



NATIONAL RESEARCH  
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# Form and content of narratives

HYГ Seminar 3  
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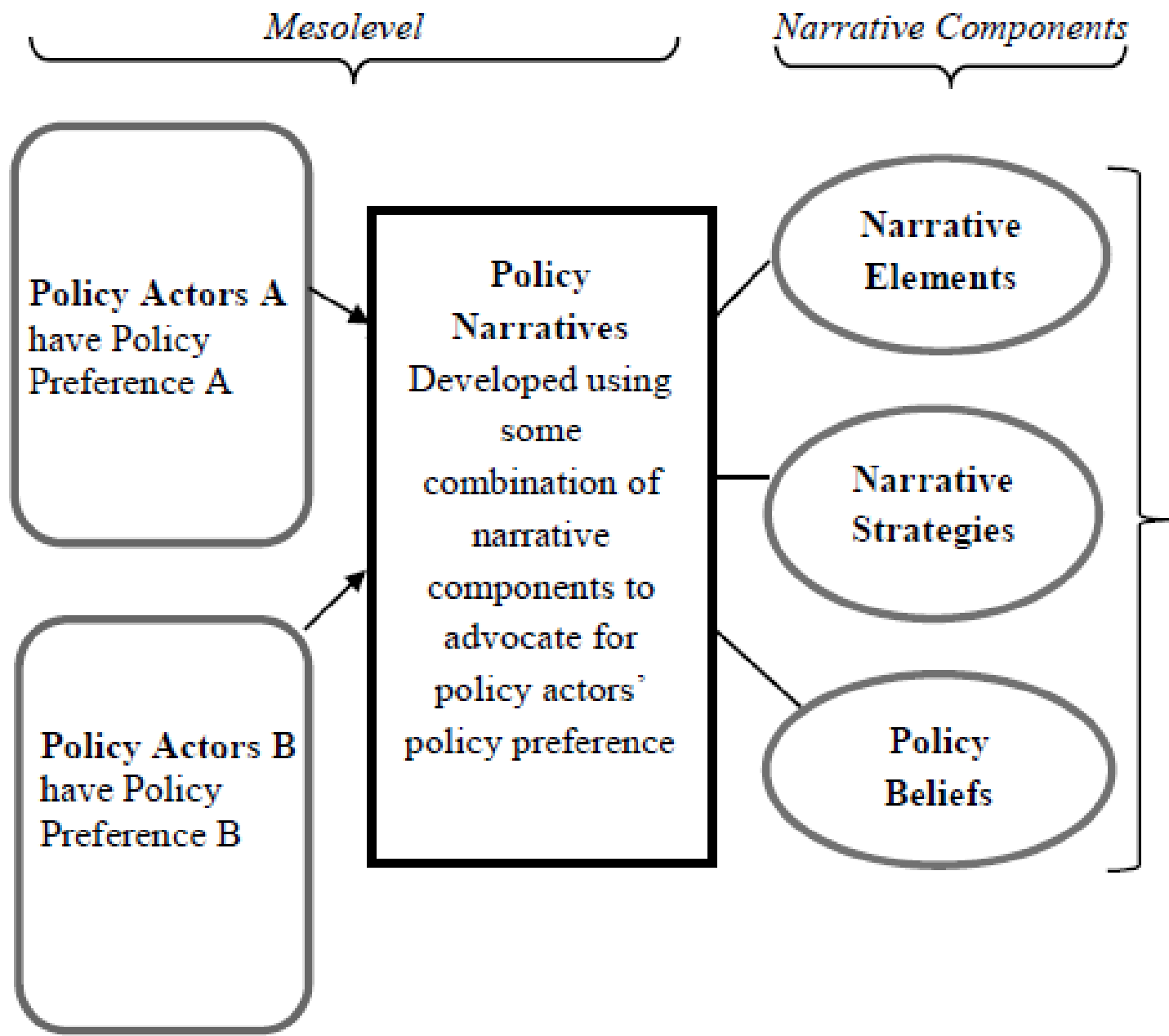
# Today's objectives

- Get a deeper knowledge of the NPF as a theoretical framework → understand form and content of policy narratives
  - Know the meso level hypotheses of the NPF
  - Refine the research questions and hypotheses for one paper per case
- After today, you should be ready to write the theoretical part of your paper

