The Narrative Policy Framework: child or monster?

Michael D. Jones & Claudio M. Radaelli


To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2015.1053959

Published online: 18 Jun 2015.

Article views: 803

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 5 View citing articles
Recent critiques of the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) have described the framework as a hybrid – and perhaps contradictory – platform using postpositivist theory in the service of positivist methods. While the NPF has done much to advance what one might term its positivist hypotheses-testing orientation, the ongoing relationship between the NPF and its postpositive, interpretative foundation is – to date – unclear. This article explores the relationship between the NPF and interpretivism. In our exploration, we detail NPF dimensions of ontology, epistemology, socio-theoretic choice, disciplinary boundaries, generalizing versus particularizing styles and normativity, as these dimensions relate to interpretivism. We find the NPF and interpretivism to be quite compatible along our analyzed dimensions – albeit with major epistemological differences. We conclude with a discussion outlining what the NPF has to offer interpretivism and what interpretivism has to offer the NPF.

Keywords: narrative inquiry; Narrative Policy Framework; interpretivism; metatheory

1. Introduction

In 2010, the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) was tabbed as a ‘quantitative, structuralist, and positivist approach’ to the study of the role of narrative in the policy process (Jones and McBeth 2010, 330). Since 2010, the NPF has taken iterative steps in broadening the framework to call for inclusion of qualitative methods (e.g., Jones, McBeth, and Shanahan 2014; McBeth, Jones, and Shanahan 2014; Shanahan, McBeth, and Jones 2014). Several recent qualitative NPF studies do just that (Ney 2014; O’Bryan, Dunlop, and Radaelli 2014). This article follows along the NPF’s increasingly inclusive trajectory.

While the 2010 naming of the NPF (i.e., Jones and McBeth 2010) identified the framework as positivist, the same introductory piece also identified the genesis of the NPF’s theoretical orientation in post-positivism. In this sense, the NPF is somewhat derivative of post-structuralist theories found in literature, and, importantly, several scholars who championed the use of narrative to study public policy long before the NPF came to be (e.g., Hajer 1993; Fischer and Forester 1993; Roe 1994; Stone 1989). This juxtaposition of postpositive theory with positive methods has prompted some to take notice (e.g., Miller 2012; Rochefort and Donnelly 2013; Smith and Larimer 2013). Aptly capturing the theme of this attention, Smith and Larimer (2013, 233–234) write:

Jones and McBeth (2010) give serious thought to – and an empirical demonstration of – how a post-positivist theoretical framework might be employed to generate hypotheses that can be empirically tested using the quantitative tool-kit of [positivists].1 The success of such hybrid platforms remains to be seen….it is too early to judge whether [The NPF] will be embraced as a child of both camps or a monster of neither.
In this article, we argue that while the contrast between positivism and post-positivism is useful in situating the NPF’s theoretical genesis, the contrast is – at base – a comparison of caricatures. As such, the prevailing positivist/postpositivist distinction lacks the nuance needed to come to terms with the framework’s paradoxical visage: that visage too frequently being a chimera composed of incompatible theoretical and methodological parts – a monster. It is of course understandable that authors use broad-brush characterizations of the NPF in overviews of the framework (e.g., Jones, McBeth, and Shanahan 2014), introductory texts on public policy (e.g., Smith and Larimer 2013) and in other contexts like academic conferences. The choice to use this simple dichotomy is largely a practical one. To provide nuanced detail about how and why the NPF is postpositivist or positivist is tangential to the purpose of such writings, which is to generally outline the NPF and/or focus on the findings of a particular study. But if we take the NPF and interpretivism (a key variant of post-positivism) as the key topic of a paper, as we do here, and begin with the high resolution provided by metatheory as opposed to the still frame depiction provided by the positivist/postpositivist dualism, a different non-monstrous picture of the NPF begins to take shape. This article argues that if we unpack the dimensions of metatheory, we find a more interesting web of relationships between the NPF and interpretivism.

