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Degrees of frame alignment: Comparing organisers' and participants' frames in twenty-nine demonstrations in three countries

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Abstract

One of the most influential mobilisation theories is the frame alignment approach. This theory holds that frame alignment is a necessary condition for movement participation. The present study challenges this premise. Instead of treating frame alignment as a precondition for participation, we address it as something that should be empirically examined. And rather than distinguishing between either aligned or nonaligned protesters, we study frame alignment as a matter of degree. We do so drawing on protest surveys collected during twenty-nine demonstrations in Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. We answer the following research questions: To what extent are the frames of protest organisers and participants aligned? And are there differences in degrees of alignment across framing tasks, countries, and issues? We find that many participants are only partially aligned. The highest levels of alignment are found for the diagnostic framing task. We find little differences across countries and issues for general alignment levels, but sub-aspects do tend to differ.

Keywords

Frame alignment, protest participation, diagnosis – prognosis, European demonstrators

Degrees of frame alignment: Comparing organisers' and participants' frames in twenty-nine demonstrations in three countries

Introduction

The frame alignment approach is one of the most influential theories among students of social movements (Snow et al., 2014). According to Benford and Snow (2000: 612), who introduced the idea of frame alignment (Snow and Benford, 1988; Snow et al., 1986), there has been an “almost meteoric increase in articles, chapters, and papers referring to the framing/movement link since the mid-1980s”. The theory holds that for people to participate in a social movement event, their frames, or beliefs about the issue at stake, must be in line with the mobilising message of the organisers: “frame alignment is a *necessary condition* for movement participation, whatever its nature or intensity” (Snow et al., 1986: 464, own emphasis). However, treating frame alignment as a precondition for participation is problematic (Opp, 2009). It suggests that frame alignment is a dichotomous variable: you are either aligned or you are not. Yet the literature remains silent about what alignment is in operational terms and what the criteria are to speak of an ‘aligned’ protester. Consequently, the idea that frame alignment is a precondition for participation is untestable. Instead of treating frame alignment as a precondition for participation, in this paper, we address it as something that should be empirically examined. And rather than (arbitrarily) distinguishing between aligned and nonaligned protesters, we study frame alignment as a matter of degree.

We empirically test, as far as we know for the first time (also see Opp, 2009: 254), the congruence between the frames put forward by the protest organisers and the beliefs and perspectives of protest participants. Though scholars have widely studied the conditions under which frames appeal to a targeted audience (Cadena-Roa, 2002; Hewitt and McCammon, 2004; McCammon, 2009, 2013) and have shown that framing matters for mobilisation

processes—like facilitating collective action (Chakravarty and Chaudhuri, 2012) and recruiting new members (Mika, 2006)—we do not know to what degree organisational frames actually resonate with participants at protest events.

We analyse twenty-nine demonstrations staged between 2009 and 2012 on various issues in Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. The frames of the protest participants are analysed via open survey questions. The organisers' frames are deduced from the official demonstration platform texts. Degrees of frame alignment are measured by comparing the extent to which a participant's reasoning corresponds with the organisations' framing regarding the diagnoses (what is the problem and who is to blame?) and prognoses (what should be done?). We tackle the following research questions: (1) To what extent are the frames of protest organisers and participants aligned? (2) Does the degree of alignment differ across the framing functions of diagnosis, blame attribution and prognosis? (3) Are protests on some issues and in some countries attended by on average more, or less, aligned participants than protests on other issues and in other countries?

In this study we make frame alignment quantitatively measurable and we show empirically that frame alignment is a matter of degree. Our research shows great variation in the degree to which protesters are aligned. In fact, the majority of participants (partly) have another understanding of the protest than the organisations staging the demonstration. Apparently, not all participants who show up for a street protest share the same understanding of the issue, how to deal with it, and who is to blame for it. We further find only slight country differences regarding alignment on diagnoses, blame attributions, and prognoses, which indicates that our results are robust and that we are talking about a generic pattern. With respect to variations between issues, especially participants in austerity events stand out. Their blaming is more congruent with the organisers', but their prognoses are less aligned

compared to other activists, especially the environmentalists. Environmental and austerity participants seem to contrast in their alignment pattern.

Frame alignment

In this section we first shortly discuss frame alignment theory and recent developments. Then we identify three important lacunae in framing literature, and subsequently we formulate our three research questions.

Framing is a broad perspective, popular both in communication sciences (Entman, 1993) and sociology (Goffman, 1974). In 1986, Snow and colleagues introduced framing in social movement studies and coined the specific concept of frame *alignment*: “the linkage of individual and SMO interpretive orientations, such that some set of individual interests, values and beliefs and SMO activities, goals, and ideology are congruent and complementary” (Snow et al., 1986: 464). The approach defines (collective action) frames as “action oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate social movement activities and campaigns” (Snow and Benford, 1992: 137). Through framing, social movement organisations try to gather support for their claims and mobilise potential participants by interpreting certain events. In operational terms we can think of frames as the sentences and words that movement ideologists and organisers use to put together a coherent package of meaning (Jasper and Poulsen, 1995). An important aspect distinguishing the frame alignment approach from other social movement theories is that it is concerned with signifying work. An essential motivation for early framing scholars was to counteract the prevailing theories that treated meaning as a given instead of something that is produced (Snow and Benford, 1988). As such, the rise of the frame alignment theory in social movement studies marked a much welcomed cultural turn. While political opportunities (Meyer, 2004) and organisational structures (Edwards and McCarthy, 2004) dominated theories of collective action, frame

alignment theory injected the field with the belief that the meanings people attach to their situation are crucial.

