A Narrative Policy Framework: Clear Enough to Be Wrong?

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Narratives are increasingly subject to empirical study in a wide variety of disciplines. However, in public policy, narratives are thought of almost exclusively as a poststructural concept outside the realm of empirical study. In this paper, after reviewing the major literature on narratives, we argue that policy narratives can be studied using systematic empirical approaches and introduce a "Narrative Policy Framework" (NPF) for elaboration and empirical testing. The NPF defines narrative structure and narrative content. We then discuss narrative at the micro level of analysis and examine how narratives impact individual attitudes and hence aggregate public opinion. Similarly, we examine strategies for the studying of group and elite behavior using the NPF. We conclude with seven hypotheses for researchers interested in elaborating the framework.

KEY WORDS: narrative policy framework, NPF, policy narratives, narrative methodology, structuralism, poststructuralism, theories of the policy process

Introduction

During the summer of 2009, YouTube, blogs, cable news shows, and newspaper columns were abuzz with health-care reform "debate," and much of the discussion focused on "death panels," socialism, Hitler, and fascism. Many observers and commentators questioned how these ideas rationally relate to the debate over reform. Yet such ideas are powerful in shaping public opinion and ultimately in shaping governmental action. Many of these slogans were elements of larger policy narratives (or stories) that were intentionally used by opponents of health-care reform attempting to derail President Obama's reform intentions. Supporters of health-care reform countered as the Obama Administration deployed the power of narrative in building support for health-care reform by soliciting personal stories from citizens (http://stories.barackobama.com/healthcare).

A narrative is a story with a temporal sequence of events (McComas & Shanahan, 1999) unfolding in a plot (Abell, 2004; Somers, 1992) that is populated by dramatic moments, symbols, and archetypal characters (McBeth, Shanahan, & Jones, 2005) that culminates in a moral to the story (Verweij et al., 2006). Narrative, understood here as both a particular category of communication and a method of cognitive

organization (see Herman, 2002, 2003a, 2009), functions as a seemingly universal device for individuals to sharpen certain elements of reality while leveling others (Gilovich, 1991). Indeed, there is increasingly persuasive empirical evidence to support such a claim as narrative is found to be a primary means by which individuals organize, process, and convey information (see, for example, Berinksy & Kinder, 2006; Gerrig & Egidi, 2003; Klein, 2003). In fact, narrative cognition may be fundamental to a meaningful human existence. Neuroscience research has approximated the neural network in the human brain responsible for narration (Troiani, Ash, Reilly, & Grossman, 2006; Young & Saver, 2001) and determined that brain injuries or degeneration such as that caused by Alzheimer's disease (Ash, Moore, Vesely, & Grossman, 2007), resulting in the loss of narration, is more problematic than the loss of other cognitive functions such as kinesthetic, mathematical, or linguistic (Young & Saver, 2001). This research finds that the loss of the ability to perceive reality through narrative structures results in a patient's loss of identity as they lose the ability to both narratively recall the past and construct the future. Given the overall importance of narrative to human communication and cognition, how does this concept translate into the scientific study of public policy? As we shall argue, narrative, as an important input in the policy process, could be translated better.

The power of narratives in shaping beliefs and actions is supported in a variety of academic literatures including communications (e.g., McComas & Shanahan, 1999), marketing (e.g., Mattila, 2000), neuroscience (e.g., Ash et al., 2007), and psychology (e.g., Gerrig & Egidi, 2003). These disciplines study narratives as an empirical concept, using traditional methodologies to build explanatory theories of narratives. Yet despite the apparent power of stories in public policy (design, formation, and implementation), policy studies has largely remained on the sidelines of the empirical study of narratives, choosing instead to leave this important topic to other disciplines. While stories are central to the important contributions of the postpositivist school of public policy (e.g., Fischer, 2003), positivists have generally failed to provide methodological alternatives to the study of narratives. In this article, we introduce a "Narrative Policy Framework" (NPF) as a quantitative, structuralist, and positivist approach to the study of policy narratives. We see our framework not as a threat to postpositivist approaches to narrative but rather as an acknowledgment that narratives matter and that by studying them in a systematic empirical manner, positivists and postpositivists can engage in more productive debates over how stories influence public policy.[2]

Following two decades of policy change theory dominated by the works of Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (e.g., 1993), Kingdon (e.g., 1997), and Baumgartner and Jones (e.g., 1993) and despite advances indicating the importance of narrative to human cognition and communication, research involving narratives and public policy remains an outlier despite calls for new theoretical directions in policy theory (John, 2003). While work on narratives does appear in mainstream policy journals (e.g., Hampton, 2004, 2009; McBeth, Shanahan, Arnell, & Hathaway, 2007), much of the work on narrative is found in a variety of interdisciplinary journals where such work fails to connect to a larger audience of policy researchers. In short, narrative remains a mysterious and elusive concept in policy theory, too associated with

literary theory, too superfluous to underpin theory building, and too nebulous to facilitate the empirical investigation of policy processes and outcomes.

In the 1990s, there was considerable debate over a positivism and postpositivism dichotomy (e.g., Fischer, 1998; Weimer, 1998) including a symposium in the *Policy Studies Journal*. Much of this debate focused on differing views of science. Weimer (1998) shows appreciation of the postpositivist approach but clearly states that prediction is a central strength of positivist and, by extension, quantitative research. Fischer (1998), while making the case for postpositivism or qualitative research, shows an appreciation for quantitative research but clearly states that qualitative research is essential because "facts" are, more often than not, social constructions. The division in the field was well defined. This debate is important for our review of the role of narrative in policy theory because policy studies that make narrative a theoretical centerpiece are, more often than not, postpositivist. These scholars claim that the social construction of facts and the primacy of values in the policy process are best understood through an examination of narratives, and have gone so far as to claim exclusive rights to narrative theory (e.g., Dodge, Ospina, & Foldy, 2005). Positivist scholars in public policy appear to have acquiesced without objection as much of the rigorous empirical work on narrative appears outside the field of public policy.