In the next sections, we first briefly outline the defining features of the NPF. Next, we turn to metatheory, focusing on relevant characteristics of the NPF in terms of ontology, epistemology, socio-theoretic choice, disciplines, style and normative standards, as these characteristics of the NPF relate to interpretivism, a subgenre of post-positivism that we believe the NPF is particularly indebted to. Section 4 then discusses the potential utility of the NPF for interpretivists and of interpretivism for the NPF.

A few caveats are in order. First, given the word-budget of an academic article, we cannot possibly engage with the many varieties of interpretivism (or the broader family of postpositivist approaches to the social sciences). Rather, we move from an initial characterization of interpretivism provided by Schwartz-Shea and Yanow’s book on research design (2012) that we deemed particularly well-suited for our intention to discuss metatheory and criteria for carrying out research, given that this particular characterization engages many of the same issues we do here. We recognize, however, that there are many renderings of interpretivism (e.g., Bevir 2011; Fischer 2003a, 139–160; Kaplan 1993; Ospina and Dodge 2008; on broader post-structuralist research design issues, see Fischer 2003a, 2003b; Gottweis 2003), and that our intentionally practical selection of the Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012) variant will necessarily portray an incomplete characterization. Hopefully, other authors will join the discussion we start with our article and introduce the necessary qualifications. Similarly, due to our space constraints, we are also unable to provide more than a glossing over of the NPF. While we address the basics of framework and highlight some of the more interesting and relevant research findings, the focus of our summary is necessarily on facets of the framework most relevant to our argument. For readers seeking a more nuanced understanding of the NPF, we suggest Jones, McBeth, and Shanahan (2014) and McBeth, Jones, and Shanahan (2014). Our third caveat is that we are not arguing for the intrinsic superiority of the NPF. We simply argue that the NPF has potential for interpretivists. And the opposite is also true – NPF scholars conversant with the work of interpretivists will likely improve the quality of their own work, and the NPF more generally. To be clear, our final objective is not to NPF-ize the readers of Critical Policy Studies: cross-fertilization, not colonization, is our intent, because we accept that there are different ways of knowing in the social sciences (Moses and Knutsen 2012; Yanow 2009).
2. **What is the NPF?**

The NPF is an approach to the study of the policy process that originates from postpositive theory in public policy (primarily policy analysis), yet, and seemingly paradoxically, the NPF also champions so-called ‘positivist methods’ (we would prefer to say ‘an objective epistemology’ as we shall argue below) to study the policy process. As such, the NPF explicitly views the policy world through a social construction lens, embracing the notion that policy problems and the whole policy process strongly depend on the meanings attached to them by the actors involved. In this sense, the NPF’s ontological orientation is subjective – following Searle’s terminology (Searle 1995). The NPF, however, is also explicitly an empirical approach to the study of public policy. And although the NPF has not excluded qualitative methods and standards, it has predominantly applied quantitative standards to study the socially constructed policy realities captured by policy narratives (see Pierce, Smith-Walter, and Peterson 2014). Both in its quantitative and qualitative modes, the NPF has adopted objective or ‘naturalist’ epistemological standards. Radaelli et al. (2013, 502) describe this meta-theoretical orientation as an objective epistemology applied to understand a subjective ontology.

The NPF begins by defining two dimensions of narrative commonly referred to in literary studies: form and content. Form refers to the structure of policy narratives. The NPF identifies four elements comprising the form of a narrative (see Jones, McBeth, and Shanahan 2014; McBeth, Jones, and Shanahan 2014):

1. **Setting**: The setting is the context in which a policy problem or issue resides. It consists of the low-contestation ‘facts’ that are generally agreed upon by actors in the policy area, various forms of evidence and indicators, legal and geographic characteristics and any other policy consequential element of the environment in which the policy exists.

2. **Characters**: To date, the NPF defines three general categories of socially constructed characters in policy narratives. Victims that are harmed or potentially harmed by the problem, a villain or villains that are the source of the problem and a hero that promises relief from the harm.

3. **Plot**: The plot temporally maps the relationships characters have with each other as well as the relationship between characters and the setting. It often contains causal relations such as ‘this happened because of that’ or ‘if we do/don’t do this, then that will happen.’ For example, to add drama, some plots may contain a doomsday scenario showing how bad things can go if we do not choose a certain policy solution.

