Mental Health News Coverage in Turkish National Newspapers with Respect to Episodic and Thematic Framing: A Retrospective Content Analysis

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Abstract. News framing is a process by which news media highlight, emphasize and place prominence to a certain aspect of a news story. This process is comprised of constructing news narratives to shape the perceptions and attitudes of the audience within the context of communication studies. Thereby, news framing is stated to shape public opinion and understanding through its emphasis of particular aspects of news stories, which may come to mean subtle guiding of the audience interpretations. Episodic and thematic framing constitute two approaches in news frames as suggested by Iyengar. If news is expressed as an episodic event, its focus is on discrete and individual cases, specific incidents, or personal aspects of issues. In contrast, thematically framed news points to a broader trend over time, background information or expert opinions provided concerning the issue being handled. Accordingly, this study aims to elucidate episodic and thematic framing approaches in the news items covered in Turkish print media over a five-year period (2014–2018). A total of 577 news items on mental health and psychological problems published in six Turkish daily newspapers constitute the sample dataset of the study on which the content analyses of framing approaches are conducted. In addition, frequency distributions calculated present the measurement of the most frequently occurring frame types in the newspaper items by the newspaper and year. The results of the study provide an extract of the portrayal of mental health-related news in in Türkiye, while attempting to point a way toward addressing news on a pressing social issue, namely mental health, from a systemic perspective. Based on these considerations and validation through the statistical frequency measurements and framing methods, the study aims at contributing to the understanding of how mental health issues are framed within the theoretical framework of social constructionism and framing applications.

Keywords: News Framing · Episodic and Thematic Framing Approaches · Mental Health News · Content Analysis · Framing Theory Applications · Textual News Data Analysis · Computational Statistical Frequency Measurements · Print News Media · Ethical Journalism · Journalistic Practices · News Media Framing

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Analysis · Frames as Dependent Variables · Qualitative and Quantitative Techniques of Content Analysis · Expert Opinion

1 Introduction

Social constructionism, pioneered by sociologist Berger and philosopher Luckman (1966), is a theory of knowledge and approach in social sciences which in brief states that people develop knowledge of the work in social contexts and much of what they perceive as reality depends on shared assumptions [1]. This theoretical position, which upholds that learning and knowledge are socially created, has become influential towards making sense of reality and social world by questioning the existence of rational and objective knowledge. In that regard, characteristics which are considered to be solely biological (i.e. class, ability, race, gender, and so forth) and immutable are products of definitions and interpretations made by humans and shaped by historical and cultural contexts. Social constructionism, therefore, challenges positivist positions as it is not possible for reality to be self-evident or stable. It cannot be an objective truth either since reality is a product of humans' activities, and their experiences are mediated historically, culturally and linguistically. The last note is related to the view that humans' understanding of the world is influenced by language, symbols and discourse, which also emphasizes the social nature of reality. Along this view, mental distress would be regarded as being situated within specific cultural and historical moments where society's language is the part of the creation of a given 'disorder' [2]. Regarding news, social construction of news perspective relinquishes handling news as an entirely formed and stable thing. Rather, it acknowledges that news is a dynamic entity shaped by the environment. This means that a journalist's personal and education background, workplace arrangements and interactions with society at large over the particular period of time could all affect the construction of news [3]. Based on the social constructionist perspective, different sorts of societal activities and interactions are at the center of how reality is perceived and understood. As a consequence, journalism can be conceptualized as a social practice, with journalists acting as critical social actors who influence the way news stories are represented [4]. Other factors like ideological impacts, professional values and organizational cultures also need to be taken into consideration in the process of construction [5]. In short, the news as is reported in the media is less a reflection of the reality and significance of a situation than a contested space in which the inclusion or exclusion of certain social actors in a story, as well as impacts of journalists themselves, conscious or else, are crucial [6]. These indicate the relevance of social constructionism to different disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, psychology, anthropology education and communication. Correspondingly, social construction of news assumes a sociological standpoint to examine the way working arrangements in the news organizations and professional beliefs shape the expectations for news production.

