

*Tarrow is making a theoretical point about the importance of frames, but it would appear to virtually require a qualitative, interpretivist method. Or?*

A major theme in our readings this quarter has been the deep connection between facts and theory. Viewing fact collection as fundamentally theory-driven may initially seem to consign us to subjectivity, but uncovering the implicit theories that motivate fact collection improves our understanding of the motivations and biases behind particular research. It is striking that the entanglement between fact and theory is not simply a problem for the researcher, but is equally a problem for the subjects of research, and indeed anyone else. Sidney Tarrow (2011) argues that social movements create and manipulate meanings by constructing interpretive schemes that simplify and condense the world (142). Drawing on prior work by David Snow (1992) and Erving Goffman (1974), Tarrow calls this process “framing,” and he argues that the mechanism operates by “selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events and sequences of action” to which individuals are exposed. Such frames enable collective action by identifying and connecting grievances into larger frames of meaning that resonate with that population’s cultural predispositions. Social movements attempt to frame specific with collective action claims that generate or buttress a collective identity (144).

Tarrow argues that movements sometimes attempt to transform inherited cultural frames, giving the harrowing example of the recent redefinition of Indian nationalism as Hindu chauvinism. This process will often involve the mobilization of accepted frames for new purposes (146). The need to transmit this re-framing via the media places greater emphasis on the performative and militant strains of a social movement, thus “providing incentives for disruptive or violent elements in otherwise peaceful movements” (149). Much re-framing involves the redefinition of social boundaries between in-groups and out-groups, and activating these boundaries can produce greater cohesion, but along a “reduced identity dimension” (151). Once constructed, such politicized identities may need to be constantly

reinforced, leading militants to create and enhance barriers to group entry by interpreting group identity in an increasingly narrow fashion. Tarrow emphasizes the emotional and non-rational basis of the framing process, arguing that many such movements are based around the “deliberate cultivation of hatred and anger” on the basis of nationalism or religion (154).

Frames are group-level phenomena. Extracting meaning from them would seem, at first pass, to require interpretation. Interpretivist approaches look askance at strict application of the scientific method to the social world, because concepts and motivations are not susceptible to scientific study (Habermas 1967). However, Tarrow argues that “[f]raming, identity construction, and emotions cannot be simply read like a “text,” independent of the strategies of movements and the conditions in which they struggle” (156), and he urges scholars to “relate text to context” by examining the opportunities and constraints faced by social movements. This resistance to interpretivism is sound to the extent that it rejects basing arguments on unfalsifiable propositions, but there genuinely does seem to be a barrier to studying frames within a positivist framework. As we have seen, there exists a two-level problem. Not only are the motivations and biases of the researcher encoded in the research question and the conduct of the study, but the actions and beliefs of research subjects are taken or held on the basis of inchoate, social and nonrational collective frames.

If the goal of research is understanding, the researcher must engage with these frames, but engagement on the basis of textual interpretation or critical theory seem inapposite because such approaches compound the problem of bias. If we accept that the social world is not wholly reducible to individual psychology, we must accept the reality of social constructs for the purposes of scientific study. This will result in inevitable muddling of subjectivity and normativity, which we must accept to properly study social frames, because to properly understand a normative precept we must evaluate it normatively. However, abandoning objectivity does not mean that we need not guard against bias. We certainly must interpret, but we need not surrender to our own biases to do so. Tarrow’s paradox implies that positivism

cannot encompass collective frames, but that their study invites a subjectivity that vitiates attempts to make causal claims. A possible compromise approach is taken by Armstrong and Crage (2006), who enter sympathetically into the norm space inhabited by their research subjects. This approach allows them to correctly interpret normative meaning and to identify and track their subject community's framing before and after the 1969 Stonewall riots. In an interesting manner, this hypothetical sympathy parallels the proper reading of an academic article. Just as we must extend hypothetical *normative* sympathy to another author in order to properly understand an argument, we must hypothetically inhabit a collective frame to understand its implications – such collective/subjective phenomena do not seem susceptible to external, positivist analysis. In the same way, after fully reading and understanding an author's argument, we re-engage our critical faculties and evaluate the argument on the basis of our own premises. This hypothetical sympathy or willingness to inhabit a thought world seems to be a vital precondition for properly understanding collective frames, but there seems no clear reason why the research so produced could not be subjected to qualitative analysis. Subjective understanding is not antithetical to positivism, but complementary.

### References

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