Until the late nineties the majority of framing research was descriptive and concentrated on the elaboration and application of framing concepts (Benford, 1997). Since then the empirical scope of the field has grown, and nowadays the bulk of framing research is explanatory (Snow, 2004). Recent studies, for instance, examine the determinants of frame variation (Haastrup, 2011; McCammon, 2012) and the effects of strategic framing (Chakravarty and Chaudhuri, 2012). More and more scholars analyse consequences of framing—like cultural change (Snow et al., 2013) and political outcomes (McCammon et al., 2007). Nevertheless, there is still a lack of standard measures and systematic studies across movements (Johnston and Alimi, 2013), making it difficult to generalise about causes and effects (Polletta and Ho, 2006).

One of the most appealing features of frame alignment theory is that it connects the micro-level of protest participation with the meso-level of protest organisation. Yet although the foundational framing studies were focused on micro-mobilisation (see, e.g., Gamson et al., 1982; Snow et al., 1986), scholars have up to now mainly analysed framing as a meso-level phenomenon and primarily stressed the strategic use of frames by organisations (Johnston, 1995; Williams, 2004). The approach brought individuals only seemingly back in. This is remarkable because alignment by definition involves both senders and receivers. An appropriate design should investigate both levels at the same time. Increasingly more framing studies examine, instead of frames of organisations, frames of individuals—of members (Ernst, 2009), participants (Alkon et al., 2013; Hadler and McKay, 2013), or even non-activists (Mika, 2006). However, the congruence with the organisers' frames—the *alignment*—has not been studied yet (Opp, 2009).

Apart from a prevailing focus on the meso-level, most scholarly attention has focused on members of organisations. However, modes and styles of participation are changing and are less driven by organisations (Rheingold, 2007; Walgrave and Verhulst, 2006). Activists are increasingly individualised *users* of protest rather than *members* of organisations (Earl and Schussman, 2003; Tilly, 2004). Diani (2009) even distinguishes two types of participation milieus: the associational and the protest milieu. Here we switch focus to the protest side of movements and analyse frames of participants in street demonstrations.

Finally, in most framing literature, frame alignment is treated as a kind of self-evident precondition for participation (Snow et al., 1986). People participate in events they agree with, not in events they do not share the goals and aims of. This premise, however, suggests that frame alignment is a binary phenomenon with an operational cut-off point that distinguishes people who are aligned from people who are not. Rather, we hold that frame alignment is a matter of degree and we argue that determining a cutting point would be arbitrary (Opp, 2009). Instead of a ‘given’ we regard frame alignment of protesters as a matter of empirical investigation. Accordingly, our first research question reads: To what extent are the frames of protest organisers and protest participants aligned?

Our second research question refers to framing tasks. Snow and Benford (1988) identify three core framing functions: diagnosis, prognosis, and motivation. Does the degree of alignment differ across these functions? Diagnostic and prognostic framing are both part of the consensus mobilisation process and must convince people of the rightness of the cause (Klandermans, 1984). *Diagnostic framing* is about identifying a problem and attributing blame or causality. What is the problem? And who or what is to blame? *Prognostic framing* is about suggesting solutions for the problem: what has to be done? *Motivational framing*, finally, is the call to arms beyond the diagnostic and prognostic components. After convincing potential adherents of what is at stake and what the possible solutions are, organisations have

to convince them that attending the event is worthwhile. Our study focuses on the consensus framing functions—diagnosis and prognosis. Like Gerhards & Rucht (1992), we did not find specific motivation frames in the platforms and only found implicit motivational framing, i.e., inherent to the diagnostic and prognostic frames.

Our third research question is whether protests on some issues and in some countries are attended by on average more, or less, aligned participants than protests on other issues and in other countries. Much of the framing literature consists of case studies examining movement-specific frames, not comparing issues, let alone countries (Snow et al., 2014). Here we study participants in three different countries—Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom—taking to the streets on various kinds of issues. We do not formulate specific country or issue expectations, and mainly want to test whether patterns hold across countries and issues.

Data & methods

Our data come from *PROJECT* (also see XXX, 2012). For this project, protest participants are surveyed during the act of protesting—or very soon afterwards—using the most employed variant of the protest survey design (Walgrave and Verhulst, 2011) (see the introduction of this special issue for additional information on the project). For this study we cover twenty-nine demonstrations staged between 2009 and 2012 in three countries—eight in Belgium, ten in the Netherlands, and eleven in the United Kingdom—surveying in total 6,095 participants. The selected protest events cover the most important (i.e., visible) street demonstrations that were held in the countries during the research period. The aim of the project was to survey all significant street demonstrations during a period of time. As a consequence, only relatively successful mobilisation campaigns were included. It must be noted as well that, for the safety of the interviewers, we only covered non-disruptive events. The selection of the countries was

pragmatic—interpreting and coding frames requires sufficient knowledge of the language. The three countries nevertheless present a robust test for answering the goals set out for this study.

Sixteen of the demonstrations are *anti-austerity* events (four in Belgium, eight in the Netherlands, four in the UK). The economic crisis hit Europe hard, and particularly unions mobilised against the austerity measures imposed by the European Union. We cover four events on *environmental* issues—climate change demonstrations or protests against nuclear energy (two in Belgium, two in the UK)—and four *anti-discrimination* demonstrations (one in the Netherlands, three in the UK). Finally, we cover five *democracy* protests, demonstrations aiming for changes in the political system (two in Belgium, one in the Netherlands, two in the UK). See the appendix for an overview of all covered demonstrations.