Framing, in communication, describes the process in which certain aspects of an issue are emphasized, while others are excluded, as put by Entman [7]. Essentially involving selection and salience, to frame refers to select some aspects of a perceived reality and to make them more salient in a communicating text so that a particular problem

definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described can be promoted. Framing is regarded as one of the ways by which media messages assign meanings to issues, linking them with the broader environment. A frame suggests how the issue should be thought about and understood [8]. More concisely, framing has a function of shaping the way the public thinks about an issue through proposing what the issue is about, who the cause is and what is required to be done as a remedy or solution. It is reported that news media can frame the question of responsibility, causing the audience to conclude the reasons for and solutions to social problems [9]. As a consequence of the function of the frames in terms of shaping individual understanding and opinion about an issue by highlighting the specific elements of a broader controversy, a generally complex issue can be reduced down to one or two central aspects [10]. At the previous stages of framing theory, Goffman assumed that framing is an analytical tool through which individuals can actively get engaged in the classification of different events and interpret the meanings of those events [11]. Further on, Gamson developed this concept into the structure of the basic point of practice providing meaning or the formation of a story line with meaningful interpretation [12, 13]. As Goffman states, frames generate a mechanism that enables us to store the realities in our minds in order that we can retrieve them as needed. Through this mechanism, the reality that focuses on a certain frame is contained, whereas the other realities are left out [11]. Besides its classification and simplification function, which is cognitive, all these definitions and explanations also indicate the subtle function of framing mechanism and its somehow manipulative aspect when selective emphasis and attribution of responsibility are at stake in particular. Another argument pointed out is that framing as a part of the culture may guide elites to construct information and influence journalists to select information and present that information in the text, which impacts the attitude and cognition of the audience [14]. Framing, noticeably, relies on the basis of social consensus whose exploration is helpful for having a more profound interpretation of the formation mechanism of frames. In addition, the basis of social consensus holds significance to refine and analyze frames [15]. When all these aforementioned cultural, contextual and linguistic aspects are considered, it can be noted that both social construction and framing consider the role of language and impact of communication in shaping perceptions of reality.

Episodic and thematic approaches to news framing as a model were suggested by Iyengar who stated that news could be expressed as an episodic event or thematic event. The former refers to the conveying of the events as isolated, one-time individual cases with a focus on the personal aspects of the issue. In episodic framing, the individual's experience or a specific event is used for the illustration of the issue. Thematic framing, on the other hand, addresses the part of a broader trend or background information on the topic, which brings up the portrayal of issues through information related to the systemic causes, consequences and trends [9]. Regarding the health problems' coverage, thematic framing would then include statistical trends, expert analyses of contextual conditions, reports on research related to disease prevention and treatment, widespread outcomes as well as presentation of remedies at community level and based on policies to be implemented [16–18].

A large body of communication research has examined how responsibility is attributed for social problems, oriented towards societal- and personal-level consequences of the responsibility attribution since Iyengar's study on responsibility framing [9] and Weiner's work on attribution theory in which the question of responsibility has been among the fundamental notions in understanding human interactions, evaluation of other people as well as policy making processes [19]. The interest in research concerned with frames and responsibility in health communication has been due to their importance in shaping public opinion. Responsibility frames are stated to have the potential to shape the public perception of health issues like diabetes, obesity or mental illness, concerning responsibility attributions for their causes and treatment in particular. To illustrate, the systematic review applied a quantitative content analysis on the published literature, namely articles in peer-reviewed scientific journals, about framing in the field of health communication to provide the description of common topics, characteristics and the use of different types of frames besides the sociological and psychological tendency of framing [20]. The review also addressed the framing effect studies to examine if they contained competitive frames along with gain and loss framing. The way news stories report about health is stated to generate shifts in the perceptions of readers pertaining to problems of health problems. Another review on the studies published between 2004 and 2019 employs different methodological approaches [21]. The content analyses conducted demonstrate that different media attribute frequently (not exclusively) health responsibility to individuals. On the effect scale, despite not being clear-cut pertaining to affective and behavioral outcomes, experimental studies show that policy support is reduced by individual responsibility frames. Another finding of the review is its revealing of some research gaps on responsibility frames related to health since the effects of responsibility frames are understudied and the focus is on noncommunicable diseases like obesity and depression with communicable diseases being paid less attention. The authors also share the finding that the conceptual focus on individual versus societal responsibility based on episodic versus thematic framing could be problematic due to inhibiting a more nuanced understanding of responsibility frames and their effects. An inductive mixed-method computational approach was presented in another study which proposed novel computational tools as for inductive frame identification in another study where the frame elements were demonstrated to be identified through topic modeling, being automatically grouped into frame packages [22].

