The framing of violence among family members or (former) intimate partners between ‘gender-based universality’ and ‘culture-based peculiarity’ - A struggle between advocacy coalitions?

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Abstract

This research explores frames of violence among family members or (former) intimate partners and their (re)production and codification at the EU level. It starts from the assumption that such violence may be framed as a phenomenon rooted in cultural patterns and/or as arising from gender-power-relations, and that these two frames are potentially competing. Recently, ‘culture-based’ frames of violence have increasingly been codified, or ‘fixed’, in EU documents.

The main question addressed in this research is if the codification of frames of violence among family members or (former) intimate partners in EU documents can be explained by a competition of advocacy coalitions.

The research draws on the Advocacy Coalition Framework as developed by Sabatier, complemented by concepts developed in frame analyses approaches. The integration of concepts of framing into the Advocacy Coalition Framework proves to provide complementing insights into activities of actors and coalitions and an enhanced understanding of the role of ‘ideas’ and ‘words’ in policy-making processes.

Guided by this theoretical framework with insights obtained from frame analyses of EU documents and acts as well as interviews with EU level actors involved in the framing of violence at the EU level, it is concluded that the frames of violence among family members or (former) intimate partners that are ‘fixed’ in EU documents can only partly be explained by the performance of the actors (re)producing competing frames. Whereas the actors (re)producing a ‘gender-based’ frame can be said to form an advocacy coalition, consisting of a variety of actors in EU institutions and civil society organisations who share the same ‘policy core’ beliefs and coordinate their activities to a significant extent, the actors (re)producing a ‘culture-based’ frame do not cooperate closely enough to be considered an advocacy coalition. However, such a coalition may develop in the future, possibly catalysed by processes of policy-oriented learning.
Whereas the relatively low degree of activity and coordination of the actors (re)producing a ‘culture-based’ frame fails to explain the considerable codification of this frame in EU documents, an analysis of the favourable external factors these actors face – most notably the conservative majorities in the EU and the current economic situation – provide further patterns of explanation.

Also beyond the case study, this research gives interesting insights into frame competitions, particularly by showing that frame competitions take place also within institutions and most notably within the European Commission, which stresses the importance of focussing on individual actors to assess policy processes.