Policy Narratives and Policy Processes

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The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) has influenced a generation of policy scholars with its emphasis on causal drivers, testable hypotheses, and falsification. Until recently, the role of policy narratives has been largely neglected in ACF literature partially because much of that work has operated outside of traditional social science principles, such as falsification. Yet emerging literature under the rubric of Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) demonstrates how the role of policy narratives in policy processes is studied using the same rigorous social science standards initially set forth by Paul A. Sabatier. The NPF identifies theories specifying narrative elements and strategies that are likely useful to ACF researchers as classes of variables that have yet to be integrated. Examining this proposition, we provide seven hypotheses related to critical ACF concepts including advocacy coalitions and policy beliefs, policy learning, public opinion, and strategy. Our goal is to stay within the scientific, theoretical, and methodological tradition of the ACF and show how NPF’s empirical, hypotheses, and causal driven work on policy narratives identifies theories applicable to ACF research while also offering an independent framework capable of explaining the policy process through the power of policy narratives. In doing so, we believe both ACF and NPF scholarship can contribute to the advancement of our understanding of the policy process.

KEY WORDS: Narrative Policy Framework, Advocacy Coalition Framework, policy stories, policy narratives, policy processes, coalitions, policy change, learning, public opinion

Introduction

The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) (Jones & McBeth, 2010) centrally locates the role of policy narratives in the policy process. As an emerging policy framework, the NPF is informed by theories from a myriad of disciplines and academic fields (e.g., Riker, 1986; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Schattschneider, 1960; Stone, 2002) to construct a holistic framework designed to accurately capture and describe policy narratives, while also employing these theories to provide testable hypotheses that allow for the accurate assessment of the influence of policy narratives on public opinion, policy change, and policy outcomes. The import of this framework, we hold, has been the inclusion of the component pieces of policy narratives—narrative elements and strategies—as classes of variables that serve as the basis for theory building and testing. To date, these elements are missing from empirical models of the policy process, in particular that of the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF)
(Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). In this article, we focus on the synergies between the NPF and the ACF at the policy subsystem level of analysis, while acknowledging that the frameworks are likely quite different when applied at different levels of analysis (i.e., when applied to the study of individuals or institutions).

In the context of unpredictable events and ever-changing informational policy terrain, the ACF (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993) seeks to empirically explain the dynamic processes of policy learning, policy change, and coalition formation and change by focusing the researchers’ attention on policy subsystems and the coalitions that occupy those subsystems. It is our contention that empirical approaches to narrative such as the NPF can better illuminate specific facets of the policy process underspecified by the ACF, particularly when combined with the ACF’s already well-defined and validated parameters. Specifically, the socially constructed elements of public policy—those elements to which relevant actors ascribe meaning—are best captured through an empirical investigation of the stories coalitions strategically deploy. Stakeholders use words, images, and symbols to strategically craft policy narratives to resonate with the public, relevant stakeholders, and governmental decision makers, with the aim of producing a winning coalition. We contend that the inclusion of policy narratives as a causal variable in the policy change process is not only helpful but also critical.

One need not speculate long or very deeply to understand why narrative has not been an important theoretical component of the ACF. Until recently, narrative has been claimed as the exclusive property of postpositivist approaches to public policy (e.g., Dodge, Ospina, & Foldy, 2005, p. 287). As an approach to public policy, postpositivism has militated against even the possibility of causation and generalizable knowledge (e.g., Fischer, 2003)—by extension then, so too has narrative. Given recent narrative research that demonstrates commitments to deductive theory building, empirical observation, falsification, and hypotheses testing more generally (e.g., Golding, Krimsky, & Plough, 1992; McBeth, Shanahan, & Jones, 2005), we find the postpositivist characterization of narrative to be both antiquated and inaccurate. Narrative is not the sole province of interpretative methods, and narrative theory can offer meaningful contributions to ACF research.

The policy environment has become progressively more complex and cacophonous as competing policy narratives are increasingly reverberating in public discourse. No longer are policy actors restricted by traditional gatekeepers, such as news editors and press secretaries. New media outlets such as YouTube, blogs, and the Internet, offer free and fast venues for the dissemination of policy narratives with fewer editorial obstacles found in traditional media. For example, the 2009 U.S. national health-care debate, the 2010 British Petroleum oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, and the current climate change policy all have bloggers, interest groups, talking heads, radio talk shows, and governmental officials all constructing policy narratives via several media outlets. These policy narratives are a critical source for researchers and practitioners to understand political maneuvering, differing political ideologies, and problem definition. Yet there is always suspicion that narratives do little to change the course of actual policy decision making, and they are instead simply fodder entertaining the masses.
Indeed, whether narratives are essential to the policymaking process or whether they are “too superfluous . . . and too nebulous” (Jones & McBeth, 2010, p. 331) is an interesting question but a question that is ultimately testable. In fact, the empirical testing of the influence of policy narratives on individual opinion, groups, and elites, as well as the influence of policy narratives on policy formation and implementation, is an emerging literature in the policy field. Over the last decade, a series of iteratively developed quantitative research studies reveal the reliability of policy narratives as a source of data to uncover stable policy narrative elements and strategies (McBeth, Shanahan, Arnell, & Hathaway, 2007; McBeth et al., 2005; Shanahan, McBeth, Arnell, & Hathaway, 2008) and explore what elements of policy narratives are most persuasive (Jones, 2010; Shanahan, McBeth, & Hathaway, 2011). Jones and McBeth (2010) envelop these studies under the rubric of the NPF, which moves narrative research more broadly into the realm of theory building with statistical testing and falsification.

The articulation and development of the ACF in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s represents a high point in the development of policy theories grounded in empirical hypothesis testing seeking to explain policy change. The NPF has its roots in these same principles. Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith’s (1993) hypotheses-driven ACF ushered in an exciting new era in the field and has dramatically influenced the last 20 years of policy theory and forever changed how an entire generation of policy scholars approaches their work. Our goal is to stay within the social scientific theoretical and methodological tradition of the ACF and show how the NPF’s empirical, hypotheses, and causal driven account of policy narratives synthesizes theories that facilitate both hypothesis testing of ACF concepts as well as an independent framework offering explanations of policy change and outcomes. In doing so, we believe both ACF and NPF scholarship can contribute to the advancement of our understanding of the policy process.

To address both framework and theory foci, we first chronicle how the NPF originated, in part, within the context of the ACF. We then detail the conceptual scaffolding of the NPF, including assumptions, and diagram NPF’s meso-level application, relying heavily on the ACF’s subsystem approach. Finally, we discuss the NPF’s synergies with the ACF as policy process frameworks, while also briefly acknowledging some of the differences. We ultimately find the two frameworks to be highly compatible at the subsystem level.