Continuing with the effects of episodic and thematic framing, the authors of a related study manipulated two variables in a controlled experiment [23]. These variables were the number of sources with their expertise and the framing. The framing was changed from an episodic frame, which is said to be traditional, to thematic frame including information related to context, risk factors, prevention strategies as well as attributions of responsibility. The results of the study indicated that the use of a thematic frame enabled readers to be more supportive regarding public policy changes, prompting them to improve their own health behaviors. Even though the study showed that no change was seen in the attribution of responsibility for health problems, it revealed the positive effect of thematic framing on the perceptions scale of the readers with regard to health problems. The findings of these studies underscore the importance of thematic framing in terms of reflecting a wide-angle lens considering the broader context. Regarding the attributions

of responsibility, the study points towards the concept of audience awareness in thematic framing, which is stated to treat the audience as informed citizens, bringing out critical mode of thinking about societal issues. Framing perspective makes up the topic of another study which examined the coverage of television news about autism based on issues, sources, personal and social responsibility [24]. The last two components mentioned refer to episodic and thematic aspects, respectively. The content analysis covering two decades (from 1990 to 2010) identified that the top three key issues were personal stories, children and cause. As source, doctors were the most interviewed sources that were followed by family and people with autism. As for episodic and thematic aspects, personal (episodic) responsibility frames were more in number compared to the social (thematic) ones.

Regarding the news media coverage of mental health news, there is often association with negative elements. Linking the individuals who experience mental health problems with criminality, violence, unpredictability, unusual acts, irrecoverability, and so on has been shown to be among the common trends in such news media coverage [25–29]. Motivated by the fact that portrayal of mental illnesses negatively by media may contribute to the mental illness stigmatization, while objective portrayals could help improve mental health literacy and reduce stigma, a narrative review of studies on mental illnesses in media is provided and important gaps in research are identified [30].

As an important source of information on different topics, particularly the ones about which individuals have no direct experience or knowledge, newspapers are considered to one of the primary sources of information on different topics. As evidenced by different work, the news items on mental health and psychological problems display negative frames (dangerousness being a very common theme) more compared to positive ones (stories of recovery or accomplishment) [31]. Negative depictions may be influential on different parties and stakeholders since the coverage of health-related information by media is stated to have impact on patients, families, medical professionals, and government officials to a significant extent [32]. In addition, the way news stories report on health issues has the potential of generating shifts in the readers' perceptions of problems [23]. The studies analyzing the depiction of mental health disorders in media in Turkish context seem to be limited in number. One retrospective scanning study deals with the investigation of the perception of the word schizophrenia in 12 Turkish newspapers (2001–2006), revealing that the word is attributed with strong negative perception [33]. Another retrospective study assesses the articles in Turkish newspapers mentioning individuals with mental disorders, presenting the way scope of the news relates to people with mental disorders. The results show that nearly all the reviewed articles were negative toward people with mental disorders with forensic, criminalization and victimization themes being dominant [34]. As shown by research, there needs to be more studies to determine the situation with regard to news media portrayal of mental health and those with mental disorders. Against this motivational aspect and need, the current study has the aim of providing information on the episodic and thematic framing approaches in the national newspapers of Türkiye so that dynamic processes underlying frames and their development can be presented.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides information on the materials and methods. Section 3 addresses the experimental results and discussion. Section 4 presents the conclusion and future directions.