Frames, as Benford (1997) elucidates, are modes of interpretation that are socially and culturally constructed. Discursive linguists would refer to them as superstructures, schemes that organise the global meaning of a given text (Dijk, 1980). We measure the degree of frame alignment between the frame articulator (social movement organisation) and the frame receiver (participant) by comparing their discourse. We scrutinise to what extent protest participants use the same arguments and concepts in their survey responses as the protest organisers did in their campaign material. The more a participant's reasoning corresponds with that of the organisations, the higher the degree of frame alignment. Since framing is about meaning and interpretations we do not compare exact phrasing. We test congruence of content, not of words.

Although Snow and Benford (2000: 56) argue that framing is “a set of dynamic, negotiated, and often contested processes”, to measure frame alignment we need to ‘freeze’ frames at a particular point in time (Johnston, 2002). In the first stage of the coding process we collected the official platform texts of the twenty-nine demonstrations, i.e., the primary

calls for action. The platform texts were retrieved from the organisers' websites. As is shown in the appendix, some of these pamphlets are produced by multiple organisers while others contain the views of only one organisation. We acknowledge that some participants may not have been in touch with the platform texts. Additionally, the pamphlets might not cover all relevant frames. The frames listed in platforms are most of the time the result of negotiations. As a consequence, platforms may be more or less elaborate and/or vague in their formulations. Especially when protest is staged by different groups that are only loosely connected, the platform may not really capture the frames of each of these groups. Nevertheless we think platform texts are a meaningful source and the best available point of reference. They represent a shared interpretation and are meant by the organisations to be presented to the outside world. According to Gerhards and Rucht (1992: 573), the leaflets signed by all supporting groups are "valid indicators for the groups' common frames".

The full platform texts are converted into a series of separate frames by the authors.¹ Each argument in the platform text is accounted for, marked with a unique frame number, and coded as (1) a diagnosis, or (2) a prognosis. The actors held responsible—blame attribution (3)—are identified and numbered as well.² Although blame attribution is part of diagnostic framing, we code it as a separate element since it might follow a different logic than the diagnostic problem component. On average, we distinguish 20 frames per demonstration platform—consisting on average of 10 diagnoses, 6.5 prognoses, and 3.5 blames. All pamphlets covered diagnostic framing and provided one or more responsible actors. Least diagnoses are mentioned in environmental platforms (mean = 6.6) and most appear in anti-austerity demonstrations (mean = 11.0). The amount of blamed actors across issues is more or less equal. Prognoses were most often found in the environmental platforms (mean = 13.5), and least in anti-austerity events (mean = 4.7). For two anti-austerity demonstrations prognostic framing was absent (see the appendix).

<Table 1 about here>

The second stage of the coding process analyses the overlap between the frames of the organisations and the answers of participants to three open questions in the survey. In Table 1 we provide examples of pamphlet frames and corresponding answers of respondents. We asked respondents: Q1 “Please tell us why you participated in this protest event?” Q2 “In your opinion, who or what is to blame for [demonstration issue]?” Q3 “What should be done to address this issue?” These are the first survey questions, assuring that respondents are not influenced by the remainder of the questionnaire. They touch upon top-of-mind beliefs and invite participants to tell in their own words what the demonstration is about and why they took part. Such written motivations reveal only a part of the motives that may have played a role, but this is not a disadvantage per se: respondents emphasise what is most important to them. The average length of the answers is 95 characters for Q1, 37 for Q2, and 60 for Q3. This distribution corresponds with the answering space that was given.

Q1 asks for the *diagnosis*; the event or situation that is problematic. Granted, it does not literally do so. Respondents might interpret this question differently and—instead of referring to the issue underlying the event—mention other reasons for attending (e.g., because their friends joined). However, of all arguments written down by respondents on the three open questions, only six per cent of the arguments did not refer to the issue at stake.³ We therefore do not consider the phrasing of Q1 to be a problem. Q2 goes into *blame attribution*; who or what is responsible for the problem. Q3 tries to elicit a *prognosis*, a possible solution. Although each question is directed to one of the three aspects, people are free to write down what comes to their mind in response to each question. Therefore, we treat the three answers as one: we code diagnoses, prognoses, and blaming irrespectively of the question that

preceded. We include only the respondents who answered all three questions, which leaves us with 5,495 of the initial 6,095 respondents.

Coding was done by five coders and one master coder. Each demonstration was coded by at least two different coders who coded approximately 1,100 respondents each. Each argument in a respondent's triple answer is coded separately up to a maximum of fifteen frames. For every fragment we examined whether it was congruent or incongruent with one of the organisations' frames. When a fragment does not correspond with one of the organisers' frames it is labelled as an incongruent diagnosis, an incongruent prognosis, an incongruent actor, or as issue-unrelated (when other reasons to participate are given; for instance "I participated because my wife asked me to"). With this information we constructed a dataset on the individual respondent level. All protest pamphlet frames are dummy variables and are coded 1 when the specific frame was mentioned by the respondent and 0 otherwise.

Ten percent of the respondents were double coded. These codings were used to test for intercoder reliability. We calculated Krippendorff's Alpha (Hayes and Krippendorff, 2007; Krippendorff, 2012) on three dimensions: the amount of frames in a respondent's triple answer ($K\text{-alpha}=.93$), whether a respondent's frame was coded as congruent with one of the organizer's frames ($K\text{-alpha}=.72$), and whether it was coded as incongruent ($K\text{-alpha}=.71$).

Measuring frame alignment

We calculate a series of frame alignment measures ranging from tolerant to strict. In total, we present five measures. This might come across as overkill. However, presenting the first empirical take on frame alignment we believe that a diverse look at such an elusive concept is both fruitful and necessary.