Advocacy Coalition Framework as the Ground Spring for Narrative Policy Framework

The publication of the first edition of his edited book, *Theories of the Policy Process* (Sabatier, 1999a) sparked a controversy when the volume did not include policy work in social construction or postpositivism, both schools of thought which are attracted to narrative (see Jones & McBeth, 2010, pp. 331–33). Sabatier (2000) responded with a rather blunt defense of his exclusion of social construction on the grounds that the work did not meet the scientific standards of falsification. Yet in the same article, Sabatier also outlines his own views of science that are far from the
stereotype of a classic positivist. Sabatier (2000, p. 137) rejects the distinction between facts and values, the “easy falsification of theories,” and “a correspondence theory of truth,” and describes himself as a “presuppositionist neo-positivist.” He also insists on clarity and clear conceptual development and that the “fundamental precept of science is ‘be clear enough to be proven wrong.’” Indeed, Sabatier (1999b, pp. 266–70) outlines his guidelines for theory development. Chief among these are testable hypotheses, uncovering causal relationships, articulating fundamental assumptions, and inviting others to replicate and build upon established work. The architects of the NPF accept these challenges as fundamental to the advancement of policy theory as science. Like Sabatier, however, NPF originators understand that good science is not an easy task and that policy process researchers, in particular, face numerous challenges. Subjective and often “nonrational” elements are the keystones to understanding public policy. These elements are difficult—but not impossible—to measure. Policy narratives, for example, fall into the category of a critical concept not easy to measure. However, driven by Sabatier’s scientific principles and influenced by concepts and dynamics presented in the ACF, the NPF has embarked on the difficult task of transforming the study of policy narratives into an empirical endeavor, amenable to falsification and, when applicable, statistical analyses.

The origins of the NPF are found in the work of McBeth and Shanahan (2004) who outline research questions for what they term “policy marketing.” The essential finding of this generative work is that narratives are strategically constructed, and thus the study of narratives can and should be approached empirically. The authors provide foundational questions (e.g., What constitutes a policy narrative? How influential are these narratives?) and conclude that they “lead to hypotheses that can be tested using traditional social science methods” (p. 335). McBeth et al. (2005) take up the research challenge within the context of the ACF and demonstrate through content analysis of competing interest groups’ documents that policy narrative elements (e.g., characters) can be empirically quantified to reliably measure policy core beliefs. McBeth et al. (2007) likewise show how a content analysis of narratives found in interest group documents provides better understanding of both Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993) and the ACF. In particular, their data provide an empirical and falsifiable analysis of how narrative strategies are predictably embedded in policy narratives of competing advocacy coalitions to achieve expansion or contraction of the policy subsystem as well as impede policy learning. Shanahan et al. (2008) also use content analysis to demonstrate how local and national newspaper accounts of a contentious policy issue possess both policy core beliefs and predictable political strategies, revealing through such narrative evidence that media outlets can be influential members of advocacy coalitions. Jones (2010) employs an experimental design to test how narrative structure and content (in this case, Cultural Theory) influence mass opinion on climate change. Jones finds that narrative structure, specifically affect for characters, plays a powerful role in shaping opinion. His work also methodologically moves the study of narrative in public policy away from what had been an exclusive use of content analysis to experimental design. McBeth, Lybecker, and Garner (2010) and Shanahan et al. (2011) follow Jones’s lead using survey research and a quasi-experimental design to
show how narratives grounded in different frames and policy core beliefs influence citizen views of environmental issues. Similarly, Jones and Song (2011) find that policy narratives help structure how individuals organize their thoughts about climate change. Most recently, research has moved from cross-sectional to longitudinal analysis of changes in policy narratives (McBeth, Shanahan, et al., 2010) and has expanded the study of policy narratives to include new media types such as YouTube. Finally, the publication of Jones and McBeth (2010) pulls this iterative work together under the rubric of NPF. Their article is a review of the philosophical issues behind the study of narratives, a review of narrative research on public policy, and an analysis of post-structural and structural approaches to the study of narrative. The authors conclude with a detailed articulation of NPF, including narrative structure, belief systems, and levels of analysis, as well as testable NPF hypotheses.

Given the NPF’s origins within the traditions of the ACF, we seek to articulate the NPF as an independent framework that is anchored in theories relevant to policy narratives from multiple academic fields and disciplines, as well as to illuminate how those same theories may be applied within the context of the ACF at the meso level of analysis.

An Overview of Narrative Policy Framework

The Narrative Policy Framework has been under development since 2004 in response to criticisms of postpositive approaches in public policy as being “largely nonfalsifiable” (Sabatier, 1999a, p. 11; Sabatier, 2000). Our approach to the study of narratives in public policy has risen to these criticisms by enveloping theories across a range of academic disciplines to provide falsifiable hypotheses and clear propositions within a discernable framework applicable at multiple levels of analysis. Just as the ACF was developed out of a frustration with the stages heuristic as an inadequate causal theory, the NPF was developed out of an impetus to include policy narratives in the policy process and develop theoretically driven quantitative approaches to measure their power and influence. Next, we first describe the NPF by defining concepts, then by our assumptions followed by our conceptual schematic, and finally, by the synergies of the NPF with the ACF.

Definitions

Narratives are a way of structuring and communicating our understanding of the world. Whereas political narratives are persuasive stories for some political end (e.g., to win an election), a policy narrative has a setting, a plot, characters (hero, villain, and victim), and is disseminated toward a preferred policy outcome (the moral of the story) (Jones & McBeth, 2010). To understand the NPF, it is first necessary to address the definitions associated with these structural components. Addressing Sabatier’s concern that narrative research is often disconnected from institutions, the authors find that the study of narratives must have “a policy setting or context” (p. 340), identifying facts, rules, and/or assumptions most relevant parties
agree upon. Informed by Stone (1989, 2002), the NPF also asserts that policy narratives must have a *plot*. Through a litany of literary devices, plots serve to link characters to settings, assign the roles of the characters, and, most importantly, assign blame through some assertion of causation (while usually assigning intent as well). Thus, policy narratives must also be populated by *characters* (heroes, villains, and victims) and offer *solutions* (e.g., a moral of the story). To avoid relativism, Jones and McBeth theorize that policy narratives must also have generalizable content. One way to allow for this, the authors argue, is through the use of *belief systems* that allow the researcher to select variable but bounded policy narrative content. Preferably, belief systems selected by the researcher should draw upon preexisting and robust deductive theories, such as Cultural Theory (e.g., Thompson, Ellis, & Wildavsky, 1990) or ideology (Barker & Tinnick, 2006; Lakoff, 2002), to avoid the validity problems associated with *ad hoc* theoretical constructs.\(^3\) Taken together, these structural qualities constitute what we refer to as the *narrative elements* of a *policy narrative*.

**Assumptions**

With policy narratives at its core, the broader foundations of the NPF as an approach to the policy process rests on a series of assumptions. These assumptions include: (i) policy narratives are central in policy processes; (ii) policy narratives operate at three levels of analysis: micro (the individual), meso (the policy subsystem), and macro (institutional/cultural); (iii) a broad set of actors (elected officials, interest groups, the media, etc.) generate policy narratives; and (iv) policies and programs are translations of beliefs that are communicated through policy narratives, the vehicle for conveying and organizing policy information. The NPF specifies a framework for policy narratives that purports to be strategically constructed, to present information as rational but based on beliefs, and identifies losses more than wins in the policy subsystem. Whereas the ACF identifies beliefs as the causal driver for political behavior, in the NPF, we dissect this idea into finer elements to better understand how policy narratives contain beliefs, mobilize citizens, strategically deploy scientific information in the pursuit of policy positions, and influence public opinion.

