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## The framing of decision situations

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## Summary

### Background

In sociology, especially in the school of Structural-Functionalism, individual actors have traditionally been conceptualized as *socially determined*, which got its modern theoretical underpinning in theories of socialization (e.g., PARSONS & BALES 1955) and role playing (e.g., PARSONS & SHILS 1951). More recently, the school of Rational Choice sociology has taken the adversary position of viewing much of society as a macro-level consequence of interdependent, individual decisions based on self-interest (COLEMAN 1964, 1990), and in the last decades, this approach has proven to be very fruitful. However, it suffers from an excess of methodological rigidity, resulting from the attempt to graft the whole discipline of sociology onto the model of man assumed in neoclassical economics (the forward-looking, utility maximizing *homo economicus*). The basic motivation behind the research reported in this book is that this concept of utility maximization at the same time appears too vague and too rigid for being fruitfully applied in a large part of sociological research. Too vague it appears because the *nature of utility* is left unspecified, which makes it prone to being applied in an unsystematic, ad-hoc manner. Too rigid it appears because in its general normative thrust, utility theory assumes individual actors to be sufficiently informed about all important consequences of their possible actions, and only interested in their overall personal profit; furthermore, preferences are assumed to be stable over time and similar across persons (STIGLER & BECKER 1977), which rules out many types of influence which the institutional embeddings of action situations can (and do) have on choice outcomes.

### Theory part

I propose to respond to these weak spots by making the utility model better-suited to match sociologists' needs. The result is Framing Theory, a sociological model of individual decision making that is able to account for the situation-sensitivity of human motivation and behaviour. The notion of situation-sensitivity here is explicitly meant to cover more ground than just sensitivity to situational incentives, i.e., to variables that contribute to expected utility. To lay the groundwork for the construction of Framing Theory, pertinent research results from disciplines as diverse as decision theory, quality of life research, and social cognition research are pulled together. Then, a utility function is suggested that is based on universal human needs and the socially prescribed ways of need satisfaction. Next, a bounded rationality mechanism is suggested which situationally highlights only special components of this utility function, leading to a disregard of the non-highlighted components. These context-dependent utility components are called *goals*, and the suggested actor model consequently is no longer one of overall (global) utility maximization, but one of (local) goal pursuit. The decision making process this way can be decomposed into two distinct stages: goal identification (also called the *framing* of the decision situation) and goal pursuit. The framing of the decision situation is conceptualized as an automatic cognitive process, while goal pursuit figures as a controlled process. By introducing the goal concept in this way, the gap between the model of man assumed in classical sociology and the model of man assumed

in Rational Choice sociology can be bridged: goals reflect the social reality surrounding an actor and at the same time define what constitutes self-interest in a given social situation.

#### Empirical part

In experimental studies, well-known examples of systematic violations of the axioms of Utility Theory are investigated in order to validate the higher accuracy of framing models vis-à-vis utility models. In three small-scale studies, it is shown that where Utility Theory fails descriptively, Framing Theory does not. Further, as several applications of Framing Theory to sociological problem fields illustrate, its higher explanatory power indeed is necessary to account for phenomena like normative behaviour, relational signalling, self-command, or collective action. For one of these applications (normative behaviour in a public goods dilemma), the application of Framing Theory is tested experimentally. This domain is a particularly interesting one because notably in social dilemma research, utility modelling has established itself as a standard approach among sociologists. The results show that individual as well as aggregate behaviour in the experimental game confirm several specific predictions of Framing Theory. Next to this application, the validity of the cognitive model underlying framing theory is tested in three smaller experimental studies.

#### Methodological part

For obtaining some of the quantitative results, a mathematical formalization of Framing Theory is elaborated, as well as a statistical procedure for fitting these framing models to data sets and evaluate these directly in the terminology of Framing Theory.

Overall, the empirical studies show that the data analytical method as well as theoretical actor model of framing theory are a fruitful contribution to sociological research and methodology.