A few years after the *PSJ* Symposium, Paul Sabatier was criticized (by Dudley, 2000; Parsons, 2000; Radaelli, 2000) for excluding postpositivism in his influential 1999 book *Theories of the Policy Process*. Sabatier (2000) responded in direct fashion, arguing that science requires clear concepts, testable hypotheses, and falsification and that by these standards postpositivism has failed to be clear enough to be wrong. We do not want to reopen this debate, nor do we want to dismiss the significant contribution that postpositivists (e.g., Fischer, 2003; Stone, 2002) have made to our understanding of narrative and public policy. On the contrary, we read, use, and appreciate their work. Rather, our goal is to ameliorate historical tensions between these two groups by arguing that in addition to the dominant postpostivist approach, narratives can and should be studied using the standards set out by Sabatier (1999, 2000, 2007, p. 5). It is our contention that narrative scholarship can be clear enough to be wrong.

With the goal of asserting a broad empirical research agenda for narrative in policy studies, this paper proceeds as follows. First, we will make a distinction between structuralism and poststructuralism in the study of narratives, providing central theoretical assumptions and methodologies for each. Second, we will review the policy literature and the use of narrative. Finally, we will make our case for a theoretically driven approach to narrative that is both empirical and falsifiable, suggesting avenues through which such exploration is possible.

Philosophical Foundations and Narrative in Public Policy

Applying a framework to narrative that would satisfy Sabatier's criticisms is difficult as definitions of narrative are contested. On the one hand, structuralist narrative approaches assert that each story has consistent and identifiable compo-

nents from which generalizations can be formed (e.g., Genette, 1983), such as plots and archetypal characters. In literary theory, structuralism is conceived in Aristotle's (1961) *Poetics* and developed through at least two major schools of thought including the Russian formalist approach to literature (e.g., Propp, 1968) and French structural approaches to literary studies that sought universal elements in linguistic structures (e.g., Saussure, 1965). By primarily examining discourse and language, structuralists focus on the text as the primary unit of analysis (Huisman, 2005, p. 39). Common to all structural approaches is that structuralists seek generalizable narrative components applicable across varied contexts (Herman, 2009; McQuillan, 2000).

Poststructuralism emerges as a critique of structuralist accounts of narrative. This critique takes issue with categorizations produced by structuralists, vehemently objecting to any notion that the text can be separated from individual interpretations. For the poststructuralist, human interpretations of narrative are the unit of analysis (Huisman, 2005, p. 39) and each instance of interpretation is unique (e.g., Derrida, 1981). Consequently, traditional goals of generalization and prediction found in structural scholarship are replaced by an agenda seeking to deconstruct narratives for the purpose of revealing hidden ideologies.[3]

Although structural and poststructural distinctions in the study of narrative find their genesis in literary theory, the philosophical orientations of these two camps influence narrative methodologies in the study of public policy. Structuralists follow a positivist methodological approach, while poststructuralists adhere to postpositivist methodologies. In mainstream public policy literature the vast majority of narrative scholarship has been in the poststructural tradition, while only a slight minority of narrative research adheres to structuralism.

At its core, positivism asserts that there is an objective reality that can be measured. Positivists employ systematic and transparent methodological techniques, build testable hypotheses, and tend toward statistical analysis.[4] Paul Sabatier (1999) has led the call for this methodological orientation in public policy by setting forth rigorous prescriptions for building policy theory (pp. 266–70). These include (i) testable hypotheses; (ii) hypotheses testing in varied policy settings; (iii) causal theory; (iv) developing a coherent model of the individual; (v) internal consistency; (vi) using theory and inviting empirical testing from other scholars; and (vii) using multiple theories. The attractiveness of positivism is that it promises to limit bias, promote objectivity, and is "self-consciously error seeking and self-correcting" (Sabatier, 2007, p. 5). Of central importance to this approach is that the researcher must show that findings are based on replicable methodological procedures.

Like its parent philosophical orientation poststructuralism, postpositivism in public policy emerges as a critique of positivism.[5] Much of the criticism of positivism in public policy comes from the subfield of policy analysis. For example, as recent as 2004, Dryzek writes, "positivism/empiricism is a dead duck in the philosophy of science, deader still in the actual practice of science, with a stake through its heart when it comes to social science" (p. 89). Positivistic and empirical research is rejected in public policy by postpositivists for at least three reasons (Fischer, 2003, p. 10). First, because of the normative values found in policy processes and conflict, the reality positivists claim to define is argued to be highly subjective and thus should be

understood in terms of the hidden ideologies they represent. Second, the tendency toward prediction and generalization in positivist and empirical methods, by definition, must ignore important micro-contexts in the process of aggregation. Third, and as a natural outcome of one and two, the use of positivist and empirical methods is argued to unfairly exclude marginalized groups—perhaps deliberately so. Out of these criticisms emerge methods that by and large produce inductive and qualitative case studies that rely heavily on the individual scholar's interpretations. Thus, poststructural narrative techniques appeared a natural fit with postpositivist criticisms and migrated from literary studies to public policy under the umbrella of postpositivism. Consequently, in public policy narrative has become synonymous with postpositivist methods and poststructural philosophical orientations. This need not be the case if one returns to a structural conception of narrative.

Narrative Research and Public Policy

Narrative research plays an increasingly important role in the public policy literature; however, most of the work on narrative is found in interdisciplinary journals. The majority of this work follows a distinctively qualitative and poststructural approach, while a minority has pursued a quantitative and structural approach. In the review that follows we summarize this literature with a focus on how these collective works can direct us toward broader theory and hypotheses. For our purposes we have categorized the literature into two categories. The first, poststructural, is indicative of a general approach in the research design to adhere to a postpositivist ontology and epistemology, inductive, resistant to hypotheses testing, and qualitative in design. In contrast, the structural approach is theoretically deductive, operationalizes narrative structure, tests hypotheses, is cognizant of reliability and falsification, and embraces quantitative methods. The categorizations do not perform perfectly as some research demonstrates characteristics of both categories; nevertheless, these categorizations do provide a valuable heuristic to discuss narrative research in public policy for the broader purpose of specifying a more coherent framework.

Poststructuralist Narrative Approaches and Public Policy

While Kaplan (1986) begins this line of research, we find four scholars' research in public policy and policy analysis as both foundational and exemplar manifestations of the poststructural tradition of narrative policy research: Maarten A. Hajer (1993, 1995), Frank Fischer (Fischer & Forrester, 1993; Fischer, 2003), Emery Roe (1994), and Deborah Stone (2002). These scholars have discernibly important similarities that epitomize poststructural work. Importantly, we argue, it is from these core works that most narrative research in public policy has drawn its cues for both philosophical orientation and methodological design.