The NPF seeks to explain how policy narratives influence policy change and outcomes at potentially three levels of analyses (Jones & McBeth, 2010): micro, meso, and macro (Table 1). At each level of analysis, the NPF identifies a specific unit, classes of variables drawn from disparate theories and academic disciplines, and relies upon theory to identify causal drivers (see Schlager, 2007, for an overview of this approach). Of course, the overriding concern of the NPF is the role of policy narratives in these myriad of relationships spanning different levels of analysis. Thus, the unit of analysis directs the researcher to the behavior of specific entities and how policy narratives shape these behaviors. For example, the meso level draws our attention to the behavior of groups and how narratives shape coalitions. Within each level of analysis, NPF researchers will also find specific theoretical tools, applicable to the study of policy narratives at that level. Finally, each theory proposes causal
relationships (also rooted in theory) to help the researcher model policy outcomes and policy change (e.g., situate relevant independent and dependent variables).

The micro level of analysis is focused at the individual level, specifically on how policy narratives shape individual opinion. At the micro level, the NPF imports theory from other fields providing measurable concepts such as *canonicity and breach* from the humanities (e.g., Herman, 2002, p. 91), *narrative transportation* from communication (e.g., Green & Brock, 2000), *congruence and incongruence* from political psychology (Lodge & Taber, 2005; Taber & Lodge, 2006), and interdisciplinary theories such as trust (i.e., source credibility) (see Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Olson, 2003) as important elements of analysis that clearly define potential causal relationships. Similarly to the ACF, the NPF meso level of analysis focuses on groups within coalitions, within the policy subsystem. Building on classic theories such as rational choice’s heresthetics (Riker, 1986) and E.E. Schattsneider’s scope of conflict (1960), the NPF meso-level analysis accomplishes this group-centered approach by specifying how policy narratives influence advocacy coalition composition. Said theories and others listed in Table 1 also produce explicit causal arrangements. For example, one can conclude from an application of Table 1’s stated theories that what coalitions believe, the strategies they employ, and the condition of public opinion are all

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<td>Unit of analysis</td>
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important predictors (i.e., independent variables) of policy outcomes and policy change (i.e., dependent variables) at the meso level of analysis. Similarly to the micro level of analysis, at the meso level of analysis, the NPF operationalizes narrative elements including plots, characters, and solutions. However, rather than focusing on how these narrative elements shape public opinion (which may be one of many concerns), narrative elements are used to generate variables that measure policy narrative strategies and—hopefully—explain policy change and outcomes through coalition variation. Because of comparable units of analysis and a focus on group and coalition behavior, it is at the meso level that we believe the NPF and the ACF are most comparable. Consequently, most of the discussion that follows is limited to the meso level applications. The macro level of analysis in the NPF is largely under development but conceptualizes the unit of analysis as the institution or culture.

**A Meso-Level Application of Narrative Policy Framework**

The NPF meso-level diagram (Figure 1) focuses attention on the role of policy narratives in policy output, grounded in theory that specifies how these narratives work within policy subsystems and how external conditions substantively affect them.

Policy narratives are generated and publicly disseminated by interest groups, individual citizens, elected officials, and media outlets (McBeth & Shanahan, 2004; Shanahan et al., 2008). These stakeholders form what Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993, p. 25) call advocacy coalitions, based primarily on congruent policy beliefs, coordination, and desired policy output. Members of these coalitions generate policy narratives. Whether groups portray themselves as winning or losing, the policy narrative contains some stable policy core beliefs, shaped by the cultural context (social and economic history and view of the role of government) in which the policy issue occurs (McBeth et al., 2005; McBeth, Shanahan et al., 2010). But other elements of these narratives are strategically constructed stories, intended to persuade the public and/or decision makers of the coalition’s preferred policy outcome.

To better illustrate the meso-level processes detailed in Figure 1, we offer an example using the installation of a 24 square mile wind farm in Nantucket Sound off the coast of Cape Cod in Massachusetts. This policy proposal has been and continues to be highly controversial, with interest groups, developers, residents of the Cape, and elected officials forming two advocacy coalitions, one for and one against this wind farm. The coalition supporting the installation of the wind farm includes Cape Wind (http://www.capewind.org/) and Greenpeace (http://www.greenpeace.org/usa); the coalition against includes The Alliance to Protect Nantucket Sound (http://www.saveoursound.org/), high-profile Cape Cod and Massachusetts residents such as the Kennedy family and Mitt Romney, and two local Native American tribes (http://thewampanoag.com/tag/wind-farm/).

As described earlier, determining policy core beliefs must engender rigorous grounding in well-established theory (e.g., Cultural Theory or theories of federalism). As such, one example of a way to conceive of the policy core beliefs for these groups is through developing a theory-driven measure of normative environmental
orientation ranging from preservation (Muir, 1912) to conservation (Pinchot, 1910) through coding of identified victims (e.g., wildlife deaths or humans through lack of employment). The prowind advocacy coalition used macro-level environmental degradation at the hands of global warming to demonstrate a preservation policy belief (Greenpeace, 2007), whereas the anti-wind advocacy coalition tended to employ human victims such as electric ratepayers and Native Americans (Alliance, 2009).
The point is that the narrative elements of characters can reveal an advocacy coalition’s policy beliefs.

In addition to policy core beliefs, the NPF also directs us to theory that suggests that policy narratives generated by these coalitions harbor divergent policy narrative strategies, depending on whether the coalition portrays itself as winning or losing in the policy subsystem (McBeth et al., 2007; McBeth, Shanahan et al., 2010). A “winner’s tale” constructs a story that seeks to preserve the status quo, whereas a “loser’s tale” seeks policy change. The theory behind this element of the NPF originates in the works of Schattschneider (1960) and more recently Pralle (2006), where winning groups try to restrict participation (issue containment) by limiting the scope of the conflict, while losing groups try to widen participation (issue expansion) in a policy issue. In terms of narrative, the storyteller seeks to contain or expand through the distribution of costs and benefits to the opposed policy solution; winning narratives diffuse benefits and concentrate costs, whereas losing narratives concentrate benefits and diffuse costs (McBeth et al., 2007). For example, the pro-wind farm coalition portrays themselves as winning through concentration of costs and diffusion of benefits. This can be documented in the coalition’s policy narratives (press releases, newsletters, YouTube videos, official documentation, etc.) through how they concentrate the costs of the wind-farm policy on the elite who live on the Cape shore (villains) and diffused the benefits to Massachusetts residents via new employment and leading the way toward national energy independence (victims) (for example, see Clean Power Now, 2006). By diffusing such benefits, the theory is that the opposition will be demobilized. The anti-wind farm coalition’s policy narratives, which engendered a perspective of losing in the policy arena, seek to expand the policy subsystem to include more stakeholders and mobilize interests. This can be documented in the coalition’s policy narratives through how they diffuse the cost of the windmills to the wildlife, ratepayers, taxpayers, fishermen, and Native American sacred grounds (victims) and concentrated the benefits on elite business entrepreneurs (villains) (for example, see Alliance, 2009). This loser’s tale tactic seeks to destabilize the status quo and expand opposition and mobilize others to action. As Stone (2002) argues, the goal in policy is to portray your side in the broad public interest and the other side as narrow special interests.

