Framing Effects on Attitudes Toward Pedophiles

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The effects of framing techniques on attitudes toward a pedophile were investigated. Framing involves organizing information in different ways to influence peoples’ attitudes. The three frames dictated the level of responsibility as well as the possible causes for pedophilia. Frame 1 indicated a neurological imbalance caused pedophilia. Frame 2 referred to pedophilia as a conscious choice. Frame 3 was the control. The questionnaire measured empathy, attribution of responsibility, and attitudes towards treatment. Multivariately, neither the main effects nor the interactions between frame, college major, and sex were significant. Univariately, major predicted students’ attitudes towards treatment. The interaction between major and frame was a significant predictor of treatment attitudes and punishment, on alternative dependent variables determined by a factor analysis.

Introduction

Several studies have researched the effects of framing on opinion formation and decision making processes. Framing effects refer to the idea that it is possible to organize information in different ways that can influence the conclusions drawn by participants. Descriptions which function as frames may have a large influence on judgments since they affect the method of categorizing and defining prominent issues. Framing can be used as an intentional communication strategy to shape peoples’ opinions on a variety of levels. Expanding this idea can lead to studies analyzing other cognitive processes that may be connected to different framing effects. Specifically, this study attempted to answer the question if creating different frames influences attitudes toward stigmatized offenders such as pedophiles.

The process of understanding and interpreting an issue can be guided by providing readily accessible information regarding the topic. For example, Joslyn and Haider-Markel (2002) examined the impact of frames on participants’ opinions regarding physician-assisted suicide and reform of social security. For physician-assisted suicide, a pro-life frame and an
individual rights frame were contrasted; for social security reform, an equal treatment for all
frame and an individual rights frame were compared. The frames were found to strongly
influence personal opinions, but to have a lesser impact on perceptions of public opinion. Joslyn
and Haider concluded that framing highlights certain features of an issue and affects how
perceivers organize information and respond to situations. They found participants’ opinions can
be manipulated based on the information presented regardless of the type of issue.

Much of the framing literature has focused on opinion change relating to various personal
and public issues, not on individual’s perceptions of stigmatized group members. Many studies
of stigmatized groups, however, use alternative techniques which may have functioned as
frames. For instance, Batson et al. (1997) manipulated the level of empathy participants felt
toward members of stigmatized groups. They examined the empathy-attitude effect by inducing
empathy toward a woman with AIDS, a homeless person, and a convicted criminal. Their results
revealed that higher scores on an empathy reaction scale directly related to more positive
attitudes toward the stigmatized members. Thus, conditions designed to induce empathy may
have created a framing effect since they influenced the participant’s attitudes toward the targets.

Woolfolk, Doris, and Darley (2006) incorporated a criminal justice aspect into the
psychological research by observing people’s attributions of responsibility for an antisocial act.
They defined the term identification as a psychological state describing the amount of ownership
a perpetrator expressed for an act. They manipulated degree of identification and whether or not
the perpetrator was coerced or compelled to commit a homicide. Findings indicated that the
higher the level of identification, the more responsibility participants attributed to the perpetrator,
which was true regardless of situational factors. Since identification influenced the amount of
perceived responsibility, it functioned as a frame in their study. More studies are necessary to
extend the ideas of Woolfolk et al. by examining if a greater amount of responsibility attributed to a criminal influences others’ attitudes about him or her. Furthermore, researchers should examine if framing effects apply to other criminal acts, such as pedophilia.

Additionally, numerous variables such as college major, sex, and attributions of responsibility have been shown to relate to a person’s response in certain situations. Becares and Turner (2004) conducted a detailed study using attributions of responsibility as a framing tool. They found that presenting alternative frames relating to a target with AIDS affected individuals’ empathetic responses. The circumstance through which the individual had contracted AIDS acted as a frame and affected the magnitude of the participant’s empathetic response. Becares and Turner also found that college major related to attitudes toward members of stigmatized groups. They speculated that this finding was either due to personality predispositions that influence vocational choices or because helping professions teach individuals to feel more empathy toward others. The present study examined attitudes toward pedophiles by comparing framing effects on psychology and criminal justice students’ judgments about a stigmatized target.

