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## Abstract

Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) contends that narratives are the lifeblood of the policy process. NPF is an empirical approach to study the role of policy narratives in policy processes that can be applied to an array of policy issues at multiple scales. To understand the structure and content of the NPF as a framework, we present (i) the genesis of the NPF; (ii) a discussion of NPF's philosophy of the science of narratives; (iii) how NPF defines a narrative; (iv) an examination of NPF's study of policy narratives using three levels of analysis: micro (the individual), meso (the group/coalition), and macro (institutional/cultural); and (v) why the NPF is important to public administration practitioners and those involved in public policy.

Keywords: policy narratives, public policy, policy process, public administration practitioners, ontology, epistemology, narrative, narrative strategies, policy beliefs, Theories of the Policy Process

## Introduction

Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) contends that narratives are the lifeblood of the policy process.

This statement is bold, given the dearth of mainstream policy process theories that shine light on narratives as a factor in policy outcomes, implementation, and designs. Why does the NPF premise that narratives are so powerful? Because as humans, we are, by our very nature, storytellers who impart narratives to both communicate and shape our understanding of the world around us. For example, we have Founding narratives, family tales, and Disney stories that both reflect and form identities at different levels—as a nation, as a group, as an individual. While these stories often have competing or counter-narratives, it is clear that narratives are fundamentally constitutive of the human experience. In public policy, it is tough—impossible, really—to imagine discourse and debate without narratives.

The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) conveys the role of narratives into the empirical study of the policy process. To understand the structure and content of the NPF as a framework that can be applied to an array of policy issues at multiple scales, we begin with the genesis of the NPF, then move to a discussion of NPF's philosophy of the science of narratives. We then delve into how NPF defines a narrative and then examine NPF's approach to the study of policy narratives using three levels of analysis. Finally, we reflect on why the NPF is important to public administration practitioners and those involved in public policy.

## The Genesis Story of the NPF

The 1990s saw a proliferation of narrative scholarship<sup>[1,2,3,4,5,6,7]</sup> centered on how narratives reflect the meanings that various groups bring to bear in policy debates. According to many of the narrative scholars at the time, policy inherently engenders such specific contextual detail that various policy terrains can only be understood through 'thick descriptions' of the meaning-making that narratives illuminate. This qualitative interpretive research (termed 'interpretivist') intentionally pushed against what was considered mainstream, deductively-oriented social science geared toward generalizability, hypothesis testing and falsifiability, and replication. At the same time, the publication of Sabatier's<sup>[8]</sup> first edition of *Theories of the Policy Process* in 1999 signified an important milestone in the study of public policy. Sabatier clearly desired that policy theory be developed with articulated assumptions, conceptual frameworks and testable hypotheses. He intentionally excluded from his book any representation of the 1990s interpretivist work on policy narratives, thus kindling a flurry of critical responses to this omission<sup>[9,10]</sup>.

During this time the originators of the NPF were avidly reading this interpretive narrative scholarship, and these works were influential in early attempts at their narrative research. Yet, journals were roundly rejecting the manuscripts of these NPF-scholars-to-be, with reviewers all pointing to the need for the traditional deductive approach to science. At that time in 2000, the NPF architects also read Sabatier's<sup>[11]</sup> response to the interpretivists' critique, when he famously defended his position by saying that policy theories must meet the standard of "clear enough to be wrong." Agreeing with Sabatier's concerns about generalizability and empiricism and temporarily sidestepping the philosophy of the social sciences debate, the NPF originators published a series of articles<sup>[12,13,14]</sup> using empirical social science techniques (content analysis and statistical analysis) to test whether public consumption documents (aka policy narratives) contain narrative elements and strategies that are reliable, testable concepts. Jones<sup>[15]</sup> developed what would become part of the micro-level of the NPF with his dissertation that involved an experimental design to study climate change policy narratives. In 2010, the publication of "The Narrative Policy Framework: Clear Enough to Be Wrong"<sup>[16]</sup> was a seminal piece that not only named the NPF but also began the conceptualization of NPF as a theoretical framework complete with different levels of analyses and testable hypotheses at each level.