# Form and content of narratives

The NPF describes narratives in terms of their form and content

- Form: structure of narratives
  - narrative elements
- Content: context and policy issue
  - narrative strategy
  - belief systems



**THE EXTERNAL CONTEXT**

# Form: narrative elements

- Narrative elements constitute the form / structure of a narrative
- 4 core narrative elements
  - Setting
  - Characters
  - Plot
  - Moral of the story
- Additional elements: e.g., evidence

# NPF definition of a policy narrative

- A policy narrative must feature at least one character and contain a reference to the public policy.

# Setting

1. Space and time in which the story takes place
  2. Includes the definition of the policy problem
- The setting may be taken for granted but also become the focus of the debate and of the narrative

# Example: Setting

*Shipment of garbage from Moscow to Arkhangelsk is not a small problem. Moscow and the greater Moscow area produce an estimated 20 percent of Russia's total waste: up to 7.2 million tons of municipal solid waste and about 6.1 million tons of industrial waste annually. Moscow can't handle its own garbage.*

<https://therevelator.org/moscow-garbage/>



# Characters

- Those, who act, or are acted upon
- Individuals, agencies, organizations, groups. Main NPF characters:
  - Victims: are harmed (by the policy problem)
  - Villains: do harm (cause the policy problem)
  - Heroes: provide relief from the harm (solve or promise to solve the policy problem)
  - (Beneficiaries: benefit from the solution)

# Example: victim

- *The construction of the largest solid-waste landfill in Europe threatens to permanently damage the health of Russia's rural citizens.*
- *In the Moscow region a dozen children were recently hospitalized due to air poisoning from a landfill.*
- *Another open-air landfill, in the town of Klin, sits just 1,300 feet away from local school, spreading illness among the kids.*

# Example: villain

- *The authorities have responded in predictable and horrific fashion: with beatings, detentions, fines, arrests and criminal cases. Despite the protests, the authorities have not abandoned the intention to build a landfill, and police batons are still used against civilians defending their homeland.*

# Example: hero

In 2011, the Moscow Government developed an ambitious upgrade programme for the capital's transport infrastructure. We are now seeing the first results after eight years of our efforts – the growing popularity of public transport, reduced average trip duration in Moscow, increased average travel speed, and the decrease in the number of traffic incidents.

Moscow has become a safer and more comfortable city with enough space for pedestrians, passengers, motorists, and cyclists.

We are currently building a new transport system for the Moscow metropolitan area for decades ahead.

# Example: beneficiaries

- *In the first half of 2019, eight metro stations were opened. Around four million passengers have already taken advantage of the new four stations of Nekrasovskaya metro line on the section from Nekrasovka to Kosino, with daily passenger traffic making up about 50,000 people.*

# Non-humans as characters

Can a non-human be a character?

- In the NPF, abstract principles and non-human can have agency → authors of narratives often use non-humans as actors
  - Characters are often used in combination with verbs or with adjectives / descriptions
    - E.g., verbs: harm, threat, suffer, benefit, solve...
    - E.g., adjectives: effective, modern...



Новые, комфортные, современные...

Они перевозят пассажиров с раннего утра до позднего вечера.



# Moral of the story

- The moral is typically equivalent to the policy solution in the narrative
- Often, the moral contains a call for action
- The policy solution is typically an action of the hero / protects a victim / creates a beneficiary



# Example moral of the story

*На заседании круглого стола по экологии в моем избирательном штабе обсуждали вопросы внедрения отдельного сбора мусора. Москва идет к решению этой задачи уже несколько лет.*

*1. Для начала правительство Москвы отказалось от строительства новых мусоросжигательных заводов. Хотя такие планы были.*

*2. Мы начали реабилитацию полигонов ТБО. Рекультивировали полигон «Малинки» в Новой Москве.*

*3. Заключение 15-летних контрактов на вывоз мусора. В рамках этих контрактов операторы установили первую тысячу контейнеров для отдельного сбора во дворах и возродили сеть приема вторсырья.*

# Plot

The plot...