Consistent with our synopsis of poststructuralism, the ontological orientation of these four foundational narrative research scholars asserts that the important elements of reality (those elements scholarship should focus on) are socially con-

structed (Fischer, 2003, pp. 12–14; Hajer, 1995, p. 51; Roe, 1994, pp. 9–10; Stone, 2002, p. 378). All agree that it is the social act of assigning meaning to objects and processes that is of signal importance when analyzing public policy. Emanating from the theorized importance of social constructions, these scholars ask the question "how is meaning developed and assigned?" In unison, but in differing degrees of forcefulness, these scholars have replied that narratives (or stories) occupy an epistemologically privileged position in making sense of a socially constructed world (Fischer, 2003, pp. 164–69; Hajer, 1995 pp. 56–63; Roe, 1994; Stone, 2002, pp. 138–45).

In privileging narrative, these scholars place discourse and symbolism and the role these concepts play in persuading, manipulating, and generating meaning at the core of their methodologies. Fischer and Stone advocate a more interpretative policy analysis, where analysts take seriously the subjectively discursive nature of public policy. For Fischer, writing with John Forrester (1993), this means the analyst must accept their critical role in both setting the agenda and defining the problem (p. 7) and focusing on ". . . the very language that is presented to the public" (Fischer & Forrester, 1993, p. 6). Deborah Stone (2002) similarly argues that traditional policy analysis, rooted in market models and instrumental reason, fails to accurately capture the subjective nature of political reality. For Stone, the analyst must immerse himself or herself in a world dominated by commons problems, coalitions, and battles over what constitutes the public good. All of these political difficulties are captured in strategically wielded language where problems are defined through narrative. Stone (2002) elaborates this point:

> Definitions of policy problems usually have narrative structure; that is, they are stories with a beginning, middle, and an end, involving some change or transformation. They have heroes and villains and innocent victims, and they pit forces of evil against forces of good. (p. 138)

Where Fischer and Stone utilize narrative to illustrate the importance of language to public policy, Maarten Hajer (1993, 1995) and Emery Roe (1994) make narrative the theoretical centerpiece of their scholarship. Similarly to Fischer, Hajer (1993) employs discourse analysis, defining discourse as "an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to phenomena" (p. 45). Hajer's unit of analysis is the discourse coalition, which is a group of actors that embrace a particular discourse (Hajer, 1993, p. 45). These coalitions seek to validate their discourses, imposing them upon others through persuasion and force via the institutionalization of the discourse (Hajer, 1993, p. 47). Discourse coalitions are theorized to pursue their end through story lines that combine ". . . elements of the various discourses into a more or less coherent whole . . ." (Hajer, 1993, p. 47). The success of the story line is derived from plausibility, trust of the story-lines source, and the degree to which the story is acceptable to the recipients' preexisting identities (Hajer, 1995, p. 63). A discourse coalition dominates when it is widely accepted by important policy actors, is reflected in institutional actions, and guides policy (Hajer, 1993, p. 47). Political change is theorized to occur when a new discourse and its constituent stories become dominant (Hajer, 1995, p. 55).

Emery Roe's work provides the most fully articulated methodology for the use of narratives in policy controversies. Hukkinen, Roe, and Rochlin (1990) first use what they term "Narrative Policy Analysis" (NPA) to identify political rather than technical roadblocks to irrigation policy in California's San Joaquin Valley. Hukkinen et al. (1990) exhibit a poststructural approach when they write about their interview process:

> Rather than treating each actor interview as a test of some externally constructed model of causality said to be operating in the controversy that is taken as a given, each story or scenario is treated as an equally valid element of a larger narrative from which "reality" . . . is constructed. (p. 312)

Then completing a network analysis they show how inner connections between narratives create a reality. Thus, Roe's work exhibits some structural characteristics while demonstrating that reality itself is socially constructed by many individual stories.

Roe (1994) further applies narrative literary techniques to public policy analysis with the publication of his influential book *Narrative Policy Analysis*. Roe (1994) describes NPA as an alternative to traditional applications of policy analysis that seek consensus and common-ground policy solutions (p. 4). NPA occurs in four phases. First, in policy areas of high uncertainty, complexity, and polarization, policy narratives (defined as having a beginning, middle, and end) and arguments ". . . that underwrite the policy assumptions of policymaking" (Roe, 1994, p. 155) are identified. Second, alternative narratives that do not conform to the dominant policy narrative(s) defined in step 1 are identified. Next, the two groups of stories identified in steps 1 and 2 are compared and a grand policy metanarrative is derived from the comparison (p. 155). Finally, the policy analyst determines how the new metanarrative "recasts the policy problem to make it more amenable to the conventional policy-analytical tools of microeconomics, legal analysis, statistics, organizational theory, and/or public management" (p. 155). Roe conceives NPA as a technique best applied using a case study approach (p. 12) prior to engaging more traditional positivistic applications of policy analysis (p. 155).

The poststructuralist orientation in NPA has frequently positioned itself as diametrically opposed to more empirically driven positivistic standards of social science as an *a priori* philosophical assumption. As a consequence, the positivistic empirical tenets that we set forth in this paper are tenets to which the foundational scholars of NPA have been observably hostile, with Emery Roe being the exception. For example, it is characteristic of this literature to assert that causality in the social sciences is not a goal (Hajer, 1995, p. 43), is relative to which social actors are consulted (Stone, 2002, pp. 188–97), or is altogether impossible to determine (Fischer, 2003, p. vii). In conjunction with this characteristically hostile stance toward positions that attempt to emulate the natural sciences, foundational NPA scholarship has also demonstrated a normative tilt toward deliberative and collaborative practices in both policy analysis (e.g., Fischer, 1993) and policy research (e.g., Hajer, 1995). We hold that the collective works of these authors have largely served as ambassadors for narrative approaches in public policy. From the premise that Fischer, Hajer, Roe,

and Stone have provided the primary philosophical and methodological orientations used in narrative studies of public policy, we proceed by reviewing both less visible and more recent poststructural works.

