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Framing Persuasive Appeals: Episodic and Thematic Framing, Emotional Response, and Policy Opinion

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Those seeking to frame political issues to their advantage recognize the power of emotional appeals. Yet the study of framing has focused mainly on the cognitive effects of framing rather than on its emotional effects. This study presents the results of two experiments designed to explore the effect of episodic and thematic framing on emotional response and policy opinion. Participants were randomly assigned to read a column arguing against mandatory minimum sentencing that employed either a thematic or one of two episodic frames featuring a woman who received a harsh sentence under the policy. Episodic framing was more emotionally engaging. Furthermore, the specific emotions elicited by the episodic frame—sympathy and pity for the woman featured in the column—were associated with increased opposition to mandatory minimum sentencing. Yet the thematic frame was actually more persuasive once this indirect effect of frame on emotional response was taken into account. The results are consistent with the conclusion that framing effects on policy opinion operate through both affective and cognitive channels. The theoretical and practical implications of the study are discussed.

KEY WORDS: Episodic Framing, Emotion, Mandatory Minimum Sentencing

Conventional wisdom tells us that emotional appeals matter. Those seeking to influence opinion and frame political issues to their advantage certainly seem to believe that appeals to emotion aid them in their attempts to gain public support. Moreover, a growing body of research demonstrates that emotion can play a crucial role in how citizens process political information and arrive at political judgments. Yet we know little about the possible effects of framing attempts on emotional response because the framing literature, with a few exceptions, has focused on cognitive reactions. This study extends Iyengar's (1991) work to examine how the use of episodic and thematic framing in a persuasive message affects emotional response and how these emotional reactions might

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help us to understand the link between these frames and policy views. It also focuses on emotions—sympathy and pity—that have received less attention in the political science literature. In doing this, the study not only increases our understanding of the dynamics of framing, but also contributes to a growing body of work that seeks to understand the role of emotion in political communication.

Framing and Emotion

According to Gamson and Modigliani (1987) a frame is "a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events weaving a connection among them. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue" (p. 143). The key premise of the framing literature is that frames will, by highlighting certain aspects of an event or policy, guide audience members' thoughts about that event or issue in predictable ways, to predictable conclusions. Numerous studies have shown that the particular frame imposed on an issue or event can shape opinion on related policies (e.g., Druckman 2001; Jacoby, 2000; Kinder & Sanders, 1990; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997; Sniderman & Theriault, 2004).

Clearly, partisans try to tap the power of emotion when developing their frames. This makes the relative lack of attention to emotion in the framing literature surprising. There are, of course, exceptions. Kinder and Sanders (1990) showed that affirmative action framed as unfair advantage invoked indignation in a way that affirmative action framed as reverse discrimination did not. Negative emotions—anger, disgust, and fury—were associated more sharply with opinion on affirmative action under the unfair advantage frame. Masters and Sullivan (1993) reported the results of an experiment suggesting that people's emotional reactions toward leaders were shaped by news commentators' judgments and interpretations. Gross and D'Ambrosio (2004) found that frames alter the explanations citizens gave for their emotional response and that frames alter the relationship between emotional response and predispositions. Other work suggests that the persuasive effect of a frame depends on emotional reactions to that frame (Brewer 2001; Nabi 1998). These studies, consistent with the argument presented in this study, show that emotional response may be contingent upon how an issue is framed and that these emotional responses may mediate the effect of frames on opinion.

These studies focus on frames that are specific to an issue or context. Other types of frames might be thought of as more general rhetorical devices—ways of telling a story to make it more understandable, accessible, and compelling to the audience. Such frames can be employed across a range of issues. In this study, I focused on one of these more general rhetorical devices—episodic and thematic framing.

Episodic and Thematic Framing

Episodic frames present an issue by offering a specific example, case study, or event oriented report (e.g., covering unemployment by presenting a story on the plight of a particular unemployed person). Thematic frames, on the other hand, place issues into a broader context (e.g., covering unemployment by reporting on the latest unemployment figures and offering commentary by economists or public officials on the impact of the economy on unemployment).

For journalists, these frames may be employed in coverage of any number of issues. They are ways of telling the story that make it understandable and accessible to readers. Journalists often use episodic frames because they believe them to be more compelling and more likely to draw the reader or viewer into the story. Put another way, episodic frames are thought to be more emotionally engaging. Partisans also use what might be considered episodic frames for much the same reason. Advocates frequently highlight a particular individual's story as illustrative of a broader issue or problem as a compelling way to make their case. They select a particular example in order to maximize the persuasive appeal of their claim. Consider, for example, President Ronald Reagan's use of the "welfare queen" anecdote in the 1976 presidential campaign. This story of a woman who defrauded the system was seemingly selected (and embellished) because it provoked anger that reinforced opposition to the program and support for the candidate who would change it.

Prior research on episodic and thematic frames has mostly focused on their use in news coverage and has failed to explore the role of emotion. In his book, *Is Anyone Responsible?*, Iyengar (1991) examined the effects of episodic and thematic framing in television news. He argued that the prevalence of episodic framing in political news coverage diverts attention from societal responsibility and leads people to hold individuals responsible for their own predicaments, thereby dampening support for government programs designed to address problems and shielding leaders from responsibility. Episodic framing also encourages a "morselized" understanding of political problems by presenting recurring problems as discrete instances (Iyengar, 1991, 136). Citizens exposed to a steady stream of episodic frames fail to see the connections between problems such as poverty, racial discrimination, and crime when they are presented as discrete and unconnected.

His expectations that episodic coverage leads to individualistic attributions while thematic coverage engenders societal attributions were borne out in various experiments. In the face of episodic frames, individuals were more likely to offer individualistic attributions; in the face of thematic frames, they offered more societal attributions. Iyengar also demonstrated that causal attributions were associated with views on policy in systematic ways. For example, people who attribute causal responsibility for poverty to societal factors were particularly likely to support social welfare spending increases. Iyengar did not,

however, directly test the effects of episodic and thematic frames on emotional response. Nor did he investigate the role that emotion plays in determining the effect of these frames on attributions or policy views. In addition, he examined news coverage, not persuasive political communication. In this research, I examine the role episodic frames and thematic frames play in enhancing the role of a persuasive appeal and the role emotion plays in explaining these effects.