In our experiment, we examined responses from participants who received one of three alternative frames about pedophilia. The information related to alternative theories of the cause of pedophilia. Two main beliefs exist about the cause of pedophilia. One theoretical perspective suggests that early sexual abuse/exposure, certain biological pathologies, specific mental illnesses, and structural brain damage may be to blame. The other theoretical perspective is that pedophilia is a criminal act that deviant individuals consciously choose to commit. These two perspectives formed the frames for the current experimental conditions, with frame 1 placing no blame on the pedophile since his actions were a result of a neurological imbalance and frame 2
assigning full responsibility to the pedophile for sexual acts. Frame 3 was the control condition and provided general information about pedophilia.

Our first hypothesis was that participants in the neurological imbalance condition would have less negative attitudes toward the pedophile compared to those in the deviant choice condition. The second hypothesis was that the psychology students would have less negative attitudes toward the pedophile and would recommend treatment options that allow rehabilitation.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were recruited from psychology and criminal justice classes at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. One hundred twenty participants were selected, including 60 students in criminal justice and 60 in psychology. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 25. Over 90 percent of the participants were Caucasian. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. To avoid confounded data, double majors were not included in the sample.

**Materials**

Experimenters used three framing vignettes, a video clip of a pedophile’s testimony, and a questionnaire assessing attitudes toward the pedophile and treatment options. One vignette described pedophilia as a neurological disorder, one described it as a controllable act of deviant behavior, and the control vignette contained general information about pedophilia. The eight items from Batson et al. (1997), which assessed beliefs about, concern for, and feelings toward murderers, were modified slightly to fit the current project (e.g., “Pedophiles have no one to blame but themselves for their troubles”). A higher score indicated a more empathetic response. Four questions were also used from Becares and Turner (2004) which measured attribution of responsibility (e.g., “I believe this person’s present situation is a consequence of past behaviors,
therefore is somehow deserved”). A higher score indicated a greater attribution of responsibility. Seven additional author-written questions related to possible treatment options for the pedophile (e.g., “Pedophiles should not have any rehabilitation options”). A higher score indicated more negative attitudes toward treatment options for the pedophile. All questions were responded to on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

**Procedure**

After consenting to the experiment, participants were randomly administered one of the three frames. Experimenters ran all conditions simultaneously and collected data during class times or in small group settings. All conditions received background information about a specific pedophile’s case. Participants were then shown a short video of the pedophile’s testimony which included questioning by both the prosecutor and the defense attorney. Then participants were asked to complete the questionnaire regarding attitudes and treatment options. Lastly, the debriefing session was conducted which revealed the purpose of the study and informed all participants about the three conditions. Any questions were answered at this time and contacts for further psychological counseling were given, if necessary.

**Results**

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with type of frame, college major, and sex of participant as the independent variables and empathy, attribution of responsibility, and attitudes toward treatment options as the dependent variables. Multivariately, the main effects and interactions were not significant. This failed to support hypothesis 1, which predicted a main effect of frame on attitudes toward pedophiles ($F(6, 242) = 1.09, p = .37$, $\eta^2 = .03$).
While the multivariate tests were not significant, the decision was made to report the significant univariate results. The main effect of major on treatment options was significant \( (F(1, 122) = 4.88, p = .03, \eta^2 = .04) \). Criminal justice majors \( (M = 2.75, SD = .47) \) were more punitive than psychology majors \( (M = 2.55, SD = .56) \) and generally did not favor rehabilitation options; this pattern supported hypothesis 2. The interaction between major and experimental frame was also significant on treatment options \( (F(2, 122) = 3.57, p = .03, \eta^2 = .06) \). A univariate post hoc test indicated that criminal justice and psychology majors did not differ after reading the control scenario \( (F(1, 44) = .02, p = .90, \eta^2 < .01) \). A univariate post hoc test conducted on the behavioral frame was significant \( (F(1, 36) = 9.54, p < .01, \eta^2 = .21) \). Criminal justice majors were more punitive with treatment options than psychology majors. Lastly, the univariate post hoc test conducted for the neurological frame was not significant \( (F(1, 42) = 2.16, p = .15, \eta^2 = .05) \). Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for each frame and the interaction is depicted in Figure 1.