4. **Moral of the Story**: The moral of the story is the takeaway of a policy narrative and often refers to the ethical aspects of the policy solution proposed within the plot.

While the NPF does identify these four basic narrative elements, it does not claim to have exclusively mined the truth on this front. Rather, the NPF is open to more or less elements and considers whether or not more or less elements should be included in the NPF’s definition of form to be open empirical and theoretical questions (see Shanahan, McBeth, and Jones 2014).

While the form or structure of narratives is argued to be transportable across contexts, content is specific to the story being told. As such, the idea that content is generalizable is
problematic. For example, a story about racial segregation is not easily morphed into a story about the risks of nanotechnology – and it is convincingly argued that all stories are unique in this way. NPF refers to this as the problem of narrative relativity (see Jones, McBeth, and Shanahan 2014, 4–5). While the NPF has never claimed that there was a way to perfectly account for context in generalizable models, it has offered two strategies that attempt to moderate the problem of narrative relativity. The first is to focus on deductive belief system theories that have already proven their merit in the scientific community. Belief systems such as ideology (e.g., Lakoff 2002) and cultural theory (Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990) can be used to determine the general, symbolic, affective or identity value that specific or categories of narrative objects provide to potential interpreters of a story. These narrative objects can be just about anything, ranging from people (e.g., Hillary Clinton, Nelson Mandela, etc.) to symbols themselves (e.g., confederate flags, rainbow flags, blackface cartoons) and a host of other objects we might find within policy narratives. The important point is that these objects have meaning tendencies we have identified elsewhere (or can reasonably infer) for some portion of the population expected to encounter the policy narrative such that we can reliably assess probabilistic meaning-making from relevant populations. Such symbols are many and variable but they are neither infinite nor is meaning random; as such, robust deductive belief system theories allow the researcher to gain leverage on the problem of narrative relativity. The second way to moderate narrative relativity is to focus on the strategies policy actors use to manipulate narrative objects to look for repeated patterns of narrative element and object usage across contexts. So far, strategies identified include scope of conflict (Schattschneider 1960), heresthetics (Riker 1986), the angel–devil shift (Sabatier, Hunter, and McLaughlin 1987) and the discursive manipulation of costs and benefits (adapted from Wilson 1983).

The NPF then lays bare five core assumptions that underpin the framework (see Jones, McBeth, and Shanahan 2014; McBeth, Jones, and Shanahan 2014).

1. **Social Construction**: 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.

2. **Bounded Relativity**: While meaning is highly variable, it is not random. Meaning is bound by contexts, values and belief; if the contexts, values and beliefs can be understood, then so too can the variable meanings.

3. **Generalizable Structural Elements**: The NPF takes a structural approach to narrative, assuming that policy narratives have specific structural elements that distinguish them from other communication and cognitive organizing modes such as frames, memes, chronologies, lists or the like. However, the NPF remains open to what those elements are.

4. **Simultaneous Operation at Three Levels of Analysis**: For the practical purposes of conducting research, the NPF divides policy narrative analyses into three levels: individuals (micro), groups and coalitions (meso) and institutions and cultures (macro).

5. **Homo Narrans Model of the Individual**: Reliant upon empirical findings in several academic disciplines, the NPF characterizes individuals as boundedly rational, affective reasoners that seek affirmation in groups, by both primarily communicating in narrative and organizing their thoughts internally in narrative form. In other words, people prefer to speak and think in story form, making social problems amenable to human action using policy stories.
From this foundation, the NPF literature specifies hypotheses and causal propositions that have been tested across a large number of empirical studies across three levels of analysis: micro, meso and macro. Interpretive policy analysis is skeptical of the word ‘hypothesis,’ in which case, let us simply say that this is a set of findings that have shown up in different empirical projects and are connected to theoretical propositions. Be it as it may, there is a little treasure chest of results that, we argue, should not be binned simply because it is supposedly ‘positivistic.’