The Effect of Episodic Frames on Emotion

The general claim that framing should affect emotional response follows from appraisal theories of emotion. This approach posits that people experience emotion as a product of their cognitive appraisals of an event or phenomenon (e.g., Ellsworth, 1991; Lazarus, 1991; Ortony, Clore, & Collins 1988; Roseman, 1991). Appraisal theory focuses mainly on the patterns of appraisal that elicit specific emotions and the ways in which individual and situational factors interact to produce different emotional responses. If frames alter the information and considerations subjects have at hand, cognitive appraisal models would predict that emotional outputs should differ.

More specifically, in the case of episodic and thematic framing, I expect episodic frames to generate stronger emotional responses than thematic frames. The "human interest" details of an episodic frame should be more emotionally engaging than the pallid statistics of a thematic frame. After all, the emotional power of episodic framing to engage the audience is probably one of its strongest appeals. While episodic frames should elicit more emotions in general, the nature of emotional response (i.e., the specific emotions elicited) would depend on the content of a given frame. Thus, one must consider the details of the particular story used in an episodic frame to generate predictions about specific emotions.

In this study, I presented individuals with an opinion column arguing against mandatory minimum sentencing for drug offenses. In constructing my episodic frames, I featured a woman with no prior record who was sentenced to nearly 25 years in prison for conspiring to help the drug-dealing boyfriend who abused her. The column recognized she broke the law but suggested that the sentence was excessive given the extenuating circumstances. Though the name of the defendant and some details were changed, I based her on a real case; a case that received considerable attention in the press and was frequently cited in news reports and by advocates as illustrating the problems with mandatory minimum sentences. Given the particular details of this column, I expected the episodic frames to generate expressions of sympathy and pity in particular. Had I presented a column in favor of mandatory minimum sentencing featuring a repeat offender, I would expect different emotions (anger and perhaps anxiety) to dominate.

Using Episodic and Thematic Frames in Persuasive Appeals: Will Episodic Frames Enhance Persuasive Appeals?

Whether the use of episodic framing would enhance or diminish the effect of a persuasive appeal relative to a thematic frame is somewhat less clear from prior literature. Prior research, from a cognitive perspective, suggests two contradictory expectations for whether episodic or thematic framing of the column should produce greater opposition to mandatory minimums. Some psychologists have hypothesized that vivid information should be more persuasive than information presented in a dispassionate manner because it should be more memorable, receive greater attention, and be more easily brought to mind. This is likely the conventional wisdom among those using a vivid case (e.g., an episodic frame) to illustrate a claim. According to this line of reasoning, one might expect the episodic frame to produce greater opposition to mandatory minimum sentencing than the thematic frame because the arguments will be better remembered. Though this common wisdom is appealing, Fiske and Taylor (1991) argue there is little empirical evidence supporting the vividness hypothesis with one exception of relevance here: Individual case histories are more persuasive than group statistics (but see Allen & Preiss, 1997).

In contrast, there is strong evidence to suggest that episodic frames may actually be less persuasive in a context such as the one at issue in this study. As noted above, Iyengar (1991) found that episodic frames produced individual attributions for political problems and thematic frames produced societal attributions for political problems. Societal attributions of responsibility led people to offer greater support for government programs to solve political problems and to hold political leaders responsible. Episodic framing of political problems diverts attention from societal responsibility and leads people to hold individuals responsible for their own situation, thereby diminishing support for government programs designed to address the problem. According to this line of reasoning, one might expect that those in the episodic framing conditions would see the woman featured in the episodic column as responsible for her predicament, rendering the persuasive effect of the episodic frames weaker than that of the thematic frame.

None of these claims, however, take account of the potential role of the emotions elicited by these framing devices in facilitating persuasion. Iyengar's work suggests that the effect of these frames operates at a cognitive level. I argue that if my expectation of distinct emotional reactions between episodic and thematic frames holds, the effect of frames on policy views may *also* operate at least partly via these affective responses. A considerable body of research in political science has found that emotional reactions shape political judgments and that their effects vary in sensible ways (e.g., Abelson, Kinder, Peters, & Fiske, 1982; Brader, 2005, 2006; Conover & Feldman, 1986; Huddy, Feldman, Taber, & Lahev, 2005; Kinder, 1994; Marcus & MacKuen, 1993; Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000). Although these authors employ different theoretical perspectives on emotion, taken together their work shows that emotional response can influence opinion. Assuming that

frames do alter emotional response, prior work on emotion and opinion would suggest that differences in opinion following exposure to episodic or thematic frames might be the result of the different emotional reactions they generate.

Schwarz (2000) suggests that emotional reactions themselves serve as a basis for judgment. This affect-as-information approach suggests that people rely on their feelings to make judgments as long as the feelings are perceived as relevant to the judgment at hand (Schwarz, 1990; Schwarz & Clore, 1983). Put another way, the emotions themselves are considerations used in coming to an opinion. Schwartz's work explores this in the context of mood; however, I follow Lerner and Keltner's (2000) argument that these influences should be emotion specific (see also Kinder, 1994). This suggests that the persuasive effect of any frame could depend on the specific emotion elicited by the frame. For example, sympathy for those who are sentenced to what may be seen as unduly harsh punishment under mandatory minimums would be expected to foster opposition to the policy whereas anger at those who commit drug offences might foster support for the policy. Because I expected the episodic frames employed in this study to generate sympathy and pity for someone who received an unduly harsh sentence, I expected the episodic frames to be associated with increased opposition to mandatory minimum sentencing.