To its credit, much of the poststructural work has applied elements. Authors in this vein write to audiences of policy analysts demonstrating the usefulness of narrative techniques not only for academic study but also for applied policy analysis as well. Such an applied foundation to the use of narratives, as established by Kaplan (1986) and Roe (1994), is explored and modified in a variety of subsequent policy works. Some work has focused on how narratives define problems and lead to solutions based on a sometimes limited problem definition. Bridgman and Barry (2002), for example, use interviews and documents in a case study of telephone portability in New Zealand. Grounding their work in metaphor theory, they explore how different metaphors define the problem and lead to solutions. VanderStay (1994) employs Roe's (1992) NPA methodology to examine homelessness in Washington, DC. Using a case study approach and describing the policy problem in terms of competing narratives, VanderStay (1994) concludes that NPA illuminates policy obstacles and opportunities in policy implementation.

Other studies are interested in how narratives allow for better understanding of values. For example, Chapman (2005) asks how stories play into the integration of values in river policies in Costa Rica. Scott (2000) examines historical captivity narratives in the United States by analyzing media narratives told during the Iranian Hostage Crisis of 1979. The author uses a case study and logical argumentation to conclude that historical narratives allow the media to communicate foreign policy to the American public through historically derived captivity values (Scott, 2000, p. 186). Other studies are interested in how narratives define who participates in policy issues. Hampton (2004) uses focus groups in Australia to ask whether narrative analysis can be used to identify public preferences in a stakeholder analysis. Similarly, Hendriks (2005) uses interviews, secondary documents, and observation to see how story lines influence participation in deliberative processes in Australia.

Other articles deal with more narrow research questions while still following qualitative research designs. For example, Garvin (2001) asks whether different groups (scientists, policymakers, the public) use different sources of knowledge when trying to understand policy controversies. Using case studies and analytical reasoning, Garvin finds that different groups employ different standards of rationality for assessing the usefulness of information. Jacobs and Sobieraj (2007) explore how members of Congress use competing narratives to define the nonprofit sector in the United States. Using a qualitative content analysis of the Congressional record, the authors find that congressional members reinforce their own legitimacy by constructing the nonprofit sector as a masquerade story that presents the congressperson as a hero.

At least one study has attempted to dramatically expand what constitutes narrative. Yanow (1995) contends that places and physical space tell policy stories. Utilizing a case study and ethnographic data of two Israeli community centers, she finds that buildings represent power and wealth and tell clear policy stories. Yanow

(1995) concludes that the structure of these buildings shape behaviors, modes of thought, and affect for state desired objects and behaviors.

All of these works share a similar understanding of the importance of stories in policy controversies. Most notably, they analyze stories to unearth underlying assumptions. In doing so, this line of research finds that policy analysts can better resolve intractable policy controversies, can better meet democratic goals by using stories to find unheard voices, and can better understand the ever-present value dimension in policy conflict. All of these works use theory and methodology, and it is possible to tease out possible independent and dependent variables, although they are rarely articulated by the researchers. However, in following a more poststructural orientation, the methodologies are not always systematic, coding is not necessarily conducted by independent coders, and reliability analyses are not conducted. While some of the research has an implied causal theory, such linear ordering of A causing B causing C is usually not the goal of these works and falsification and hypothesis testing are not present.

A recent series of articles published in the *Public Administration Review* embodies the poststructuralist dominance in the study of narrative in venues relevant and visible to public policy (Dodge et al., 2005; Ospina & Dodge, 2005a, 2005b). This three-part series details how narrative theory is relevant to public administration (Ospina & Dodge, 2005a), how that research can be rigorous by postpositive standards (Dodge et al., 2005) and linking academics and practitioners via narrative research (Ospina & Dodge, 2005b). Importantly, the authors begin from the assumption that narrative and postpositivism are synonymous:

> The standards of quality that are commonly recognized in assessing research, such as validity and reliability, are not consistent with the logic of {postpositive} approaches such as narrative inquiry. (Dodge et al., 2005, p. 287)[6]

As the following section will show, the claim that scientific standards cannot be applied to narrative scholarship is simply inaccurate as some policy scholars and scholars in other academic disciplines regularly use such standards to study narratives. However, we emphasize that in stating the inaccuracy of this claim, it in no way invalidates the work of poststructuralists; rather and as we shall demonstrate, our rebuttal simply acknowledges that narrative has already been studied scientifically.

Structuralist Narrative Research and Public Policy

Structural approaches, by our assessment, take a specifically deductive approach where narrative is clearly defined and some attempt is made to operationalize narrative structure and/or content to test clearly stated hypotheses. All of the following articles we categorize as structural meet at least some of these qualifications, and offer replicable methodologies. Moreover, many of these studies tend toward quantification and frequently apply statistical techniques. Our review of the narrative literature reveals this research to be in the minority. Despite the fact that this

research is numerically inferior, we take the few structural studies we cite as evidence that narrative can in fact be approached with positivistic standards in mind when studying public policy.

Much of what we classified as strong structural work appears in research dealing with risk perceptions. In a study of risk perceptions of radon gas and communication format, Golding, Krimsky, and Plough (1992, p. 33) find that narrative formats of communication may be better at holding a reader's attention than more technical formats. The research team defines narrative as structurally distinct from other forms of communication, perform an experiment employing a narrative treatment, and offer clear guidelines for replication and falsification. Similarly, Ricketts (2007) experimentally tests the effectiveness of narrative safety warnings versus concrete nonstory and traditional abstract safety warnings. Ricketts's findings show that those exposed to narrative safety warnings were 20 percent more likely to comply with safety instructions. Finucane and Satterfield (2005) lay out a theoretical narrative framework to assess risk and value in biotechnology policy areas. Narrative in this work is found to be a means of both obtaining more representative data of values from individuals than typical survey metrics employing declarative statements (p. 131) and as a more effective means of conveying technical policy information (p. 133).