At the micro-level, where researchers examine how narratives interact with and are used by individuals, the NPF has suggested five main hypotheses concerning narrative breach, narrative transportation, the individual perception of congruence and incongruence, the role of trust in narrators and the power of characters. Studies at this level of analysis typically embrace experimental designs, deploying narrative experimental treatments of various designs alongside a control group to test hypotheses. Findings at this level are promising. For example, the portrayal of policy narrative characters has been shown to have substantial influence on the preferences of citizens, elected officials and elites than scientific or technical information (see Jones 2014). In other experimental studies, the NPF has drawn on the insights of the cognitive sciences to show that stories packaged with language and symbolism recognized as coming from one’s own culture have a powerful effect on how individuals process and remember scientific information embedded within the story (Jones and Song 2014).

At the meso level, where groups and coalitions are the focus and content analysis the method of choice (see Pierce, Smith-Walter, and Peterson 2014), the NPF has contributed to, qualified and ultimately strengthened some popular theoretical lenses of the policy process, especially the advocacy coalition framework (e.g., Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth 2011) and the multiple streams model (see McBeth, Jones, and Shanahan 2014). Here, the major findings are about the types of strategies used to alter influence in competitive policy narrative environments, the connection between beliefs contained in narratives and coalitions, coalition membership and policy learning. While many of the meso-level studies have to date been simply descriptive, a notable few have offered insights into what policy narrative strategies might yield success. For example, Shanahan et al. (2013) found that winning policy narratives in the Cape Cod wind farm siting controversy were less committed to demonizing their opponents (termed the ‘angel-shift’) than the losing coalition’s policy narratives. Similarly, McBeth et al. (2007) find that coalitions interested in the Greater Yellowstone Area in the United States are strategic in how they discursively allocate costs and benefits within their policy narratives. At the macro level, little NPF work has been conducted, but recently Steven Ney (2014) explored how macro-cultural narratives shape social entrepreneurship at the group or coalition level of analysis. Most of these studies have been in what has been labeled the ‘positivist’ tradition, prompting some to ask what the relationship is between the NPF and its postpositive moorings.

3. **Defining the metatheory of the NPF**

Metatheory is a set of connected standards, rules and principles. It ‘describes and prescribes what is acceptable and unacceptable as theory . . . in a scientific discipline’ (Overton 1998; cited by Jupille 2005, 210). Following Jupille (2005), there are at least five dimensions of metatheory: ontology, epistemology, socio-theoretic choice, disciplines and style. To these dimensions we add normative standards. Normative analysis is
particularly important in defining the theoretical posture of an approach, as typified by authors working in ‘critical policy analysis,’ who often orient toward empowerment and participation. The idea to reconcile policy analysis with democratic standards and participation is as old as policy analysis, going back to Lasswell’s vision of ‘the policy sciences’ (Lasswell 1951; see also Turnbull’s article in this journal, 2008). For us, the important point is that these meta-theoretical dimensions can be variously combined. The permutations are limited, however, in the sense that there are conceptual boundaries – beyond which some meta-theoretical combinations become nonsense (Jupille 2005). We consider the dimensions one by one as they relate to the NPF.

3.1. Ontology

Let us begin with ontology, that is, the foundational claims about reality. The NPF makes a clear ontological choice: reality is socially constructed by and through narratives that provide both organization and meaning to public policy. Thus, for the NPF, the material world exists – but it becomes relevant for policy only when social actors attach (more or less contested) meanings to it. To illustrate, while most would agree that the average global temperature (a material condition) has increased, what that increase means varies. For conservatives in the United States, average temperature increase signifies little risk, while liberals find the increase quite threatening: same material condition, different meanings (Jones 2011). The same process applies to nonmaterial concepts. For example, tax competition exists and can be measured by trends in effective corporate tax rates, but it becomes ‘harmful’ or ‘beneficial’ to sovereignty only through policy narratives that define intersubjective meaning (Radaelli 1999). Taxes are not brute facts in the sense of Searle (1995, 27 and Chapter 2); they exist only in an institutional world that stabilizes social interpretations and shared beliefs. And while taxes may not be real in a material sense, their consequences for our lives certainly are. In the words of Moses and Knutsen (2012, 8), the view that ‘there is a Real World (big R, big W)’ does not belong to the NPF. To conclude, partly because there are material entities that need discursive constructions to become relevant for policy, and partly because there are concepts that exist only via social representations, the NPF is grounded in a social ontology.