The publication of this article along with the earlier work led NPF originators to be invited by Paul Sabatier to a 2010 conference at University of California-Davis on the future of the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF). This resulted in the publication of an article<sup>[17]</sup> on policy narratives and the policy process which featured how the NPF complements the ACF. As the interest in the NPF grew in the policy community, the NPF authors were invited to present the framework in various venues: a symposium issue on new theories of the policy process in *Policy Studies Journal*<sup>[18]</sup> and in Sabatier and Weible's *Theories of the Policy Process*<sup>[19]</sup>. Finally, the NPF saw the publication of the first international collection of NPF studies in *The Science of Stories: Applications of the Narrative Policy Framework to Policy Analysis*<sup>[20]</sup>.

In sum, NPF's central claim that narratives are meaning-making tools used in policy debates to influence policy process and outcomes was inspired by our interpretivist colleagues; the development of NPF as a framework based in the realm of generalizability and hypothesis testing was inspired by Sabatier and other policy process scholarship. As such, the NPF has been intentionally developed as a framework that both sees narratives as social constructions *and* tends to employ methods of traditional policy science.

## NPF's Philosophy of the Science of Narratives

The tensions in 1999 between traditional mainstream and interpretive approaches to public policy are reflections of a larger discourse in the academe surrounding different philosophies of social science. These are not insignificant debates, because what constitutes knowledge is typically based on shared assumptions within disciplinary studies. The philosophy of social science is the study of the normative assumptions that anchor the practice of social science inquiry. These assumptions are centered on the perspectives of what constitutes truth or reality (ontology) and what constitutes knowledge or understanding reality (epistemology). With Sabatier's rejection of interpretivist work as 'legitimate' social science, the studies of narratives were viewed primarily as the domain of interpretivists. However, NPF has changed the landscape of narrative research in fundamental ways, starting with a new perspective on the philosophy of the science of narratives.

Ospina and Dodge<sup>[21]</sup> describe the assumptions that anchor the early interpretive studies of narratives as a subjective ontology and a constructivist epistemology. Broadly stated, this means that this line of narrative inquiry does not claim nor aim to document one objective true reality, but rather "to capture individual interpretations of reality" (p. 1285). In turn, these subjective realities are understood through a constructivist epistemology, whereby knowledge of these subjective realities is apprehended through a deeply contextual understanding of meanings that are communicated through stories and derived from

people's worldviews, lived experiences, and cultural norms. Each interpretation of a narrative is a unique manifestation of the interaction between the reader and the text. Thus, the study of narrative from this perspective means that the goal is to understand meaning-making situationally, and interpretation is possible only through understanding individual contexts. In short, each individual comes to terms with their context in such a specific way that their reality must be uniquely understood on its own terms.

While NPF's philosophy of the science of narratives diverges from interpretive narrative scholars, remember that the NPF originators read the 1990s body of interpretive research as it emerged and were heavily influenced by these works. The assumption that NPF shares with the interpretivist narrative scholars is that meanings are socially constructed and communicated in stories. While the NPF does believe that there are objective realities such as physical pain or gravity, the NPF also philosophically asserts that "all concepts are not created equal and thus vary in their stability"<sup>[22]</sup> (pg. 4). For example, concepts such as citizenship, marriage, or the environment are the epicenter of policy issues such as immigration, gay marriage, and climate change, and the meaning of these concepts are contentiously deliberated. The NPF's espousal of a subjective ontology means that narratives are constructions of different policy realities.

However, the NPF departs from interpretivists and aligns with mainstream social science on the use of an objective epistemology. NPF scholars believe that there are characteristics of narrative—form and content—that can indeed be objectively measured across varying policy realities communicated in narratives. In other words, competing policy narratives will *both* use universal elements of narrative (form: e.g., characters, plot) and account for the specific content of narratives in a way that maximizes narrative content generalizability across specific contexts (content: e.g., belief systems and strategy). Thus, the NPF can study subjective realities (meaning-making policy realities) with an objective epistemology (narrative form and content). To be clear, the NPF does not claim that there is one "true" narrative, but, rather, that such variation in policy realities can be objectively studied; in other words, the scientific process can be applied to better understand the diverse narratives people use to represent their variable but not random understandings of public policy.