Other promising research articles appear across an array of subfields but are still strongly aligned to the study of public policy. In communication, for example, McComas and Shanahan (1999) use a content analysis of newspaper coverage of global warming to connect narrative theory to Downs's classic issue attention cycle (IAC). Testing three hypotheses, the authors find that newspaper stories tend to emphasize different narrative elements (drama, conflict between scientists, economics) during different stages of the IAC. Comparing a narrative technique to traditional measures of environmental concern, Shanahan, Pelstring, and McComas (1999) expose survey respondents to traditional survey measures and narrative stimuli. This research succinctly states both a research question and resultant hypotheses. Findings indicate that narrative measures slightly increase attitude-behavior models employed over traditional approaches. However, the authors respectably counsel against generalization as sample size is an issue.

Another example examines implications for policy related to teen conflict. Morrill, Yalda, Adelman, Musheno, and Bejarano (2000) use narrative analysis to assess individual youth interpretations of conflict. Morrill et al. (2000) code student narratives as one of four structural categories: action, expressive, moral, and rational tales (p. 534). The authors clearly specify procedures and report reliability metrics (p. 535). Findings indicate that listening to individual narrations of conflict may provide policymakers with solutions that resonate with target populations and thus overcome common policy implementation obstacles.

An ambitious strain of narrative research has made attempts to integrate structural narrative approaches and the advocacy coalition framework (ACF) (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). McBeth et al. (2005) use content analysis and hypothesis testing to demonstrate how narrative analysis can be used to uncover competing interest group policy beliefs and argue that this methodological approach benefits the ACF.

McBeth et al. (2007) again use content analysis and hypothesis testing to study how interest groups use political tactics in their narratives and how these tactics are predictable using Schattschneider's (1960) classic articulation of issue expansion and containment. The authors suggest that such a methodological advancement fits into the ACF. Finally, Shanahan, McBeth, Arnell, and Hathaway (2008) use content analysis and hypothesis testing to demonstrate that narratives in newspaper stories reveal consistent policy beliefs (and link these to ACF) and narrative framing strategies.

In addition to structural narrative findings across an array of academic subfields and attempts to integrate narrative into the ACF, a merger of several theoretical literatures has generated a promising structural discourse-analytic framework. Ney (2006) relies on narratively structured policy stories to integrate the ACF, Cultural theory (CT), and the broad theoretical foundations of the argumentative turn (e.g., Fischer & Forrester, 1993) to identify distinct narrative structures: setting (basic assumptions), villains (policy problem), and heroes (policy solution) (Ney, 2006, p. 26). Using these components, researchers are able to map areas of agreement and disagreement and generate solutions to problems that appear intractable. Promising findings have been produced using this method. For example, research utilizing this framework has examined climate change, detailed the relevant cultural stories in terms of their narrative structural components, and proposed crosscutting cultural solutions (Ney & Thompson, 2000; Verweij & Thompson, 2006; Verweij et al., 2006). The policy solutions offered in this research are derived from largely qualitative approaches, yet the approach exhibits structural characteristics as there are clear theoretical assumptions, hypotheses, and the possibility of falsification.

The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF)

We have argued that narrative entered policy studies through the vehicle of poststructural literary theory. As a consequence, the vast majority of narrative studies in public policy have been postpositivist in orientation. These works are predominantly inductive, qualitative, do not engage in clear hypothesis testing, and would be both difficult to replicate and falsify. We have also argued that the dominant view that narrative and postpositivism are synonyms is inaccurate, as strong empirical studies of narrative already exist both within and outside of policy studies. In what follows, we synthesize extant narrative scholarship to offer an NPF as a quantitative, structuralist, and positivistic approach to the study and theory building of policy narratives. We emphasize that we do not see our framework as a threat to postpositivism but rather as an acknowledgment that narratives matter and that by studying them empirically, positivists and postpositivists can engage in more productive debates over how stories influence public policy.

We begin our discussion of the NPF by supplying a definition of narrative followed by narrative content specifications that address postpositive and poststructural assumptions of the relativity of narratives. In specifying the NPF, we articulate two levels of analysis, appropriate units of analysis within each level, and causal drivers; we also offer preliminary hypotheses.

Defining Narrative Structure

In engaging in a structural approach to narrative, narrative structures must be shown to have generally agreed upon characteristics. For our purposes, we define narrative in a manner that is consistent with a structural methodological approach with the aim of providing a framework amenable to scientific inquiry while providing strategies for addressing charges of narrative relativity.

Consistent with studies of narrative in public policy, we find that for a narrative to be a narrative it must possess certain minimal qualities. In stating these qualities we rely on past research utilizing narrative in the study of public policy. Policy narratives have (i) a setting or context (Ney, 2006; Ney & Thompson, 2000; Verweij & Thompson, 2006; Verweij et al., 2006); (ii) a plot that introduces a temporal element (beginning, middle, end) (McBeth et al., 2005; Roe, 1994; Stone, 2002), providing both the relationships between the setting and characters, and structuring causal mechanisms (Stone, 2002); (iii) characters who are fixers of the problem (heroes), causers of the problem (villains), or victims (those harmed by the problem) (Jacobs & Sobieraj, 2007; McBeth et al., 2005; Ney, 2006; Stone, 2002); and (iv) the moral of the story, where a policy solution is normally offered (Ney, 2006; Ney & Thompson, 2000; Stone, 2002; Verweij & Thompson, 2006; Verweij et al., 2006).[7]

Setting or Context

Sabatier's consistent criticism of narratives and poststructural work is that work is often disconnected from institutions or policy settings. The structural study of narrative requires that such narratives have a policy setting or context. For example, McBeth et al. (2005, 2007) use narratives to explore the roots of environmental policy conflict in Greater Yellowstone, a policy arena characterized by intense and emotional conflict. However, the setting need not be bound by geography or institutional venue. In many cases the basic assumptions of the policy controversy (Ney, 2006, p. 152) will provide a suitable setting. For example, Verweij et al. (2006) provide a study of how different cultural types and their constituent groups use narratives to explain climate change.

Plot

Plots are fundamental components of narrative (Abell, 2004; Somers, 1992), providing relationships between component parts (e.g., characters and setting) and structuring causal explanations (Somers, 1992; Stone, 2002) that determine the plausibility of the narrative. Deborah Stone (2002, pp. 138–45) provides several plotlines common to public policy, such as the story of decline, stymied progress stories, or change is only an illusion. Stone (2002, p. 191) also argues that narratives have causal stories that can be considered part of a plot. Such causation stories include intentionality, inadvertence, accidental, and mechanical. Although we do not singularly endorse Stone's plotline specifications, we believe that Stone's work provides a strong starting point for potential operationalizations of plot.