3.2. Epistemology: research design criteria and methods

Second, we consider epistemology. The vast territory of epistemology includes the standards we use to establish the accuracy and truth of our conjectures, perceptions and findings. More specifically, and in terms of how this truth objective relates to the NPF, the framework asks how can the NPF know what it knows? What standards can be employed by different researchers to validate NPF claims? Does explanation have an objective or socially constructed character? Are answers to these questions fixed or flexible?

All too often, the literature on epistemology spirals into sophisticated conceptual constructs. Here, we offer a simple, real-world notion of epistemology, grounded on comparisons we make all the time in our professional life, where we use – implicitly or explicitly – research design criteria. How do we know that a given article should be published and another rejected? Is this project ‘better’ than this other project? Do we believe in the findings of article A more than the findings of article B? We answer these questions using epistemological criteria. The NPF, both in its quantitative and qualitative varieties, has predominantly embraced the classic ‘naturalist’ canons of the social sciences such as validity, reliability, replicability and (varieties of) falsification. For the most part,
this is the classic position articulated by Paul Sabatier in his article on the necessity to be clear enough to be proven wrong in public policy analysis (Sabatier 2000), with a slight – but important – caveat. Jones and McBeth (2010) explain this caveat:

We recognize that the term ‘positivist’ may be perceived as a pejorative by some of those we classify as such. However, we do not employ the term as the oft-used caricatured version of the word; rather, 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. (Jones and McBeth 2010, 37, footnote 4)

While the NPF is clearly tethered to the tenets of science, these ostensibly objective tenets are bracketed by the NPF’s social ontology inasmuch as Jones and McBeth recognize that the objectivity of science they tether the NPF to is also an intersubjective form of truth in its own right (i.e., not exogenous to human beings, nor independent of perception – intersubjective, as it were). In practice, this means that NPF articles publish coding frameworks, variables, measurement instruments and justify, at length, case selection. For this dominant strain of the NPF, the essence of research design is to reduce bias in social scientific research by conforming to agreed-upon standards of science (Maggetti, Gilardi, and Radaelli 2012; see the interpretive criticism of this position in Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). As a consequence of this dominant use of the NPF, we define the most common epistemology of the NPF as objective (following Searle 1995; or ‘naturalist,’ following the vocabulary of Moses and Knutsen 2012). But note, we said, ‘most common.’ Interpretivists may want to explore the less trodden intersubjective NPF pathway informed by the different criteria suggested above by Jones and McBeth (2010).

Epistemology is also concerned with methods. The NPF is compatible with a range of qualitative and quantitative methods. In the words of Brady and Collier (2010), quantitative and qualitative tools differ, for example, in terms of case selection, variable-based versus case-based research, data-set observations versus causal-process observations and causal heterogeneity. But, at least in the world of Brady and Collier’s authoritative edited volume, the epistemology of qualitative and quantitative research remains objective – as typified by the subtitle of the volume stressing ‘shared standards.’ Up until now, whether NPF authors have relied on the quantitative or qualitative methods has not made any difference in terms of the research design criteria – they were always objective. Logically, however, there is nothing inherent in the NPF’s theoretical structure that discriminates between qualitative and quantitative methods (or other methods, such as the experimental and ethnographic methods). Clearly, the difference lies in research design criteria, not in the methods (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012; Guba and Lincoln 1994).

