



Being(s) framed: The means and ends of framing environmental migrants



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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an evolving typology of frames – filters of sense-making – to unpack how actors are interpreting and responding to the issue of environmental migration. We use frame analysis to draw attention to how a variety of actors define the boundaries of environmental migration, both intentionally and unintentionally, and how this generates interpretations and directions for policy action. In particular, we identify and discuss four unique framings of the environmental migrant notable in popular policy and academic debate: victims, security threats, adaptive agents and political subjects. Although not always consistently deployed by the same actors, and often hybridised, we argue that the four framings highlight different political, ideological and practical beliefs associated with particular interests and normative assumptions. The paper uses a qualitative, interpretive approach suited to understanding over-arching, macrocultural frames. We explore how key actors produce, communicate and legitimise each framing, discuss the ramifications of such and highlight major apparent critiques. We conclude that despite the four framings identified by us, scope of debate concerning environmental migration is marked by continued dynamism. Within this context, the frame perspective may stimulate greater reflexivity about assumptions and blindspots about this complex phenomenon to ground debate and action, in an arena that often relies on high-level and abstract language.

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1. Introduction

Environmental migration policy frameworks have mushroomed, especially in the international environmental and humanitarian policy arenas (Black et al., 2011; Renaud et al., 2007; Warner, 2010). Energy has been invested in defining and characterising environmental migrants to identify, locate and categorise this diverse social group, thereby enabling 'solutions' to the 'problem' of environmental migration. Scant explicit attention has been paid to how and why various conceptualisations have been propagated by different actors (exceptions include Mayer, 2014; Morrissey, 2012). And yet conceptual diversity is evident and, we argue, dependent on how the 'environmental migrant' is framed. Indeed, it is not unusual for actors to make explicit reference to framing. For example, one advocate for environmental

migrants (Randall, 2013) has stated: 'We need a new narrative in which we frame migration as a way for people to adapt to climate change'. The aim of this paper is therefore to show how the concept of framing can be useful for understanding the ways in which the topic of environmental migration is interpreted and contested by different actors. Just as importantly, perhaps, the frames we present also provide a conceptual platform for all actors, including researchers, to engage more reflexively with the issue.

We present four framings of the environmental migrant that have successively emerged in the environmental migration policy sphere. These are as: victim, security threat, adaptive agent and political subject. The four framings are separated here as a heuristic only, and are not understood as reified or static entities. We conceive of frames primarily as filters of sense-making, specifically focusing on how the figure of the environmental migrant has been interpreted and communicated to various audiences. There are already some scholarly contributions warning of the normative assumptions behind particular conceptualisations of environmental migration with consequences for policy

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options (Bettini, 2014, 2013; Felli, 2013; Methmann and Oels, 2015). Our paper builds on this body of work by using the concept of frames to explore comprehensively how actors have interpreted, contested, deployed and intermixed multiple frames in their communications (not necessarily in strategic or conscious ways) with consequences for the scope of policy action. While critiques of dominant approaches to conceptualising environmental migration are becoming more common, there remains a need for analyses that unpack how these conceptualisations get used: by whom, how and to what end? A framing approach brings the analysis to a practice-based level to explore detailed use of language and metaphor, in specific situations, rather than at a broader discursive level.

2. Framing and communication

Broadly speaking, frames organise central ideas of a complex issue, endowing certain dimensions with greater apparent relevance than others (Nisbert, 2010). The myths, narratives and metaphors at the centre of a frame are abstract and general in nature and, to have power, must resonate within a particular culture (and, we would add, sub-culture) (Hertog and McLeod, 2001). Since the early 2000s, the concept of framing has become increasingly deployed in a number of academic fields, most particularly in the study of management and organisations, communication and media, and social movements, though it has also recently been deployed by scholars of environmental change (e.g. Dewulf, 2013; McEvoy et al., 2013). Symbolic interactionist Erving Goffman (1974) is credited with bringing the concept to a broader audience in his book *Frame Analysis*, where he defines frames as the basic element of an individual experience through which a situation is interpreted. Here, we consider framing a useful approach for analysing how the environmental migrant has been interpreted and translated in policy, advocacy and other arenas. The value of a framing approach is to draw attention to ways in which actors both intentionally and unconsciously draw on various cultural resources to define the boundary of an issue. The narrative within a frame can foreclose particular options, while making others appear more rational and reasonable. Importantly, a framing approach focuses the analysis on the *processes* behind how a particular issue is problematised, and how, meaning, can in turn, be mobilised, contested and, ultimately become the basis for decision-making. Framing, to an extent, overlaps with the concept of discourse, but we deploy frame analysis to understand how different interpretations and directions for action are generated in response to a policy issue of concern (in this sense, different frames could be drawn from the same discourse). We take a 'processual' understanding of framing that draws attention to the contextual and dynamic nature of how framings emerge and are communicated within particular fields, but acknowledge that to do full justice to such an analysis would require further empirical research (Snow et al., 2014). In line with a processual understanding, we are less interested in identifying and describing separate frames as an end in itself, and more intent on understanding how these multiple frames have developed and have come to define the scope of contested policy options through various communication mediums.