Characters

The role of characters in public policy narratives has been theorized to play an important role in understanding policy (Ney, 2006; Stone, 2002). Recent evidence produced by the study of policy narratives supports this theorizing (Jacobs & Sobieraj, 2007; McBeth et al., 2005). For example, guided by the ACF, McBeth et al. (2005) use characters in interest group narratives to quantify two key policy core beliefs in an environmental policy dispute. The authors use victimhood to measure a group's construction of the policy belief of humans and the role of nature.[8] Furthermore, they use a narrative's listing of allies as a measure of an interest group's belief in federalism. These characters can vary in their specific characteristics but are theorized to occupy one of three general categories: heroes (and allies), villains (and enemies), and victims (McBeth et al., 2005; Ney, 2006; Verweij et al., 2006).[9]

Moral of the Story (Policy Solutions)

The final component that must be present for a policy narrative to be a narrative is the moral of the story. The moral of the story in a policy narrative is often portrayed to prompt action (Stone, 2002) and as a policy solution (Ney & Thompson, 2000; Verweij et al., 2006).

Defining Narrative Content

A common assessment of narratives professed by postpositivists is that narratives are relative and thus immune to attempts at generalization and quantification. The NPF, as a structural approach to narratives, rejects such a claim. Rather, we suggest that to avoid the charge of relativity, narratives must be anchored in generalizable content to limit variability. In what follows we briefly outline two potential candidates among many.

Belief Systems

Partisanship and Ideology

Partisanship and ideology are strong candidates when modeling the content of narratives as Republicans and Democrats as well as conservatives and liberals are likely to use different plots, characters, and causal mechanisms. Partisanship, understood as how strongly or weakly an individual affiliates with a political party, has been found to work as a cognitive filter (Bartels, 2002), explain issue positions (Markus & Converse, 1979), and has been causally modeled to drive core values (Goren, 2005). Alternatively, ideology, measured on a single dimension ranging from liberalism on the left and conservatism on the right, is found to structure politically sophisticated preferences in educated classes of Americans (e.g., Converse, 1964, Zaller, 1992).

Although there are many possibilities for anchoring narrative to partisan content, we present recent work pioneered by cognitive psychologist George Lakoff. Lakoff (2002) theorizes on the power of metaphors and links these metaphors to ideology and partisan affiliation; recent empirical work has validated some of his work (e.g., Barker & Tinnick, 2006). The core of Lakoff's argument is that two Family-as-Nation metaphors exist around which conservatives and liberals orient themselves politically: on the right, Strict Father Morality (SFM), and on the left, Nurturant Parent Morality (NPM). SFM is based on the principle that the father is the *absolute* moral authority where children (i.e., citizens) learn right from wrong through strict structural constraints (i.e., rules) and punishment for misbehavior (Lakoff, 2002, pp. 65–66). On the other hand, NPM is based on the principle that parents share familial responsibilities, where a child's (i.e., citizen's) obedience is founded upon mutual love and respect (p. 108). Lakoff's familial metaphors (extrapolated to the state) present exciting opportunities for the operationalization of NPF structural components, ranging from familial plotlines to archetypal characters suggested by this body of work.

Cultural Theory (CT)

CT measures belief systems along two dimensions of grid and group (see Mamadouh, 1999, for a succinct overview of CT literature). Grid measures preferred levels of group interaction, while the dimension of group captures the degree that these groups are expected to constrain the individual's beliefs and behavior (Thompson, Ellis, & Wildavsky, 1990). By surveying respondents, individuals are placed in a two-dimensional space and classified as most closely approximating one of four types: fatalist, hierarch, individualist, and egalitarian. CT measures regularly outperform demographics, partisanship, ideology, and knowledge in explaining policy preferences and opinion (Kahan, Braman, Gastil, Slovic, & Mertz, 2007; Wildavsky & Dake, 1990). CT has been used to identify policy narratives, including significant work on climate change (Ney, 2006; Ney & Thompson, 2000; Verweij & Thompson, 2006; Verweij et al., 2006). As ground has already been broken regarding techniques and methods for identifying culturally specific policy narratives, CT should serve as a robust anchor for narrative content.

The potential "content anchors" provided above are not intended to be exhaustive. We offer these anchors only as suggestive of how narrative scholars can avoid charges of narrative relativity by grounding narrative in preexisting theory, but envision many possibilities.[10] The thrust of including these belief system measures in our discussion is to emphasize that narratives must be secured to some larger deductive theory that facilitates both generation and identification of stories of interest. Once the stories have been identified in terms of the structural components identified earlier (e.g., characters and plot) it then becomes possible to track the development and movement of these stories through both public and elite venues of communication, or perhaps experimentally test their persuasiveness.

NPF and Levels of Analysis

The NPF defines two levels at which narrative cognition and communication can be studied: micro and meso.[11] This two-level distinction provides a useful way to categorize units of analysis, specify causal drivers on theoretically important dependent variables, and guide hypothesis development. In what follows, we detail each level.

Micro: Public Opinion and Narrative Persuasion

Empirical research of narratives at the micro level is generally interested in explaining how policy narratives impact individual public opinion and hence aggregate public opinion. Thus, research would focus on evaluating the persuasiveness of narratives on individuals. Change in individual attitudes toward a policy issue would be the dependent variable. Methodologically, this would occur with the use of experimental design or survey analysis, although other methods would be possible. There are several distinctive causal mechanisms that can be used at the individual level of analysis, and these include *canonicity and breach*, *narrative transportation*, *congruence and incongruence*, and *narrator trust*.