Two additional policy narrative tactics (see McBeth et al., 2007) are used to influence the membership of the policy subsystem, that of the use of policy symbols (e.g., Cobb & Elder, 1972) and policy surrogates (Nie, 2003). While the winner’s tale is less likely to use such divisive tactics because they are likely to rile the opposition and lead to mobilization, the loser’s tale is more likely to strategically use these tactics to expand policy issues and mobilize larger publics. Policy characterization symbols (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Cobb & Elder, 1972; Gray, 2004) are emotionally charged rhetorical attempts to negatively characterize opponents (e.g., pro-wind coalition referred to a Senator Kennedy as the “liberal lion” (Anonymous, 2003). Policy issue symbols (Cobb & Elder, 1972) work to define policy issues in memorable ways (e.g., anti-wind coalition referred to the Cape Wind project as a “neo-Big Dig” (Mihos, 2010). Policy surrogates are defined by Nie (2003, p. 314) as a strategy where “relatively straightforward policy problems” are used “as a surrogate to debate larger and more controversial problems” (e.g., pro-wind coalition suggesting that installing
the wind farm is stand against terrorism). In sum, as Figure 1 illustrates, at the meso level, policy narratives are used to impact the policy subsystem to affect policy change and outcomes.

**External Conditions.** The NPF agrees with the ACF that external conditions and events can impact policy change. *Changes in the external environment* have one of two effects in the policy subsystem. As Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993, pp. 17–18) theorize, one effect may occur within the advocacy coalitions themselves as resources shift, rules are altered, and/or political agendas change. Another effect is that such changes may simply enliven an existing coalition because of higher levels of public awareness or new knowledge, with no internal changes to the subsystem. If the external events do effect change in the policy subsystem, the NPF theorizes that changes will be reflected in the policy narratives; however, synergy within a coalition will result in no changes in the policy narrative. To continue with our Cape Cod example, the death of Senator Kennedy should be conceived of as an external event, potentially altering the generation of the anti-wind farm coalition’s policy narratives as the emotional draw of his personal perspective changed the political landscape.

Understanding any policy subsystem also requires a deep appreciation for the *cultural context* in which the policy debate resides (Weible, 2008). Social and economic history as well as view of the role of government clearly helps to form policy core beliefs. It is around these beliefs that narratives are developed to reflect the preferred policy outcome. In our example, the cultural context of the Cape is deeply rooted in the Kennedy dynasty, with JFK successfully conserving miles of coastline with the 1961 establishment of Cape Code National Seashore, a national park. Most certainly, this sort of historical reality creates a climate where certain political actions and policy narratives become more or less constrained.

In sum, the NPF represents the import of policy narratives in the policy process. Our framework may be utilized in two ways. First, *theories* enveloped by the NPF may be operationalized to document policy change or status quo. Second, the NPF is a *framework* drawing upon theories from multiple academic fields and disciplines that suggests that policy narratives shape policy output through influence on coalition membership and public opinion. In the sections that follow, we lean on said theories to deduce hypotheses applicable within both the ACF and the NPF at the meso level.

**Narrative Policy Framework and the Advocacy Coalition Framework**

Now, the question is what theories within the NPF can be accessed to test ACF concepts and variables? To address this question, we focus on four concepts and their requisite assumptions in the ACF that we find most relevant to the NPF at the meso level: (i) *belief systems* are the glue that bind advocacy coalitions (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993); (ii) *policy learning* is a relatively enduring alteration in thought or behavioral intention on the part of a coalition (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993); (iii) *public opinion* serves as an exogenous constraint, internal shock, and an advocacy
coalition resource (Jones & Jenkins-Smith, 2009); and (iv) strategy is used by advocacy coalitions to influence decisions by governmental authorities (Hirsch, Baxter, & Brown, 2010).

Policy Narratives and Advocacy Coalitions’ Belief Systems

The ACF focuses on advocacy coalitions and the role of belief systems in shaping those coalitions (Weible, 2005; Weible, Sabatier, & McQueen, 2009). By definition, these coalitions of individuals and groups share “...a set of basic values, causal assumptions, and problem perceptions” (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993, p. 25). Thus, the ACF is reliant upon core beliefs to militate against being altered, to constrain and define coalition long-term membership, and, most importantly, to provide a teleological compass for the coalition’s behavior. It is the belief system that gives the coalition purpose; it is that purpose that guides the coalition to strategically translate those beliefs into preferred public policy.

In understanding why particular coalitions affect policy change, past research has focused on aspects such as advocacy stability (Zafonte & Sabatier, 1998), the relationship between policy core beliefs and types of network ties (ally, coordination, or advice) (Weible & Sabatier, 2005), and the external perturbances affecting coalition belief systems (e.g., Nedergaard, 2008). In the NPF, we focus on the quantification of policy beliefs that bind these coalitions (McBeth et al., 2005) as we ultimately believe that the quality of the policy belief bonds matter in terms of policy change and outcomes. Others have used surveys (Weible & Sabatier, 2009) and coded hearings (Jenkins-Smith & St. Clair, 1993) to measure the quality of policy beliefs. Policy narratives should allow for another viable way to quantify the belief system “glue” that binds the coalitions. One way to accomplish this is to utilize policy narratives to quantify a scale variable of a policy belief, thus generating the needed variation. In our earlier example, the policy belief of environmental orientation could be measured through coding the identity of victims in the policy narrative, i.e., nature itself (preservation) or humans who use nature (conservation). For each policy narrative, the researcher would take the total number of conservation victims, subtract the total number of preservation victims, and divide by the total number of victims, providing an environmental orientation score for each policy narrative ranging from −1.00 (conservation) to +1.00 (preservation). These scores may be averaged per group within a coalition or per coalition and tested against the policy belief mean score of the opposing coalition.

While possibilities for statistical testing are abundant, the point is that policy narrative elements (e.g., characters, plot, etc.) are the basis for hypothesis testing. For example, the quantification of policy beliefs through the policy narrative element of characters can be used to test and explain different facets of coalition behavior. Characters can be used to measure stability, strength, and cohesion of policy beliefs over time.

Stability. While the ACF posits that policy beliefs are stable over time, there is some question whether the presentation of beliefs through narrative is more of a strategic
manipulation, subject to change depending on political winds. Whereas previous NPF research (McBeth et al., 2005; McBeth, Shanahan, et al., 2010) has demonstrated that policy beliefs can be quantified through use of characters in the policy narrative, policy beliefs may also be tested for stability across time. Difference of means can determine whether a coalition’s mean policy belief scores across time are statistically different, indicating instability, especially following an external event. For example, McBeth et al. (2005) find that the environmental interest group, the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, and the motorized recreation group, the Blue Ribbon Coalition, both had stable policy beliefs in a period between 1996 and 2002, despite a changing governing coalition of two presidential administrations. In contrast, a study (McBeth, Shanahan, et al., 2010) of the single issue group, the Buffalo Field Campaign, revealed that the group had stability in the human-nature belief over a 10-year period but that their use of federalism changed rapidly over time, indicating instability. Thus stability and instability may prove to be strong indicators of whether or not a coalition or group is engaging in strategy or if the stories it emits are reliable indicators of the group’s beliefs.