Finally, I was interested in whether the race of the individual used in the episodic frame would alter the impact of that frame given that previous research has sometimes found evidence for differences in the effects of episodic (vivid) presentations based on the race of the individual featured (e.g., Iyengar & Kinder 1987). These differences could be the result of differences in emotional or cognitive responses to the individual featured. Iyengar's own experiments suggest that qualities of the particular individual highlighted in an episodic story may play a role in determining the effect of episodic framing. In the case of crime, which is of special relevance here, he found significant differences across episodic frames featuring white violent crime and episodic frames featuring black violent crime. Audience members cited societal causal attributions more frequently when coverage focused on white violent crime and less frequently when coverage focused on black violent crime; news about black crime also enhanced attributions directed at individuals (see also Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000). I included a race manipulation in the episodically framed column in this study to determine if respondents would express less sympathy and pity and to determine if the direct effects of the episodic frame would differ when the column featured a black individual.

Method

Design

To explore how episodic and thematic frames affect emotional response and policy views, I conducted two laboratory experiments with students at a private

mid-Atlantic university. The experiments varied the presentation of an opinion column arguing against mandatory minimum sentences for drug offenses. Specifically, I created three versions of the opinion column using information and quotations that appeared in newspaper coverage and editorials dealing with this issue: a thematic column, an episodic column featuring an African-American woman, and an episodic column featuring a white woman. These treatment articles were used in both experiments, though the procedure and the variables measured in each experiment differed somewhat (e.g., the first experiment included a control condition; the second experiment included additional emotions measures as detailed below).

The thematically framed column presented the case against mandatory minimum sentences by providing details on the sentencing guidelines, the exploding prison population, and the high costs of incarceration. This column also included quotations from an interest group representative and a Supreme Court justice opposing the policy. Both episodic frames used the story of a particular individual—"Janet Smith," a woman sentenced under the federal drug-sentencing laws for conspiring to help her drug-dealing boyfriend—to illustrate the case against mandatory minimum sentences. The column observed that she broke a number of laws and was "no angel" but argued that her sentence was "disproportionately harsh for a woman with no prior criminal history, who had arguable extenuating circumstances mitigating the severity of her conduct and who had never actually handled drugs." After featuring her story, the episodically framed columns included the same quotations from the interest group representative and Supreme Court justice. To assess whether the race of the individual featured in the episodic frame would matter there were two versions of this treatment. In one "Janet Smith" was white, in the other she was black. See Appendix A for the text of the treatment articles.

Procedure

I conducted the first experiment in the fall of 2001. Participants completed a pretest that measured opinion on mandatory minimum sentencing and a host of other policy and demographic variables. After a minimum of two weeks—an interval intended to minimize contamination by the pretest questions—each participant was randomly assigned to read one of the three mandatory minimum columns or a story on DC voting rights (the control condition). To prevent undue attention to the crime story, all participants also read two unrelated articles. They then completed a posttest questionnaire designed to measure views on mandatory minimum sentencing, opinions on a variety of other public policies, and emotional reactions to the articles. Specifically, I asked if they felt anger, disgust, sympathy, or pity while reading the article. These emotions—emotions that suggest empathy and aversion—were selected because I anticipated they were the emotions most likely to be evoked by the details of the columns.

The second experiment, administered during the fall of 2002, was designed to further explore the role of emotion by including additional emotions and by including questions designed to assess respondents' explanations for their emotional reactions. Participants read one of the same three columns dealing with mandatory minimum sentencing along with a filler story and then completed a posttest questionnaire designed to measure views on mandatory minimum sentencing, emotional reactions, and demographics. This experiment did not include a control condition or feature a pretest as in Experiment 1. It did feature two emotions assessing anxiety (fear and worry) that were not included in the first experiment. The measure of emotional response also differed between the two experiments. In the second experiment I asked participants whether they felt the emotion (binary variable) and, for those who said they felt an emotion, I used a follow-up question asking about strength of that emotional response. This experiment also included open-ended questions that asked about the object or impetus for a particular emotional response as well as questions developed by Wolski and Nabi (2000) to assess respondents' perceptions of their attention to, interest in, and objectivity toward the article. See Appendix B for more detail on these measures.

Sample

A total of 163 participants completed the first experiment. Fifty-two percent were women; 84% were white. Forty-seven percent of the sample identified as Democrats, 14% were Republicans, and 39% were Independents (58% of the Independents lean Democratic, and 16% lean Republican). A total of 105 participants completed the second experiment. Sixty-three percent were women, and 84% percent were white. Forty-seven percent of participants identified as Democrats, 13% identified as Republicans, and 40% identified as Independents (62% of Independents lean Democratic; 26% of Independents lean Republican). The use of student samples necessitates caution in generalizing from the results (Sears, 1986), a point I return to in the discussion.

In keeping with the democratic orientation of the samples, participants in both experiments tended to be fairly supportive of equality (mean .70, standard deviation .19 on the 6-item American National Election Study (ANES) equality scale in experiment 1; mean .70, standard deviation .21 in experiment 2) and less supportive of limited government (mean .39, standard deviation .22 on the three item ANES limited government scale in experiment 1; mean .31, standard deviation .37 in experiment 2). Participants in the second experiment were also less racially resentful (mean .36, standard deviation .25 on a 2-item racial resentment scale—there was no measure of resentment in the first experiment). I found no evidence of systematic differences across conditions on a variety of background measures for either of the two experiments.

Table 1. Emotional Response by Frame

Emotion	Episodic Frame White Individual	Episodic Frame Black Individual	Thematic Frame
	Experiment 1		
Sympathy	.61 (.28)***	.66 (.23)***	.43 (.29)
Pity	.53 (.30)***	.56 (.30)***	.33 (.28)
Anger	.53 (.36)*	.59 (.30)***	.39 (.34)
Disgust	.51 (.37)	.54 (.34)*	.40 (.34)
Aversion Scale	.52 (.35)*	.57 (.28)**	.39 (.31)
Empathy Scale	.57 (.28)***	.61 (.24)***	.38 (.26)
	N = 38	N = 40	N = 41
	Experiment 2		
Sympathy	.41 (.33)***	.52 (.28)***	.18 (.27)
Pity	.31 (.29)**	.37 (.31)***	.13 (.26)
Anger	.25 (.25)	.24 (.29)	.29 (.29)
Disgust	.31 (.31)	.33 (.31)	.28 (.31)
Worry	.16 (.28)	.10 (.24)	.20 (.29)
Fear	.09 (.25)	.04 (.14)	.07 (.19)
Aversion Scale	.28 (.25)	.29 (.26)	.28 (.27)
Empathy Scale	.36 (.26)***	.44 (.26)***	.16 (.19)
Anxiety Scale	.13 (.25)	.07 (.16)	.14 (.22)
	N = 31	N = 36	N = 38

Note. Table entry is mean emotional response by frame with standard deviation in parentheses. Emotional reactions are coded to range between 0 and 1. Asterisks indicate that the episodic framing condition differs significantly from the thematic framing condition (t-test on means): ***p < .01. **p < .05. *p < .10.

