

ANALYSIS OF AN ACADEMIC PAPER

Goetz, E. G. (2008). Words Matter: The Importance of Issue Framing and the Case of Affordable Housing. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 74(2), 222-229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944360802010251>

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Abstract:

The article *Words Matter: The Importance of Issue Framing and the Case of Affordable Housing*, by Edward G. Goetz examines the impact of issue framing, specifically the terminology used to describe policies, on public support for affordable housing in a predominantly White, affluent suburb. The article was published online 18 April 2008 in the *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 74(2) 222-229. The study is grounded in the theory of issue framing, which suggests that the way an issue is framed can significantly influence public opinion and policy outcomes. It explores the concept that different framing can lead to various levels of support among the public. The analysis is primarily quantitative, comparing the percentage of respondents supporting or opposing the policy under different framings, with a focus on exploring the effects of these framings on different demographic groups. The study was conducted using a survey that divided participants into two groups. One group was asked about their support for the term of 'affordable housing', while the other was asked about the term of 'lifecycle housing', a term developed to avoid the stigmatisation associated with affordable housing. The results show a significant difference in support based on the terminology used, with 'lifecycle housing' receiving over thirty percentage points more support from the White, non-Hispanic respondents than 'affordable housing'. The opinions of non-white respondents are not significantly affected by this difference in wording. The study concludes that the choice of words can indeed influence public opinion and suggests that, under certain conditions, careful framing of policy issues can expand the range of policy options available to local officials. This effect is particularly pronounced among affluent and white non-Hispanic respondents, suggesting that issue framing may be a useful tool for overcoming opposition to policies that are perceived negatively because of associations with race or class.

The findings of the article highlight the significance of word choice in public policy discourse, showing that framing can lead to substantial shifts in public opinion, especially among specific demographic segments. This underlines the importance of carefully considering how policies are presented to the public to enhance their acceptability and support.

Keywords: Affordable housing, framing the issue of affordable housing, not-in-my-backyard, social acceptability

JEL Classification: M14, M38, R21

1. INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the article the author provides an overview of the problem to be addressed in the study. The problem outlined is whether the language used by planners to talk about policy issues, in particular low-cost, affordable housing, has an impact on the support of public for these policies. The author mentions the conduct of a survey in a suburban area to evaluate whether changing the term 'affordable housing' to the term 'lifecycle housing' would have an impact on public opinion and acceptance of housing policy. The introduction sets the scene for the research question, telling the purpose of the study to examine the impact of framed issues on the level of acceptance of housing policy in the suburbs.

The author argues for the importance of the research question by providing context and background on the importance of issue framing in public policy and planning. It is highlighted how public opinion, and ultimately policy outcomes, can be influenced by the language used to discuss policy issues. By citing earlier research in political science and policy studies, the author establishes a foundation for understanding the role of issue framing in shaping public beliefs and attitudes towards various policies. In addition, the author illustrates the

specific relevance of the research question through a focus on the contentious issue of affordable housing in a predominantly white, affluent suburb. The article explains the historical resistance to affordable housing in such communities and the challenges faced by advocates and officials in overcoming the stigmatisation associated with it.

The article outlines the research design and methods used in investigating the impact of framed issues on public support for affordable housing. By conducting a random survey of suburban residents and comparing responses to questions framed using different terminology, the author aims to provide empirical evidence of the importance of language in shaping attitudes towards policy initiatives. In proving the research question within the broader context of issue framing theory, proving its relevance to a specific and controversial policy issues, and outlining the research approach to investigate its implications the author effectively presents a compelling argument for the importance of the research question.

The author ends the introduction with a concise and focused summary and statement of the problem or research hypothesis. A predominantly White, affluent American suburb resisting affordable housing, which is thought to be influenced by the terminology used to describe such housing. The research hypothesis evaluated is whether renaming affordable housing as 'lifecycle housing' can lead to a significantly different public opinion outcome, specifically in the context of suburban acceptance of residents. The introduction effectively sets the stage for the research by highlighting the importance of issue framing in public support for policy initiatives, particularly affordable housing, and outlines the core aim of the study.