- ...provides the arc of action
- ...links the narrative elements
- ...explains how characters interact

The NPF distinguishes 6 different plots (but there may be more)

# Types of plots

- Story of decline:

Things became bad and got worse and are now very bad (so bad that something must be done)

– *Globalization has stolen our jobs. Youth unemployment has returned after decades of prosperity.*

– *A flood of illegal immigration is going to bankrupt our country*

# Types of plots

- Story of change / control:

A bad situation can be changed, things are getting better

– *Our economy is blooming thanks to the tax cuts of our president*

– *Great times are coming, after waiting for decades, for our Farmers, Ranchers, Manufacturers and ALL. Nobody else could have pulled this off!*

# Types of plots

- Stymied progress:

things were terrible, but got better due to a hero, but now they are getting worse because someone or something is interfering with the hero's work

– *Instead of letting me creating more JOBS, JOBS, JOBS, they organize a witch hunt!*

# Types of plots

- Change-is-only-an illusion:

Everybody always thought that things were getting better (or worse), but they were wrong, and things are going into the opposite direction

– *I smile at Senators and others talking about how good free trade is for the U.S. What they don't say is that we lose Jobs and over 800 Billion Dollars a year on really dumb Trade Deals....*

# Types of plots

- Story of helplessness:

A situation is bad, and it is believed that the situation must be accepted because it cannot be changed

– *The large majority just believes that they cannot change anything. Unfortunately, that is why they do not complain about this new road.*

# Types of plots

- Blame the victim:

It is the victims' fault that they suffer from the problem, the victims could control the situation, but they don't

– *We should stop to treat them special in school and spend more money. If they don't like our education system, they can just go back from where they came from.*

Swiss newspaper,  
reader's comment



# Combination narrative elements

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• solutions / moral</li><li>• heroes</li><li>• stories of control</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• problems (setting)</li><li>• victims and / or villains</li><li>• stories of decline</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• problems (setting)</li><li>• villains (and heroes)</li><li>• stymied progress</li><li>• Illusion stories</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• problems (setting)</li><li>• victims and / or villains</li><li>• story of helplessness</li></ul>

# Additional narrative elements

- Evidence
  - How does evidence (= scientific studies, statistics....) relate to narratives?
  - NPF: “narratives more persuasive than facts”
- Evidence as a separate narrative element
- Evidence integrated in other narrative elements

# Example evidence

- *The department of education has developed the new law based on the knowledge from the latest PISA study and the best available evidence. It would be careless to not adopt the reforms known as being effective to improve school quality.*

# Narrative content

- Narrative content infuses meaning into narrative elements to create policy realities. The NPF measures narrative content through:
  - Policy narrative strategies
  - Policy beliefs

# Policy narrative strategies

- A narrative strategy is the communication of narrative elements to achieve a certain goal: convince, recruit, mobilize, create conflict.....
- The NPF distinguishes several narrative strategies
  - Scope of conflict
  - Causal mechanisms
  - Devil-angel shift

# Narrative strategies: scope of conflict

- Scope of conflict: a narrative distributes costs and benefits of a policy to the characters
  - Losing coalitions tend to diffuse costs to many victims and concentrate benefits to the elite few (the villain)
  - Winning coalitions tend to attribute benefits to a large population of victims (or beneficiaries) and concentrate costs to a few

# Scope of conflict: examples

- Losing coalitions concentrate benefits and distribute costs:
  - Example: Waste management, “protesters” narrative: many victims suffer but only a few companies benefit
- Winning coalitions tend to distribute benefits and concentrate costs:
  - Example: Transport, governmental narrative: everybody benefits from the new metro lines

# Narrative strategies: causal mechanisms

- Causal mechanisms strategically arrange narrative elements to assign responsibility and blame for the policy problem. The NPF distinguishes 4 causal mechanisms.