2 Materials and Methods

2.1 Mental Health News Dataset

The newspaper stories about mental health and psychological problems printed over a five-year period (2014–2018) in six daily national newspapers of Türkiye, which are *Hürriyet*, *Milliyet*, *Cumhuriyet*, *Posta, Sabah* and *Sözcü,* accessible through their electronic databases comprise the dataset of this study. The total number of the newspaper stories analyzed corresponds to 577 with the following distribution across the newspapers: *Hürriyet* (n = 187), *Milliyet* (n = 131), *Cumhuriyet* (n = 28), *Posta* (n = 14), *Sabah* (n = 131) and *Sözcü* (n = 86). The number of newspaper stories analyzed by year is as follows: 75 stories in 2014, 127 in 2015, 113 in 2016, 126 in 2017 and 136 in 2018. The newspaper items were selected from the regular news stories related to mental health and psychological issues. The dataset belongs to the dissertation named "News Media Portrayal of Mental Health and Psychological Problems: An Analysis of Daily Newspapers in Turkey". The focus of the news stories is on the portrayal of mental health and those living with this particular condition.

2.2 Methods

Media framing for the current research involves the analysis of media by employing qualitative and quantitative content analysis techniques to assess and describe the frames in the news. Media frames have been treated as a dependent variable to examine how different frames have been used by the newspapers so that specific issues can be presented. It has been analyzed whether a news item has been predominantly presented episodically and thematically, which is Iyengar's concept forming the foundation of the content analysis of the study. The news item was coded as episodically framed if individual-focused matters were foregrounded and as thematically if systemic and societal factors were predominant. If the content covered both aspects of the issue with equal amounts of episodic and thematic content, it was coded mutually episodic and thematic. For cases when no such focus was able to be captured, it was coded as non-applicable (NA).

2.2.1 Media Framing Theory and Methods Related to Frames

Framing analysis is presented as a constructivist approach for the examination of news discourse with the principal focus on news texts' conceptualization into empirically operationalizable dimensions (i.e. script, syntactical, thematic and rhetorical structures) so that proof of the news media's framing pertaining to issues in news texts may be gathered [13]. Media framing involves a process of developing certain interpretation based on problem definition, cause, moral judgment and solution, so it may provide an appropriate method to the question regarding media. In making sense of the real world and everyday life situations, frame analysis provides a systematic account of the

way humans use expectations, which is known as the framing process [35]. According to Goffman, daily life encompasses numerous shifts in frames which are negotiated through the use of social cues [11]. These show the discursive and dynamic aspects of frames. Along these lines, framing research suggests that a symbiotic relationship exists between journalists using frames to support the status quo and news consumers that typically want to be reassured that the status quo will endure with problems being only temporary. This relationship between journalists and consumers may be particularly strong during times when the status quo is challenged severely [35]. The potential of framing theory rests on the focus on communicative processes, and rather than being stable, communication is a dynamic process which include the elements of frame building (how frames emerge) and frame setting (the reciprocal interaction between media frames and audience inclinations) [36].

2.2.2 Textual News Data Analysis with Statistical Frequency Measurements

Textual data signifies the systematically collected materials that are made up of printed, written or electronically published words. Data gathering process for the analysis of text data is a methodology which provides the examination of the content, structure and meaning of a text.

In addition to content analysis, the methods of descriptive statistics have also been used to summarize the sample of this study. To this end, frequency distributions were employed to measure the most frequently occurring frame types in the newspaper items by newspapers and years of publication. The frequency distributions were calculated based on the following formula:

$$P = \frac{F}{N} \times 100\%$$

P refers to the percentage, F denotes the frequency and N is the total number of respondents' frequency. P is obtained by dividing F by N with the result being multiplied by 100 [37–39]. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software program (IBM SPSS Version 26.0) was used for the data analyses of this study [40].

3 Experimental Results and Discussion

The distinction between "episodic" and "thematic" news framing based on Iyengar's classification puts forward that episodic framing presents a concrete event, whereas thematic framing provides the presentation of the story within a context relating to broader social trends and factors [9]. Accordingly, the unit of analysis concerning the news coverage concerning mental health and psychological problems of six national newspapers (*Hürriyet, Milliyet*, *Cumhuriyet*, *Posta*, *Sabah* and *Sözcü*) published in Türkiye over a five-year period (2014–2018) reveals the news stories' episodic and thematic framing modes. Table 1 shows the frequency of episodic and thematic frames in the newspaper items analyzed for the purposes of the study.