3.3. Socio-theoretic choice

Third, we find what Jupille labels ‘socio-theoretic choice.’ In political science, over the years, this choice has emerged around two important options. One is an understanding of political behavior as rational choice: actors calculate the expected utility of different courses of actions and make choices consequently. They may or may not have all the information they need to make optimal choices – most rational choice scholars concede that policy choice is often made under conditions of bounded rationality. But the essence of behavior is choice. The other option is social constructivism: actors follow the logic of appropriateness rather than calculating. They do not ask themselves the question ‘what is the expected utility I get from doing A instead of B?’ but the
question ‘what is appropriate for someone like me in this situation?’ Briefly, such actors are norms-driven, following the social norms that are appropriate given their identity and the characteristics of a situation. On this dimension, the NPF is situated near the social constructivist pole, but with ample margins allotted to agency and strategy. In fact, the NPF has a family resemblance with scholars talking about strategic constructivism (like Jabko 2006; Eberlein and Radaelli 2010): norms and collective identity matter, but strategic actors can manipulate social meanings by intervening on policy narratives. To illustrate, citizens may follow norms of reciprocity and solidarity when they think about appropriate policies for migration, but powerful policy actors (in the NPF, we perhaps unflatteringly refer to these actors as ‘policy marketers,’ see McBeth and Shanahan 2004) can manipulate policy narratives to socially construct migrants as undeserving people with deviant cultures and standards of rule of law, thus pushing citizens toward different norms.

However, it is difficult to imagine a strong rational choice posture in the NPF. In a pure rational choice world, policy narratives have no autonomy from exogenous interests; hence, we can just concentrate on the utility function of the key actors and forget about the possibility of endogenous preferences (i.e., knowledge, ideas, etc.) and how those preferences might be represented in the world (i.e., argumentation, narratives, etc.). The NPF relies on findings across several academic fields to formulate a homo narrans model of the individual that ultimately does not belong to rational choice. Given the NPF’s focus on strategies employed by homo narrans, it is safe to conclude that strategic constructivism is probably the best way to characterize the type of constructivism dominant in the NPF; but, it would also seem that the NPF is not too strict about the variety of constructivism ultimately chosen by the researcher.

3.4. Type of discipline

Our fourth dimension is the type of discipline. Here, Jupille (2005) mentions international relations (IR) and comparative politics. For the NPF, this dimension is totally open. To be honest, the main disciplinary choice of the approach is public policy, but the theories used to construct the framework that is the NPF are unapologetically interdisciplinary. Examining overviews of the framework (e.g., Jones and McBeth 2010; Jones, McBeth, and Shanahan 2014; McBeth, Jones, and Shanahan 2014; Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth 2011), one will find many fields represented, including philosophy, narratology, neuroscience, psychology, economics, literary analysis, marketing, communication, political science and, of course, public policy. Applications reflect this interdisciplinarity. NPF studies most frequently focus on individual policies; however, comparative studies have been done (e.g., Crow and Berggren 2014). Micro-level NPF studies have made ‘intrusions’ into the domains of cognitive psychology and IR-foreign policy – recent examples are provided by Jones and Song (2014) and O’Bryan, Dunlop, and Radaelli (2014). For the NPF, the discipline does not matter much, provided that there are narratives to take into account and that there is a policy component. In turn, the disciplinary dimension can be combined with all the previous dimensions: one can use the NPF to look at, say, foreign policy, using different degrees of constructivism.
3.5. Generalizing style

The fifth dimension is style. Jupille explains that we can either write with a generalizing style or with a particularizing style. He adds: ‘do we wish to examine general theories, or, spatially, temporally or otherwise, particular instances? As ever, our position on these issues will considerably shape our research, defining its scope, shaping the questions we ask and the answers that we seek (or feel able) to give, and so forth’ (Jupille 2005, 211–212). In a sense, the NPF is more generalizing than particularizing. In part, this is because it belongs to the social sciences. John Gerring (2001) explains that whilst the doctor sees a human body and tries to understand what happened in that particular case and how to improve the health of that person, the social scientist will always look at the individual case with the intent to use or draw more general lessons for social groups or society at large. The NPF mirrors Gerring’s generalizing sentiment; however, we also believe the NPF has a particularizing interest, which we discuss in more detail in a later section of this article.