Results

Framing Effects on Emotional Response

I found support for the claim that episodic framing alters emotional response relative to a thematic article on the same topic. Table 1 presents mean emotional reaction by frame condition with standard deviation in parentheses. The emotional reaction variables were recoded to range between 0 and 1, where 1 signals stronger emotional response.[1] The table reports emotional reactions for individual emotions as well as scales for empathy (sympathy and pity combined), aversion (anger and disgust combined), and anxiety (fear and worry combined).

Those who read a column that featured an episodic frame were significantly more likely to express sympathy and pity in both experiments. Moreover, this was

[1] Emotional response was measured slightly differently in the two experiments, which results in differences in the reported level of emotional reaction between the two experiments. I am interested in the pattern of means across experimental conditions, not the differences between the two experiments. See Appendix B.

true whether Janet Smith was described as a black mother or a white mother. In the first experiment, those who read one of the episodically framed columns were also more likely than those in the thematic condition to report feeling angry. In addition, those in the episodic condition featuring the black mother were significantly more likely to report feeling disgust. However, these findings for anger and disgust were not replicated in the second experiment.[2]

In short, as I expected, the episodic frames seemed to have a greater emotional impact on the reader than the thematic frame. Given the nature of this particular treatment, it was not surprising that the effects found were mainly centered on empathetic emotions—pity and sympathy. The goal of the columnist in this case would be to use the story of Janet Smith to generate sympathy and pity that would translate into reduced support for mandatory minimum sentences. The results in Table 1 suggest that the first step was successful—the episodic frames generated increased expressions of sympathy and pity (empathetic emotions). Moreover, this increased empathy was not specific to the race of the individual portrayed. There were no differences across the two episodic frames on any of the emotions examined. The differences in emotional reactions were driven by the difference between the use of thematic and episodic storytelling.

Framing Effects on Opinion about Mandatory Minimum Sentencing

Next, I explored the effect of these different frames on the persuasive appeal of the column by examining views about mandatory minimum sentencing. All participants were asked "Do you favor or oppose mandatory minimum sentences for first or second time nonviolent drug offenses?" Responses to this question were coded to range between 0 and 1 where 1 represents those who strongly oppose mandatory minimum sentencing.[3] Table 2 presents mean opinion on mandatory minimum sentencing by framing condition for each experiment and opinion change by framing condition for the first experiment.

The argument developed above, in combination with the results of the analysis of framing effects on emotion, leaves me with no clear expectation about which frames will be more persuasive. If emotional reactions influence judgments, the sympathy and pity aroused by the episodic frames should lead to increased opposition to mandatory minimum sentencing relative to the thematic frame. Yet Iyengar's work suggests reasons that the episodic frames may not, in fact, be as persuasive as the thematic frame.

[2] All framing results hold when I estimate the effect of frame, controlling for gender, ideology, support for equality, support for limited government, and party identification (and in the second experiment racial resentment).

[3] In keeping with the liberal orientation of the student samples, participants on the whole opposed mandatory minimum sentences as evidenced by the high mean in the control condition (first experiment).

Table 2. Opposition to Mandatory Minimum Sentencing by Framing Condition

Episodic Frame White Individual	Episodic Frame Black Individual	Thematic Frame	Control Condition
	Experiment 1: Post test Opinion		
.72 (.24)	.64 (.29)	.75 (.27)**	.64 (.31)
N = 37	N = 39	N = 40	N = 42
	Experiment 1: Change in Opinion Pretest to Posttest		
.10 (.24)**	.03 (.29)	.14 (.35)***	.00 (.24)
N = 37	N = 39	N = 40	N = 41
	Experiment 2: Post test Opinion		
.67 (.25)	.61 (.28)	.70 (.26)	
N = 29	N = 36	N = 37	

Note. Table entries are mean opinion on mandatory minimum sentencing with standard deviation in parentheses. Opinion on mandatory minimum sentencing is coded to range between 0 to 1 where 1 represents those who strongly oppose mandatory minimum sentences for first time drug offenders. Change in opinion on mandatory minimum sentencing is coded so that positive numbers represented increased opposition between the pretest and posttest.
Asterisks indicate that a t-test on means shows framed condition differs significantly from control condition, **$p < .05$, ***$p < .01$ (one tail test).

The results of the first experiment, which included a control condition and pretest measure of opinion on mandatory minimum sentencing, suggest that the thematically framed column was most persuasive while the column featuring the story of a black Janet Smith did little to move opinion. I found significant differences in opinion change across experimental conditions. Those in the thematic frame condition and in the episodic frame condition featuring a white defendant exhibited significantly greater mean opinion change (e.g., they became significantly more opposed) than those in the control condition. By contrast, those who read the column featuring a black defendant were indistinguishable from the control group. This contrast is striking given that the race manipulation in the study was subtle: the conditions vary a single word within a 555-word column.

