How to conduct a Narrative Policy Framework study

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\section{Introduction}

Policy process research endeavors to unpack the complexity of temporal interactions between public policy and policy actors, events, contexts, and outcomes (Weible, 2017, p. 2). As theories of the policy process (e.g., Weible & Sabatier, 2017) become more precise in specifying their models, there is a concurrent exigency for clear research methods as these theories are applied across various policy domains. Masters and Ph.D. programs train students broadly in methods and data analysis but questions about specific policy process applications persist over matters such as operationalization of concepts, sampling, data collection, and appropriate methodology. Importantly, these questions are agnostic to rigor of methodological training. As such, addressing the range of questions becomes critical to achieve both validity and replicability, the building blocks of scientific knowledge.

The alpha and omega of scientific inquiry is theory. The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), a policy process framework, has two major expositions detailing core assumptions, levels of analysis, hypotheses, and definitions of narrative concepts (Jones, McBeth, & Shanahan, 2014; Shanahan, Jones, McBeth, & Radaelli, 2017).\textsuperscript{1} As a result of these and other publications, there is a growing community of researchers devising NPF studies to address the framework’s central research question: what is the role of policy narratives in the policy process? Increasingly, we are receiving inquiries about our methodologies that basi-

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\begin{thebibliography}{1}
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\url{https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2017.12.002}

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2. Is the NPF the right choice for your research?

2.1. Alignment of NPF assumptions and your research approach

The NPF is not a one-size-fits-all for research projects centered on narratives. While most research design and methods texts give a nod to the importance of theory, what is often more obtuse in these texts is an articulation of why theories matter in the first place. Embedded in theories are assumptions about how the world works. In the policy literature, theoretical work on narratives is based on different and contrasting assumptions, e.g., the model of the individual, what constitutes reality.\(^3\) The NPF articulates five core assumptions that you must consider before making the decision to apply the NPF:

1) **Social construction.** Meaningful parts of policy reality are socially constructed.
2) **Bounded relativity.** The meaning of those social constructions vary to create different policy realities, but this variation is bounded (e.g., by belief systems, ideologies etc.) and thus is not random but, rather, has some stability over time.
3) **Generalizable structural elements.** Narratives have specific and identifiable structures.
4) **Three interacting levels of analysis.** Narratives operate at three interacting levels, micro (individual), meso (group), and macro (cultural and institutional).
5) **Homo narrans model of the individual.** Narrative is understood to play a central role in human cognition and communication, i.e., people prefer to think and speak in story form.

A major departure from any of these assumptions means the NPF is not right for your research. For example, if your research assumes a narrowly defined instrumental rational actor driven by preferences generated by their environment and an objective world independent of human perceptions, then this is a fatal flaw for NPF research due to violation of NPF assumptions #5, #2, and #1. The point is to think carefully about your research assumptions and ensure that they are aligned with those of the NPF.

3. Finding your research compass

3.1. Develop NPF research questions

With a sense of the assumptions that guide your research, the next decision point is the development of the research question. All NPF research questions in some way address the role of narratives in the policy process. Whether inspired by an interest in a specific policy issue, readings from the literature, or a colleague, we have found specific NPF research questions typically lead down one of two paths. One route is policy-centered by examining the...
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