Reframing child welfare inequalities: making sense with research and changing the conversation

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For the past three years, during undergraduate seminars, I have asked sociology students how they experienced reading their first article in an academic journal. The responses have been almost uniform. Until students have learned how to engage with scholarly writing (which can take years) academic journals are experienced as difficult, convoluted and dense. Is it any wonder then, that academics struggle to make sense in ways that can effect change? This is certainly the case when change is sought beyond the academy. History also tells us that this is not a new problem. Matters of accessibility have impeded the effect of social sciences for decades (*see for example* Mills, 1959). We need to break the mould.

Drawing on the work of framing theorist George Lakoff (2014), this article considers the ways and means of sense making. In so doing we hope to signpost helpful tools for communicating research in ways that can reframe social problems and effect social change. Our research seeks to reframe child welfare as a matter of social inequality (Bywaters, 2015).

Analyses of child protection data across the UK have established significant associations between social advantage/disadvantage and children's chances and experiences of involvement with child protection systems. In England a child's chance of being on a child protection plan (CPP) is 10 times higher in the most deprived 10 per cent of areas compared

with the least deprived 10 per cent of areas. A review of key literature on the association between poverty, child abuse and neglect also indicates that reducing child poverty would likely reduce the extent and severity of child maltreatment (Bywaters et al., 2016). This suggests that, as with health and education, child welfare is a matter of inequality. Where you are born and raised significantly influences your chances of involvement with the child protection system, and this is unfair. However, unlike health and education there is no established inequalities discourse on child welfare. The conversation is not happening. Rather, child maltreatment is principally framed as a problem of failed parental responsibility, with little attention paid to the impact of structural conditions - like poverty - on parenting capacity. How do we change the conversation?

Research findings are not enough. Indeed, the events of the EU referendum and the US election demonstrate just how easily facts can be ignored and, conversely, how unsubstantiated or poorly evidenced claims can be used to shape conversations and compel publics. Experts need to finds new ways of communicating facts (Brown, 2016). Framing theory, we argue, offers valuable guidance on how this can be done.

George Lakoff (2014) is a cognitive linguist who has spent decades exploring the framing of public discourse in the US and advising advocacy groups and politicians on framing issues from a progressive perspective. Lakoff argues all too many progressives have been taught a false and outdated theory of reason, one in which framing, metaphorical thought and emotion play no role in rationality – this has led them to the view that the facts alone will set them free. 'Facts matter enormously, but to be meaningful, they must be framed in terms of their moral importance' (xiv).

According to Lakoff (2014, xi-xii) frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world. They shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome. Frames are part of what he calls the 'cognitive unconscious' – 'structures in our brains that we cannot consciously access, but know by their consequences' (xii). In politics frames shape social policies and the institutions we form to shape our policies. To change our frames is to change all of this. He argues that reframing is social change.

Framing is not about coming up with clever slogans. Certain ideas have to be ingrained in us, developed over time consistently and precisely enough to create an accurate frame for our understanding. It is difficult to say things people are not ready to hear. Lakoff argues this is a problem of hypocognition - the lack of the overall neural circuitry that makes common sense of the idea and that fits the form of communication that one normally engages in. Slogans cannot overcome hypocognition - only sustained public discussion has a chance and that involves knowledge of the problem and a large-scale serious commitment to work for a change.

The world reflects our understandings through our actions, and our understandings reflect

the world shaped by the frame-informed actions of ourselves and others. To function effectively in the world it helps to be aware of reflexivity, it helps to be aware of what frames have shaped and are still shaping reality if you are going to intervene to make the world a better place.

A really crucial point made by Lakoff is that even when we are negating a frame, we are evoking it because the more we repeat a frame even if only to disagree with it, the stronger it gets. Thus Lakoff counsels when arguing against the other side in an argument, do not use their language. For example, he notes in a blog ([2017](#)) that in response to President Trump calling journalists 'enemies', journalists have resisted by using hashtags in social media campaigns such as #NotTheEnemy. He argues that adopting this hashtag is a big mistake. Rather, he counsels journalists instead to use a hashtag such as #ProtectTheTruth.

Lakoff argues that the most effective frames connect with people's values. Appealing to values increases the chance people will engage with and respond to what is said, because values are things we hold in common, that resonate at a deep emotional level. Furthermore, the more we appeal to a value, the stronger it becomes.

Lakoff's (2014) work is not without criticism. Scholars have criticised Lakoff's ideas for denying human agency and potentially supporting elites to devise new and more sophisticated ways of framing that render human dialogue about pain, suffering, hope and change even more problematic to develop ([O'Neill, 2010](#)). Still, what the work of Lakoff and that of those who develop his ideas (*see* www.frameworksinstitute.org) tell us - in no uncertain terms - is that research impact needs attention to framing and to do that we need to *make sense*.

We argue that framing theory offers a valuable contribution to the problem of sense making in research dissemination. In fact, what framing theory encourages is a reconceptualization of the research process, focussing particularly on the need to present research and extend dissemination, thoughtfully, beyond publication. Changing the conversation, on issues like poverty, inequality and child welfare, requires more than research findings, presented in research briefings, academic journals and at conferences. Academics in the social sciences need to learn how to communicate beyond the academy and to do so in ways that are convincing and capture audiences, particularly those who do not share the same worldview. Framing theory offers a sense of how this can be done. In this respect the work on framing also offers some hope to progressives interested in effecting social change. In the current social and political context, hope is exactly what is needed.

References

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