An important area of framing analysis is the consideration of issues of power. Carragee and Roefs (2004) have argued that framing research has too often neglected issues of power, instead reducing the concept to a broad definition of an issue or a story topic. Further, it is important to attend to the ideological nature and consequences of the framing process (Carragee and Roefs, 2004). Researchers can do this by engaging with social theories of power, paying particular attention to inequalities of resource distribution (cultural, intellectual, political and financial) available

to invest in reproducing frames. Moreover, the micro-dynamics of frame use is important. For example, the way that people draw on particular frames might not be static, whereby they reject or accept a particular frame according to changing interests. It is worth noting that resources available to actors are different in type and effect, so that simply because one frame is no longer being invested in heavily, for example by intellectual resources, it may still remain powerful because of the strength of underlying cultural myths in the field in which it is being pursued. Moreover, power is not always necessarily intentional or coordinated (Foucault, 1982). To explore frames as constitutive of power relations – and bridge the analytical gap between frame and discourse – we examine the 'knowledges', resources and language actors draw on; whose knowledge/s does this include; what communication channels used by different groups; and who is excluded. Finally, the broader discursive field also plays a role in allowing particular groups' framings to succeed over others and these 'discursive opportunity structures' become important in explaining whether or not certain actors can seize such opportunities to re-frame an issue (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014).

3. Methods

In this paper, the concept of framing is used to analyse how the environmental migrant has come to be interpreted by key actors across different sectors and across time. Our focus is on how frames are constructed through language, reasoning, metaphor or abstraction, and how these contribute to multiple understandings of 'managing' the environmental migrant. In line with our interest in power, we also explore the cultural and political dimensions and outcomes of framing and how the framing process 'draw[s] upon a shared store of social meanings' (Reese, 2010). From this perspective, frames do not arise as free-standing entities, but are part of a context dependent 'web of culture' (Reese, 2010). Our frame analysis, therefore, is intended to raise rather than definitively answer questions about 'where do frames reside?' (Reese, 2010). We take an interpretive, qualitative approach to our frame analysis, which is suited to understanding over-arching, macrocultural frames (Reese, 2010).

Multiple frames are observable in the cultural record of various groups. They are used by: people in everyday life as an 'interpretative schema' to make sense of and discuss an issue; by journalists to condense complex events into newsworthy reports; by policy-makers to draw the boundaries around policy options, make decisions and evaluate outcomes; by NGOs to promote and advocate a particular agenda; and by researchers to communicate with each other or a broader audience (Dewulf, 2013; Nisbert, 2010; Nisbert, 2010). In this study, given that environmental migration remains a concept prominent in expert, rather than everyday, domains, we focus primarily on the latter four groups – journalists, policy-makers, NGOs and researchers – and the interactions between them which have contributed to particular framings of the environmental migrant becoming prominent. In relation to the selection of sources, Hertog and McLeod (2001) emphasise the importance of drawing on ideologically divergent sources, as well as a range of different types of texts. 'Texts' are defined in a broad fashion as resources involving all manner of narratives, symbols and images from both primary (e.g. interviews with key informants) and secondary (e.g. news reports, policy documents, websites, documentaries) sources. In this study, we focus on publically available texts only, and the actors from which they emanate (see Table 1), rather than eliciting perceptions directly involved in environmental migration work. These texts are extremely diverse and rich, sufficient to provide a detailed analysis of framings of the environmental migrant. We identified, as a first group, actors and texts which

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