3.6. Normative standards

Finally, we add the normative dimension. What are the standards of democracy, participation, fairness, empowerment that the NPF cares about? Can the NPF blend with breeds of ‘action research’ (Moses and Knutsen 2012, 292–298), thus encouraging a participatory attitude of researchers? This dimension has not become as yet particularly visible on the NPF radar. At least, it is not explicit. It has not been theorized enough. There are no major findings to report, although we can distill some lessons from the manipulation of policy narratives to evaluate certain features of contemporary political systems. For example, O’Bryan, Dunlop, and Radaelli (2014) studied the hearings system in the United States and the United Kingdom with NPF methods and concluded that the hearings do not serve their purpose in democratic systems. The foreign policy hearings examined by O’Bryan and colleagues make things worse rather than better – in terms of what we expect from parliamentary behavior. There is nothing hindering normative extensions of the NPF – the door is open and needs to be pushed, possibly with the sensibility and intent that are predominant in interpretivism, as we shall argue later on.

To wrap up the general architectural principles guiding the NPF: this is an approach to the study of narratives in public policy that embraces a social ontology and primarily an objective epistemology (both when it works with quantitative methods and when it operates with qualitative methods), with some (Gray and Jones 2013) arguing that NPF is open to many epistemologies. It belongs to social constructivism, albeit it accommodates strategy in this constructivist thinking. It is neutral when it comes to disciplinary options, but it is obviously more at ease within public policy. In terms of style, there is not only a generalizing intent in the authors that follow this approach, but also an underlying concern for the particular. Finally, it has barely explored the normative implications of public policy, although there is nothing preventing NPF researchers from doing so.

4. Interpretivism and the NPF

What can an interpretivist ‘do’ with the NPF? The first question is whether to accept or reject the approach. If we follow the tabloid version of things, interpretivists should reject the NPF due to its embracing of the canons of positivism. And yet, our brief analysis of metatheory has shown the NPF to be more nuanced than the positive/postpositive
caricatured dualism often used to describe the framework. In fact, our discussion has illuminated several dimensions along which NPF and interpretivism might be quite compatible. Interpretivists should not have any difficulty in operating within a social ontology, different socio-theoretic postures within the logic of appropriateness (social constructivism, more or less strategic) or disciplinary varieties where meanings are condensed into narratives that transform social problems into policy choices. Actually, from our reading of the interpretivist literature, this sounds quite like the territory of interpretivism.

There are three other dimensions where the overlap between interpretivism and the NPF appears more challenging, although potentially exciting as well. One is the particularizing–generalizing dimension. We believe it an oversimplification to say that the NPF is simply a generalizing framework. Similarly, we also think it is an oversimplification to argue that interpretivists are purely ‘particularists.’ If we look at the shop-floor activity of scholars carrying out research projects in both camps, we find the NPF on one side giving considerable attention to the ‘particular’ by focusing on policy narrative contexts (e.g., McBeth et al. 2010) or cases (e.g., Crow and Berggren 2014), albeit with significant attention still devoted to generalizing; we similarly find interpretivists engaging the ‘general’ via examining complex relations between context, meanings and their implications for narratives. For example, the study on Lesotho carried out by Ferguson (1994) is not just about narratives of development in Lesotho. The study is also interested in exposing the discursive mechanisms through which a country becomes the ideal candidate for that type of apolitical and technocratic intervention that development institutions were keen on selling in the 1980s and 1990s (Ferguson 1994). Similarly, another example can be found in Hajer’s analysis of metaphors, storylines, discursive affinities and performativity that goes beyond explaining certain overt environmental policy narratives (Hajer 1993) or episodes such as the killing of Theo van Gogh (Hajer 2009: Introduction); it also explains discursive patterns in the emergence of coalitions and in governance as ‘authoritative enactment of meaning’ (Hajer 2009, 2).

Illustrating the synergies between the NPF and interpretivism, the following quote comes from a text on interpretive research design, but it could have been just as easily authored by any NPF specialist:

In interpretive research, human beings are understood not as objects, but as agents. Such persons are seen as actively collaborating and constructing (and deconstructing, meaning both critically assessing and changing) their polities, societies, and cultures – along with the institutions, organizations, practices, physical artifacts, and language and concepts that populate these. At the same time, those same political and cultural contexts frame these agents’ possibilities for thought, discourse and action. Interpretive research understands that the motivation that animates these several activities is meaning – both its expression and its communication to others. (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 46)

Thus, meaning is not free-floating for either the NPF or interpretivists – the social and institutional contexts matter and provide stability to meanings and therefore narratives. And while both the NPF and interpretivism approach questions related to narrative differently in terms of one focusing on the general (NPF) and the other on the particular (interpretivism), the difference – we submit – is not a difference in kind; rather, it is a difference in degree. NPF and interpretivism share the aim of generalizing in the sense of finding key narrative mechanisms that, given a particular context, shape meanings and therefore influence policy. And while some interpretivists will certainly object to the NPF’s regular reliance on statistical notions of generalization, the NPF neither requires
nor insists upon statistical generalization (as evidenced by the recent wave of NPF qualitative studies).