The introduction is logical and empirical. It begins by noting the importance of how planners frame issues, drawing on research in political science and policy studies. It introduces the specific issue of affordable housing and the stigmatisation associated with it, particularly in affluent, white, suburban communities. The introduction provides background information on the framing of the affordable housing issue, discusses strategies for addressing stigmatisation, and introduces the concept of renaming affordable housing as 'lifecycle housing' as a potential solution. The introduction also outlines the research design and the hypotheses to be evaluated, providing a clear structure for the study. It concludes by summarising the implications of the research and acknowledging its limitations. The introduction moves logically from a general discussion of issue framing to a specific focus on affordable housing and the potential implications of renaming or reframing it.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The author presents evidence of knowledge of the topic of research through extensive references to and descriptions of relevant and current research. The article includes citations of a wide range of sources that discuss various aspects of issue framing, policy change, urban planning, and the specific issue of affordable housing. These references span from theoretical discussions on policy framing (Cobb and Ross, 1997; Rochefort and Cobb, 1994; Sniderman, 1993; Jacoby, 2000; Riker, 1986; Weiss, 1989; Schattschneider, 1960; Schön and Rein, 1994; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993) to empirical studies and practical examples related to urban planning and community development (Vigar, 2002; Lindseth, 2004; Bryson and Crosby, 2006; Goetz and Sidney, 1997; Willson *et al.*, 2003).

The article discusses specific challenges and strategies around framing the issue of affordable housing, referencing specific cases and initiatives (Kirp *et al.*, 1995; Danielson, 1976; Downs, 1993; Keating, 1994; Bellah *et al.*, 1985; Bell, 2002) that illustrate attempts to reduce the stigmatisation associated with affordable housing through the use of different terminology. The named references prove a comprehensive understanding of the historical context, contemporary challenges, and innovative approaches to discussing and promoting affordable housing. Including these references not only supports the arguments of the author but also shows his extensive engagement with both academic literature and practical efforts related to the topic. This approach enriches the article with a broad perspective that encompasses theoretical insights, empirical findings, and applications in the real world, and proves an in-depth knowledge of the research topic.

3. METHODS AND DESIGN OF THE STUDY

3.1 Research question and hypotheses

The author presents the research design and method used to evaluate his hypotheses, proving a clear and systematic approach to investigating the impact of issue framing on public opinion.

The design of the study effectively addresses the research question regarding whether the terminology used to describe housing policy influences public support. The hypotheses (H1 to H5) are clearly defined in order to evaluate different dimensions of this question, including the level of support based on different terminologies and the impact of the demographic characteristics of the respondents on their level of support. These hypotheses are directly tied to the research question and are evaluated through the survey results, providing a structured framework to analyse the impact of issue framing on public support. The problem statement is clear that there is a stigmatisation associated with the term of 'affordable housing', particularly among affluent, white suburban

residents. The author aims to explore whether changing the language used to describe the policy can mitigate this stigmatisation and increase public support. The design of the study addresses this issue by evaluating the effectiveness of renaming the concept to 'lifecycle housing'.

The research hypotheses of the author are well-defined and related to the research question and problem statement. The hypotheses predict differences in public support based on the wording of the question, particularly among White, non-Hispanic respondents, affluent respondents, and different age groups. The study design collects data to evaluate these hypotheses, providing evidence to support or disprove each one. The author employs a clear and proper method to investigate the impact of issue framing on public support for affordable housing policies, leading to significant findings that contribute to understanding the role of language in policy acceptance.

