Relational Framing Theory and Coming-Out Narratives: A Data Analysis Activity

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Relational Framing Theory and Coming-Out Narratives: A Data Analysis Activity

Rose Helens-Hart

Courses: This single class activity would be most useful in interpersonal, family, gender/sexuality communication, or research methods courses. This activity facilitates better discussion in a small or seminar-style class with students who have had previous exposure to or who are in the process of learning about interpersonal communication theory or research methods.

Objectives: The goals for this activity are to (a) practice data analysis utilizing a specific theory, (b) identify the presence of relational frames and judgments to become more familiar with the interpersonal dimensions of coming-out interactions, (c) appreciate a multiplicity of data interpretations through the practice of group coding, and (d) practice evaluating the quality of data interpretations.

Introduction and Rationale

Relational framing theory (RFT) suggests that people make inferences about relationships by interpreting (framing) relational messages as indicators of either dominance–submissiveness or affiliation–disaffiliation. The dominance–submissiveness frames refer to the degree of influence between communicators, while the affiliation–disaffiliation frames refer to the degree of like, esteem, and or appreciation communicators have for one another (McLaren & Pederson, 2014; Solomon & McLaren, 2008). It considers what evaluations are made when people draw inferences about their relationships and how characteristics of the interaction context and cognitive process jointly contribute to relational judgments (Solomon & McLaren, 2008). In other words, people rely on cognitive structures (frames) to interpret relational communication (McLaren & Pederson, 2014). For example, imagine if a mother said to her daughter, “You look so pretty and professional today. I love that...”
skirt with those heels.” The daughter might frame the messages as a display of dominance where her mother was attempting to convince her to present herself in a more prototypically feminine way more often. The mother, however, might have understood her message as an attempt to flatter and compliment her daughter, not influence her. The extent to which relational partners perceive and apply similar or different frames will influence their understanding of relational communication (McLaren & Pederson, 2014). Contextual factors influence which frame will be activated and perceived in a given exchange. Social and cultural norms, individual predispositions, relationship history, function of the interaction, and episode message content all influence why certain frames are activated (Solomon, 2007; Solomon & McLaren, 2008).

Coming-out scenarios have been described as potentially traumatic events that change the parent–child relationship (MacDonald, 1983). Little research in the field of communication studies has been conducted on how the process of coming out unfolds within families (Valentine, Skelton, & Butler, 2003). This exercise encourages students potentially to pursue this line of research or seek new contexts in which RFT could provide important insights. Since coming-out scenarios often involve heightened emotions and signify a change in the parent–child relationship, they are ideally explored using RFT.

Frequent practice of data analysis can help students discover personal methodological preferences and identify educational and research goals. Students may be or become members of research teams, and thus working with others in a classroom setting can assist them in understanding the challenges and benefits of group analysis (Saldaña, 2012). The use of coming-out scenarios is important because it demonstrates that one does not need to consider oneself a critical scholar to study lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) experiences. Communication researchers have also called for greater attention to diverse populations, and frequently identify LGBTQ groups as underrepresented in research (Yep, 2003). This activity puts a common LGBTQ experience in the context of everyday coursework.

The Activity

After a review of the coding process, RFT, and the list of influences on frame activation (Saldaña, 2012, Solomon, 2007; Solomon & McLaren, 2008), groups of three to four students should be given a set of two to three coming-out stories. Stories should be gathered by the instructor who may utilize the Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) Story Center (PFLAG Story Center, 2013), personal stories from Your Teen Magazine (Coming out, 2012), or other sites that publish coming-out stories of parents and children. Story excerpts that attempt to describe emotional states, give some context or background to the parent–child relationship, and are no more than a few paragraphs are ideal, as it may be easier for students to identify frames, activation influences, and complete coding within a short period of time. Instructors may choose to code a set of stories in front of the class to demonstrate the process or provide an example of previously coded data.
The first step of this activity is for students to code their excerpts independently utilizing RFT to mark salient frames where they perceive them to be activated. If attempting to do the entire activity in a single class period, instructors should allow about 15 minutes for the individual coding step. If instructors anticipate that students need a longer period of time to do individual coding or are concerned with the time constraints of their class period, stories may be individually coded outside of class and then brought in for the group work component of this activity. Students should keep the following questions in mind as they code:

- Which relational frames are activated?
- What factors are potentially influencing frame activation?
- What might you conclude about when, why, and how the frames are activated in the stories?

Consider this excerpt from the PFLAG Story Center (2013):

My parents were raised strictly Baptist and were against homosexuality from the beginning. When I told my mom, we both cried for hours on end. We talked for a while and she told me that she would love me no matter what. She warned me about my father though. My dad was very strict and never changes his mind or opinion about anything! When I told him he said, "You can’t be gay! You play sports and you are very manly!"

A student might write (code) “affiliation” in the excerpt where the mother tells her son that she would love him no matter what. A “dominance” frame could be coded when the father tells his son that he “can’t be gay.” Influences on frame activation could also be coded in this excerpt where social and cultural norms of religion and gender are mentioned, as well as the individual predisposition of the father who will “never changes his mind.”

To encourage close readings of the excerpts, students should use single sentences as their units of analysis. As a group, students will share their coded excerpts and attempt to come to a consensus on their interpretations and answers to the questions above (Saldaña, 2012). After approximately 20 minutes of small group discussion, groups will read their excerpts aloud and discuss their findings with the rest of the class. To make presenting group results to the class easier, instructors may choose to provide the group with an additional copy of the stories so that they may code the excerpt again to reflect the results of their group discussion. To accompany the group presentations, the coded stories may then be shown to the whole class utilizing a document projector.

**Debriefing**

This activity helps students practice utilizing theory, in this case RFT, to analyze data. Many undergraduate students do not have data sets of their own or previous experience in analysis. This activity attempts to overcome some of these barriers that could prevent undergraduates from becoming interested in research. It provides students
with data and identifies alternative sources from which data can be obtained. In addition, it gives them an opportunity to familiarize themselves with a popular interpersonal communication theory and an area of sexuality and family communication research. Finally, it introduces them to the tensions and benefits of group coding (Saldaña, 2012). Students may experience a high degree of consensus that should be questioned or their discussion may be fraught with disagreement emerging from different interpretations.

Debriefing questions that begin conversations on RFT, data analysis, and coming out include:

- What was challenging about your individual and group analysis?
- How did your codes change as you moved from individual to group coding?
- How useful is RFT for analyzing these excerpts?
- What potential is there for RFT to enhance our understanding of coming-out interactions?

**Appraisal**

Discussion of the activity can confront stereotypes of LGBTQ individuals and how families interact in coming-out scenarios. Instructors should feel comfortable talking about sensitive topics in class and set clear guidelines for inclusive and nondiscriminatory language and behaviors before students engage in group discussion. The challenge students will face coming to consensus on when, where, and how particular frames are activated highlights the systematic rigor needed to conduct group analysis (Saldaña, 2012). Students often comment on the complexity and ambiguity of excerpts in that they may identify multiple frames and influences on their activation in a single sentence. Faced with not having one “right” answer, they must practice articulating why certain interpretations should be preferred over others and or why multiple and conflicting interpretations are valuable to the analysis process. Talking about how to manage ambiguity and the interpretive nature of coding cognitively may alleviate some of the stress that students experience. Instructors should familiarize themselves with excerpts, perhaps coding all of them before class, to be able to comment on and challenge student work better and to field questions during small group discussion.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**References and Suggested Readings**


PFLAG Story Center. (2013). You can't be gay! You play sports and you are very manly!. Retrieved from http://community.pflag.org/page.aspx?pid=531