**Strength.** While resources might be defined as funds and membership, strength of a policy belief may be an additional resource that affects policy outcomes. In contrast to stability, which is based on the consistent use of a policy belief over time, strength of policy beliefs is the intensity with which a group or coalition employs a particular policy belief perspective. For example, in the aforementioned −1.00 to +1.00 scale, the closer to ±1.00, the stronger the policy belief; conversely, the closer to 0, the weaker the policy belief. Strength can be assessed both within and between coalitions. Intra-coalitional strength can be assessed by the extent to which groups within a coalition are strong (i.e., closer to ±1.00) in their presentation of policy beliefs. We reach back to our early Cape Cod example to provide a hypothetical inter-coalition measure of strength. If the anti-wind farm coalition identifies both environmental victims (birds, marine life) and local businesses (fishermen, tourists), then their human-nature policy belief is weak (i.e., closer to 0); in contrast, if the pro-wind farm coalition identifies only human victims (jobs, human health because of fossil fuel pollution) then their policy belief is strong (i.e., closer to 1.00). Ultimately, the NPF can be used to test whether higher levels of policy belief strength are associated with policy outcomes.

**Cohesion.** Advocacy coalitions are typically comprised of multiple entities. While these intra-coalitional policy actors share a preferred policy outcome, prioritization of beliefs and congruency of said beliefs may diverge, indicating varying levels of cohesion. Determining prioritization of beliefs is accomplished by assessing how often their policy narratives identify a particular policy belief; in other words, policy belief priorities can be empirically ranked via frequency in policy narratives. For example, the Buffalo Field Campaign’s (BFC) most used policy belief is human-nature relationship (McBeth, Shanahan, et al., 2010), whereas, in contrast, the Greater Yellowstone Coalition’s (GYC) primary policy belief is that of federalism (McBeth et al., 2005). Thus, even though the BFC and GYC are treated as part of the same coalition,
it is apparent that the two groups do not share the same belief system priorities. Importantly, prioritization is a necessary condition but not sufficient to obtain high levels of cohesion. If groups share the same policy belief priority, this policy belief must also be congruent between the groups to achieve cohesion. Congruency is defined as being on the same side of a policy belief (e.g., on the +1.00 on the preservation side of the human-nature policy belief scale).

In sum, the quality of the policy belief bonds—stability, strength, and cohesion—can be considered what the ACF calls *coalitional glue* and can be empirically determined through the quantification of policy narrative elements. As such, we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1: Coalition Glue and Policy Outcomes.** Advocacy coalitions with policy narratives that contain higher levels of coalitional glue (coalition stability, strength, and intra-coalition cohesion) will more likely influence policy outcomes.

Policy beliefs are a critical element of policy narratives because this coalitional “glue” is very likely to provide focus and purpose and ensure that the coalition is not distracted by internal disagreement regarding the best policy outcomes and the preferred policy changes. Thus, the meso-level perspective of the NPF purports that the relative stability, strength, and cohesion of these policy beliefs within the coalitions are useful and relevant independent variables for predicting policy change and outputs.

**Policy Narratives and Policy Learning**

In the ACF, a causal mechanism for policy change is policy-oriented learning that results from “...experience and/or new information” (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1993, p. 42; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999, p. 123) altering belief systems in the policy subsystem. Minor policy change may occur over time, through a process called “enlightenment” (Sabatier, 1991, p. 148) whereby new information is introduced, and advocacy coalitions iteratively integrate this new policy knowledge, converging on policy beliefs that result in a policy outcome. As can be imagined, the role of scientific information in such a process is typically an important one.

Conditions in which policy learning is likely to occur are specific in the ACF and characterized by: (i) low levels of conflict; (ii) analytical tractability (agreement on the facts and theories); and (iii) a professional forum whereby members of the coalitions are governed by generally accepted rules and norms (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1993). In other words, policy learning is most likely to occur in collaborative policy subsystems rather than adversarial or intractable policy subsystems (Weible & Sabatier, 2009). Policy narratives could play a valuable role in further explaining this relationship. For example, a collaborative subsystem could be defined as having high levels of cohesion within and across coalitions, while an adversarial system could be defined as having low levels of cohesion within and across coalitions. In this way, narrative structural elements, such as characters, can be used to help ACF scholars assess when policy learning does and does not occur by providing alternate
measurement strategies for determining whether a subsystem is collaborative or adversarial.

Narrative theory suggests that policy narratives may be an important input (i.e., independent variable) in policy learning. Hajer (1993) writes of discourse coalitions that validate and/or impose their policy story through the institutionalization of their preferred policy story (p. 47); policy change is theorized to occur when a new discourse, or story, becomes dominant (p. 55). And because narrative is a universal form of human communication (White, 1987), it is quite likely that stories are the social synapses linking individuals to their coalitions. Thus, the acceptance of a new narrative could feasibly help facilitate what the ACF terms “policy learning,” even if such variables as scientific information were to remain constant. Shifts in belief systems (i.e., the definition of policy learning) could be brought on by the broad acceptance of a new normative setting (e.g., the importance of equal rights); belief system alteration could be induced by a new causal arrangement (e.g., conspiracy); belief systems could be altered by a different prioritization of values (e.g., security vs. liberty). To be clear here, all of these posited changes could occur without fundamentally altering the scientifically agreed-upon facts in the relevant policy subsystem. The change in the status and legal treatment of the disabled in our society is a good example of a change in narrative with little (if any) change in the science. Historically, the disabled were viewed as weak and unable to adapt to society. Employing a new policy narrative, policy entrepreneurs were able to imbue narrative elements with different meanings that portrayed society as the villain refusing to adapt and the disabled as victims deserving of society’s aid (e.g., Jeon & Haider-Markel, 2001). In other words, the power of a good story is likely to shape subsystem policy learning and outcomes, regardless of the available scientific information. Empirical narrative research supports this conjecture.

Recent experimental design research in psychology (e.g., Ricketts, 2007) reveals that narratives are often more persuasive than science. Golding et al. (1992), in a study of radon gas information dissemination, similarly show that narrative forms of information better hold a reader’s attention compared with technical information. Other research on recycling policy has suggested that policy learning occurs among individuals when information (grounded in science and evidence) is presented in the form of a story that emphasizes individual responsibility, efficiency, and good business acumen because these elements produce ideological consensus compared with other recycling information campaigns that define recycling in terms of as a way to reduce climate change and think globally (McBeth, Lybecker, et al., 2010). From the NPF perspective, a new policy narrative may be so powerful in and of itself as to precipitate policy change. As such, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Policy Narrative Persuasion. Variation in policy narrative elements helps explain policy learning, policy change, and policy outcomes.

The NPF thus proposes that narratives are an important independent variable to the dependent variables associated with policy change and outcomes.
Policy Narratives and Public Opinion

As early as 1967, public opinion scholar Lee Benson observed that an empirically inspired narrative framework could be applied to the scientific study of public opinion. Benson argued that where polling data are sparse or nonexistent, such as when examining historical opinion trends, such a narrative framework “...is the indispensable first operation required...for historical opinion research” (1967, p. 552). We concur with Benson’s earlier theorizing. Narrative techniques and theories such as those articulated by Benson (1967) and those enveloped by the NPF (Jones & McBeth, 2010) are quite amenable to the study of public opinion. These theories and methods, we argue, can be further extended for the betterment of the ACF’s meso-level treatment of public opinion.

