# Chapter 13
# Policy Framing in Canada, the U.S. and Western Europe – A Comparison


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**Abstract** The chapter compares how policy issues in higher education and how research in this area in Canada, the U.S. and Western Europe have been framed in a historical perspective. By interpreting policy framing as a sensemaking process, a de-construction of the specific elements of the framing process is offered, and a comparison is made with respect to similarities and differences in how policies have been framed in the three contexts. In addition, the chapters provide observations on framing as a means for analyzing policy formation, identifying advantages and disadvantages of the framing approach. Key points made include how framing approaches also may assist researchers in their communication of common observations in different empirical contexts and how framing may build bridges between different disciplinary traditions.

## Introduction

The framing literature is, as underlined earlier in this volume, multifaceted (Rein & Schön, 1977; van Hulst & Yanow, 2016). We can find distinct disciplinary footprints and a range of research traditions making this literature quite dynamic but also quite diverse. This diversity is very evident in the three contributions that have had a closer look at the framing of policy agendas in the U.S., Canada and Western Europe. Given the different political and cultural contexts and traditions, one could argue that such diversity is understandable and natural. For a contribution aimed at comparison, it is nevertheless a challenge.

The approach taken in this chapter is that framing is a concept that allows to make sense of a complex reality providing guideposts for knowing, analysing, persuading, and adapting. Applying this approach may also make particular sense in the area of higher education studies as the key characteristics of the classic contributions in the field always has been to coin situations and complex realities in ways

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J. Jungblut et al. (eds.), *Comparative Higher Education Politics*, Higher Education Dynamics 60, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-25867-1_13

that create meaning and understanding. Hence, when the legacies of universities were described as 'sagas' (Clark, 1972), the organizational fabric of the universities were seen as 'loosely coupled' (Weick, 1976), or when the internal decision-making processes were understood as 'garbage can' processes (Cohen & March, 1974), the concepts added value to the reader. As such, these descriptions should not only be seen as sense making concepts, they are in addition sense giving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) – concepts that may turn words into actions in transformation processes in higher education (Gioia et al., 1994).

The contributions analysed in this comparative chapter can be said to face a double challenge: While they are identifying the frames used to describe and make sense of policy changes in Canada, the U.S. and Western Europe, they are providing their own sense making of those frames – suggesting some sort of meta-analysis of the analytical process (Goffman, 1974). To avoid creating another layer of frames on top of that, this contribution will instead offer an attempt of de-construction of the frames applied – adding to the micro-processes involved in the framing process (Drori & Honig, 2013). It is the ambition that diving into the micro-processes of framing, the reader will also gain new insights on both similarities and differences of the policy processes playing out in the three contexts in focus.

To simplify the comparisons made, this chapter first and foremost focuses on the 'federal' policy developments taking place – with less focus on the policy developments at state/national level.

## How to Make Sense of Policy Frames – A De-construction Attempt

In the introduction to this book, two key theoretical positions were outlined as an analytical points-of-departure. The first position suggested that policies – and the sense-making underlying the development of these policies – is driven by global rationalized assumptions about the means that will drive quality, effectiveness and relevance (Ramirez & Meyer, 2013). The consequence of adaptation to such rationalized assumptions would be more similarity in policy framing and policy content. The second position outlined was that policies may in fact be inspired by global trends, but that the specific history, legacies and other path-dependencies would lead to sense-making activities more characterized by translation than imitation (Meyer, 2008). Policies developed would, as a consequence, be more characterized by considerable diversity.

These two positions share some key elements, including the importance of the external environment and the globalization processes that has been unfolding during the latter decades. At the same time, they can also be seen as contradictory with different emphasis being put on elements such as external legitimacy or local history (Drori & Honig, 2013). Both positions are still somewhat silent on the actual processes that embed the potential rationalization or translation processes that plays

out, and the ambition with the current chapter is to add to our knowledge about how potential rationalization and translation processes has unfolded in the three empirical settings studied.

Karl Weick (1995: 17–62) – one of the key contributors to the field of sense making, has suggested that the process of sense making can be broken up into seven properties. In short, sensemaking is for Weick:

- Grounded in identity construction
- Retrospective
- Enactive of sensible environments
- Social
- Ongoing
- Focused on and by extracted cues
- Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy

While Weick (1995) applied the concept of sensemaking to organizations, the framework provided is rather generic and is relevant to other contexts – including that of policymaking. In the latter utilization one could argue that policies also could be interpreted as a form of identity construction – and that policies are used to reaffirm who we are as a nation or a community (Albert & Whetten, 1985). The link to identity construction is a reminder of that policymaking also embed values and norms. It follows from this that the sensemaking process is retrospective – identities, values and norms derive from the past – with history being an important factor (Clark, 1970; Stensaker et al., 2012).

