

We focused on the noun (the frame) instead of the verb (framing) because the vast majority of research in the framing perspective has done that. Our discussion of two approaches in the framing perspective, frames as either "fixed templates" or "inherently malleable and emergent" recognizes the grammatical division of labor; but we stand by our

judgement that "subsequent elaborations ... moved to a more fixed conception of collective action frames." This is clear in the reports we have cited. It is also clear in the way framing processes have been incorporated into political process theory, for example in Tarrow's *Power and Movement*, second edition.

This noun-verb distinction goes to the heart of several other of their criticisms, most of which are about framing, not ideology. In our judgement, it is the noun-an interpretative frame defined as a cognitive structure with specifiable content-that will move the framing perspective forward, not the verb, not descriptions of framing processes as ends in themselves. Of course, *all of social life is emergent, negotiated, and contextual*, and so too is the social construction of frames and ideology. Detailed descriptions of these emergent social processes can be useful, but to insist on the primacy of emergent processes above all is to trap social scientist in an interactionist bubble that limits all research to descriptions of process. To get outside that interactionist bubble and talk about how frames or ideologies relate to other features of social life, it is necessary to make the verbs of process into nouns of ideas. That is why, Snow and Benford's concerns notwithstanding, most people who invoke frame theory study *frames* and not *framing*. To put it another way, it is necessary to freeze the process in time to take soundings, artificially halting the variation of the variables to make measures. As we stated in our article, this is a methodological artifice; but as far as we know, is the best way to systematically analyze what changes, how much, and how these changes might be related to other factors so as to suggest a causal relation. It advances theory by offering concrete examples of how frames change and testing what factors may influence these changes.

It is puzzling that Snow and Benford claim that we said *a social constructionist view* "has been missing from recent scholarship," an incorrect assertion which is obviously contradicted by the rest of our article. The sentence that they refer to clearly focuses on ideology (not framing) and processes of *thinking* ideologically-especially thinking about the material world, the ideas that describe it and make sense of it, and the values that are often the basis of action to change it. Obviously, thinking is one kind of social construction, but that paragraph in our article (bottom p. 43) discusses not social constructionism in general, but the narrower realm of self-conscious intellectual activity as a corrective to the pejorative conceptions of ideology. We go on to say (bottom p. 44), "People think a lot in social movements, along with the related activities of reasoning, judging arguments, evaluating evidence, testing predictions, recognizing connections, and developing new knowledge. There is a continuity in the theorizing of ideologues and the theorizing of those who study ideologues." In Snow and Benford's comments they revisit this sentence, this time to defend the claim that people think about framing, and then to argue that framing injects a give-and-take into ideology that is missing from some of the past conceptions. We certainly agree that people can think about tactical framing and that some older conceptions of ideology are too static, but if they think that all intellectual processes are best understood as framing processes, we disagree with them.

They question our assertion that frame alignment concepts are more relevant to modern social movements than older ones. Of course, framing is a fundamental cognitive processes in *all* interaction. Applied to social movements, it is as much an element in Greenpeace as it was in seventeenth century peasant *jacquartes* when an act of the king was defined as warranting rebellion rather than quiescence. But *frame alignment processes* are a specific element of framing, and were discussed by Snow and Benford in part as an element of SMO tactical framing. Subsequent treatments have seized the frame alignment concept as akin to marketing a social movement, a move that is consistent with the bulk of the 1986 article. Greenpeace uses media consultants to maximize alignment of their membership

campaigns with target populations; leaders of the 1719 "harvesters" uprising in Catalonia did not. Al Gore has a stable of media consultants and specialists to align his campaign with the primary states' voters; Abraham Lincoln did not.

Our rhetorical juxtaposition of politics/ideology *versus* social psychology/framing is obviously unfair at the extreme, but we used the rhetoric to point to the problems with unfettered social constructionism, specifically its lack of a model of social structure and its risk of staying trapped in an interactionist bubble, of being unable to evaluate the relationship of ideas to other social structures. Ideologies are complex systems of ideas that are systematically related and which describe and explain the social world. They embrace a theory of how social relations came to be and how they can be changed, and stipulate core values and norms. Ideologies are social constructions, to be sure. But they are continually tested and refined on the anvil of the material world. Arguing that an ideological system is grounded in the material world is different than merely asserting that "experiential commensurability" is an aspect of framing. Discussions of the "politics of signification" do not address these concerns.

Snow and Benford's last comment on our article finally *breaks their own frame* and takes up the issue of ideology. We stand accused of not offering a water-tight definition that reconciles the various ways the term has been used over the last 200 years. To this we must plead guilty; we avoided those issues because of space limitations. They are correct in sketching some of the key problems with ideology as it has been understood, and correct that those problems must be revisited if the concept of ideology is to be revived. Where we part company is with their assertion that frames and framing (here they blur the noun and verb) will solve all these problems. Frame theory needs to continue to advance and is a valuable element of our theoretical repertoire, but the core issues about movement ideologies and their relations to material conditions and experiences that are at stake in those older problems and debates and definitions point to real issues that need to be grappled with on their own terms, not redefined out of existence in framing language.

The last section of the response, in which Snow and Benford sketch some of the relations between frames and ideology, are useful and suggestive, and we commend them to *Mobilization's* readers. However, we disagree with their last point, that framing as an activity is more observable than ideology, which they seem to assert can reside only deep in the psyche. We made precisely the opposite point, that ideologies can be written down and take on a life of their own, apart from the mind of any particular individual. In fact, both frames and framing on the one hand, and ideology on the other, can be observed in texts, public utterances, and interviews with leaders and activists; and both are in the same sense ultimately unobservable within individual's mind.

Indeed, more rigorous empirical work along these lines is necessary to rejuvenate both a non-pejorative use of ideology and the framing perspective. While details are beyond the scope of these comments, there are new methodologies that hold promise to move both approaches forward (see Johnston 2001). For example, story grammar analysis (Franzosi 1998, 1999) is one way to move beyond qualitative descriptions and measure the strength of what is being said or written about. Story grammars represent the essence of what is meant in textual episodes, and are often presented in the form of hierarchical semantic structures. The occurrences of specific structures can be quantified to yield measures of how often specific meanings occur. Shapiro and Markoff's (1998) innovative approach to computer-assisted textual processing combines the advantages of story grammar analysis with number-crunching abilities of computers. These methodological innovations hold promise to move both ideological analysis and frame analysis out of their descriptive bias and to give both firmer empirical grounding on which comparisons can be made.

Separately and together, Snow and Benford and their colleagues have written a great deal of important sociology, and we have not pretended to do justice to all of their work. Our emphasis on key points of disagreement with them, our stress on a particular "turn," and our concerns about the ways in which their work has been used by others, could easily but quite incorrectly be read as an attack on them or their work. As we have repeatedly stressed in our original article and in this reply, we are not calling for an abandonment of work on frame theory. Rather, we believe that it is time for a serious reappraisal of the relations between newer work on frame theory and the older issues and ideas surrounding the non-pejorative understanding of ideology. As their response amply demonstrates, they are well prepared to bring rich scholarly and intellectual resources to this reappraisal.

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