In their recent piece about trans-subsystem dynamics, Jones and Jenkins-Smith (2009) chronicle the evolution of the treatment of the concept of public opinion within the ACF. The authors conclude that the ACF, in its most current manifestation, treats public opinion as a tripartite concept (pp. 39–40). First, public opinion acts as an exogenous constraint outside of the policy subsystem. Second, public opinion can also operate as an internal shock within a subsystem, critically redistributing resources (Sabatier & Weible, 2007). And third, public opinion is a resource that elites within subsystems will tap when possible. We find that policy narratives can be empirically specified within all three of these theoretical demarcations (i.e., exogenous constraint, internal shock, and resource) to better specify how and why public opinion matters in the policy process. We address each of these areas.

Recent narrative scholarship has used narrative analysis to assess public preferences (e.g., Hampton, 2004, 2009; Jones, 2010). For example, Hampton (2004) uses narratively structured focus groups to determine which environmental quality stories are most salient in the community in question. Hampton alludes to the comparative benefit of this approach (as compared with polling data reliant on simple declarative statements). Paraphrasing Hampton, a narrative approach gets at the “why” of public opinion as it explicitly attempts to unveil diversity in values and goals (2004, pp. 263–64). Related directly to the NPF, narrative elements (e.g., characters, plots, causal linkages) could be discerned through a multiplicity of research techniques including focus groups, in-person interviews, and survey instruments. Once these narrative structures are observed, the majority and minority goals and values of the public can be used to demarcate coalitional constraints, both exogenous and internal to the subsystem in question. For example, a large public exogenous to the energy policy subsystem that believes climate change is part of a larger conspiracy led by Obama in the pursuit of one-world socialist government is likely to constrain subsystem actors who advocate renewable energy. These exogenous public opinion constraints could be quite severe, despite the fact that energy subsystem actors might not actually be concerned at all with the truth or falsity of climate change. Presumably, you do not have to believe in climate change to advocate for solar panels—one could simply own a company that manufactures solar panels. At the same time, actors within the subsystem could also be
influenced by opinion endogenous to the subsystem that dislikes nuclear energy, thereby potentially favoring renewables if put forth in the right story. Beyond simple measurement novelty, we suspect narrative theory will better inform why behavior is constrained and perhaps explain why some policy strategies are more effective than others. In the case of our hypothetical example about energy policy, one might hypothesize that subsystem actors who are able to disassociate their regulatory policies from Obama, tell a story of American independence and ingenuity and root their regulatory policies in values far from socialism (e.g., competition and free markets) will be least constrained by public opinion. Below is a hypothesis that tests for the effect of exogenous public opinion on subsystem policy narratives.

**Hypothesis 3: Exogenous Public Opinion.** When exogenous public opinion is congruent with a coalition’s preferred policy outcomes, coalitions will offer policy narratives that seek to contain the subsystem coalition (by maintaining the status quo membership of the coalition).

Internal public opinion shocks are also amenable to narrative measurement and assessment. A classic example of an internal shock is the Three Mile Island nuclear reactor incident (Jones & Jenkins-Smith, 2009).10 After the near catastrophe at Three Mile Island, public support for nuclear energy fell dramatically (Freudenburg & Baxter, 1985). A potential explanation for this is that subsystem actors were unable to produce a plausible policy narrative that actually took advantage of the internal shock to the nuclear power subsystem. Next is a hypothesis that tests for the effect of endogenous public opinion on subsystem policy narratives.

**Hypothesis 4: Endogenous Public Opinion.** When endogenous public opinion shocks are incongruent with a coalition’s preferred policy outcome, coalitions will offer policy narratives that seek to expand the subsystem coalition.

When examining public opinion as either an external constraint or internal subsystem shock, it is important to emphasize that public opinion and policy narratives are not the same thing. Rather, policy narratives, operationalized in terms of the NPF’s narrative structural elements, are likely to provide a more nuanced understanding of the dominant public perception. The advantage for the ACF, then, is one of a more sophisticated measurement tool than simple declarative statements typically operationalized in public opinion polls.

Given the role of public opinion in assessing the virility of the linkage between the public and democratic institutions, conceptualizing and testing the role of public opinion in the policy process is vital to a normatively useful policy framework. Operationalizing narrative theory, NPF helps direct ACF scholars to measurement techniques that are more likely to capture the nuance of public opinion; as a framework, NPF posits that advocacy coalitions strategically wield policy narratives to influence, direct, and, if possible, outright control public opinion for the coalition’s benefit. Or, in ACF terms, public opinion is a resource.
The NPF asserts that the strategic use of policy narratives matter in policy outcomes. The so-what question about the import of policy narratives on policy beliefs, policy learning, and public opinion hinges on the strategy and intention behind the use of policy narratives to affect policy change and outcomes. As Stone (2002, p. 155) asserts, the language and symbols embedded in narratives are “always strategic, designed to call in reinforcements for one’s own side in a conflict.” As they are strategic, we contend that policy narratives are amenable to measurement and traditional public policy theories, like the ACF provide, fertile groundwork for narrative theory building (Jones & McBeth, 2010). As a conceptual model, the ACF contends that coalitions use strategy to influence decisions by governmental authorities. There is no doubt that such strategies play a crucial role in inter-coalition struggles, and yet such strategies have received scarce attention by ACF scholars (Brown & Stewart, 1993, p. 101; Weible et al., 2009). We suggest that policy narratives are at once the window to and the essence of coalition political strategy. In fact, recent narrative policy research suggests that the study and measurement of narratives is one way for the ACF to flesh out the role that such strategies play in influencing governmental authorities, shaping public opinion, and reforming coalitions (e.g., see Hirsch et al., 2010).

Although not explicitly a study in narrative, Pralle (2006), in her case studies of Canadian and U.S. forestry policy, shows how groups use language and framing to influence public policy and how groups build new coalitions by managing participation. Importantly, she observes that the trend in ACF scholarship is to focus on coalition stability. In the process, Pralle further illuminates a strategy narrative theory is likely to clarify when she states that the primary goal of coalitions is “dividing opponents, not attracting allies” (2006, p. 201). The NPF draws upon narrative and rational choice theories to hypothesize that the strategic deployment of policy narratives is aimed at dividing or maintaining coalitions. Specifically, Jones and McBeth (2010, p. 346) find that the work of Riker (1986) on “heresthetics” provides a source for NPF researchers to explore such restructuring of coalitions. Pralle’s work is heavily influenced by Baumgartner and Jones’s (1993) punctuated equilibrium and as such, deals extensively with venue shopping and how groups construct their stories according to venue choice. Similarly, the ACF would benefit from the empirical study of narrative and venue choice to both better identify political strategies and assess the importance of those strategies.