The pattern of means across framing conditions suggests a similar interpretation. In the first experiment, the difference between the control and thematic conditions was significant ($p < .05$, one-tail test). The difference between the episodic black and thematic condition was also significant at $p < .10$ (two-tail test).[4] The pattern looks similar in the second experiment—those who read about Janet Smith, the black mother, were least opposed to mandatory minimum sentencing, and those who read the thematic version were most opposed. However,

[4] Given the persuasive intent of the column, one-tail tests were appropriate when examining the framed conditions relative to the control condition while two-tail tests of significance were appropriate when examining differences between the differently framed columns (I did not have clear expectations regarding which frames would be more effective).

differences among the frames were not significant. Here, in contrast to the pattern for emotional response, the pattern for opinion on mandatory minimum sentencing suggests that the race of the individual used in the episodic frame did matter.

How Episodic Framing Effects Work: Affective and Cognitive Influences on Policy Views

The results in Table 1 show that episodic framing conditions invoked sympathy and pity to a greater degree than the thematic framing condition in both experiments. Given the persuasive intent of the column and the nature of the individual's story, this would lead one to expect the episodic framing conditions to be associated with greater opposition to mandatory minimum sentencing if emotional response (sympathy and pity in this case) influences policy views. Yet I found a pattern that suggests the opposite when I examined the direct effect of frames on policy attitudes. Those who read the thematic frame expressed greater opposition (Table 2). One possible explanation for these seemingly contradictory findings is that participants' sympathetic responses were not targeted in a way that would encourage opposition to mandatory minimum sentencing. For example, sympathy and pity for those hurt by Smith's actions in helping her boyfriend might not lead to greater opposition to mandatory minimums, though sympathy and pity for Smith herself might be expected to do this. Put another way, perhaps I had been assuming something about the nature of the empathy response that was untrue. The second experiment allowed me to explore this possibility by examining the questions which asked participants to explain their emotional reactions.

When I examined these open-ended responses, I found nothing to suggest that the episodic frames induced emotional reactions targeted in ways that might have encouraged support for, rather than opposition to, mandatory minimum sentencing. Sympathy and pity centered either on sympathy and pity for Janet Smith herself (e.g., the participant mentioned Smith in the open-ended response) or on sympathy and pity for "people" who were given what the participants saw as unfair and long sentences under the mandatory minimum guidelines.[5] Furthermore, no differences were found in the nature of the responses between the two episodic frame conditions that might account for differences in views on mandatory minimum sentencing. The two episodic conditions were equally likely to elicit expressions of sympathy and pity targeted at Smith individually. Thus, any differ-

[5] Not surprisingly, participants in the thematic frame condition had more expressions of sympathy directed at people generally, whereas those in the episodic frame conditions directed their sympathy to Smith. This seemed to be an informational effect, not a framing effect. I found no difference in the nature of sympathy responses across experimental groups after merging these categories (thinking about them as expression of sympathy for those receiving unfair sentences). The content of anger and disgust responses did not suggest that the experience of these emotions should be associated with decreased opposition to mandatory minimum sentences and thus would explain the pattern of support shown in Table 2. More detail on the content of the open-ended responses is available from the author.

ences in policy attitudes between the two episodic conditions cannot be explained by differences in the nature of the emotional response when faced with the story of a white mother versus a black mother.

There are two other possible explanations for the pattern of opinion across experimental conditions. Emotional response may be epiphenomenal; the emotional reactions generated by the episodic frames may not translate into effects on policy views as hypothesized. Alternatively, the effect of the frames may operate along both cognitive and affective tracks but in distinct ways. In addition to direct effects, frames may have had indirect effects on policy views through their effects on emotional response. In other words, emotional response may mediate the relationship between frames and policy views but it may not completely mediate the relationship.

In order to assess if and how frames and emotion together affect opinion on mandatory minimum sentencing, I estimated two ordered probit equations for each experiment. The first included only dummy variables for each of the episodic frame conditions (the thematic frame condition was the excluded category) to replicate the results in Table 2. The second included dummy variables for the episodic frame conditions and my combined measures of strength of emotional response. These results are presented in Table 3.[6]

Those who expressed empathy were significantly more opposed to mandatory minimum sentencing than those who did not, as one would expect given that sympathy and pity were targeted at the plight of Smith and others who might receive such sentences. Moreover, once I accounted for the effects of emotional response in determining opinion, I found that those in the episodic frame conditions were actually significantly less opposed to mandatory minimum sentencing than those in the thematic frame condition. This was particularly so in the case of those who read the episodic frame in which Janet Smith was described as a black mother.

The results suggest emotion was not epiphenomenal but neither did it carry the full effect of the frames. In these experiments, the partial effect (controlling for emotional response) of the episodic frame conditions was to lessen the persuasive effect of the column relative to the thematic frame. In other words, the episodic frames were less likely to produce opposition to mandatory minimum sentencing. However, episodic frames also produced greater empathy (Table 1) and that empathy was associated with greater opposition to mandatory minimum sentencing (Table 3). These results suggest that the effect of these frames may operate along two separate tracks—cognitive and affective.

[6] Because the patterns of emotional response across framing conditions were similar for related emotions (e.g., sympathy and pity, see Table 1) and the correlations between related emotions were high, I used the combined emotion variables (empathy, aversion, and anxiety scales) in these models. When I estimated the models using the individual emotion questions, I found significant effects for sympathy, pity, and anger in the first experiment. In the second experiment, I found significant effects for pity and worry (the effect for sympathy was significant at the $p = .10$ level).

Table 3. How Emotional Response and Frame Condition Effect Views on Mandatory Minimum Sentencing

	Experiment 1		Experiment 2	
Frame				
Episodic Frame with Black Individual	−.45 (.24)*	−1.10 (.28)***	−.35 (.25)	−.94 (.31)***
Episodic Frame with White Individual	−.17 (.25)	−.60 (.27)**	−.13 (.26)	−.45 (.29)
Emotion				
Empathy Scale (sympathy & pity)		1.28 (.48)***		1.77 (.51)***
Aversion Scale (anger & disgust)		1.43 (.41)***		.75 (.46)
Anxiety Scale (worry and fear)				−.92 (.56)
Cut1	−2.18	−1.48	−1.95	−1.73
Cut2	−1.27	−.52	−1.18	−.92
Cut3	−.66	.21	−.54	−.24
Cut4	.30	1.42	.70	1.15
Pseudo R2	.01	.13	.01	.07
N	116	116	102	101

Note. Table entries are ordered probit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Opinion on mandatory minimum sentencing is coded to range from 0 to 1 where 1 represents those who strongly oppose mandatory minimum sentences for first time drug offenders. The thematic frame is the excluded category.
*p < .10, **p < .05, ***p < .01.

