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Indication and inference: reflections on the challenge of mixing paradigms in the Narrative Policy Framework

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How does one draw inferences from a conceptual framework that mixes research paradigms? How does one go about convincing others that this is a worthy enterprise in narrative analysis? These are the questions I seek to address in this brief response to Michael Jones and Claudio Radaelli’s article (2015, this issue), ‘The Narrative Policy Framework: child or monster?’ In their article, the authors articulate a framework for carrying out narrative policy analysis that blends what they call a subjectivist/social constructionist ontology, an objectivist epistemology, a blended social constructionist/positivist theoretical perspective and a positivist methodology that includes quantitative and qualitative methods. On the one hand, Jones and Radaelli appear to seek to position the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) as a legitimate approach to policy analysis. On the other hand, a generous reading suggests an interest on their part in situating the NPF within a broader, long-standing interpretive narrative policy analysis tradition. In the spirit of academic pluralism, I respond to their project by assuming, for the moment, that mixing paradigms is possible (though I retain some ambivalence on this point), and I critically assess aspects of their approach that need further explication and development to be convincing.

Mixing paradigms poses fundamental challenges to drawing inferences. These challenges derive from a standard of quality in research, known as ‘indication’, that refers to the ‘fit’ in a study between theoretical assumptions and methodological choices (Gaskell and Bauer 2000; Ospina and Dodge 2005), and for my purposes, extends to include the fit among ontology, epistemology, theoretical assumptions and methodology (Crotty 1998). This focus situates the discussion within a meta-theoretical perspective that Jones and Radaelli also use to justify their approach: they acknowledge that frameworks such as the NPF must be supported by defensible reasoning about the relationship between these or similar components (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006). Most researchers working within the positivist paradigm take these relationships for granted. To Jones and Radaelli’s credit, their article responds to the interpretivist critique of the NPF by making related assumptions explicit and initiating a conversation with the interpretivist community.

Before I begin, it is necessary to describe two broad research paradigms and their approaches to inference (drawing on Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006; Schwandt 2001; King, Keohane, and Verba 1994).1 First, a hypothetical deductive approach to research mirrors the natural sciences by emphasizing the application of empirical methods (procedures, tools, techniques) of observation and experimentation to generate and analyze data and produce knowledge. The logic is hypothesis testing and deductive reasoning as a means to explain the way the world really is (the Truth) as accurately as possible. This

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approach assumes a ‘subject–object’ dichotomy that enables the researcher to stand outside social processes and observe them objectively. Accurate portrayal of reality requires researchers to ‘bracket’ their bias or prejudice so it does not contaminate the application of the procedures and thus the results.

Second, an interpretive approach assumes that the social world is different from the natural world; thus different methods are needed to develop knowledge about it. It emphasizes interpretation through, for example, practical reasoning or dialogue as a means of producing knowledge in the form of Verstehen (understanding). From this perspective ‘bracketing’ bias is difficult to achieve because researchers cannot escape the world they inhabit to make sense from some external position. The implication is that, for example, the very questions we ask can involve bias, even if couched in the most careful, objective language. In addition, ‘bracketing’ is not necessary for developing understanding and may even hinder it, because it cuts off a potential source of insight. Thus researchers do not aim for detached objectivity but rather capitalize on their subjectivity as a source of understanding. From this perspective, researchers aim to illuminate one truth (lower case t) among many (Dodge, Ospina, and Foldy 2005). This does not mean ‘anything goes’. Quality research is developed through defensible reasoning that is convincing according to the standards of a research community.

The goal of both approaches to knowledge development is inference; however, the basis of valid inference differs. The naturalistic social sciences aim to develop generalizable causal explanations of the Truth, while interpretive social science aims to understand meaning from within a social context, a truth. Insights may be ‘generalized’ to theory, so that causal mechanisms identified in one context can inform knowledge development in another, but the expression of the mechanisms will be context specific.

Jones and Radaelli make an implicit argument about indication – the fit across elements – in the NPF. While some elements are unclear, the basic argument seems to be that a subjective/social constructionist ontology is consistent with an objectivist epistemology, a blended social constructionist/positivist theoretical perspective and positivist methodologies.