Canonicity and Breach

When little has changed and the world is moving along as we would expect, there is scant reason to alter either our attitudes or our behaviors. In terms of stories, narrative theory refers to this state of normalcy as canonicity (Bruner, 1991; Herman, 2002, p. 91, 2003b, p. 179), where things are as they should be. Stories that change the way we view the world do violence to the norm, breach banality, and rend our expectations. Narrative theory refers to this break with expectations as breach, and the persuasiveness of a story is largely contingent on the extent of breach (Herman, 2002, 2003b). Therefore:

> *Hypothesis 1: As a narrative's level of breach increases, the more likely an individual exposed to that narrative is to be persuaded.*

Narrative Transportation

Green and Brock (2000, p. 701) explain narrative transportation as a concept describing whether a reader is transported into a narrative and becomes "involved with its protagonists." Typically employing an 11-point scale, narrative transportation measures whether a reader "gets lost" in a story and then returns and is changed or persuaded by it (Green & Brock, 2000, citing Gerrig, 1993). Applications of narrative transportation have found that narratives are more persuasive than analytical arguments as they are more likely to transport readers (e.g., Escalas, 2004, 2007; Ricketts, 2007).

Hypothesis 2: As narrative transportation increases, the more likely an individual exposed to that narrative is to be persuaded.[12]

Congruence and Incongruence

New information in narrative form is generally easy for individuals to process as it is structured similarly to life experience (Mattila, 2000). Narratives are theorized to persuade to the extent they comport with that individual's understanding of the world or life experience (Hajer, 1993, p. 63; Schank, 1995). Concerning NPF, narrative is posited to comport to an individual's reality to the extent that it is congruent with their belief systems (discussed in the section on narrative content). Through symbols (e.g., characters), plots, causal connections, and language, certain facets of the story are sharpened and more apparent, while others become leveled and obscure (Gilovich, 1991). These identifiers, working as cognitive shortcuts, allow an individual to quickly gauge congruence or incongruence. Congruence is preferred by the individual as he or she protects his or her understanding of the world (Kunda, 1990, p. 495; Taber & Lodge, 2006); incongruence is actively rejected (Lodge & Taber, 2005; Taber & Lodge, 2006) as individuals engage in identity protection (Kahan et al., 2007). Identity protection makes it difficult to persuade an individual to accept incongruent information. Thus:

Hypothesis 3: As perception of congruence increases, the more likely an individual is to be persuaded by the narrative.

Narrator (Source) Trust and Credibility

The importance of source effects is well documented as an important component of message persuasion. A source's trustworthiness (Hajer, 1993, p. 63; Popkin, 1994, p. 47), accuracy and objectivity (Iyengar & Kinder, 1985), expert status (Page, Shapiro, & Dempsey, 1987), likability (Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991), and ideology (Zaller, 1992, p. 47) influence a recipient's willingness to accept a message. Related specifically to narrative, the plausibility of a story is conditioned by the extent to which individuals trust the source of the narrative (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Olson, 2003). Thus:

Hypothesis 4: As narrator trust increases, the more likely an individual is to be persuaded by the narrative.

A micro-level analysis of the persuasiveness of policy narratives is likely to provide valuable insight into narrative persuasion; however, any such analysis is limited in its implications on public policy insofar as public opinion influences public policy. A recent meta-analysis of the influence of public opinion on public policy finds that high-salience issues are more likely to be influenced by public opinion (Burstein, 2003), while low-salience issues favor special interests (Burstein,

2006). Given the limitations of studies of public opinion on important policy vari-
ables, moving the NPF into the realm of elite behavior is essential to demonstrating
its utility to policy scholars.

Meso: Strategic Elements of Policy Narratives

Recognizing that the public opinion focus of the micro-level analysis is limited
by studying only a narrow area of potential factors influencing policy outcomes, the
NPF at the meso level is interested in explaining how policy narratives influence
policy outcomes. Hajer (1993, 1995) theorizes that when a policy story becomes
dominant, that story will drive policy change. However, more recent empirical
research finds that the framing of issues changes little once issues reach Congress
(Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Kimball, & Leech, 2009, pp. 166–89). Extrapolating
from frames to narratives, we interpret Baumgartner et al.'s finding to mean that
narratives likely change little once captured by an institution. Relating this finding to
a potential hypothesis drawn from Hajer's work, we conjecture that policy narratives
likely influence policy change and outcomes indirectly, primarily through influences
over coalition composition. Thus, meso-level research should focus on evaluating the
strategic use and/or outcomes of specific policy narratives on coalition composition
as it relates to policy outcomes. More specifically, *variation in coalition composition* is
seen as the key dependent variable, while policy narratives are the independent
variable(s) of interest. Of course, one would also control for more established pre-
dictors of policy change or outcomes (e.g., institutions and resources).

Stone (2002) and Hajer (1993, p. 47) argue that narratives are strategic and
designed to call in reinforcements. Just as viewing narratives as reflective of belief
systems, viewing narratives as strategic mediates criticisms that narratives are rela-
tive and thus not amenable to scientific investigation. Viewing narratives as strategic
helps ground them in traditional policy theory as narratives are told by political
actors (particularly interest groups and elites) in efforts to expand their power and
ultimately win in the policy process.[13] One such study has already been conducted.

McBeth et al. (2007) empirically examine how two competing interest groups use
narratives as political tactics to either contain or expand the scope of conflict. Using
the classic work of Schattschneider (1960), the authors demonstrate through a
content analysis that groups that portray themselves as losing are more likely to use
their narratives to diffuse the costs of the policy status quo (victims), concentrate the
benefits to an elite few, and use symbols and policy surrogates. By using policy
stories to get more people involved, these tactics potentially expand the scope of
conflict. Similarly, the authors find that while these interest groups are winning, they
are more likely to use narratives that potentially concentrate the costs of the policy
status quo (only a few pay in one way or another), diffuse benefits (many people
are benefitting from the status quo), and stay away from divisive symbols and
surrogates.