3.2 Participants

The people who took part in the study are residents of a large and growing suburb of Minneapolis, which is characterised by higher home values, a higher proportion of White residents, affluent residents and single-family homes compared to the metropolitan area as a whole. The suburb is typical of areas that are highly resistant to affordable housing initiatives, making it an ideal setting for evaluating the impact of language on public opinion. The sample consists of respondents who completed a community survey that was mailed to a random sample of 2,000 residents and all eight hundred residents of apartment buildings in the community. A total of 1,589 responses were received. This is a response rate of 56.75%. Reflecting the actual proportion of renters in the community, 92 % of respondents were homeowners and 16 % were renters. Demographically, the respondents closely reflect the racial and ethnic composition of the community, with 93 % identifying as White, 1 % as African American, 1.5 % as Asian American, 1.8 % as Native American, 0.9 % as Hispanic, and 1.9 % as other. The racial distribution of respondents closely matches the 2000 Census data for urban households. The respondents are evenly divided into two groups, with half randomly assigned to answer questions using the term 'affordable housing' and half using the term 'lifecycle housing'. There are no systematic differences between the two groups in terms of demographics or responses to other survey questions on unrelated community issues, ensuring a fair comparison between the two framing conditions. The participants are representative of the population of residents in the suburban community, offering valuable insights into the impact of language framing on public opinion about affordable housing initiatives.

3.3 Materials and assessment instruments

The materials and assessment devices used in the study appear to be consistent with the research question and hypothesis. The research question focuses on whether the words used to describe a policy have influence on public support. The materials, namely the survey questions, directly address this question by presenting participants with two versions of the same question, differing only in the terminology used. The characteristics of the participants, particularly those living in a predominantly white, affluent suburb, are well matched to the research question and hypothesis. By conducting the survey in such a community, the study is consistent with its purpose.

With regard to the validity and reliability of the instruments, the study does not explicitly say how validity and reliability were determined. The study design appears to be logically constructed to measure the impact of language framing on public opinion, which contributes to its face validity. The large sample size, and the random assignment of participants to different versions of the survey question increase the reliability of the study. If the author had developed the instruments, he could have proved validity and reliability through various means such as expert review, pilot testing and statistical analysis. For example, he could have conducted a pilot study to assess whether the survey questions effectively captured the attitudes and beliefs of the participants, and he could have used statistical methods such as factor analysis to assess the internal consistency of the measures.

In terms of analysis and scoring, the study compares responses between participants who received the question using the term 'affordable housing' and those who received it using the term 'lifecycle housing'. Responses are categorised as supporting, opposing, strongly supporting, strongly opposing and no opinion. Chi-square tests are used to decide the significance of differences in responses between the two groups. For each version of the question, the scoring scheme for analysing 'agree' and 'disagree' responses involves calculating the percentage of respondents in each category. As scoring involves a simple categorisation of responses according to predetermined criteria, inter-rater reliability or agreement is not explicitly mentioned in the study. If multiple raters take part in the coding of responses, inter-rater reliability could be assessed using methods such as Cohen's kappa coefficient to ensure consistency of scoring.

3.4 Procedures for collecting data and conducting the study

A large and growing suburb of Minneapolis, characterised as part of the most dynamically growing region, is the setting for the research described in the article. The description states that the community is typical of suburban areas that are highly resistant to affordable housing, making it a useful setting for testing whether language can influence public opinion. The article warns that the results of this research cannot be generalised to all communities, or even to all suburban communities. The description of the setting is sufficiently detailed to allow to judge its compatibility with the research question and the characteristics of the participants. By providing specific demographic and socio-economic details about the suburb, the article allows to understand the context in which the research is conducted and why this particular suburb was chosen to examine the impact of issue framing on public support for affordable housing.

In terms of data collection and interaction with participants, the description is explicit. The article explains that the city authorities mailed a community survey to a random sample of 2,000 residents and to all eight hundred residents of apartment buildings in the community, resulting in a total of 1,589 completed surveys, an overall response rate of 56.75 %. The survey includes questions about satisfaction with city services, neighbourhood conditions, traffic, and a specific question about housing policy that was manipulated to use either the term 'affordable housing' or 'lifecycle housing' to evaluate the effect of issue framing. The description mentions that renters made up 16 % of those who returned questionnaires and that their responses were weighted to reflect their true proportion of households in the city. This detailed description of the survey method, including the randomisation of question wording and the adjustment for renter responses, provides a clear understanding of how the data was collected and how the interaction with participants was structured to ensure the reliability and validity of the research findings.