Although the independent variable of empathy was not significant in our analysis, it appears that participants generally had low levels of empathy toward the pedophile since all scores were below the midpoint of the questionnaire. The descriptive statistics reveal that criminal justice majors were less empathetic \( (M = 2.39, SD = .77) \) than psychology majors \( (M = 2.44, SD = .79) \). Participants in the behavioral choice condition were slightly less empathetic \( (M = 2.44, SD = .71) \) than those in the neurological condition \( (M = 2.50, SD = .73) \) and those in the control \( (M = 2.30, SD = .88) \). Lastly, there was not a drastic difference between men \( (M = 2.41, SD = .73) \) and women \( (M = 2.41, SD = .81) \) in regards to level of empathy.

Likewise, the analysis of attribution of responsibility on attitudes toward pedophiles was not significant. Descriptive statistics, however, reveal that participants generally attributed a high
level of responsibility to the pedophile since all scores were above the midpoint of the questionnaire. Furthermore, psychology majors ($M = 3.07$, $SD = .58$) attribute less responsibility toward the pedophile than criminal justice majors ($M = 3.20$, $SD = .54$). The level of responsibility attributed to the pedophile was similar in the three conditions with a mean of 3.15 and a standard deviation of .56. Lastly, males attributed slightly less responsibility to the pedophile ($M = 3.10$, $SD = .50$) than women ($M = 3.18$, $SD = .59$).

An exploratory factor analysis was also conducted to determine if our a priori grouping of questions into empathy, attribution of responsibility, and treatment attitudes would be supported. Five factors resulted which appeared to measure punishment options, rehabilitation options, level of empathy, attitudes toward prison effectiveness, and the pedophile’s mental defect. We repeated the MANOVA with type of frame, college major, and sex of participant as the independent variables and the five factors as dependent variables. Multivariately, the main effects and interactions were not significant. A univariate test was significant, showing an interaction between frame and major on Factor 1, which measured attitudes favoring punishment ($F(2, 122) = 3.73$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .06$). A univariate post hoc test indicated that criminal justice and psychology majors in the control group did not differ in attitudes favoring treatment options ($F(1, 44) = .07$, $p = .80$, $\eta^2 < .01$). A univariate post hoc test for the behavioral frame was not significant ($F(1, 36) = .04$, $p = .84$, $\eta^2 < .01$). A univariate post hoc test for the neurological frame was significant ($F(1, 42) = 11.00$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .21$), which indicated criminal justice majors favored punishment options more than psychology majors. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics for each condition and the interaction is depicted in Figure 2. Factor 2 related to rehabilitation options but was not univariately significant. Factor 3 assessed the level of empathy toward the pedophile but was not univariately significant. Factor 4 measured attitudes of prison
effectiveness but was not univariately significant. Factor 5 implied the pedophile had a defect and there was a significant effect of sex of participant ($F(1, 122) = 5.59, p = .02, \eta^2 = .04$). Women ($M = 2.89, SD = .88$) were more likely to view the pedophile as someone with either a mental or personality defect than men were ($M = 2.62, SD = .81$).

**Discussion**

Our main hypotheses predicted differences in attitudes toward pedophiles depending on the vignette participants read, as well as differences between psychology and criminal justice majors on measures of empathy, attribution of responsibility, and treatment options. While the first hypothesis was not supported by our findings, the second hypothesis was.

The present findings failed to support the idea that framing effects influence the conclusions drawn by participants about attitudes toward pedophiles. Our experiment did not demonstrate that participants in the neurological imbalance condition had less negative attitudes toward the pedophile compared to those in the deviant choice condition. Unlike the results obtained from Joslyn and Haider (2002), type of frame did not affect how participants organized information, responded to situations, or formed attitudes toward pedophiles. However, the experiment confirmed that the psychology students had less negative attitudes toward the pedophile in that they recommended treatment options that favored rehabilitation. *Post hoc* tests indicated that criminal justice majors were more punitive than psychology majors and generally did not favor rehabilitation options.