The indirect effect of the frame via emotional response suppressed the direct effect of the frame. Sobel tests for mediation suggest that these indirect effects of the episodic frames on opinion were significant. I separately compared the effect of the episodic frame featuring a white individual to the thematic frame and the effect of the episodic frame featuring a black individual to the thematic frame. In both experiments, the indirect effect of the episodic frames through empathy was significantly different from zero. The effect on opposition to mandatory minimum sentencing of the episodic frame with a white defendant was mediated by empathy ($z = 2.68$, $p < .01$ for experiment 1; $z = 2.56$, $p < .05$ for experiment 2). Empathy also mediated the effect of the episodic black frame ($z = 2.91$, $p < .01$ for experiment 1; 2.19, $p < .05$ for experiment 2).[7] Traditionally, tests for mediation following Baron and Kenny (1986) require that the independent variable significantly affects the mediator. Table 1 demonstrated that the use of the story of a particular individual harmed by the policy did influence emotional response, specifically empathy. It also requires, as a first step, estimating the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable to show that there is something to be mediated. Shrout and Bolger (2002) suggest this is not required when suppression is present as is the case here.

Why might the direct effect of the episodic frame conditions dampen the persuasive effect of the column? Iyengar's work suggests one reason why the

[7] In the first experiment, the expression of aversion also varied by frame and I found aversion did mediate the effect of the episodic black frame ($z = 2.08$, $p < .05$).

episodic frames may not produce as much opposition as thematic frames. By centering attention on Janet Smith, these frames generate sympathy but they may also encourage individualistic attributions and less willingness to see a need for policy change. Furthermore, this was a conditional effect once I took account of emotional response. Thus, my results suggest that episodic and thematic frames can exert influence on policy views through their effect on emotions in ways that may not necessarily reinforce the influence through attribution.

An alternative possibility is that episodic frames are less persuasive than the thematic frame because the arguments are processed with less depth. Although I cannot directly test this interpretation, the second experiment did include a series of questions asking participants to assess their attention to, interest in, and impartiality toward the article. I found those who read the column featuring the story of Janet Smith reported greater attention (depth scale $F = 3.89$, $p < .05$) and less distraction (ability scale $F = 5.97$, $p < .01$), though no differences were found in reported interest. This pattern across frames indicates that the more emotionally engaging episodic frames draw the reader in, generating greater attention, not less. This is consistent with work in psychology that argues people pay more attention to personalized case history information (Nisbett & Ross, 1980) and appears to be at odds with the possibility that the arguments are processed with less depth. Yet, I have no way of knowing if this attention and interest was centered on Smith's particular plight, making the more general arguments against mandatory minimum sentencing less of a focus (Smith & Shaffer, 2000). More importantly, these questions do not actually test depth of processing or learning but rather respondents' perceptions of how much attention they paid to the article (see question wording in Appendix B). Research has shown that interest and motivation do not necessarily result in increased learning under certain conditions. For example, in an examination of the effects of anxiety on political learning in the context of the Iraq War, Feldman and Huddy (2005) show that anxiety can enhance motivation (measured as talking and thinking about the war) and increase exposure to news without increasing learning.

Discussion

The results presented here indicate that rhetorical devices such as episodic framing influence emotional response. This finding is consistent with others who demonstrate affective effects of context or policy-specific frames (e.g., Brewer, 2001; Gross and D'Ambrosio, 2004). Taken together, this research shows emotion is worthy of inclusion in our accounts of framing.

More importantly, the results presented here are consistent with the claim that episodic framing operates via both affective and cognitive routes. In the case at hand, I found the conditional effect of the episodic frames was to dampen the persuasive effect of the column, generating less opposition to mandatory minimum sentencing than a thematic frame. Yet these episodic frames also generated sym-

pathy for Janet Smith, and that sympathy led to greater opposition to mandatory minimum sentencing. The persuasive effect of the episodic frames in this instance would seem to run through their ability to engender sympathy and pity. This would be consistent with the claim that emotional reactions serve as information that individuals use in coming to their opinions. While the affective and cognitive effects of a frame or rhetorical appeal could certainly be reinforcing rather than countervailing, the finding that the direct and indirect effects work in opposite directions in this case lends support to the conclusion that these may be distinct routes for framing influence.

These findings seem to both reinforce and extend Iyengar's work in *Is Anyone Responsible?* Episodic frames appear to minimize attitude change by focusing on individual rather than societal forces (Iyengar, 1991). However, episodic frames can actually increase persuasion if the individual's story is compelling enough to generate intense emotional reactions from a significant portion of the audience. In other words, the value of episodic framing may be conditional on the ability of the subject featured in the frame to generate particular emotions. A story that generates incredible anger at how an individual has been treated by the government or that generates incredible sympathy and pity for an individual's plight can facilitate persuasive claims on behalf of policy change. By contrast, when the central character in a story does not arouse persuasive emotions as intended by the communicator, the persuasive appeal is more likely to fail.

The distinction that emerges between the two episodic frame conditions cannot be explained by a lack of sympathy among those reading about a black Janet Smith (if anything, they report greater sympathy and pity) or by differences in the target of that sympathy (in open-ended questions participants in the two different episodic frame conditions are equally likely to say they felt sympathy toward Smith). It would seem, then, that the difference between these frames operates on a cognitive level, though work needs to be done to disentangle this.

It is also important to raise the possibility these may be short-term effects. While thematic frames may prove more persuasive in the short run, as demonstrated in the experiments presented here, the emotional engagement of the episodic frames might produce persuasive effects over a longer period. An individual case like Janet Smith's may be remembered long after the arguments of the column fade precisely because the story is more emotionally engaging. I do not have a way to test this possibility in this study.