A further possible application of narratives to coalition reforming rests in how advocacy groups present narrative characters. Schneider and Ingram (2005) demonstrate how public policy outcomes favor those who are “deserving and entitled.” The construction of victims in policy narratives plays an important role here. For example, a narrative analysis of AIDS and tobacco policy highlights the importance of innocent victims. U.S. AIDS policy gained prominence only after the disease was shown to impact sympathetic celebrities like Rock Hudson (Shilts, 1987), children like Ryan White (Donovan, 1993), and heterosexuals receiving blood transfusions. Similarly, with U.S. tobacco policy, second-hand smoke (Sweda, 2004) and revela-
tions that tobacco companies long knew the addictive qualities of nicotine (Derthick, 2001). Again, narratives featuring innocent victims both influence public opinion and shape new coalitions. In this latter case, tobacco policy entrepreneurs were able to shift causation from a by-product of the system (inadvertent) to directed by the tobacco companies (intentional) (see Stone, 1989), thus providing a much stronger justification for tobacco regulation and ultimately dividing part of the tobacco advocacy coalition. Though scientific information (about nicotine) was important in policy change, it was likely the narrative construction of an innocent victim from the scientific findings that proved to be a tipping point in turning public opinion against tobacco companies.

Conversely, Jones (2010) finds that the hero is the key factor in determining the power of policy stories in climate change policy. Jones’s experiment exposes nearly fifteen hundred respondents to one of four experimental treatments—three policy narratives about climate change and a control list of facts. Jones found that characters are incredibly important in narrative persuasion, but heroes (interest groups) cast in a good light were more important than other narrative structural elements or cultural beliefs in influencing individual opinion. Across all of the narrative treatments and unlike any other independent variable examined in this analysis, affect for heroes demonstrates the most consistent significant findings and partial regression coefficients are comparatively larger than other independent variables across a host of 11 dependent variables related to climate change opinions.

As theorized in early NPF scholarship (McBeth & Shanahan, 2004), advocacy coalitions strategically use narrative tactics to gain support for their preferred policy outcomes. Thus, an empirical measure of the influence of such policy narrative strategies would significantly add to the ACF’s emphasis on political strategies.

Hypothesis 5: The Power of Characters. The portrayal of policy narrative characters (heroes, victims, and villains) has higher levels of influence on opinion and preferences of citizens, elected officials, and elites than scientific or technical information.

While policy narrative elements are strategically deployed to affect individual policy preferences, there are also embedded policy narrative strategies designed to shape policy subsystem parameters through efforts to contain or expand the policy arena (e.g., attract allies, limit enemies, etc.). The NPF takes its theoretical cues from the ACF, which indicates that along with leadership, information, and financial resources, public opinion is a resource for subsystem actors (Weible, 2008). As a resource, we can then logically infer that actors will engage in strategies to both obtain this resource and direct it for their benefit. At least two recent studies speak to narrative strategies and public opinion. McBeth et al. (2007) use Baumgartner and Jones (1993) and Schattschneider (1960) to explore how interest groups use narrative strategies (e.g., use of condensation symbols, Cobb & Elder, 1972; Edelman, 1967), policy surrogates (Nie, 2003), and the allocation of benefits or costs to policy outcomes (Schattschneider, 1960) to either expand or contain policy issues, depending on whether the group is portraying themselves as winning or losing on a policy issue. Jacobs and Sobieraj (2007) examine the congressional record to determine how the members of Congress narratively portray the nonprofit sector. The authors find
clear strategies where members of Congress tell competing stories, presenting themselves as heroes in masquerade narratives.

**Hypothesis 6: Narrative Scope of Conflict.** Advocacy coalitions use differing policy narrative strategies depending on whether they perceive themselves as winning or losing on an issue with the intention of expanding or containing membership of the public in the policy subsystem.

Importantly, the previously specified hypotheses regarding exogenous and endogenous public opinion (H3 and H4) refer to how policy narratives—the dependent variable—are shaped by public opinion. In contrast, H6 is interested in how the coalition views itself (winning or losing) and the ensuing attempts to manipulate public opinion as a resource—the dependent variable. Future research will have to deal explicitly with this likely endogeneity problem.

Up to this point, we have discussed political strategies as a way to prompt action. Yet strategies are also increasingly used to stifle policy learning. Such strategies have obvious and important implications for the ACF. One of these strategies already accepted by the ACF but rarely examined (Weible et al., 2009, p. 132) is the “devil shift,” first articulated by Sabatier, Hunter, and McLaughlin in 1987. Weible et al. (2009, pp. 132–33) describe the devil shift in this way: “...the devil shift predicts that actors will exaggerate the malicious motives, behaviors, and influence of opponents.” The devil shift, among other factors, leads to polarization, intractability, and inhibits policy learning. Recent work provides some evidence of how the devil shift might occur and the role that narratives play in that process. McBeth et al. (2007) find that two competing interest groups most often simultaneously portrayed themselves as losing and were more likely to use narratives to expand policy conflict. In doing so, groups construct the opposing coalition as more powerful than they really are, and the constant narrative expansion of the issue inhibits policy brokers from using science to reduce intractability.

Policy narratives provide an opportunity to empirically study the devil shift in an examination of the narrative element of characters: heroes, villains, and victims. Heroes are classically understood in a policy narrative as a fixer of a problem (Stone, 2002). Villains, on the other hand, are the causers of problems, while victims suffer at the hands of the villain and are generally saved by the hero. We would expect that the devil shift would find a high ratio of the casting of the opposition as the villain to heroes—meaning a clear indication that it is the opposition who are the bad guys. However, we are also likely to find frequent references to the victim(s) so as to demonstrate the power of the villains and the extent of the threat they pose. In other words, the devil shift would find policy narratives that focus blame and vilification on the opposition, with less attention to the identification of heroes who are likely to fix problems. Thus, it would appear that policy narratives are fertile ground for ACF scholars to better understand how groups deploy policy narrative strategies as a way to intentionally construct devil shift outcomes.12

**Hypothesis 7: The Devil Shift.** Higher incidence of the devil shift in policy subsystems is associated with policy intractability.
The study of narratives provides ample opportunity for ACF to expand understanding of how coalitions use political strategies. Jones and McBeth (2010, pp. 345–46), however, note that for the NPF to fully realize its potential as a viable framework of the policy process, researchers must find ways to measure how policy narratives actually influence policy outcomes. Thus, while there is ample evidence that narratives influence individuals at the micro level of analysis, the NPF must mature to the point where narratives are tested for their impact on actual policy outcomes, actual coalition reformation, and actual creation of intractability. In short, there is a synergy between the NPF and the ACF that will likely benefit both approaches to the study of public policy.

Conclusion

Recounting the genesis of NPF, we began this article with an explicit nod to how much the ACF shaped our approach and deepened our thinking about policy change and outcomes. Paul Sabatier’s and the ACF’s blunt criticisms of the non-falsifiability of narrative approaches served as an inspiration for our research. We also stated that there were identifiable intersections between the ACF and the NPF at the subsystem or meso level of analysis where the ACF would likely benefit from an empirical study of policy narratives. In identifying these intersections, we cite two ways in which narrative theory enveloped by NPF may be useful to ACF and thus detail specific hypotheses and speculate about measurement and operational strategies. First, the NPF identifies strategies that can be used to measure the extent to which exogenous (H3) and endogenous (H4) public opinion impact the strategic use of policy narrative structure. Second, the NPF has also shown that narrative theory and measurement can be quite helpful in measuring the devil shift and explaining policy stalemate (H7). However, we also diverge from the ACF in important ways. As a framework, the NPF asserts, quite simply, that policy narratives matter in policy change and outcomes. The ACF does not assert this. In our detailed accounts of this difference, we also rise to the empirical challenge by presenting theoretically driven and testable hypotheses captured by the NPF. First, we hypothesized that the more cohesive and strong the coalition is through its narrative representation, the more likely that coalition will succeed in affecting policy change and outcomes (H1). Second, we hypothesized that policy narratives drive policy learning, policy change, and policy outcomes through a particularly persuasive policy narrative (H2). Third, we hypothesized that policy narrative characters influence opinions of the general public and elites (H5). Fourth, we hypothesized that policy narratives are used to tap public opinion to alter the scope of conflict in the policy subsystem (H6). Our hope is that these points of confluence and divergence between the ACF and the NPF will benefit the development of both frameworks.