Our first measure is *dummy alignment*. Respondents with at least one frame in common with the official platform are coded 1, the ones without any overlap are coded 0. Our

second measure is *full argument*: respondents who mention a complete argument—the combination of a congruent diagnosis, prognosis, and blamed actor—are coded 1, the others 0. To measure *total alignment*, we simply add up the amount of congruent frames for each respondent. With *relative alignment* we measure the share of congruent frames in proportion to the total amount of frames the respondent produced (see the appendix for the relative alignment per demonstration). *Total nonalignment* measures the sum of frames that are incongruent with the platforms. The descriptives of all alignment variables can be found in Table 2.

Using these measures we create a scale (0-4) for *degrees of alignment*. Respondents with no congruent frame are coded 0 ('not' aligned). 'Low' alignment (1) captures respondents who share only one frame with the organisers. Respondents who are 'moderately' aligned (2) mention more than one congruent frame, yet more than half of their mentions are incongruent. The 'highly' aligned (3) have more than half of their arguments in common with the organisers. Finally, when all given arguments are congruent with the organisers' pamphlets, the respondent is considered 'very highly' aligned (4).

As mentioned earlier, within each respondent's answer we distinguish between diagnoses, prognoses, and blamed actors. For each of these categories we calculate per respondent the total amount of congruent frames (*congruent diagnoses*, *congruent prognoses*, *congruent blames*), the total amount of incongruent frames (*incongruent diagnoses*, *incongruent prognoses*, *incongruent blames*), the total amount of frames in that category (*total diagnoses*, *total prognoses*, *total blames*), and the relative amount of congruent frames (*relative diagnoses*, *relative prognoses*, *relative blames*).

<Table 2 about here>

Results

Using the measures presented in Table 2 and looking at Figure 1, we can answer our first research question: To what extent are the frames of protest organisers and participants aligned? We find great variation in the degree of protesters' frame alignment. The picture that arises is clear: most demonstrators have some frames in common with the organisers, but we also find many 'extreme' cases with—on the one hand—respondents who share no frames at all with the organisers, and—on the other hand—respondents whose answers are fully aligned.

Figure 1 shows that about 10 per cent of the participants do not mention *any* frame in common with the demonstration platform. This implies that 90 per cent of the respondents can be considered as aligned to a certain extent. However, a quarter (24%) has only a single element in common with the organisers. We consider these participants as very loosely aligned, especially since respondents do mention a fair number of frames in their answers—the average number across demonstrators is 4.1. Combining the first two parts of the pie chart in Figure 1 ('not aligned' and 'low alignment'), more than a third (34%) of the protest participants are not aligned or only aligned to a limited extent.

<Figure 1 about here>

The *full argument* variable measures whether respondents have at least one diagnosis, one prognosis, and one blamed actor in common with the protest organisers. Do respondents replicate a full argument that was put forward by the organisers? The results in Table 2 indicate that 87 per cent of the protest participants do not produce an answer that is covering a congruent diagnosis, prognosis, and blame at the same time.⁴ If we loosen the criterion—only taking into account diagnosis and prognosis—still 73 per cent do not write down a fully

congruent argument. We consider this as strong proof of the fact that the extent to which participants are aligned is rather low. Note that we included only participants who answered all three open questions, which provides us with conservative measures for degrees of alignment.

Furthermore, Figure 1 indicates that 24 per cent of the protesters are ‘moderately’ aligned: they mention more than one congruent frame, yet more than half of their arguments were *not* part of the official call for action. This shows that many protest participants attribute an alternative meaning to the event in which they participate. Of all the frames voiced by participants, half do not overlap with the message of the protest organisers (*relative alignment*=.49). One-third of the protesters (33% in Figure 1) can be called ‘highly’ aligned: at least half of their frames are congruent with those of the organisers. Finally, only 9 per cent of the demonstrators are ‘very highly’ aligned: all their answers reflect the protest organisers’ call for action.

Our second research question regarded the different tasks of framing—diagnosis, prognosis, and blaming—and whether frame alignment differs between these tasks. We start again by looking at Table 2. Protesters on average tend to mention an equal amount of solutions (*total prognoses*=1.53) and problems (*total diagnoses*=1.58). They blame actors least (*total actors*=1.05). Of all participants, 10.8 per cent did not mention any solution, 14.5 per cent did not mention a diagnosis, and 26.1 per cent did not blame any actor (figures not shown in table). The main reason for the latter result is probably the fact that there are often only two or three blamed actors mentioned in a pamphlet, while there are mostly many diagnoses and prognoses. Furthermore, blame can also be attributed to a certain situation or ‘something’ (which we coded as a diagnosis) rather than to a person, party, or organisation.

Looking at the degree of alignment, frame alignment levels are highest for the diagnoses. Of all diagnoses mentioned, half are congruent with the organisers (*relative*

diagnoses=.50). The level of alignment is lower for blaming actors (*relative actors*=.41) and for prognostic framing (*relative prognoses*=.37). The same picture emerges when we look at the nonaligned arguments. About half of the respondents (48%) write down one or more incongruent diagnoses while a good deal more, 64 per cent, mention at least one incongruent prognosis. Only 39 per cent mention an incongruent actor (figures not in table). We can state that demonstrators mention an equal amount of problems and solutions, yet the problems they mention are on average more in line with the demonstration platforms than the solutions they formulate. Hence, organisers are more successful in getting the problem across to their participants than in persuading them of their preferred solution. Note that the actual causal chain may also be reversed. Organisers could be more *reactive* to the problems as defined by their potential participants and less responsive to their constituency when it comes to possible solutions. Since we do not have over-time data, we cannot tease out the direction—top-down or bottom-up—of the frame alignment.

