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How to conduct a Narrative Policy Framework study

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ABSTRACT

The Narrative Policy Framework has a growing number of researchers seeking to apply the framework in policy process scholarship. This article is intended to assist those interested in conducting an NPF study that is 'clear enough to be wrong' (Sabatier, 2000). While graduate programs offer critical methodological training, this article focuses on the specific application of the NPF to research inquiries about the role of policy narratives in the policy process. We approach our discussion by examining various decisions in the research process and include a detailed discussion of specifying the model and obtaining narrative data. We also point out areas for further investigation.

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1. 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).[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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[1] While we assume minimal knowledge, these expositions are worth having on hand as you work your way through this article and your NPF project.

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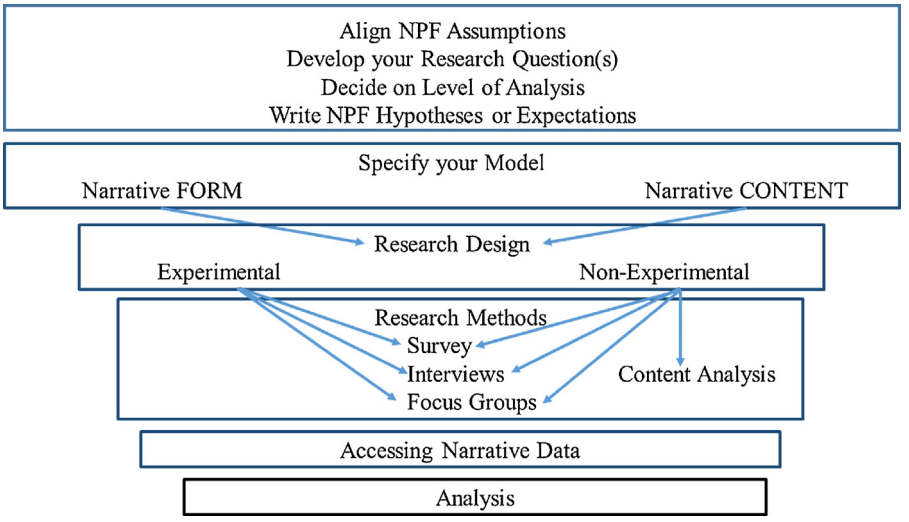

Fig. 1. Research approach in the Narrative Policy Framework.

cally come down to this question: How do I conduct a good scientific NPF study?[2]

Some readers may find this expose useful from top to bottom, and others may find particular sections enlightening. We thus approach answering how to conduct a good scientific NPF study through a series of decision points in the research process (Fig. 1). We also recognize that these choices are presented in a linear or hierarchical order and yet the research process is more of an iterative venture, with some ideas developed concurrently and not necessarily bound by any order we might try to impose here.

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

[2] We focus here exclusively on what might be termed "traditional" applications of the NPF, referring to building both qualitative and quantitative NPF applications rooted in the scientific method. NPF applications interested in alternate epistemologies such as interpretivism should see Jones and Radaelli (2015) and Gray and Jones (2016).

[3] See Jones and McBeth (2010) for an overview of these differences and Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth (2015) for a discussion of NPF's philosophy of the science of narratives.

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