3.5 Analysis of the data

The analysis schemes presented in the article reflect the research question, problem statement and hypothesis. The problem statement finds the potential stigmatisation associated with the term 'affordable housing' and aims to evaluate whether reframing the issue can influence public opinion. The statistical hypotheses (H1 to H5) are derived from the research question and aim to evaluate specific effects of the different terminology on public support, considering factors such as race, income, and age. The analysis plan is proper for the type of data collected, which includes survey responses from residents of a suburb on their support for affordable housing. The data consists of categorical responses to questions about support for housing policies, demographic information, and comparisons between diverse groups of respondents based on the wording of the questions they received. Where changes are made to the planned analytical strategies, the author provides a rationale for the change and describes the alternative plan. For example, the author discusses the exclusion of certain demographic groups from the analysis due to small sample sizes and acknowledges the limitations of the study in extrapolating to attitudes towards specific projects or policies.

The sample size appears reasonable for the analytical strategy employed, as the study collected responses from over 1,500 residents, providing a large dataset for analysing public opinion on housing policy in the suburb. The design of the study and the analytical strategy take some account of competing explanations. The study acknowledges limitations in separating the effects of race and income due to significant overlap in sample demographics.

4. RESULTS

The author finds a cause, not just a correlation, between the terminology used to describe affordable housing and public support for it. The significant difference in support for housing policy based on the terminology used suggests that the choice of words directly caused a change in public opinion.

There are alternative interpretations of the results. It could be argued that the difference in support is not only due to the terminology but could also be influenced by underlying attitudes towards the concepts implied by the terms. For instance, the term 'lifecycle housing' might evoke a more inclusive and less stigmatised view of housing needs that spans distinct stages of life, while the term 'affordable housing' might be more associated with poverty and race, triggering negative biases. Another interpretation could be that the term 'lifecycle housing' was simply less familiar to respondents, and therefore less likely to evoke strong negative reactions compared to the more commonly understood and potentially stigmatised term of 'affordable housing'.

The findings of the study are not highly generalisable due to several limitations. The research was conducted in a single, affluent, predominantly White suburb, which limits the ability to generalise the findings to other demographic and geographic contexts. The responses of the surveyed population may differ significantly from those in more diverse or less affluent communities. The research acknowledges that while renaming the concept of affordable housing can influence widespread support in a survey context, this may not necessarily translate into support for specific affordable housing projects or policies. The gap between principle and practice, where individuals may support a concept in theory but not its implementation in their community, further limits the generalisability of the findings. While the study offers valuable insights into how issue framing can affect

public support for housing policies in a specific context, caution should be exercised in applying these findings to other populations or situations without further research. The effectiveness of renaming or reframing policies as a strategy to gain public support may vary depending on the context, including demographic, geographic, and socio-economic factors, as well as the specific issue being addressed.

5. CONCLUSION

The author clearly tells his argument and hypotheses at the beginning. The wording used to describe a policy has a significant impact on public acceptance of that policy, particularly in a predominantly White, affluent American suburb. The hypotheses are explicitly said, providing a clear basis for the purpose of the study. To support his argument, the author provides reasonable premises. These include background on the impact of issue framing on public opinion and policy outcomes, the specific context of opposition to affordable housing in American suburbs, and a detailed explanation of the research design and method. The premises are supported by a survey which shows a meaningful change in public opinion based on the terminology used, lending plausibility to the argument of the author. The theoretical position on issue framing and its influence on public opinion is justified and appears right.