<Table 3 about here>

The third goal of the paper was to tests whether levels of frame alignment differ across countries and issues. For both countries and issues the answer is negative: there are no substantial differences in frame alignment. Yet we do find some underlying differences regarding diagnoses, prognoses, and blames.

Table 3 compares our measures across countries. The results are remarkably stable. Notwithstanding the real differences between the countries, e.g., in terms of the strength of the social movement sector and the issues that were high on the agenda, we find no significant differences in general alignment levels. Frame alignment seems to be the highest in Belgium. All alignment measures—except for *total nonalignment*—suggest that the beliefs of the

average Dutch and British demonstrator are a little bit more disconnected from those of the organisers. Nevertheless, one-way ANOVA tests reveal that these general inter-country differences displayed in the upper pane of Table 3 are minor: the effect size (η^2) for all these variables is below .06.⁵ The countries do differ, however, on a few sub-aspects of framing. Dutch protest participants write down fewer *incongruent diagnoses* than the Belgian and British activists ($F=217.95$; $\eta^2=.07$). Yet, their prognoses are less aligned than the prognoses of their Belgian and British colleagues (*congruent prognoses*, $F=381.12$; $\eta^2=.12$; *relative prognoses*, $F=248.91$; $\eta^2=.08$). It thus seems that—in comparison with Belgian and British activists—Dutch participants agree more with their organisers on ‘what is the problem’ and less on ‘what should be done’. These results are probably due to differences across issues. Eight of the ten Dutch demonstrations were anti-austerity events, and—as we will see below—austerity demonstrations particularly differ from demonstrations on other issues.

<Table 4 about here>

Table 4 presents the results per issue. The story is similar: no overall differences, yet a few differences on sub-aspects. None of the general alignment figures in the upper pane produce large effects (η^2 is below .06 for all these variables). The only thing the aggregate measures indicate is that environmental protests score somewhat higher on both the *full argument* and the *total alignment* measure. This suggests that environmental protests may have higher or different alignment patterns than the other types of protest in the sample.

Issues do have a considerate effect on *congruent prognoses* ($F=228.85$; $\eta^2=.11$) and *relative prognoses* ($F=144.14$; $\eta^2=.07$). The scores on these prognostic variables are lowest for anti-austerity participants and highest for environmental activists. Also, issues have a significant effect on *congruent actors* ($F=66.08$; $\eta^2=.06$) and *relative actors* ($F=84.34$;

$\eta^2=.06$), which—on the contrary—are highest for austerity demonstrations and lowest for environmental events. The fact that anti-austerity marchers, compared to the demonstrators on the other issues, are less aligned on prognoses and more on blamed actors makes a lot of sense. The ‘problem’ underlying austerity protests is quite clear: austerity measures. The agency to be blamed is rather self-evident as well: the government. For nine of the anti-austerity demonstrations in the sample ‘the government’ was the most mentioned blamed actor. These results may also be explained by the fact that austerity demonstrations are usually staged by ‘strong’ organisations—most often unions—that have access to resources to publicise their protest messages. However, while austerity protesters agree with their organisers about what the problem is and who is to blame for it, they do not seem to be in line with the proposed solutions.

Environmental protesters, to some extent, display just the opposite pattern. In their prognoses, environmentalists are more congruent with the organisations. They more often share the solutions for environmental problems with the official demonstration platforms. Again, these results make a lot of sense. Environmental organisations are part of an international movement, supported by international discourses and international solutions. Furthermore, the environmental movement can be seen as the prototype of the new social movements. They draw a different constituency to the street (Verhulst, 2011) and make more norm-, identity-, and lifestyle-related claims (Williams, 2004). It seems that old social movement participants are more preoccupied with problems and expressing blame whereas new social movement protesters are keener to put forward solutions. This is in line with old social movements foremost protesting against the coming into being of material disadvantages (or the loss of advantages) and new social movements foremost protesting for the development of certain solutions.

Conclusion

The study tested empirically, and across a wide range of protest events in three countries, to what extent frames of staging organisations resonate with protesters. Instead of treating frame alignment as a precondition for participation, we approach it as a matter of empirical investigation. Moreover, rather than proposing that someone is either aligned or not, we suggest that there are degrees of frame alignment.

Our first finding is that there is great variation in the extent to which demonstrators are aligned with the frames of protest organisers. The majority of our respondents (90%) voiced at least one congruent argument, and a third of the demonstrators could be considered highly aligned. However, few participants generated an account indicative of a systematic overlap between their and the organisations' beliefs. Additionally, many participants have, compared to the organisers, an alternative understanding of the protest they participate in. Nearly all participants (91%) mention frames that are absent in the demonstrations' platform. In sum, using a variety of alignment measures that tap into the concept from different angles, a clear picture arises. We cannot but conclude that, in general, frame alignment is rather low, and this holds across issues and countries.

This does not imply that frame alignment is not *helpful* for getting people to take to the streets. Our study only draws on people who actually showed up. If we had possessed evidence about non-participants we could have investigated whether being more aligned increases chances of participation. We think we would have found that it does. The only thing we showed here is that not all participants who *do* show up share the same understanding of the issue, how to deal with it, and who is to blame for it. Added to that, our claim is not that less aligned activists are irrational. The fact that they are either not aligned or only partially aligned does not mean that their reasons to participate are not valid or wrong. Rather, they bring additional grievances and problem solutions to protest events. It may be the case that

this leads organisers to reframe the issue for a next event (see the part on ‘frame extension’ in Snow et al., 1986: 472).