First, with respect to ontology and epistemology, Jones and Radaelli argue that the NPF ‘makes a clear ontological choice: reality is socially constructed by and through narratives that provide both organization and meaning to public policy’ (2015, 344). Here Jones and Radaelli conflate ontology with epistemology and theoretical perspective. Social constructionism is an epistemological position that assumes that meaning (knowledge) is created out of human engagement with the world (objects) (Crotty 1998). Meaning is thus not discovered (as a reflection of the one single Truth) but is constructed by the people researchers observe and by researchers themselves, in different ways in different contexts, as a truth among many other possibilities. Ontology, in contrast, refers to the status of reality (Crotty 1998). For example, realism is the notion that there is a reality outside the mind (e.g., trees exist whether we encounter them and make sense of them or not). Jones and Radaelli seem to suggest that there are multiple realities when they make a ‘social constructionist’ or ‘subjectivist’ ontological choice. But they explicitly adopt an objectivist epistemology, which involves a search for a unified (generalizable) Truth. Thus, the fit here needs to be clarified and its implications further explicated. Ontologically, does the NPF assume a single objective reality exists, or multiple subjectively derived realities can coexist – as we see, for example, when hermeneutically isolated cultural groups engage the world in radically different ways such that their realities are different: the sun rises when the Gods are pleased versus the sun rises with the regularity of scientific laws. These two narratives create the world in
very different ways. The choice between a realist ontology and a ‘social constructionist’ one has very different implications for epistemology: does one search for generalizable laws or different interpretations of material/social objects?

In short, there is a mismatch between the ontological and epistemological perspectives of the NPF. An ontology acknowledging multiple realities (truths) is inconsistent with an objectivist epistemology that would seek to discover the Truth in the form of generalizable patterns across contexts. This raises the question: of what are Jones and Radaelli making an inference? A universal Truth, or a specific truth unique to the context in a study? And what is the relation between this and their assumptions about the status of reality (is there a single reality or multiple realities)?

This confusion between ontology and epistemology allows Jones and Radaelli (2015, 345) to make statements such as the following:

‘...the objective reality we refer to is an intersubjectively reliable reality rooted in scientific agreement, as opposed to other uses of the term that would invoke some exogenous “truth” independent of human perceptions’ (citing Jones and McBeth 2010, 37, footnote 4).

But this statement simply does not make sense. How is it possible to have an objective reality simultaneously with an ‘intersubjectively reliable reality’? And how can an objective reality not refer to some exogenous Truth?

These reflections not only bring us ‘climbing down a ladder of abstraction’, as Jones and Radaelli pejoratively put it, but have important methodological implications. One, from an interpretive perspective – e.g., interactive discourse analysis – one would not measure the frequency with which the word ‘threatening’ was used to describe fracking over time, but would examine in context how ‘threatening’ was used at different times by different actors to do all kinds of things, e.g., legitimize a certain form of environmental regulation, win favor among a particular constituency, and so on. In the first case, the inference is based on the notion of a single reality, while in the second it is based on the notion that realities are multiple and non-generalizable to other contexts, at least not in any straightforward kind of way. Two, I wonder if what Jones and Radaelli mean to say is that there is a single objective reality (ontology), but actors make sense of it differently through socially constructed processes (epistemological position with theoretical implications). They seem to contradict themselves on this point. On the one hand, they note that, ‘while most would agree that the average global temperature (a material condition) has increased, what the increase means varies’ (2015, 344). This suggests a realist ontology with a social constructionist epistemology. On the other hand, they argue that, “the view that “there is a Real World (big R, big W)” does not belong to the NPF (citing Moses and Knutsen) and that integrating a realist ontology with a social constructionist epistemology is a nonsensical position. Yet, interpretive researchers regularly integrate a realist ontology with a social constructionist epistemology. For example, John Dryzek (2005) acknowledges that pollution does exist (realist ontology), but how people make sense of it, or come to know it, varies (social constructionist epistemology): pollution is either not a problem at all, an unfortunate consequence of industrialization, or a serious threat, depending on one’s ‘reality’.

