Identities and Frames in the US Abortion Debate: A Semantic Network Approach

Zhong Zheng | University of South Florida

Abstract

After analyzing the semantic content of pro-life and pro-choice social movement organizations' (SMOs) mission statements, this study shows that SMOs utilize various framing strategies to reinforce and expand a sense of collective identity, including frame bridging and frame extension. The pro-choice frame of women's decision-making on abortion care has been extended to a broader social justice frame and the pro-life frame of the protection of the rights of the unborn has been extended to a frame of god-centric value of life and family. The paper also suggests local knowledge and existing interests affect framing in the abortion debate.

Research Questions

This study considers mission statements that appear on the websites of pro-life and pro-choice SMOs as products of collective processes, remaining relatively stable within a certain period. I propose two research questions: *What is the semantic structure of pro-life and pro-choice SMOs' mission statements? How do pro-life and pro-choice SMOs construct organizational frames and collective identities in their mission statements?* Additionally, Tarrow's (2013) work on the dynamics of language in social movements across time and space leads to the third research question: *Are there any differences in the wording of SMOs' mission statements regarding their geographic locations?*

Methods

Semantic network analysis examines the relationship among words in terms of their co-occurrence, frequency and distance, and reveals the semantic organization of the text. KH Coder (Higuchi 2016), an application for quantitative content analysis and text mining, is adopted for this study. Five analytical strategies have been employed to understand organizational frames and collective identities in the abortion debate. The first one is a word frequency analysis of mission statements. Secondly, a hierarchical cluster analysis was conducted to examine the similar appearance patterns of combinations or groups of words. Then a correspondence analysis is used to explore the appearance pattern of Top 50 words in pro-life and pro-choice mission statements and see whether some SMOs locate in certain states would prefer certain words compared to their peers. The fourth step is to draw the co-occurrence network of words and detect the clusters of words via random-walk. Finally, the structural embeddedness of nodes (words) in the semantic network has been examined, including degree centrality and betweenness centrality.

Figure A: Semantic Network of Pro-Choice Mission Statements

Figure B: Semantic Network of Pro-Life Mission Statements

Results

1. Pro-choice SMOs highly regard "woman" (more than 400 times), while pro-life SMOs' prime concern is "life" (over 600 times). Among pro-life SMOs, only 8 words appear more than 100 times ("life", "human", "abortion", "right", "pro-life", "death", "protect", and "god"), compared to 18 words in pro-choice SMOs, including "woman", "abortion", "reproductive", "health", "rights", "access", "decision", "care", "make", "people", "family", "justice", "child", "right", "state", "freedom", "education", and "work".

2. Pro-choice SMOs frame women's decision-making in reproductive health access and abortion care as priorities and extend the frame into a boarder social justice context. Pro-life SMOs focus on a wide range of pro-life issues including anti-abortion and ending assisted suicide.

3. Correspondence analysis reveals that SMOs that locate in certain states would prefer certain types of words. For example, pro-choice SMOs in California highly regard "value", while those in Texas tend to talk more about "life" even they are pro-choice.

4. In pro-choice mission statements, the most noticeable frame is advocating for the safe and legal access to abortion. Other prominent frames include the protection of personal decision making, strive to promote the life of children, women and family, electing pro-choice law-makers, grassroot actions and the safeguard of progressive values. In pro-life mission statements, respecting and protecting innocent and vulnerable human life from the moment of conception and fertilization to natural death is the most salient frame. Other noticeable frames of pro-life mission statements are aligning individual decision making with the expectation from God, opposing stem cell research, building a culture of life, developing life-affirming information for the public, supporting legislative and political actions through advocacy and education as well as highlighting the importance of marriage between men and women.

5. "Turn", "abortion", "decision", "NARAL", "Jewish", "progressive", and "NCJW" show high degree centrality in the pro-choice semantic network, suggesting that these words have more connections to other words. It is not surprised to see the major pro-choice advocates like NARAL and NCJW would receive more links. "Abortion", "access", "health", "reproductive", "rights", "freedom", "child", "family", "life", "strive", "individual ", "ideal", "turn", and "NCJW" indicate high betweenness centrality in the pro-choice network, suggesting that reproductive freedom and access to abortion is the bridging frame. In the pro-life network, "euthanasia", "God" and "Christ" have the highest degree centrality with low word frequency and "human" and 'god' are the nodes with the highest betweenness centrality.

Conclusions

SMOs in the abortion debate strive to attract potential adherents through a construction of collective identity. SMOs utilize various framing strategies to reinforce a sense of collective identity in their mission statements, including diagnostic framing that identifies the problems, prognostic framing that proposes possible solutions, and motivational framing that calls for collective action. SMOs also seem to consider other identity communities including antagonists and observers. Pro-choice SMOs specifically point out the role of volunteers and politicians in achieving full reproductive freedom and notice the counterparts (anti-choice groups). In contrast, pro-life SMOs propose an overarching frame of the respect of human life that seeks to cover protagonists, antagonists and observers at the same time. Semantic network analysis has practical implications for social movement research. Investigating the semantic structure of mission statements can help identify salient themes (via word frequency count), patterns of appearance of words (via correspondence analysis), and clusters and communities of frames (via hierarchical cluster analysis and semantic network analysis). It can present the connection and distance between themes, the processes of frame bridging and extension, and different identity communities in the abortion debate in a visual way .