The article references a wide range of literature that supports the concept of issue framing and its implications for policy acceptance, showing a solid theoretical framework. The author acknowledges the limitations of his research, particularly in its applicability to actual projects or policies beyond the scope of the survey. Within the argument itself, there is a less explicit recognition of bias. The implied assumption includes the idea that the opinions of suburban residents can be significantly affected by terminology alone, without changing the substance of the policy. It is also assumed that the stigmatisation of the term 'affordable housing' is largely the result of race and class prejudices of wealthy, suburban Whites. Each supporting premise is supported by evidence from the survey results, showing clear statistical differences in support for 'affordable housing' versus 'lifecycle housing'. The literature drawn upon spans political science, urban planning, and sociology, showing a well-researched foundation. The author may have overlooked literature directly questioning the effectiveness of terminological changes without addressing underlying social and economic inequalities.

Problematic argumentation techniques such as slippery slopes or logical fallacies do not appear to be used by the author. The argument is logically constructed. Each point builds on the last, leading to the conclusion that wording has a significant impact on policy support. Key issues that may be overlooked include the wider social and economic factors that contribute to the stigmatisation of affordable housing, and how these might be addressed beyond just rebranding. The long-term effectiveness of changing terminology as a strategy for increasing policy acceptance is not professionally researched. The author makes some generalisations, particularly about the attitudes of white non-Hispanic respondents and the uniformity of the effect across different demographic groups. These generalisations have some support in the data presented but could receive help from more in-depth exploration of the nuances within these groups.

The conclusions drawn by the author directly address the original question posed about the impact of language on public support for policies. The choice of language significantly influences public opinion on the issue of affordable housing. When the term 'lifecycle housing' is used instead of 'affordable housing', there is a substantial increase in support among respondents, particularly among White, non-Hispanic individuals. This highlights the importance of understanding and addressing these dynamics in policy debates, suggesting that issues of race and class are linked to public beliefs of particular policies. The article shows that issue framing can have a substantial impact on public support for policies. The use of a different term leads to a significant shift in opinion, suggesting that proper framing could increase policy options and gain more public support. Other conclusions that might be proposed based on these research could include the need for continued adaptation. The article suggests that in order to build public support for policies, language and framing strategies need to be continually adapted as public attitudes towards certain terms may change over time. While the article focuses on the impact of language, it also highlights the complexity of public opinion, which may be influenced by factors beyond just framing, such as individual demographics and socio-economic status.

While the article offers valuable insights, the author acknowledges limitations, such as the gap between widespread support for a principle and support for specific policies. The findings may not be generalisable to all communities, but the study highlights the importance of issue framing in political debates. It suggests that careful attention to language can shape public opinion.

The results and findings of the study are presented in a structured manner, with statistical analysis supporting the hypotheses. The author effectively discusses the implications of his findings, acknowledging limitations and suggesting avenues for future research. The arguments presented by the author are logical, well supported, and relevant to the research problem of examining the impact of issue framing on public support for affordable housing. Comparing the conclusions of the author with findings from other studies would require examining similar research on issue framing and public opinion in different contexts. Nevertheless, the conclusions are in line with research in political science and policy studies, which also emphasises the importance of language and framing in shaping public attitudes and policy impacts.

From the author's perspective, next questions to be answered might include the long-term effects of reframing or renaming:

- How do changes in language and framing strategies affect public opinion over time?
- Are there sustained shifts in support, or do attitudes revert to earlier levels?
- The intersectionality should also not be disregarded:
- How do factors such as race, class, and gender intersect with language and framing effects?
- Are there differences in how various demographic groups respond to different framing strategies?
- From an external perspective, more questions that might come to mind include the effectiveness of alternative terms and policy implications:
- Are there other alternative terms to 'lifecycle housing' that could be effective in changing public opinion?
- How do different terms resonate with different demographic groups?
- Beyond public opinion, how do language and framing strategies affect policy outcomes, such as funding allocations or legislative decisions?
- Are there cases where language change alone has led to significant policy change?

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