Second, researchers make different theoretical assumptions about the ways narratives organize (socially construct) meaning, with consequences for methodology and methods. Interpretive researchers draw variably on hermeneutics (e.g., Lejano and Leong 2012), phenomenology (e.g., Riessman 2002) and Foucaultian discourse analysis (e.g., Hajer 2005), among others. The NPF borrows extensively from interpretive
theoretical perspectives, translating them into a positivist (theoretical-methodological) framework.

For interpretive researchers, this translation obliterates the intent and analytical power of narrative theory. It also strains the link between theoretical perspective and ontology/epistemology. For example, Jones and Radaelli argue that the form and structure of narratives are transportable to other contexts (do they mean generalizable across populations?), while the content of the story is not (e.g., ‘a story about racial segregation is not easily morphed into a story about the risks of nanotechnology’, 2015, 342). They call this non-transportable quality of narrative content a ‘problem’ of ‘narrative relativity’. To address this problem, they translate interpretive narrative concepts into positivist categories, for example, by arguing that ‘narrative objects’, such as specific people or symbols in a narrative, have ‘meaning tendencies’ ‘for some portion of the population... such that we can reliably assess probabilistic meaning-making’ (2015, 342). They seem to assume that the meaning of narrative objects transcends context: most people will understand a particular narrative in the same way across contexts (and even within contexts), although there is some variation that does not need to be understood or explained.

The lack of fit here between theory and ontology/epistemology has to do with the search for probabilistic meanings of narrative content. Rather than making an analytical asset out of relativity and ambiguity in narrative content, and making it a central focus of analysis as interpretive theory would indicate, Jones and Radaelli’s approach masks the ways in which narratives organize social interaction. From Hajer’s discursive approach, for example, the ambiguity of storylines performs a critical social and political function: it enables policy actors at times to understand themselves to be involved in a common project — such as sustainable development — when they may attach very different meanings to the notion of sustainable development: for example, one may emphasize making money from new environmental projects or ensuring that any economic activity puts back more resources than it uses.

Instead, Jones and Radaelli lose the analytical power of narratives. At the micro level, the NPF narrowly examines public opinion as a function of different features of narratives (e.g., narrators that are perceived to be more trustworthy will be more persuasive to an individual, i.e., will cause an individual to change his or her mind) (Jones and McBeth 2010). So this approach is incapable of detecting when, how and why certain narratives lose their trustworthiness even if their elements do not change, and how this shapes the transformation of coalitions to produce policy change. At the meso level, changes in coalitions are a function of policy narratives, but not through changes in those narratives or how they are understood. Narratives and their features are assumed to be static. Rather it is the strategic use of existing narratives that shapes coalitions by shifting the value dimensions of a debate (Jones and McBeth 2010). It is not clear how the value dimensions of a debate are shifted, and how this relates to policy change.

More generally, the hypothetical-deductive approach to science emphasizes standards of quality (e.g., validity, reliability, replicability and falsification) that demand a narrowing of empirical focus for researchers to achieve them. In the case of the NPF, this removes from narrative analysis the ability to apprehend narrative dynamics important from an interpretive perspective and diminishes the ability to answer questions of broader relevance. This is seen in Jones and Radaelli’s attempt to reduce epistemology to quality standards: what is relevant from a hypothetical deductive approach is the soundness of method, not these broader dynamics and their effects on policy change and democracy. Jones and Radaelli assume that interpretive researchers object to hypothesis testing per se as an approach to policy analysis. Some might, but the more fundamental objection is that...
hypothesis testing is incommensurate with social constructionist epistemologies and interpretive theoretical assumptions in narrative inquiry. Jones and Radaelli do argue that the NPF could stretch to include normative concerns of importance to the interpretive community, such as the impact on democracy of the strategic use of narratives, but do not convincingly provide a way forward that would address this dual concern (narrow focus, incommensurability).

The implications for inference have to do with being clear about what the researcher seeks to illuminate from a narrative point of view. Interpretivists focus on the work that narratives do to persuade or instruct (Feldman et al. 2004), not on whether or not they do this and how much. We might learn something interesting from a positivist, ‘structuralist’ approach to narrative – for example that ‘stories packaged with language and symbolism recognized as coming from one’s own culture has a powerful effect on how individuals’ process and remember scientific information’ (citing Jones and Song 2014, Jones and Radaelli 2015, 343). But even here, questions are narrowed in a way that misses the analytical power of narratives: do these cultural groups have competing narratives that are denied or dominate? And what effect does this have on the shape of policy formation or change? And why? Post-positivist/interpretivist approaches have more resources to answer these types of questions.