Our second finding is that there are different levels of alignment in terms of the different types of frames. In general, protest participants are more aligned regarding diagnoses than with regard to prognoses and blames. People who take to the streets agree with the organisers that a certain issue is problematic. The possible solutions for the problem provide reason for debate.

Third, we found that there are hardly any differences between demonstrations in Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Results are strongly similar across countries, reinforcing confidence that we are talking about a robust and generic pattern. The same applies to issues: there are few differences regarding frame alignment in general. Yet we do find some differences when it comes to the distinct aspects of framing. Austerity protesters and environmental protesters contrast in their alignment pattern. Prognostic framing resonates less and actor blaming resonates more with activists in austerity events while for environmental protesters this is the other way around.

One of the study’s lacunae is that we only looked into protest participation. Social movement activism often also implies associational membership. That we found frame alignment levels to be low for protest participation does not mean that they are low for associational participation as well. Membership implies more commitment and durability. It increases the chance that individuals get socialised—and thus more aligned. It is possible as well that frame alignment levels have changed over time. There are reasons to expect that there is less alignment now than thirty years ago—when the concept was developed—since modes of participation and mobilisation have changed and protesters have become more individualised. Fragmentation in the social movement sector and, especially, the ICT revolution may have furnished participants with more information, and potentially more

diverging information, about the demonstration and its issues. We expect that it has become much more difficult for protest organisers to control the information regarding their event. So, perhaps in earlier days the crowds were more homogeneous and more connected to the organisers.

Added to that, we have stayed silent regarding frame alignment processes. Our analysis only tapped the outcome of these processes. We do not know whether the frames produced by organisations have actually *changed* the beliefs the participants hold. Is frame alignment the result of framing activities by organisers? Or do organisers and rank-and-file activists mutually influence each other? The fact that frames are aligned between organisations and participants may be, for example, because these recruits already held certain visions of the world before they joined (Jasper, 1997). It may be the case that organisers follow their members' frames, and not vice versa. This was not examined. Our design did not allow us to study the dynamic interactive process between participants and organisers.

A final methodological caveat is that we measure frame alignment *after* people participated; we use postal questionnaires that were distributed among participants and were then sent back after the event. So, in a sense, it may be that protesters have become (more) aligned at the event itself—being exposed to messages, slogans, and pamphlets during the event. This possibility makes our finding that many demonstrators are only partially aligned stronger. Even after being exposed to the protest event and its surrounding messages, many do not seem to echo the official diagnoses, prognoses, and blames underlying the demonstration.

Since we studied one form of contentious action, peaceful street demonstrations, in three similar Western countries, it may be interesting for future research to apply our method to other forms of action and to other countries. More risky and costly forms of action may require higher levels of frame alignment. Also, the three countries under study are characterised by high levels of individualisation. It may be that general levels of alignment in

such countries are lower than in less individualised countries, as participants might be more inclined to attribute their own interpretation to the events they join.

Furthermore, future studies could try to explain differential levels of frame alignment. We examined differences between countries and issues, and found mainly stability. This suggests that the differences in frame alignment that are clearly present are probably caused by determinants at the individual and the demonstration level. The way people are mobilised, whether they are organisation members or not, may have an effect on their personal level of agreement with the protest organisers. The same applies for demonstration characteristics like the broadness of the coalition organising the event.

We believe that our study has contributed to the knowledge of framing in protest events. We made frame alignment quantitatively measurable, did so across a wide array of events across countries and issues, and produced systematic and sensible results. We showed empirically, probably for the first time, that frame alignment is a matter of degree. Few participants are fully aligned with ‘their’ organisers; many of them attribute alternative interpretations to the event they attend. This seems to be a generic phenomenon, irrespective of the country in which the event takes place or of the issue the protest is dealing with. The next step, of course, is to explain differences in degrees of frame alignment between individuals and protest events. We leave it to other work to tackle that matter.

Notes

1. Although scholars of framing mostly treat a frame as a combination of arguments, we refer to each argument in the organisations’ pamphlets as a separate frame.
2. Frames are coded as ‘blame attribution’ when *actors* are blamed for the problem in the pamphlet (the government, an organisation, a particular politician, etc.). When something else—a situation, process, structure—is held responsible, this is coded as a diagnosis.

3. Because we treated the answers on the three questions as one during the coding process, we cannot calculate this percentage for Q1 separately.
4. One cannot argue that this finding is a consequence of questionnaire design. In fact, our three open questions primed/probed respondents to give answers that match the diagnosis, prognosis, blame attribution structure, presenting respondents with the opportunity to bring their arguments full circle.
5. Because of the large N (5,495) of our study, almost all variables have a significant effect, even when differences between groups are very small. Therefore, rather than looking at significance levels we look at the size of the effect (η^2). As rules of thumb we use Cohen (1988): .01 = small; .06 = medium; .14 = large—and only report on medium and large effects.

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Table 1: Two examples of pamphlet frames and congruent respondent answers

Million Women Rise (UK)	
Diagnosis pamphlet	Women experience a lot of violence
Respondent	“Violence is committed against women all over the world in domestic and political situations”
Blame pamphlet	Women have been socially, culturally and economically conditioned to defer to men
Respondent	“Men”
Prognosis pamphlet	We can change the attitude towards women via education and awareness
Respondent	“Address the issues in schools”
Take Back Parliament (UK)	
Diagnosis pamphlet	The current voting system is not fair / is broken
Respondent	“FPTP [First-Past-The-Post] is not a good system”
Blame Pamphlet	The political elite
Respondent	“Political elite”
Prognosis pamphlet	A proportional system should be installed
Respondent	“A move to PR [Proportional Representation], either fully or partly”

Table 2: Variables and their descriptives (N = 5,495)

