

Primary and Secondary Reframing

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Abstract: Don Schön and I explored primary reframing in our 1994 book *Frame Reflection*. Primary reframing is an attempt to shift the paradigm of a problem so that it can resolve an intractable policy controversy. The approach is an open, deliberative process grounded in argument, evidence, and policy debate where participants can critically reflect and reappraise their initial framing of the issue. Secondary reframing is a phenomenon whereby activities in one policy domain are offloaded to another domain; a process, which, by definition, reframes the original mission of that domain, committed to the realisation of its goals with the terms, set by the logic of its domain. The underlying process is not about debate; it arises from the dilemmas of practice, governed by the pragmatic attempts to make the general policy happen in the real world of people's behaviour and organisational performances. Conviction is replaced by practicality. Two concrete examples of offloading in the domain of mental health in the United States and unemployment in Europe illustrate secondary reframing and the processes that produce it. A third example from the public child welfare field is summarised to illustrate the problem of domain failure, which might, in principle, contribute to domain drift. Idealised norms can also contribute to domain failure. But the child welfare field does not provide clear evidence that the failure leads to domain offloading into the criminal justice domain. How then are primary and secondary reframing linked? A historical dialectic process best describes the link. A published case study of French unemployment is developed as a good example of the resolution of an intractable controversy by primary reframing leading to a new convention for dealing with unemployment. Movement from doubt and uncertainty at the turn of the last century led gradually to moments of mobilisation where a new economic convention for dealing with full unemployment emerged. However, secondary reframing emerged later as government and private enterprise offloaded unemployment to the disability and retirement domains in the new context of growing unemployment. A sense of the weakness of this form of secondary reframing became clear and government then responded by trying to stop the process of domain shifting. In return, firms responded to the public response. Eventually, new primary reframing might emerge as the concept of full employment is reassessed in a new historical context.