The difficulties related to indication stem from Jones and Radaelli’s lack of a deep understanding of the interpretive approach to social science. In fact, it allows them to miss that their own article can be read as a narrative that seeks to persuade by using many common narrative strategies. 1) Positivist scientists are the heroes, referred to as authorities, that justify the NPF (Brady and Collier are ‘authoritative’ and Sabatier offers a ‘classic’ critique of interpretivism as not being science). 2) Post-positivist/interpretive researchers are, if not the villains, then at least rather annoying (they present a ‘tabloid version of things’ or a ‘positive/post-positive caricatured dualism’ (Jones and Radaelli 2015, 347–348)). 3) ‘Structural’ approaches to narrative are positioned as science (‘…the NPF is clearly tethered to the tenets of science’ (Jones and Radaelli 2015, 345)), while post-positivist approaches to narrative are positioned as non-science, although more subtly than in previous work (Jones and McBeth 2010). For example, Jones and Radaelli continue to discuss post-positivist research in positivist terms (‘…it will not present causal hypotheses in the form of “if A then B”. Neither will it seek to falsify or test claims…’ (2015, 350)). While acknowledging that interpretive research will be judged by different standards, they fail to fully comprehend those standards and how they should be applied to produce sound science. Narrative standards might include coherence (Dodge, Ospina, and Foldy 2005 citing Riessman 2002). How, then, might coherence apply to the NPF, given its mixture of interpretive and positivist theories? 4) Objections to the NPF from interpretivists are dismissed as ‘climbing down a ladder of abstraction’. 5) Finally, and perhaps paradoxically, ‘structuralist’ and ‘poststructuralist’ (post-positivist) approaches to narrative are also viewed as not so different and as having ‘synergies’. The emplotment of the NPF and post-positivist approaches as science and not-science, respectively, and the simultaneous dismissing of the ‘dualism’ between them have the consequence of bringing down the interpretive approach while upholding the NPF. All of these strategies are intended to legitimate the NPF as an approach to narrative policy analysis.

For Jones and Radaelli’s narrative to persuade interpretive researchers that the aim is not colonization but cross-fertilization, however, it will have to change. It will have to show a deeper understanding of the belief systems of narrative researchers, to use the terms consistent with their project (Jones and McBeth 2010).
My aim has been to lay bare issues related to indication that Jones and Radaelli, and co-contributors to the NPF, will need to address to more convincingly justify the choice to mix paradigms. This will require engaging more directly with the ‘sophisticated conceptual constructs’ of epistemology and ontology that underlie the different approaches (2015, 344). From a pluralist approach, the problem with the NPF is that it is not yet convincing: the legitimacy of adapting interpretive theoretical frameworks into positivist theories and methodologies on the basis of a mixed ontological and epistemological approach needs more work. Jones and Radaelli need to clarify the ways these paradigms can be reasonably integrated, not by relying on rhetorical strategies such as appeals to other authorities, but by developing their argumentation and more substantively addressing their critics.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor
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Notes
1. These distinctions are simplified and may be less sharply distinguishable in practice. They are important, however, because they are characteristic of the difference between Jones and Radaelli’s positivist (mixed) approach to narrative analysis and more established interpretive approaches.
2. It may also explain social phenomena, not by identifying general causal relationships that transcend context, but by identifying particular ones unique to a social context, such as the strategic use of stories to persuade (Stone 2002).
3. Later in the article, Jones and Radaelli contradict this point by claims that ‘While there is a real world out there, the perceptions and meaning of that world vary tremendously, and it is those meanings that matter most in public policy’ (2015, 342).
4. Jones and Radaelli also contradict this point: ‘perceptions and meaning[s] of that world vary tremendously...’ (2015, 342).
5. The post-positivist critique of the Advocacy Coalition Framework develops this argument in more depth (Fischer 2003).

References