However, other properties in the framework are more related to and aligned with the assumptions derived from global rationalized assumptions. The weight being put on the environment and that sense-making is a social activity driven by plausibility rather than accuracy, provide hints as to how imitation processes plays out in practice. For Weick though, rationalization and translation processes are still very intertwined and complex, and while making the distinction between rationalization and translation more difficult, his framework could be useful for uncovering the nuts and bolts of policy framing.

Weick (1995: 30) argues that enactment is the process where the sensing is transformed into 'making'. Hence, framing is an active process where policies highlight particular elements of the environment they try to capture, and as such, they create the environment by presenting it in specific ways. The active part of the framing process is further developed when policies are discussed, adjusted, fine-tuned and transformed through various social and ongoing processes. These properties underline the active but also the collective work involved in legitimizing policies. This collective process is not always about agreeing in the policy proposed, but having the opportunity to provide input and views on it (se also Czarniawska, 1997). As policies may not always present relevant problems, solutions, involve the right people or identify acceptable solutions (Cohen & March, 1974), the process of 'making and framing' a policy tends to be more ongoing than having a distinct start and end point.

To make sure that policies stand out from other policies and assist the sensemaking process, having an extracted cure is of high importance (Fiol, 2002). Extracted cues are 'simple familiar structures that are seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring' (Weick, 1995: 50). They create the structure of context, or the frame as Goffman (1974) would have put it. It directs attention, evoke action, and create a material order of steps, logics, and sequences. However, these structures may not provide accurate details. They could be globalized assumptions. They work even better when they are plausible rather than accurate as too many details may distort rather than clarify, add complexity rather than simplicity and coherence.

It should be underlined that the propositions listed above should not be interpreted as a standardized sequential logic of the sensemaking process. The propositions are intertwined, interdependent and may have blurred boundaries between them. The advantage of the propositions is still that they offer insight into the microprocesses of framing, and allows for a more structured way to compare policy frames, and how rationalized assumptions and translations processes impact policy developments.

## Canada, the U.S. and Western Europe – Framing Components Compared

The three contributions in question are all applying a perspective on framing closely intertwined with sensemaking. However, empirically the contributions differ substantially despite their historical approach. While in Canada the focus is on how four specific issues have been framed since the 1980 (access, student success; skills and employment; research and innovation; regional integration), the U.S. contribution (Orphan & McCoy-Simmons, this volume) compares how three federal administrations (Truman; Bush; Obama) framed the purpose of higher education since WWII. The contribution on Western Europe (Chou et al., this volume) starts out in the 1970s and looks specifically into how European level policy initiatives have developed, providing a few deep dives into two countries (Germany; Norway) along the way.

While all three cases are examples of federalism – the analysis also differs regarding the take on the concept: While the administrations play a key role in the U.S., we also learn a lot about the role of interest groups, media and social movements in the process (Vukasovic et al., 2018). In the Canadian contribution (Bégin-Caouette et al., this volume), the policy issues are highlighted, and the different provinces stand out as central part of the analysis. With respect to Western Europe focus is more on how a European policy level emerged over time, and where we only pay short visits to the national level. As indicated, the framing is quite different reflecting geopolitical characteristics, historical paths and the preferences and priorities of the authors. If we apply Weick's seven sensemaking propositions some interesting comparative patterns still emerge.

### *Grounded in Identity Construction*

In all three cases, we can clearly see that identity construction is a central part of the policy framing process. The questions of 'who we are' and 'who do we want to be' are implicitly present in creating and constructing Europe as a concept for the further development of higher education. In Canada (Bégin-Caouette et al., this volume), we learn about the 'Canadian realities' and how the identity linked to Indigenous and Francophone (and Anglophone) communities have shaped the context for policy developments over time. In the U.S. (Orphan & McCoy-Simmons, this volume) the analysis highlights how the balance between the democratic and the commercial purposes of higher education has always been a key to understand how policy frames have been developed, and also how this balance has shifted over time.