As indicated in Table 1, while the frequency of episodic framing corresponds to 44.2%, that of thematic framing is 42.5%. The number of episodic frames is slightly

Table 1. Frequency of episodic and thematic framing.

variable	frequency (f)	percentage (%)
Episodic frames	255	44.2
Thematic frames	245	42.5
Both	72	12.5
Non-applicable	5	0.9

more than that of thematic frames by a difference of 1.7%. Both kinds of frames are seen in 72 of the news items analyzed, corresponding to 12.5%. 5 news items could not be identified as to whether episodic and thematic framing was used.

The type of framing, namely episodic and thematic, analyzed in the newspaper content by the newspapers and the related publication years is depicted in Fig. 1.

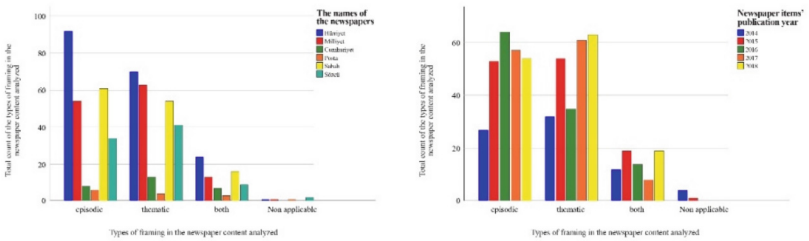

Fig. 1. Histogram depictions of type of framing by the newspapers and publication years.

The year with the highest frequency of episodic framing is 2016 with a percentage of 56.6%, while the year when the highest frequency of thematic framing is observed is 2018 with a percentage of 46.3%. There is no evident upward or downward trend in episodic or thematic framing over the years, which shows that the distribution is stable.

As indicated previously, thematic frames are defined as texts which focus on reports, background data, contextualizing information as well as expert opinion. The inclusion of expert opinions was also analyzed in the study, and the related frequency results are presented in Table 2.

As Table 2 presents, psychiatrists make up the highest frequency. Their opinions were provided in 99 of the newspaper items analyzed, which corresponds to 17.2%. Legal professionals' opinions follow those of psychiatrists with a percentage of 6.9%. Medical doctors' opinions (5%) are slightly more than the ones of psychologists or psychological counselors (3.6%). Opinions of the academics were observed to be the lowest (1.2%) based on the frequency analyses conducted. Although not indicated in Table 2, it can additionally be noted that in 381 of the news items analyzed which make up 66% of the dataset, no expert opinion was included.

Previous research on news media coverage demonstrates that public health issues are generally framed episodically as individual problems which can be solved by individual action [16, 17, 41–43]. These studies are concerned with childhood nutrition

Table 2. Frequency of expert opinions.

expert	frequency (f)	percentage (%)
Psychiatrist	99	17.2
Legal professional	40	6.9
Academic	7	1.2
Psychologist/Counselor	21	3.6
Physician (MD)	29	5.0

policies, obesity, public health advocacy and intimate violence reporting. Parallel with these findings, episodic framing is stated to be more common in the news coverage of social issues, and Western news media are observed to be using episodic framing frequently while covering social problems [44]. Poverty is the social problem addressed in the aforementioned study. Regarding mental health problems, it is shown that depression has been framed more thematically in Chinese newspapers compared to American newspapers [18]. The results of the current study are in line with the findings that Western media use more episodic frames while addressing social issues. The frequency of episodic framing is at 44.2%, corresponding to 255 in a total of 577 news items. This frequency is slightly more than that of thematic framing at 42.5%, corresponding to 245 news items (see Table 1). Even though the difference is not significant, episodic framing is found to be more frequent statistically, which supports the findings of the previous literature.