## How Does NPF Define a Narrative?

The next layer to peel back in understanding the NPF's approach to narrative research centers on what constitutes a narrative. In concert with other narrative scholarship, the NPF approaches narratives in terms of form and content. However, NPF's approach to form and content in light of our philosophy of the science of narrative does not conform to traditional narrative perspectives.

Narrative form consists of elements specific to policy narrative structures: setting, characters, plot, moral of the story<sup>[19]</sup>. Narrative form is what makes a narrative recognizable and different from other communications such as chronologies, lists, frames, and memes. It is, in part, through narrative form that the NPF derives its objective epistemology, as narrative form can be objectively measured across different policy contexts<sup>[16,22]</sup>. Policy narratives (e.g., interest group letters, speeches, letters to the editor, some media accounts) tend to be brief and vary in 'narrativity'<sup>[23]</sup> or how many narrative elements are present in a given policy narrative. Thus, in policy debates, for a policy narrative to be considered a narrative, at a minimum there must be at least one character and some reference to the moral of the story or policy solution<sup>[18]</sup>.

In the space of narrative content lives much of the meaning-making in narratives; content (or at least some portion of it) is unique to the policy topic and specific policy landscapes. For example, the content of a story about climate change policy is substantively different from the content of a narrative about immigration policy. Both narratives employ measurable narrative elements (form) such as characters and moral, but the content for each is quite different. Importantly, policy narratives aimed at addressing the

same policy issue also contain references to the same content or narrative objects, but the meaning ascribed to them is often different. For example, immigration policy narratives often reference ‘citizenship’; however, what citizenship means with each reference may vary between legal arguments, community membership, and refugee status. This variation in meaning is not random. Recipients of the narrative will interpret the concept of citizenship in specific ways informed by their culture, beliefs, and identities that if approached carefully can be gauged ahead time by the researcher. The NPF refers to this problem as the problem of narrative relativity<sup>[22]</sup> and addresses it by leveraging well-tested social scientific theories related to policy beliefs and communication strategies to objectively measure these subjective narrative realities. In applying belief system and communication theories, the NPF attempts to determine what a concept such as citizenship is allowed to mean by both those communicating the concept and those having the concept communicated to them. Two examples of theoretical belief system measures used in NPF scholarship are Cultural Theory<sup>[24]</sup> and compact—national theory of federalism<sup>[25]</sup>. Similarly, narrative strategies such as the distribution of costs and benefits are also used to objectively measure the policy terrain of varying content. In sum, NPF understands that form and content are the building blocks of narrative, but *how* we understand and measure form and content is anchored in our philosophy of the science of narrative that takes a scientific approach to subjective realities.

## How Narratives Work

In order to best capture the variety of ways narratives function, the NPF describes how narratives operate at three levels: micro level (individual), meso level (group or coalition), and macro level (institution or culture) (see Table 1).

Table 1. The Narrative Policy Framework

	<b>Level of Analysis</b>	<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Methods</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>Interacting Levels of Analysis</b>	Micro: the individual	What influence do narratives have on individual preferences and cognitions? What influence do narratives have on individual decision-making?	experiments, interviews, focus groups, cluster and factor analysis	McBeth et al. <sup>[26]</sup> Shanahan et al. <sup>[27]</sup>
	Meso: groups, coalitions	How do groups construct policy narratives? What is the effect of policy narratives in the policy process?	content analysis, network analysis, regression	Crow and Berggren <sup>[28]</sup> Gupta et al. <sup>[29]</sup> Heikkila et al. <sup>[30]</sup> Kear et al. <sup>[31]</sup> O’Bryan et al. <sup>[32]</sup>
	Macro: Institutions/culture	What are the conditions under which macro-level narratives develop and change?	American political development, historical analysis	Ney <sup>[33]</sup>

At the micro-level, the NPF has developed hypotheses focusing on the effects of narratives on the individual. At this level, narratives are used both to communicate (e.g., persuade and manipulate) and to structure cognition, or how individuals think. To best understand how these processes work, it is necessary to understand some of the assumptions regarding how people as ‘homo narrans’ function<sup>[19]</sup> (pp. 230-233). Informed by several social science theories, the NPF assumes that people make decisions and understand the world around them with limited time and information (bounded rationality). The result is that people rely on information shortcuts (heuristics) to process information and make decisions. With both bounded rationality and heuristics at work for individuals, narratives then play key structuring roles in people’s thinking (narrative cognition) and communication. First, narratives serve as a means for

organizing thinking, memories and emotions<sup>[34]</sup>. Second, narratives serve as the primary way in which we communicate amongst ourselves, leading to persuasion and manipulation. Thus, NPF micro-level analyses focus on the influence of narratives on individual preferences, cognitions, and decisions.