The big difference between the cases is still that while in the U.S. and Canada, much of the identity construction is backward looking, and where new policy initiatives are seeking legitimacy from the past, the Western European (Chou et al., this volume) case demonstrates a more forward looking identity construction process – perhaps more influenced by globalized assumptions of how higher education should develop. This is a finding in line with research suggesting that identity construction in higher education simultaneously involve backward- and forward-looking elements (Stensaker, 2015) – and in line with how sensemaking (what situation is this) sometimes can foster actions and become sensegiving (how should I respond to this situation).

### *Retrospective*

For the Western European case (Chou et al., this volume), history is and historical legacies is often interpreted as 'the European problem' – that Europe is lagging behind and where policy solutions are not found in the past. The retrospective view is used as an argument for a different way forward. In Canada the retrospection is very visible as the concept of 'right to education' dominated the policy framing for more than three decades. In the U.S. case (Orphan & McCoy-Simmons, this volume), we learn about how interest groups through various initiatives and supported by powerful organized interest (including the Big Six institutional membership associations) also attempted to protect the higher education sector from what was perceived as unwanted federal influence on the system. Historical legacies is in this case used as a potential defense against global (federal) assumptions about what is the best way forward. For the latter two cases, the retrospective sensemaking is about highlighting the good, the strengths and the comparative advantages of the higher education sector, and its inherent cultural characteristics (Välimaa & Ylijoki, 2008). The past needs to be preserved – especially the values and norms associated with higher education (Weerts et al., 2014).

### *Enactive of Sensible Environments*

This proposition suggests that the world around us is a social construction – at least with respect to how we choose to interpret it – the making of what we are sensing. Thus, this proposition suggest that rationalized global assumptions are 'selected' rather than 'imposed' on various political constituencies. In the U.S. and Canada, this enactment process was central in coining a de-regulation and competition agenda. The framing activities were used to launch a 'freedom of choice' agenda in Canada and was also central in promoting MOOCs as a technological radical innovation that would disrupt and transform U.S. higher education.

While concepts such as the 'Europe of Knowledge' pointed to a seemingly different framing, also in Europe this frame had to compete with ideas of future knowledge economies, strategic public private partnerships, ideas of competition, student mobility (for the best of the economy) and being at the forefront with respect to innovation (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1997) – although the weight given to these various elements has differed in individual countries (see also Vukasovic et al., 2018). As such, there are many similarities between the three cases regarding the substance of the policies suggested. Framing promoting a neo-liberal policy agenda are rather dominating in all the cases.

### *Social*

All cases also pay attention to how policy framing is shaped, edited and transformed in various social processes. The most illustrating example is perhaps the Canadian case (Bégin-Caouette et al., this volume) analyzing a student strike opposing increased tuition fees in Quebec – revoking an old frame ('the right to education') – using this frame to attack both the political leadership in the province and the institutional leadership of the universities.

The U.S. case (Orphan & McCoy-Simmons, this volume) also provides interesting illustrations of social processes – especially those related to social and racial injustice in the higher education system – and how policy frames may be used in quite effective ways by the 'powerless' to raise issues publicly. In both the U.S. (Big Six) and in Europe (E4), the role of interest organizations and associations are very distinct in framing processes (Fumasoli et al., 2017) – although they perhaps are more re-active than pro-active in the framing process – as illustrated below. An interesting observation though is that the three cases to a lesser extent report in how academic staff were involved in the discussions. While there are studies demonstrating how academic staff have been affected by policy changes and reform attempts (see Locke et al., 2011), there is far less information on how this interest group has been involved in the framing of policies.

### *Ongoing*

The three cases illustrate that framing and reframing is a continuous process, where European level policy makers, province authorities or federal and state legislators in the U.S. and Canada play dominant roles as the key agenda setters (Kerr, 2001).

However, this does not imply that interest groups, political elites, media and social movements are powerless actors. All the cases illustrate how a range of policy actors uses frames as means to influence policy agendas. Not least is it visible in the U.S. case (Orphan & McCoy-Simmons, this volume) how intermediary public policy organizations often provide 'solutions' to the 'problems' defined by federal and state authorities. These solutions are often the starting point for a reframing of the dominant interpretations, indicating how the framing best could be described as an ongoing process.

### *Focused on and by Extracted Cues*

Frames are meant to produce direction of the mind and need a point of reference to which sensemaking can be attached. The frame must be distilled and refined in attractive ways (Goffman, 1974). A good example of this is how the 'completion agenda' came to the forth in the U.S., and how powerful phrases such as 'no child left behind' are used for mobilizing support despite the many challenges related to the implementation of this policy. Similarly, the European 'modernization agenda' has also been an influential point of reference for a number of European countries in pushing a domestic reform agenda in higher education.