# Narrative strategies: causal mechanisms

- Intentional: the villain intentionally created the problem
- Accidental: the problem is not the villain's fault, it was “an accident”
- Mechanical: Actions are unguided but intentional and they produce negative results
- Inadvertent: somebody wants to do good, but creates the problem as a negative side effect

# Causal mechanisms: examples

- Intentional: the tobacco industry sells tobacco, even though they know it is harmful
- Accidental: the problem was due to a natural disaster
- Mechanical: this bureaucracy produces bad policies
- Inadvertent: good environmental taxes create social problems

# Narrative strategies: Devil-Angel shift

- Devil shift: Actor focus on the evilness and power of opponents
- Angel shift: Actors focus on their own power and their ability to solve problems

The NPF measures the devil-angel shift as the extent to which opponents are identified as villains in comparison to how much the narrator himself identifies him-/herself as a hero

# Policy beliefs

- Policy beliefs are a set of values. They are expressed through narratives.
- Typical policy beliefs are found in other theories (ACF, cultural theory, political ideology, political identity...)
  - E.g.,: equality, liberty, security, relationship between humans and nature, religion
- The NPF measures policy beliefs through narrative elements, but also other symbolic or contextual means

# Hypotheses of the NPF

- Meso-level hypotheses / Narrative strategy
  1. Policy actors who are portraying themselves as losing on a policy issue will use narrative elements to expand the policy issue
    - = Losing coalitions tend to diffuse costs to many victims and concentrate benefits to the elite few

# Hypotheses of the NPF

2. Policy actors who are portraying themselves as winning on a policy issue will use narrative elements to contain the policy issue
  - = Winning coalitions tend to attribute benefits to a large population of beneficiaries and concentrate costs to a few

# Hypotheses of the NPF

## Devil-angel shift

3. Losing coalitions tend to strategically construct narratives with the devil shift
4. Winning narratives tend to use the angel shift

(not conclusive, a few NPF studies found the opposite).

# Hypotheses of the NPF

Policy beliefs:

5. Coalitions that share the same policy beliefs (“coalition glue”) will more likely influence policy with their narratives



# Hypotheses of the NPF

## Role of narratives

6. Coalitions using narratives will more likely win policy debates than actors using technical or scientific communication

# Hypotheses of our project

Our assumptions:

1. Actors advocating policy change will construct different narratives and employ different narrative strategies from those actors that resist policy change.
2. On one side of the debate we will find the official governmental position, while on the other side a counternarrative will challenge the official narrative.
3. Narratives and narrative strategies will largely depend on whether the policy change is advocated by the official position or not.

# Hypotheses of our project

## Narrative strategies

Winning coalitions (= advocating official position)

4. Focus narratives on solutions and heroes

5. Strategically use angel shift

6. Contain the policy issue (diffuse benefits / concentrate costs)

Losing coalitions (= resisting official position)

7. Focus their narrative on problems and victims

8. Strategically use devil shift.

9. Expand issues (concentrating benefits / diffusing costs)

# Hypotheses of our project

9. The longer a narrative countering the official position persists, the more the official narrative will become similar to the counternarrative.

# Work in groups

- Refine for your case
  - The research questions and select 1-2 research question as a focus for your article
  - The hypotheses that fit your research question

# Urban Policy

Waste  
management

Housing  
renovation  
program

Transport  
policy

# General research questions

1. What policy narratives and narrative strategies are used on each side of the debate?
  - E.g.: How are public problems constructed in non-democratic regimes?
2. How do narratives change over time?
  - E.g.: Do the narratives of government and the counter narrative become similar over time?
3. Through what channels are policy narratives communicated?
  - E.g., How are protests used to tell a narrative?
  - E.g., How does a non-democratic regime use digital media to tell a narrative?
4. What are the effects of policy narratives?

# Next seminar

Tuesday 18 February 2020, 3-6

Topic: Data collection. Where do we find narrative data?



# Tasks until next seminar

Group leaders (together with students):

- Each group prepares a draft introduction and draft theoretical part for one paper → send to Caroline
- Prepare and submit an abstract for the ECPR conference (deadline 19 February)
  - Section 04: Acknowledging the Role of Institutions in the Policy Process
    - Panel: The interplay between narratives and institutions in the narrative policy framework
    - Panel: Between general and particular: Applying policy process frameworks in new institutional settings

# Tasks until next seminar

All students:

- Find one text on your case that contains a policy narrative. Bring the text and the source to the next seminar.

HSE April conference, 6-10 April 2020:

- Our paper was accepted
- Who wants to participate in the presentation?
- All NUG students need to participate as listener at the conference