At the meso-level, the NPF has developed hypotheses that focus on the effect that a group's policy narratives have on the policy process. The space in which policy narratives are generated, contested, and disseminated is referred to as the agora by the NPF. Narratives in this 'agora narrans'<sup>[19]</sup> are strategically constructed to persuade and manipulate. For example, a coalition may construct a narrative to try and attract support from a targeted group (expand the scope of conflict<sup>[35]</sup>) by identifying the group as victims of an undesired policy. Another narrative strategy used to try to win in policy battles is to assign blame (intentional or inadvertent causal mechanism<sup>[5]</sup>) to a villain that is branded as responsible for a policy problem who, consequently, needs to be defeated. In addition to these narrative strategies, narratives also have embedded policy beliefs, or core normative values, that are theorized to serve as the bedrock for a coalition's cohesion<sup>[36]</sup>. For example, a coalition working on passing a climate change policy that will regulate carbon emissions likely shares a core value about the preservation of nature being as important as human wellbeing. However, some NPF scholarship has found that a plurality of policy core beliefs in one advocacy coalition may actually serve to attract additional groups into conflicts<sup>[18]</sup>. Thus, meso-level analyses focus on the power of narrative strategies in achieving policy goals as well as on the role that policy beliefs and policy narratives play in coalition formation, maintenance, and change.

At the macro-level, the NPF focuses on how macro policy narratives embedded in cultures and institutions shape public policy. Macro-level narratives are the foundation from which competing micro and meso narratives spring. For example, competing narratives in the debate over the installation of windmills off the U.S. eastern seaboard<sup>[18]</sup> were primarily both within the macro-level economic progress narrative. The supporting coalition penned narratives around the idea that the installation of these windmills would lead to less reliance on foreign oil and was a matter of national security (without which would threaten our economic progress); the opposing coalition wrote that the installation of the windmills would gravely affect the fishing industry and aquatic life (e.g., seals) that tourists come to see. Interestingly, macro narratives also serve to create boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable policy narratives. For example, in this windmill policy issue, narratives from the Native American community fell on deaf ears as their policy narratives were centered on the sacred grounds of the harbor and other cultural references as victims—a narrative that the broader American culture and existing institutions do not readily embrace. Thus, narrative outside the boundaries of the dominant macro narratives are by definition illegitimate, silenced voices exiled to a discourse wilderness.

## The NPF and the Practitioner

The 1990s was a time when there was concern over the power of narratives and how a new policy environment characterized by hyper-reality (24 hour news cycles, talking heads, the proliferation of narratives and the decline of discourse) would impact the work of public administrators<sup>[37]</sup>. The NPF, of course, was in part born of this work and concern. As such, the NPF is an approach to public policy that has direct importance for practitioners (public administrators, policy analysts, and other experts involved in the formation, adoption, and implementation of public policy). This usefulness is best described in terms of the previously mentioned micro and meso-levels of analyses.

At the meso-level, the NPF provides the practitioner with knowledge of how policy narratives are generated by interest groups, the media, and elites and how they influence and strategically shape the public policy process. The NPF helps practitioners understand both how policy narratives are reflections of policy beliefs and how policy beliefs shape individual and group behavior. For example, McBeth, Shanahan et al.<sup>[38]</sup> show that practitioners can use the NPF to understand how a group's policy beliefs remain stable or change over time and thus practitioners can have a better understanding of what

motivates different groups to be involved in the policy process. Part of understanding how groups use narrative in the policy process also includes understanding under what circumstances groups and individuals use policy narrative to shape the scope of policy conflict. In terms of understanding these circumstances, the NPF can help practitioners understand when and how competing groups in a policy controversy strategically deploy narratives to entice or prohibit new groups and individuals from entering a policy conflict. The NPF has been especially helpful in this regard when problems have been identified as wicked or intractable<sup>[38]</sup>.