However, what is striking in the three cases is also how researchers in the field are central in producing meta-frames that compliment and provide context to the frames offered by policymakers. Concepts such as 'academic capitalism', 'entrepreneurial' or 'corporate' universities have been effective ways to shape research agendas in all three regions (see also Clark, 1998; Kirp, 2003; Huisman, 2009; Shattock, 2010), extracting meaning and adding complementary understandings of dominant policy shifts in the higher education sector.

### *Driven by Plausibility Rather than Accuracy*

While extracted cues provide a sense of direction for the framing that goes on, it perhaps goes without saying that the extraction process is not characterized by accuracy and detail. On the contrary, too much detail and accuracy is not very helpful in framing process as it may open up for contestation and unnecessary questions (Weick, 1995). The 'responsiveness' agenda in Canada and the 'modernization' agenda in Europe are good examples of concepts that add value by signalizing progress, a move to something better, a solution to a problem. They are socially and

credible concepts that are taken for granted as plausible and acceptable responses to challenging situations. They are also 'global' in that the solutions suggested are thought of as universal remedies and recipes regardless of context.

In federal higher education systems such as the U.S. and Canada, and in a quasi-federal higher education regions such as Europe where considerable power and authority is found at state level, province level, and within the individual European country, the attractiveness of frames becomes particularly important as a means to motivate states, provinces or countries to support the policies that are being framed.

## Frames as a Tool for Analyzing Policy Change – Some Reflections

This de-construction exercise can be said to build on the insights from Rein and Schön (1977) when they argued that policy framing is a sense-making process that can be split up in various sequences such as selection, naming, and storytelling. The contribution of Weick (1995) has been to offer an even more detailed framework for understanding the micro-processes of policy framing – identifying seven key properties of the sensemaking process. This de-construction illustrates some common elements in the framing process; the emphasis on history and identity; the rhetorical attributes attached to reform attempts, and the characteristics of successful framing attempts (Drori & Honig, 2013).

The de-construction undertaken may also contribute to shed light on how global rationalized assumptions or translations processes plays out in practice, which may also provide new insights that can add to both sociological and historical institutionalism. One example is how European history and legacies were used to construct the political perceptions of a 'European problem' which was in need of 'modernization'. This way of using history is interesting in a historical institutionalist perspective where path-dependency usually is thought of as a concept shaping what is acceptable solutions. Hence, it opens up for possibilities that change in a historical institutionalist perspective in principle may be more radical, and not so incremental as usually imagined. Another example from the empirical cases is more relevant to the sociological institutionalist perspective. The way various interest organizations operate and influence policy processes provide more detailed insights as to the specific mechanisms at play when global rationalized assumptions are spread. As Vukasovic (2017) has argued, these kind of organizations are important providers of policy content, although as the cases in the current book illustrate – it might still be an open question whether they are mediators of translators of global policy ideas.

While the cases in question are different, the way that the framing takes place in Canada, the U.S. and in Western Europe also points to empirical settings where some common shifts in policymaking have taken place over the decades. The major story told is one about a (perhaps too) glorified past embedded in concepts such as the right to education, democracy, academic freedom, followed by a period of

reform and an overarching policy agenda emphasizing more the role of higher education as a driver for economic growth, innovation and prosperity.

Policy framing has an important role in this transformation. While framing as such could be described as merely 'symbolic', frames may still exert much social and transformative power (Greenwood et al., 2011), not least if the frames provided also are embedded in governance arrangements such as funding, legal changes, accreditation and other accountability arrangements. While frames potentially may be characterized as hypocrisy, frames can also have practical implications for the higher education sector and for the university (Ramirez & Christensen, 2013). For example, ideas about 'inclusion' in higher education may be easily translated with respect to access procedures and how to develop learning environments.

The ontological dimension of framing is as such interesting to discuss. Just how real and relevant are the frames that are provided as carriers of meaning and direction – and how coupled or decoupled are the frames with respect to the dynamic developments of the higher education systems in question? While the big framing story is about a transformation from democracy and academic freedom to entrepreneurialism and innovation, there is also another story told more implicit by the frames provided in Canada, the U.S. and Western Europe. This story is about higher education systems expanding quite dramatically after WWII, and how elite systems with privileges for the few transformed into systems of mass higher education. As such, the interest in access and regional development that can be detected in all the three contexts are quite natural themes to address in the framing of the policies suggested. In this perspective, framing becomes a rather reactive process, as a retrospective attempt to make sense of empirical realities and demographical changes. What would be more interesting to know is how framing also had a proactive function as a vision of the future. This is, of course, a difficult question to research as sensemaking is so closely intertwined with the world as we experience it (Weick, 1995). Nevertheless, if framing is to become more than a specific form of discursive analysis – there is perhaps a need for further methodological advancements.