Similarly, after a factor analysis, a significant univariate *post hoc* test for the neurological frame indicated that criminal justice majors favored punishment options more than psychology majors. This further supported the findings by Becares and Turner (2004) who found that college major related to attitudes toward members of stigmatized groups. They speculated that this result
may reflect the differences in curriculum used for the specific majors or it may result from a predisposition that influences students’ vocational choices. Further studies can expand upon this finding to help identify the causal link between the factors.

Although our original analysis did not find significant results based on sex, the results from the factor analysis indicated that women were more likely to view the pedophile as someone with either a mental or personality defect than men. The striking difference between the original analysis and the factor analysis suggests that regrouping the questions uncovered the degree of severity in attitudes about punishment options for both majors. Apparently the original questionnaire did not effectively categorize questions together that measured similar variables; thus, the factor analysis produced different results.

Our results measuring empathy were not significant based on type of frame, sex of participant, or college major. It is possible that our a priori measure of empathy was flawed and we could use different questions that more effectively measure empathy. However, participants in both majors and in all frames had relatively low levels of empathy. It is possible that low scores on the empathy questionnaire were universal across all conditions because we chose a pedophile as the stigmatized individual. Pedophiles are often seen to be the lowest of the low among offenders, which may explain the more negative attitudes reported compared to the convicted murderer used by Batson et al. (1997). Thus, we cannot contribute the lack of significant findings solely to flawed methodology. Further examination of empathy could be conducted based on findings from Batson et al. since the question remains if higher levels of empathy in criminal justice and psychology students directly relate to more positive attitudes toward the pedophile. Perhaps a method more similar to that used by Batson et al. would yield more positive attitudes toward the pedophile. To modify our method, we would have to include a
means of inducing empathy in participants and examine the empathy-attitude effect assessed by Batson et al.

Our findings measuring attribution of responsibility were also not significant, indicating that type of frame, college major, and sex of participant did not influence the level of responsibility placed on the pedophile. Based on the Becares and Turner (2004) study, we predicted that participants in the neurological condition would attribute less responsibility to the pedophile compared to those in the behavioral choice condition. Perhaps the means and standard deviations for participants in all three frames were so similar because they believed the pedophile was responsible for his behavior, regardless of the condition in which they were placed. Becares and Turner discussed the just world hypothesis which indicates that people believe bad things happen to bad people. Applying this theory to our study, participants who viewed the pedophile as a bad person committing a deviant act were more likely favor consequences for his actions. Our experiment supported this idea because the criminal justice majors attributed more responsibility to the pedophile and also were more punitive in their sentencing decisions regardless of the frame they read. A future study that incorporates the just world hypothesis could expand our findings to assess if significant results can be attained regarding attribution of responsibility and its effects on attitudes toward treatment options.

Our findings suggest possible limitations in the use of vignettes to impact peoples’ opinions. The vignettes used in our study may not have adequately framed the desired conditions. Alternatively, the lack of significant results may be due to the fact that the issue of pedophilia is too serious, and participants have negative attitudes regardless of the frame they read. Since majors only differed on attitudes toward treatment options, it appears that, generally, the level of empathy for a pedophile is low and the level of attribution of responsibility is high.
The findings of this study are important because they provide insight for future research. Further studies are necessary to assess other influential factors that impact participants’ attitudes toward pedophiles. In additional studies, experimenters can use empathy and attribution of responsibility as independent variables and include attitude toward treatment options as the dependent variable. Basically, our experiment could be replicated, substituting a measure of empathy for the criminal justice and psychology students. This would answer several questions that emerged as we conducted our experiment. Also, a deeper understanding of these issues would help professionals develop treatment plans and policies related to convicted pedophiles. The criminal justice system can use future results to devise new sentencing options and allocate funding to effective treatment options.

**References**


Table 1

Interaction of Major and Frame on Treatment Attitudes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>Neurological</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Behavioral</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>0.41</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Neurological</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Behavioral</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Higher scores indicate attitudes favoring more punitive treatment options.
Table 2

Interaction of Major and Frame on Punishment (Factor 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>Neurological</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Behavioral</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>0.71</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Neurological</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Behavioral</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Higher scores indicate attitudes favoring more punitive treatment options.
Figure 1. Interaction of major and frame on treatment attitudes (higher is more punitive)
Figure 2. Interaction of major and frame on punishment factor (higher score is more punitive)