Given my use of student samples, I must be careful in generalizing from this study. In particular, both student samples are more democratic and liberal than the general population. As such, the participants in this study may be particularly disposed to agree with the arguments in the column, as liberals tend to be less supportive of mandatory minimum sentencing.[8] Such a sample may also be pre-

[8] Unfortunately, I do not have enough cases to analyze and test the models separately for democrats and republicans.

disposed to sympathy and pity for the woman used to illustrate the problem in the episodic conditions. The experience of emotion or the content of the emotional response may have been different with a different population. For example, an overwhelmingly conservative sample, whose predispositions inclined them against mandatory minimums, might have reported less sympathy and more anger and disgust in general or might have reported anger and disgust directed in different ways (e.g., more anger and disgust directed at Smith's actions or at the notion that mandatory minimums might be changed). By the same token, the effects may be particular to the issue of mandatory minimum sentencing or the specific exemplar employed in the episodic frames. The content of the stimulus matters, but predispositions likely matter as well, in determining emotional reactions (Gross & D'Ambrosio, 2004). Thus, further work with more diverse samples is needed to show how emotional response is contingent on both the nature of the frame and an individual's predispositions toward the issue at hand.

Although this study only explored the effect of a particular set of episodic and thematic frames on emotional response, the results have some practical implications. Partisans assume that emotional appeals are an important element of any persuasive message. The results here support the notion that episodic frames are more emotionally engaging, but this alone does not make them a more compelling rhetorical device for someone seeking to change opinion. Advocates must carefully select the individual stories they choose to feature if they want to facilitate persuasive appeals through effects on emotion. In short, the choice of how to frame a story may have important consequences for how citizens feel and think about the policies implicated by that story.

Appendix A

In each case, the treatments were formatted to appear as if they were real newspaper articles. The text of the episodic frame stories is exactly the same except the fourth sentence which either describes her as "a single, white mother" or "a single, black mother." The italicized text is present in both conditions.

Episodic Frame (White)

Frederick Jackson

The Case Against Mandatory Minimum Sentencing

Janet Smith stands for the controversy surrounding federal drug-sentencing laws passed in the 1980s.

In 1995, a federal judge sentenced Smith to 24.5 years in prison without parole. Smith did not murder anyone. She wasn't a major crime figure. She was a single, white mother in her 20s with the bad judgment to have fallen for a drug dealer who abused her.

The middle-class only daughter of a schoolteacher and an accountant, Smith was a college sophomore when she became involved in a relationship with Peter Hall. Hall turned out to be a drug dealer in a murderous East Coast crack ring. Smith helped Hall in a number of ways, bailing him out of jail, carrying money for him, lying to authorities. By the time she was ready to cooperate, Hall was dead and she no longer had information to trade for a reduced sentence.

She pleaded guilty to three charges including conspiring to help Hall with crack and powder cocaine trafficking.

A fringe player in a crack cocaine ring and a first time nonviolent offender—Smith's penalties were greater than the average state sentence for murder or voluntary manslaughter. It will cost close to half a million dollars to keep Smith behind bars.

Clearly, Janet Smith was no angel. She broke a number of laws and deserved punishment. But 24.5 years is a disproportionately harsh sentence for a woman with no prior criminal history, who had arguable extenuating circumstances mitigating the severity of her conduct and who had never actually handled drugs.

Even a judge who rejected one of Smith's appeals wrote that her prison sentence was "truly heavy" and represented "the unintended consequences of Congressional legislation." But his hands were tied.

Under current law, judges have little discretion over whether a drug offender will be imprisoned and for how long. Instead, they must operate within a range of minimum and maximum sentences that fail to take account of whether the crime involved violence or whether there are mitigating circumstances. Only the government can seek a reduction in the minimum sentence. Since Smith failed to cooperate until it was too late, prosecutors never asked for a reduction.

Monica Pratt, spokeswoman for Families Against Mandatory Minimums, explains, "The more information you have to trade, the more information you can give to prosecutors to reduce your sentence. The less information you have to trade, the less of a chance you will have to reduce your sentence." So federal and state prisons are full of low-level nonviolent drug offenders instead of drug kingpins.

According to 1993 statistics from the Department of Justice, low-level players—first-time, nonviolent offenders whose criminal activity was not sophisticated—numbered over one-third of those in federal prison on drug charges. Under mandatory minimums the prison population is exploding and prison costs are skyrocketing.

It is time to end federal mandatory minimums for drug offenses. As Supreme Court Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist argues, "mandatory minimums impose unduly harsh punishment for first-time offenders and have led to an inordinate increase in the prison population." Former Attorneys General Janet Reno and Edwin Meese, the American Bar Association, and judges across the nation have all called for a reassessment of mandatory minimums. It is time for Congress to listen. The alternative is more wasted lives and wasted dollars.

Thematic Frame

Frederick Jackson

The Case against Mandatory Minimum Sentencing

Congress responded to the crack cocaine epidemic of the mid-1980s with get-tough measures like mandatory minimum sentencing for drug offenses. It is now clear that mandatory minimums and their ripple effects are not punishing the major drug player they were intended for. Instead we have a system where first time nonviolent offenders can receive penalties greater than the average state sentence for murder or voluntary manslaughter.

Under current law, judges have little discretion over whether a drug offender will be imprisoned and for how long. Instead, they must operate within a range of minimum and maximum sentences.

The federal mandatory minimums are determined by the amount of drugs—for example, a 10-year sentence is imposed for possession of 1,000 marijuana plants, while 5 grams of crack cocaine will send a defendant to jail for five years. They *fail to take account of whether the crime involved violence or whether there are mitigating circumstances.*

Under this system, *only the government can seek a reduction in the minimum sentence*. These restrictions give prosecutors greater control of cases. When prosecutors are in charge, the importance of cooperating with investigators is magnified.

Monica Pratt, spokeswoman for Families Against Mandatory Minimums, explains, "The more information you have to trade, the more information you can give to prosecutors to reduce your sentence. The less information you have to trade, the less of a chance you will have to reduce your sentence."