It is recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) that mental health should be integrated into primary care, and such integration would be successful if mental health can be incorporated into health policy and legislative frameworks with the support of senior leadership, ongoing governance and adequate resources. It is further noted that primary care for mental health requires coordination with a network of services on different care levels to be complemented by broader health system development. This last note on 'broader' is reflected in thematic framing of news which has a systemic outlook toward social issues addressing the background data, expert opinion and contextualization of information. Even though episodic stories are said to initially grab the readers' attention, it is the thematic stories that are better to confer information and suggest policy solutions to the readers. As demonstrated through the research on alcohol problem, thematically-framed stories can lead the readers to focus on solutions that involve policy makers and public institutions [45]. Regarding problems like immigrant health, smoking, obesity and diabetes, another study revealed that a thematic frame, including information on context, prevention strategies, risk factors, and social attributions of responsibility, made readers be more supportive of public policy changes, while also encouraging them to improve their own health behaviors [23].

With regard to sources, medical experts, nonmedical experts and research documents are stated to be significantly more likely to be used as sources in thematic stories than in episodic ones [46]. As demonstrated by earlier research, more medical experts are used as sources than nonmedical experts [31], which supports the concept of medicalization

of mental health news. A relevant content analysis of newspapers revealed that nearly all expert medical opinions were from psychiatrists, and a strong emphasis was placed on hospitalization and medication as treatments [25]. This observation is also in line with the findings obtained by the present research whose frequency analyses have shown that the psychiatrists' expert opinions were used most as sources in 99 of the news items (17.2%). Physicians' opinions ranked the third mostly occurring source in 29 new items (5%) (see Table 2). Since health information is complex, journalists rely on sources for explanations if they lack adequate background. In addition, sources are used for giving perspective and balance to a news story in the building of frames and for the generation of story ideas. Overall, experts, sources and referrals are employed as important elements of responsible journalism in order that unbiased and accurate news can be generated.

4 Conclusion and Future Directions

Media framing helps to shape our understanding of the meaning of news events, often problematically. Considering that health information is sensitive and not easy to address, it is important to build frames by giving an unbiased perspective and balance to a news item. Yet, it is not always possible to achieve this kind of accuracy and balance since news framing by journalists is every so often dependent on the availability of various sources of information and specific attributes thereof, which are subject to shifts over time, influenced by new events and changing conditions. Amid these multiple factors, journalists are encouraged to develop comprehensive and informative presentations related to mental issues surrounding the mental system so that readers can be provided with accurate information within the context of general social trends and relevant expert opinions [47]. This point is related to presenting news thematically within context, pointing to a broader trend over time, background information or expert opinions provided concerning the issue at hand. Accordingly, this study has attempted to reveal episodic and thematic framing approaches in the news items covered in six Turkish daily newspapers over a five-year period between 2014 and 2018 through content analysis based on Iyengar's concept. A total of 577 news items have been analyzed, and frequency distributions have presented the measurement of the most frequently occurring frame types in the newspaper items by the newspaper and years. Episodic framing has been found to be slightly more frequent than thematic framing by a difference of 1.7%. Related to expert opinions, which is an important part of thematically framed news, it has been revealed that 381 of the news items analyzed, making up 66% of the dataset, has included no expert opinion. Among the experts, psychiatrists' opinions (17.2%) have been included more than the opinions of other sources, which reveals the medicalization of mental health news. The results of this research can provide an extract of the portrayal of mental health-related news in Türkiye to point a way toward addressing news on pressing social issues, like mental health in this case, from a systemic perspective. Based on these considerations and validations enabled by the statistical frequency measurements and framing methods employed, the study can contribute to the understanding of how mental health issues are framed within the theoretical framework of social constructionism and framing applications.

Mental health disorders affect millions of people worldwide, and they may lead to permanent harm if left untreated. Negative media portrayals may perpetuate stigma

and discourage some individuals from seeking treatment. On the other hand, media can also serve as a collaborator to challenge public prejudices by reflecting positive portrayals on people with mental illness, providing factual information based on the analyses of contextual conditions, accurate data and experts' opinions as well as reports on research concerning disease prevention, treatment, remedies and policies that can be implemented. Future work can be directed to focus on nuances of framing and their effects on the audiences so that guidelines can be prepared in detail for the presentation of mental health-related news. Based on the findings to be obtained from further work, application-oriented research can open up new directions towards responsible and ethical journalistic practices.

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