One limitation of the research line is that there is no empirical study of how such
narrative political tactics of interest groups, the media, and elites actually influence
decision-maker behavior and opinion. However, such a task would be possible

through content analysis of relevant documents, experimental design, survey research, or field interviews and would test the power of narratives on elite opinion, action, and involvement. One way to approach the strategic application of narratives to policy controversies is found in the work of the late William H. Riker (1986).[14]

Differing from conventional usages of rhetoric, Riker (1986) uses the term "heresthetics" to mean strategically shifting value dimensions of a debate to beneficially restructure political coalitions. Riker uses several examples (Lincoln, the Constitutional convention, roll call voting) to show how heresthetics are employed to split, expand, or maintain political coalitions. In short, heresthetics restructure the political world "so you can win" (Riker, 1986, p. ix) relying on persuasion, coercion, and manipulation. Such an approach lends itself to the study of policy narratives. No doubt, groups employ narratives to manipulate coalition composition, and such activity can be studied empirically at the elite level. Our point is that rather than just studying how policy narratives influence individuals (and hence aggregate public opinion), Riker's approach leads to the study of how policy narratives influence or drive coalitions of elites, which in turn most certainly drive both policy change and policy outcomes. We hypothesize the following for the meso level:

> *Hypothesis 5: Groups or individuals who are portraying themselves as losing on a policy issue will use narrative elements to expand the policy issue to increase the size of their coalition.*
> *Hypothesis 6: Groups or individuals who are portraying themselves as winning on a policy issue will use narrative elements to contain the policy issue to maintain the coalitional status quo.*
> *Hypothesis 7: Groups will heresthetically employ policy narratives to manipulate the composition of political coalitions for their strategic benefit.*

Conclusion

In a political world that is increasingly about policy marketing and narratives, the NPF positions policy studies to better describe, explain, and perhaps predict a wide array of policy processes and outcomes. We envision a rigorous testing of our seven hypotheses. Future research should focus on issues like the recent health-care reform debate. We began this article with a discussion of how both opponents and proponents of health-care reform engaged in storytelling. Certainly, the players in this important debate believed that narratives are an important part of public policy making. While important, the policy literature can now only generally provide poststructural accounts of narratives and their role in health-care policy making. Our framework invites new theory building and empirical testing of health-care reform along with other policy issues.

In regard to health care, it would be possible to identify Republican and Democratic narratives, thus anchoring narrative structures to narrative content. Several strategies could be employed to identify the narratives including content analysis of media coverage or of public consumption documents generated by interest groups with a stake in the debate. Then, at the micro level of analysis, experimental design

and surveys may be used to allow researchers to determine to what extent these narratives resonate with differing components of the American populace. Similarly at the meso level, the narratives of elites and groups can be evaluated in terms of political strategies and how those strategies help shape coalition composition. Ultimately, it should be possible to test the connection between how narratives impact aggregate public opinion and how (or whether) that public opinion impacts elite and institutional decisions. Such data might also allow for exploring ethical questions including whether narratives benefit more powerful groups over less powerful ones. Narratives can be clear enough to be proven wrong.

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Notes

1. Author ordering is alphabetical and does not indicate level of contribution.

2. That is not to say that postpositivist scholarship is without systemic standards. See, for example, Lincoln and Guba (1985). However, standards are not uniformly acknowledged across poststructural studies.

3. See Farmer (1997) for a concise and accessible overview of deconstruction relevant to public policy and public administration; see Danziger (1995) for a discussion of how these techniques may be relevant to public policy.

4. We recognize that the term "positivist" may be perceived as a pejorative by some of those we classify as such. However, we do not employ the term as the oft-used caricatured version of the word; rather, the objective reality we refer to is an intersubjectively reliable reality rooted in scientific agreement, as opposed to other uses of the term that would invoke some exogenous "truth" independent of human perceptions.

5. In the interest of conceptual clarity, we treat postpositivism as synonymous with interpretivism and constructivism. Although we recognize that interpretivism, constructivism, and postpositivism are not directly analogous, in our assessment the three approaches are more similar than not, with difference found in nuance rather than epistemological or ontological orientations. Importantly, all are similar in that they are reactions to positivism, which we believe justifies our treatment of the terms.

6. The author's treatment of interpretivist is consistent with our definition of postpositivism, and in the interest of clarity we have substituted interpretivist with postpositive.

7. There is some confusion over the difference between narratives and frames, and in some cases the two terms are used interchangeably (e.g., McComas & Shanahan, 1999). Issue frames, those most analogous to our definition of policy narratives, are communication messages structured to draw attention to a particular dimension or attribute of an object (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Druckman, 2004). Policy narratives, as we define them, must have distinct structural components not required of frames, making policy narratives definitionally distinct from frames.

8. Small, Loewenstein, and Slovic (2007) use experimental design to demonstrate how individuals are more likely to give charitable contributions to an individual and identifiable victim than a statistical and unidentifiable victim (also see Slovic, 2007). In short, individuals have more empathy for identi-

fiable individual victims than they do groups. So, for example, individuals are more likely to give money to help a child in Africa than they are to give money to feed millions of starving children in Africa. Likewise, individuals turn away from genocide because they are numbed by the enormity of the numbers. Such findings have implications for understanding how some problems are ignored and others are not in terms of their narrative character portrayals. In this manner, the NPF would tap into classic policy works in agenda setting and policy change (e.g., Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Kingdon, 1997).

9. Policy Design Theory (e.g., Ingram, Schneider, & deLeon, 2007) describes four classes of socially constructed actors: advantaged, contenders, dependents, and deviants. These categorizations may provide character types and/or critical variables in NPF models, perhaps explaining how these groups are assigned meaning in the first place.

10. For example, cultural studies of materialism and postmaterialism may also provide a suitable anchor (see Inglehart, 1997). Other works have recently used "citizenship" as an anchor in an empirical study of policy narratives (McBeth, Lybecker, & Garner, 2010).

11. Macro-level applications of the NPF may also be possible. See Jones and Jenkins-Smith (2009), who posit narrative approaches as synergistic with their *trans*-subsystem approach (pp. 42, 54). Additionally, see Büthe (2002), who specifies historical narratives as data points when modeling historical events.

12. Or alternatively, researchers may lean on the dramatic and literary conception of alienation-effects. Alienation-effect, theorized by Bertolt Brecht, posits that if an audience is held at bay and remains emotionally detached, cognition and individual objectivity are more likely (see Brecht, 1977).

13. A variety of work on the strategic use of narratives might provide guidance in the development of methodologies. These include Jabko (2006) and Parsons (2002). While neither of these pieces deal with narratives per se, they do deal with the power of ideas and their influence on public policy. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting these sources.

14. Interestingly, recent scholarship finds that stories about political strategy are more effective than general policy stories with the public (Iyengar, Norpoth, & Hahn, 2008), while other scholarship finds that messages communicated from political elites, as opposed to the media, are more effective with the public (Fogarty & Wolak, 2009). These findings may provide a critical link between the micro and meso levels posited in the NPF.

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