Because those who are more involved have more information to trade, it is the drug users and those who are caught up with the actions of loved ones who are put into jail. *In fact, federal and state prisons are full of low-level nonviolent drug offenders instead of drug kingpins.*

According to 1993 statistics from the Department of Justice, low-level players—first-time, nonviolent offenders whose criminal activity was not sophisticated—numbered over one-third of those in federal prison on drug charges.

Under mandatory minimums the prison population has exploded and prison costs are skyrocketing. The national crime rate has been dropping for seven years, yet more Americans are going to jail than ever before. The number of prisoners nationwide has more than tripled over the past 20 years, according to Justice Department statistics. More than half of these prisoners were locked up for non-violent crimes, most of them drug driven.

States and the federal government are spending $31 billion a year on corrections. From 1987 to 1995 money spent by states on prisons rose by 30% while expenditures for universities dropped by 19%. This is not what we intended with the War on Drugs.

It is time to end federal mandatory minimums for drug offenses. As Supreme Court Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist, argues "mandatory minimums impose unduly harsh punishment for first-time offenders and have led to an inordinate increase in the prison population." Former Attorneys General Janet Reno and Edwin Meese, the American Bar Association and judges across the nation have all called for a reassessment of mandatory minimums. It is time for Congress to listen. The alternative is more wasted lives and wasted dollars.

Appendix B

Measuring Policy Views

In both experiments the following question was used to measure opinion on mandatory minimum sentencing: "Do you favor or oppose mandatory minimum sentences for first or second time non-violent drug offenses?" Responses were coded to range between 0 and 1 as follows: strongly favor (0), favor (.25), neutral (.50), oppose (.75), strongly oppose (1).

Measuring Emotional Response

The measures of emotional response varied slightly between the two experiments. In the first experiment, respondents were asked for their emotional reactions to the articles on a five point scale ranging from "none" to "a lot" for four different emotions (anger, sympathy, disgust, and pity) using the following question: "How much anger did you feel while reading the article?" This was recoded to range between 0 and 1, where 0 represents those who said "none" and 1 represents those who said "a lot."

Subjects in the second experiment were asked whether or not they felt a series of emotions—anger, sympathy, worry, disgust, pity, and fear—while reading the article. These questions took the following form: "While reading the article did you feel angry?" Those who said yes were asked to answer two follow-up questions: They were asked about the strength of their emotional response measured on a ten point scale ranging from "only a little angry" to "extremely angry"; and were asked about the object or impetus for their emotional response ("If yes, why did you feel this? What was it that made you feel angry?"). The two closed-ended questions were combined to create a measure of strength of emotional response that ranged between 0 and 1. This was done as follows: Those who reported they did not feel the emotion when asked the first binary (yes-no) emotional response question were coded as 0 on the new measure of emotional response. For those who said they did feel the emotion on the initial binary emotional response measure, I recoded the strength of emotional response to range from .10 (for those who selected a 1, "only a little angry") to 1 (for those who selected a 10, "extremely angry"). I also created

three scales for use in the analysis: an empathy scale which combined sympathy and pity (Pearson correlation .77 in experiment 1 and .50 in experiment 2); an aversion scale which combined anger and disgust (Pearson correlation .71 in experiment 1 and .56 in experiment 2); and an anxiety scale (combining fear and worry, Pearson correlation .65 experiment 2 only).

How one measures the experience of emotion does affect the number of people claiming to have experienced the emotion. When offered the five point scale anchored 1 "none" and 5 "a lot" in experiment 1 fewer individuals report feeling no emotion (e.g., select "none") than report not feeling the emotion when presented with the yes or no question in experiment 2. This change in question wording does result in different mean levels of emotional response between the two experiments. However, I am interested in variations across treatments not differences in the level of emotion between the two experiments.

Detail on the coding of the open-ended items measuring emotion is available from the author. Open-ended items measuring emotion are rarer than closed-ended items measuring emotion at least partly because of the demands they place on researchers (e.g., the time-consuming reading and coding that must be done to make them useful as data). However, such items allowed me to more fully understand emotional reactions by helping me to get a better handle on their meaning. Individuals might report feeling the same emotion but for very different reasons. For example in the case at hand, one might express disgust with mandatory minimum sentencing because it forced someone like Smith to spend such a long time in jail or express disgust with the article for trying to portray Smith as deserving of a lesser sentence. Wilson and his colleagues raise concern about the use of open-ended responses as legitimate measures (Erber, Hodges, & Wilson 1995; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Wilson, Dunn, Bybee, Hyman, & Rotondo, 1984). They suggest that people have little ability to understand their mental processes and thus the true underlying reasons for their attitudes (or in this case emotion). Their concerns suggest caution in interpreting the meaning of the open-ended measures.

Measures of Message Processing

A series of questions designed by Wolski and Nabi (2000) to measure different aspects of message processing were included in the second experiment. Respondents were asked "Still thinking about the article on mandatory minimum sentencing, please tell us how much you agree or disagree with the following statements." These 16 statements were recoded into four scales: motivation, ability, depth, and bias. Motivation Questions: This issue is interesting to me; I was interested in what the author had to say; I don't find this issue very interesting; I was motivated to read this article (Scale alpha = .79). Depth Questions: I focused on the arguments the author made; While reading the article, I paid close attention to each point that was made; I didn't pay close attention to the author's arguments; I concentrated on the article arguments (Scale alpha = .83). Ability Questions: My

mind kept wandering as I read the message; While reading, I didn't let myself get distracted from focusing on the article content; While reading the message, thoughts about other things kept popping up in my head; My mind did not wander as I read the article (Scale alpha = .86). Bias Questions: I remained objective about the article content; My prior beliefs about the issue prevented me from being objective; I tried not to let how I feel about the issue influence how I read the article; I tried to remain impartial as I read the article. (Scale alpha = .79). Motivation, depth, and ability scales are highly correlated (Pearson correlation ranges from .48 to .59), but bias scale is not particularly correlated with the others (−.19 with motivation, −.01 with depth, and .07 with ability).

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