Ultimately, however, the theoretical contributions and the framework assertions seemingly converge upon an understudied facet of the ACF: strategy. In approaching strategy in terms of policy narratives, the ACF research could not only come to terms with coalition strategy but could very well speak to coalition maintenance and
change, venue choice, characters and outcomes, expansion and containment, and policy learning, as well as public opinion. Testable hypotheses clearly provide a path for the ACF to explore these issues. We believe that our hypothesis-driven approach to the NPF is within the long tradition of the ACF in terms of being clear enough to be wrong. Politics and political strategy might be messy but ultimately with our narrative approach, such messiness is measurable.

It is our hope that the NPF might well contribute to the ACF’s already significant contribution to our understanding of the policy process. In the spirit of Sabatier’s (1999b, pp. 266–70) guideline for theory development, the NPF can be applied in a variety of policy settings and employs extant theory to identify causal relationships and testable hypotheses. As such, could NPF be of use in the some of the scholarship in this special issue? Nohrstedt (2011), Pierce (2011), and Albright (2011) each employ elements of NPF, as their data—written comments by organizations in Sweden; historic testimonies on the creation of Israel; and interviews of flood management policy actors in Hungary, respectively—are words that are content-analyzed for policy beliefs in each study. The added advantage of using specific elements of NPF would be the quantification of coalitional strategy via changing policy narratives, particularly after external perturbations. Ingold (2011) and Matti and Sandström (2011) employ social network analysis (SNA) to characterize different types of relationships among coalition actors in the Swiss climate change policy issue and Swedish carnivore management; an unexplored area of NPF research is the use of SNA with words instead of actors to quantify, among other ideas, centrality of policy beliefs via narratives. In sum, we seek to invite others to use the literature and ideas in this article to explore the role of policy narratives in the policy process and in doing so, expand the usefulness of the ACF and our understanding of the role of narratives in the policy process.

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Notes

1. We rely on the distinction between frameworks, theories, and models applied in the policy process literature (see Ostrom, 1999; Schlager, 1999, 2007). Frameworks organize groups of variables, define relationships between groups, and are conceptually more encompassing than either theories or models (Koontz, 2003, p. 1). Theories “... place values on some of the variables identified as important in a framework, posit relationships among variables, and make predictions about likely outcomes” (Schlager, 2007, p. 296). Theories can exist independently but can also be organized into frameworks. Models, more narrow than theories, “... test specific parts of theories by fixing a limited number of variables at specific settings and exploring the outcomes produced” (Schlager, 2007, p. 294). We recognize that the categories of framework, theory, and model may not be mutually exclusive (e.g., model of the individual in theories vs. types of actors in frameworks) and distinctions within categories may, at times, seem blurred (e.g., the concept of scope of inquiry—a subcategory of theory—is discussed in terms of the stages heuristic (Schlager, 2007, pp. 297–99), which is openly recognized to draw
unclear lines between stages of the policy process). We openly recognize these potential limitations, yet hold that the concepts of framework, theories, and models provide a useful organizing heuristic to explain the role of policy narratives in public policy, especially given NPF’s portability across multiple levels of analysis (micro, meso, and macro, as discussed in more detail later).

2. Throughout this article, we will refer to policy change and policy outcomes as classes of dependent variables that we are interested in explaining. By policy change, we mean both major and minor change (see Schlager, 2007, pp. 309–12). By policy outcomes, we mean to capture the outputs of public policy. These outputs could be many including the (re)distribution of resources (Lowi, 1964), the social construction of affected populations (Schneider & Ingram, 1997), or the design of institutions (Shepsle & Bonchek, 1997). We intend for both classifications of potential dependent variables to be broadly understood and deliberately do not limit these concepts by providing specific definitions.

3. Generalization from NPF studies will be limited by the theories they employ to discern narrative content. For example, a study employing Lakoff’s ideology is not likely to be generalizable to Russia. This is precisely the reason the architects of NPF recommend deductive belief system theories such as Cultural Theory and ideology, or abstracted foci that rely on generalizable narrative strategies (e.g., heresthetics and scope of conflict). Both approaches are likely to provide the researcher with the broadest possible reach with the most explanatory power.

4. To be clear, our use of rational choice is not the narrow instrumental version frequently caricatured and dismantled by social constructivists (e.g., Stone, 2002). Rather, our use of rational choice is more in line with bounded rationality (Simon, 1983). For a very compelling account of bounded rationality that is likely to dovetail with NPF, see Jones (2001).

5. The NPF briefly posits a macro level of analysis but discusses the topic only briefly in a footnote (see footnote 11, Jones & McBeth, 2010, p. 348).

6. We deliberately do not offer specific definitions of either culture or institutions. It is simply beyond the scope of our inquiry to do so but suffice to say we view such concepts as larger than the individual (micro) and group (meso) while also recognizing the need for future specificity. For an introduction to the debate regarding how to define culture, see Keesing (1974); similarly, for more on institutions, see Searle (2005).

7. To most readers, it will be readily apparent that our figure is quite like ACF schematics (e.g., Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993, p. 18; Sabatier & Weible, 2007, p. 191, 202). The similarity is intentional. We mean to emphasize the intersections of ACF and NPF; combining the well-established parameters of the ACF with policy narrative theory is likely to best illuminate these points of intersection. We do not, however, want to leave the reader with the impression that NPF, at the meso level, must always be operationalized within the confines of ACF. On the contrary, we view this depiction of NPF and ACF synergies as only a step among the many that will illuminate the role of policy narratives in the policy process.

8. May (1992) distinguishes between instrumental policy learning, social policy learning, and political learning arguing that political learning is most common. We use the term “policy learning” to include these definitions. For example, intra-coalition learning might include political learning where groups “surf” for new problems for their solutions (Boscarino, 2009).

9. While Hajer and other postpositivists would disagree with analogizing the discourse coalition with the advocacy coalition (see, for example, Fischer, 2003), Ney (2009) argues that the two concepts are very similar (although he prefers the term advocacy coalition, p. 46). We agree with Ney.

10. It should be noted that while the Three Mile Island incident is considered endogenous to U.S. nuclear power, the incident is also treated as an exogenous public opinion event for the Swedish nuclear power subsystem (see Nohrstedt, 2005).

11. In addition, in a review of 32 years of survey findings, Lewis (2009) found that individuals are more tolerant of homosexuality when they believe that homosexuality has a biological basis rather than being a choice or preference. The idea is that individuals are more tolerant of homosexuality when people who are gay are in essence “innocent victims” of their own biology.

12. One way to measure the devil shift is through an advocacy coalition’s policy narratives with higher ratios of the characterization of the opposing coalition as villains to the identification of heroes.
References