At the micro-level, the NPF can provide guidance for practitioners about how different policy narratives influence individual opinion and thus might well provide valuable insight into how specific decision-makers and stakeholders are likely to behave, given certain policy narrative configurations. For example, Jones<sup>'[39]</sup> work on climate change policy narratives reveals that narrative structure--particularly the use of a hero character--influences assessments of risk and policy preferences. Similarly, Lybecker, McBeth et al.<sup>[40]</sup> show that a recycling narrative grounded in heroic elements of duty-based citizenship is more powerful than a villainous narrative in terms of influencing support for recycling policy. This battery of hero findings has been validated at the meso-level, where Shanahan, Jones et al.<sup>[18]</sup> show that groups that use themselves as heroes in a policy narrative (termed the 'Angel-Shift') are more likely to achieve their goals. Thus, understanding the role of the hero in policy narratives could help practitioners move beyond the abstract world of research to real world policy situations. For example, McBeth, Lybecker et al.<sup>[26]</sup> suggest that practitioners use real heroes to build policy support for recycling. Relying on a micro-level NPF study of recycling opinion, their data show that both conservatives and liberals support recycling if the hero in a recycling policy narrative is exercising individual responsibility or showing good business sense. Thus, using stories about real individuals that exhibit these traits is a way to positively package recycling for a broad ideological audience. We recognize that public administrators are involved in telling stories in today's policy world. We also recognize, however, that using NPF research to construct policy narratives for the purpose of shaping support or outcomes raises important ethical questions.

The first of these ethical issues relates to whether or not deploying policy narratives in this way means abandoning practitioner commitments to science. We have stringently argued elsewhere that applying the NPF in a practitioner setting does not and should not mean abandoning scientific evidence and facts<sup>[26]</sup>. Instead, the use of stories can be used in addition to science and evidence in a way that appreciates the importance of beliefs and values in public policy and how these play into an individual's processing of evidence and facts.

Despite the emerging NPF guidelines on the ethical use of narratives, the use of policy narratives by practitioners, elected officials, policy actors, and others for what will often be seen as political purposes will continue to raise important ethical debates<sup>[32]</sup> within the NPF community. Shanahan, Jones et al.<sup>[41]</sup> address this concern head on in the concluding chapter of *The Science of Stories*. They ask:

Could a young and aspiring David Axelrod or Frank Luntz use the NPF to build perfect narratives that could then be used by elected officials, think-tanks, interest groups, and others to influence (or manipulate) public opinion? In other words, there are ethical concerns about the scientific study of policy narratives. We ask whether we are mad scientists building a Frankenstein monster who once unleashed, will harm rather than help democracy? (pg. 258)

Our answer to these questions is found in the very process and endeavor that is the NPF. The scientific study of policy narratives (the NPF) in public administration and public policy classrooms and programs pulls away the fig leaf that veils the processes of political meaning-making, revealing biases, unearthing manipulations and serendipitous persuasion alike; while certainly there is unethical activity behind the leaf, exposing these processes is not unethical in its own right. Rather the right or wrongness in the deployment of policy narratives is bound to and by the contexts in which they are deployed, the intentions

of the actors deploying them, and the consequences of the outcomes wrought by specific policy narrative configurations. In our assessment, a better scientific understanding of narrative in public policy can only help practitioners and citizens by providing a better understanding of the power of narratives in public policy; in so doing, such an understanding will necessarily expose the ethical obligations that must evolve concurrently to NPF's explanations. Our hope has always been that such an endeavor will prove beneficial for democracy.

## Conclusion

If narratives are the lifeblood of the policy process, we had better understand their power. The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) is a systematic empirical approach to understanding the role policy narratives play in the creation, adoption, implementation, and evaluation of public policy. As such, the NPF is a framework for both scholars and practitioners to explore the crucial role that narratives play and how scholars and practitioners can better describe, explain, and predict the use of policy narratives in the important policy issues of our times.

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## Table in Text

Table 1. The Narrative Policy Framework

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