Variable Name	Measurement	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.
General Alignment					
Dummy Alignment (0-1)	0 = no congruent frame 1 = at least one congruent frame	.90	.30	0	1
Full Argument (0-1)	0 = all other cases 1 = at least one congruent diagnosis, prognosis and blame	.13	.34	0	1
Total Alignment (#)	Total amount of congruent frames	2.10	1.30	0	7
Relative Alignment (%)	Total alignment divided by total amount of frames	.49	.28	0	1
Total Nonalignment (#)	Total amount of incongruent frames	2.02	1.47	0	10
Diagnoses					
Congruent Diagnoses (#)	Total amount of congruent diagnoses	.88	.87	0	6
Incongruent Diagnoses (#)	Total amount of incongruent diagnoses	.70	.90	0	6
Total Diagnoses (#)	Total amount of diagnoses	1.58	1.12	0	8
Relative Diagnoses (%)	Congruent diagnoses divided by total amount of diagnoses given	.50	.44	0	1
Prognoses					
Congruent Prognoses (#)	Total amount of congruent prognoses	.71	.90	0	6
Incongruent Prognoses (#)	Total amount of incongruent prognoses	.82	.78	0	6
Total Prognoses (#)	Total amount of prognoses	1.53	1.05	0	8
Relative Prognoses (%)	Congruent prognoses divided by total amount of prognoses given	.37	.42	0	1
Blames					
Congruent Actors (#)	Total amount of congruent blames	.55	.64	0	5
Incongruent Actors (#)	Total amount of incongruent blames	.50	.73	0	5
Total Actors (#)	Total amount of blames	1.05	.86	0	5
Relative Actors (%)	Congruent actors divided by total amount of blames given	.41	.46	0	1
Platform Features					
Frames (#)	Amount of frames covered in the pamphlet	20.10	7.75	9	37

Figure 1: To what degree are respondents (%) aligned (0-4)?

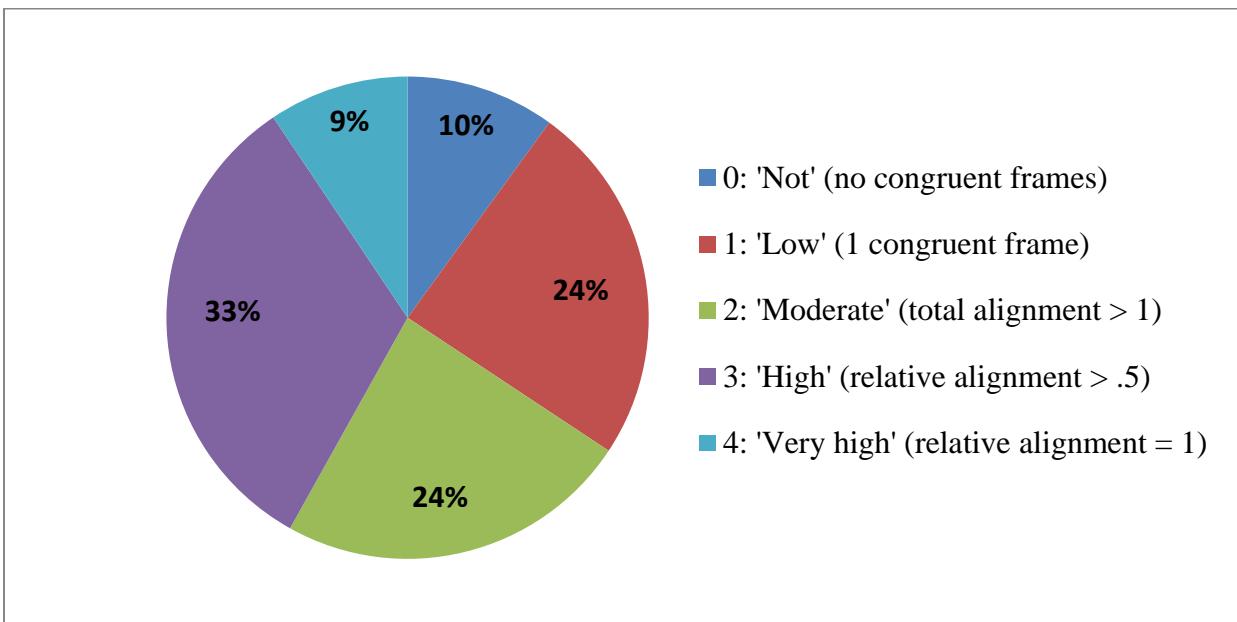


Table 3: Average alignment, diagnoses, prognoses, and blames per country

	BE (N = 1,562)	NL (N = 1,874)	UK (N = 2,059)	Total (N = 5,495)	ANOVA (F) (η^2)
General Alignment					
Dummy Alignment (0-1)	.92	.89	.89	.90	55.43 (.00)
Full Argument (0-1)	.19	.10	.11	.13	6.72 (.01)
Total Alignment (#)	2.39	1.95	2.03	2.10	33.15 (.02)
Relative Alignment (%)	.53	.50	.45	.49	43.97 (.02)
Total Nonalignment (#)	1.86	1.78	2.37	2.02	96.70 (.03)
Diagnoses					
Congruent Diagnoses (#)	.94	1.00	.73	.88	52.43 (.02)
Incongruent Diagnoses (#)	.73	.38	.96	.70	217.95 (.07)
Relative Diagnoses (%)	.50	.61	.39	.50	122.00 (.04)
Prognoses					
Congruent Prognoses (#)	.94	.27	.94	.71	381.12 (.12)
Incongruent Prognoses (#)	.73	.75	.96	.82	50.39 (.02)
Relative Prognoses (%)	.46	.20	.45	.37	248.91 (.08)
Blames					
Congruent Actors (#)	.63	.68	.36	.55	143.27 (.05)
Incongruent Actors (#)	.40	.65	.46	.50	56.74 (.02)
Relative Actors (%)	.46	.51	.28	.41	130.72 (.04)
Platform Features					
Amount of Frames (#)	22.88	19.40	18.73	20.10	.711 (.05)