However, the three case studies on Canada, the U.S. and Western Europe also provide a valuable glimpse into how higher education researchers have analyzed the changes, and how they have played part in the process of trying to make sense of the unfolding policy changes. Frames are important for higher education researchers, and the case studies invite some observations on the research in this area.

First, an important role taken on by researchers is to act as independent interpreters of the policy frames than have emerged. Through providing a series of meta-frames, researchers in the field seems to have managed to establish a joint agenda – having impact on research not only within their own regions, but also globally. Many contributions from researchers in the field have focused on describing the organizational consequences of a more neo-liberal framing of higher education policy, and how such framing has triggered rationalization, standardization, bureaucratization, and professionalization, and a more market-oriented university (Kirp, 2003; Hazelkorn, 2011; Drori & Honing, 2013; Ramirez & Christensen, 2013). The frames coined by researchers have in this way functioned as means of research communication in the field.

A second observation is that researchers in higher education still could be accused of being too attentive to the agendas created by policymakers. This is perhaps an unintended consequence of policy frames as they can dominate the public agenda, making it difficult to identify other issues of importance. This is not to say that radically different framing attempts by researchers are nonexistent – but such attempts are often closely bounded to images of the university and the values and norms of the past (Shapin, 2012). As such, one could claim that alternative research sense-making attempts are embedded in the identity construction of the past, thus more retrospective than forward looking. Stylistic characterizations of universities as 'historically embedded' are, of course, not taking into account that organizations in general, and universities in particular, are complex and often carriers of multiple logics (Greenwood et al., 2011). Examples include how universities sometimes are characterized as bureaucracies, anarchies, loosely coupled organizations or professionalized institutions. All observations may be true for some part of the university – sometimes.

A third observation following as a consequence of the former two is then that there is a danger that framing as an activity engaging both policymaker and researchers easily can run the risk of turning into a stylistic and rather abstract activity. Frames are attractive and may simplify portraits, visions and ideals either linked to a 'modernized' future advocated by policymakers, or obituaries of the past offered by the researchers. In this way, one can argue that framing could be an activity that overlooks complexities, paradoxes and the possible ironies related to change processes witnessed (Fumasoli & Stensaker, 2013). While framing undoubtedly has advantages, we should nevertheless not forget the inherent tensions, inbuilt dynamics and the struggle for coherence that characterize both higher education, and its most significant institution – the university.

Thus, a fourth observation is that the idea of 'framing' perhaps is spreading to other areas of higher education, and higher education research. While universities perhaps are facing more demands and expectations than ever, and as a consequence, becomes even more complex as organizations – both universities and the students of universities as organizations – have engaged in a range of branding, marketing and profiling exercises and analysis thereof (Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Christensen & Gornitzka, 2017). Hence, in the same way as framing demonstrate the expressive side of politics and political analysis, it is possible to witness how universities also are becoming expressive organizations (see also Schultz et al., 2000) – in need of framing their activities in ways that make sense to their surroundings, opening up a new area of analysis for those interested in studying it.

In conclusion, it should still be underlined that the three contributions analyzing policy framing in Canada, the U.S. and Western Europe add value to the field of higher education studies in a number of ways. They are valuable as they not only point to issues that are 'popular' and on the agenda – but also highlight issues receiving less attention over time, adding a historical account to a field that often pays much attention to the latest policy fashion (Fumasoli & Stensaker, 2013). The studies also connect to research undertaken in political science and public administration – bringing these areas of study closer to higher education research.

The U.S. case is as such very interesting as it pays attention to intermediate public policy organizations, the role of policy elites and the dynamics of social movements in policy processes – representing an inclusion of important actors in the policy process – a tendency also observed related to European studies in higher education (Fumasoli et al., 2017). The framing approach is as such interesting as it draws our attention to policy formation processes – how policies emerge, and how they are shaped and transformed (van Hulst & Yanow, 2016). As such, this approach is a much-needed add-on to the traditional interest in policy implementation in higher education.

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