Table 4: Average alignment, diagnoses, prognoses, and blames per issue

	Austerity (N=3,019)	Environ. (N=1,046)	Discrim. (N=599)	Democ. (N=831)	Total (N=5,495)	ANOVA (F) (η^2)
General Alignment						
Dummy Alignment (0-1)	.90	.92	.87	.91	.90	6.94 (.00)
Full Argument (0-1)	.12	.16	.12	.11	.13	2.58 (.00)
Total Alignment (#)	2.06	2.27	2.06	2.08	2.10	5.53 (.00)
Relative Alignment (%)	.49	.50	.42	.52	.49	12.20 (.01)
Total Nonalignment (#)	1.94	2.14	2.49	1.83	2.02	29.14 (.02)
Diagnoses						
Congruent Diagnoses (#)	.94	.81	.87	.68	.88	26.00 (.01)
Incongruent Diagnoses (#)	.58	.82	1.00	.77	.70	53.20 (.03)
Relative Diagnoses (%)	.55	.44	.44	.39	.50	46.06 (.03)
Prognoses						
Congruent Prognoses (#)	.46	1.24	.80	.95	.71	228.85 (.11)
Incongruent Prognoses (#)	.82	.83	.95	.69	.82	9.85 (.01)
Relative Prognoses (%)	.26	.54	.40	.51	.37	144.14 (.07)
Blames						
Congruent Actors (#)	.65	.38	.39	.48	.55	66.08 (.06)
Incongruent Actors (#)	.54	.49	.54	.37	.50	8.39 (.00)
Relative Actors (%)	.48	.28	.26	.41	.41	84.34 (.06)
Platform Features						
Amount of Frames (#)	19.56	23.00	20.50	19.20	20.10	.218 (.03)

Appendix: Overview of the covered demonstrations

#	Demonstration	Date	Country	Issue	# participants	# organizers	# diagnoses ^a	# actors ^a	# prognoses ^a	R.A. ^b
1	Climate Change	05-Dec-09	BE	Environment	15,000	5	9	7	18	.67
2	No to Austerity	29-Sep-10	BE	Austerity	70,000	4	10	4	12	.47
3	We have alternatives	02-Dec-11	BE	Austerity	70,000	3	17	8	12	.43
4	Not in Our Name	02-May-11	BE	Democracy	700	1	11	5	1	.52
5	Fukushima never again	11-Mar-12	BE	Environment	1,000	4	7	4	3	.61
6	No Government, Great Country	23-Jan-11	BE	Democracy	45,000	1	3	1	5	.43
7	March for Work	29-Jan-10	BE	Austerity	31,000	3	11	5	7	.55
8	Non-Profit Demonstration	29-Mar-11	BE	Austerity	15,000	1	8	2	13	.53
9	Retirement demonstration	21-Nov-09	NL	Austerity	7,000	2	4	3	2	.47
10	Culture demo Amsterdam	20-Nov-10	NL	Austerity	15,000	5	7	6	2	.69
11	Culture demo Utrecht	20-Nov-10	NL	Austerity	2,500	5	7	6	2	.62
12	Stop budget cuts (care & welfare)	19-Sep-11	NL	Austerity	4,500	2	13	1	0	.45
13	Occupy Netherlands	05-Nov-11	NL	Democracy	120	1	19	6	8	.45
14	Together strong for public work	17-Feb-11	NL	Austerity	8,000	5	17	1	4	.41
15	Stop racism and exclusion	19-Mar-11	NL	Discrimination	350	4	14	3	1	.50
16	Student demo Amsterdam	21-May-10	NL	Austerity	15,000	3	22	3	5	.60
17	Student demo The Hague	21-Jan-11	NL	Austerity	2,000	5	11	3	3	.56
18	Military demo	26-May-11	NL	Austerity	4,000	4	14	4	3	.34
19	National Climate March 2009	05-Dec-09	UK	Environment	50,000	1	8	3	16	.38
20	Unite Against Fascism	06-Nov-10	UK	Discrimination	3,000	1	11	2	2	.23
21	Fund Our Future: Stop Education Cuts	10-Nov-10	UK	Austerity	30,000	1	13	5	0	.39
22	National Climate March 2010	04-Dec-10	UK	Environment	1,500	1	3	1	13	.35
23	Second Student National Demo	09-Dec-10	UK	Austerity	40,000	1	7	2	2	.40
24	Occupy London	12-Nov-11	UK	Democracy	600	1	6	3	6	.35
25	May Day Labour March	01-May-10	UK	Austerity	5,000	1	4	3	8	.50
26	Million Women Rise	05-Mar-11	UK	Discrimination	3,000	1	15	3	17	.60
27	Take Back Parliament	15-May-10	UK	Democracy	2,000	5	11	2	9	.62
28	No to Hate Crime Vigil	23-Oct-10	UK	Discrimination	2,000	2	3	3	8	.40
29	'TUC's March for the Alternative	26-Mar-11	UK	Austerity	250,000	1	7	3	7	.60
Mean					84,879	2.5	10.1	3.5	6.5	.49

a. Amount of diagnoses, blamed actors, and prognoses in demonstration pamphlet

b. R.A. = Relative Alignment