Then we have to consider epistemology. Here it is fair to say that there are different epistemological standards that describe and prescribe the best ‘way(s) of knowing’ – to paraphrase an illuminating volume on methods and research design in different socio-scientific traditions (Moses and Knutsen 2012). On one side, we find criteria such as validity, reliability and replicability. On the other, we find the key issue of the researcher’s sense-making in an abductive logic of inquiry. It is absolutely false to say that there are no research design criteria for interpretive analysis. They exist, but they are different from the ones used in an objective epistemology – be it qualitative or quantitative. These criteria (illustrated by Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, chapter 6) guide the process of sense-making during data generation and analysis. It is interesting to note that interpretivists are not afraid of using words like ‘data generation’ and ‘data analysis’ – actually they are very important, but the meaning of data generation and analysis is different when we move from objective or naturalist epistemology to social constructivist epistemology (Moses and Knutsen 2012). To illustrate, we can imagine an NPF researcher coding a narrative of the prime minister on migration using categories identified by her deductive theory, whilst an interpretivist would prefer coding oral narratives in a community of migrants using grounded theory.

To illustrate further, let us compare two hypothetical studies of policy narratives informed by the NPF and interpretivism. No matter what the empirical case may be, the NPF scholar would most likely start from some hypotheses or conjectures drawn from a theoretical framework. This connection between hypotheses or conjectures and theory would be explicit. For example, in a hypothetical study of narratives used by a bureaucracy like the European Commission, the link with theory might be made via principal-agent models, with the Commission accountable to the member states of the European Union as principal. In connecting hypotheses or conjectures to theory, the NPF scholar would be eminently concerned with causality. This would lead to research questions about what is causing what, whether narratives are independent variables affecting policy outcomes or the product of explicitly theorized power relations and so on. In moving on toward empirics, the NPF study would be explicit about the standards of measurement and their internal and external validities. The reliability of coding would be tested and the results reported. Empirical analysis would be in the form of a plausibility probe or in the shape of an attempt to falsify hypotheses. In the latter case, the NPF scholar would inform the reader of the evidence that would prove the hypotheses wrong. Findings would be used to contribute to theory building within a vision of the scientific world in which there is cumulative progress – in the sense that findings can either move our priors about the world or confirm existing theories, but in any case with the belief that findings are somewhat cumulative. The study would probably provide an appendix detailing the coding framework and measurement protocols adopted by the researcher to identify and code policy narrative elements within the studied texts.

By contrast, an interpretivist study of narratives would not be eminently concerned with establishing causality via empirical findings. This hypothetical study would probably start with the assumption that social reality is made up of sense-making, interpretations and meanings. It would show to the reader how meanings were inferred from evidence or from conjectures (in the case of post-empirical interpretivism). There would not be an explicit anchorage to criteria like validity and reliability because interpretivism rejects these standards. Instead, the study would be based on interpretive criteria for research design (e.g., Lincoln and Guba 1985). The study will contain a set of explicit claims and
connect them to theoretical policy frameworks such as discourse coalitions (e.g., Hajer 1993) or narrative networks (i.e., Lejano, Ingram, and Ingram 2013). But it will not present causal hypotheses in the form of ‘If A then B.’ Neither will it seek to falsify or test claims by suggesting that evidence speaks unequivocally to the community of social scientists, who could replicate the findings and still come to the same result. The conclusions will be contingent on a very different set of standards for social scientific research (not falsification or replication of data). And though the study may well contain claims about the connection between its findings and what was already known in the field – thus contributing to a cumulative enterprise, like the NPF fictional study of the previous example – it would likely do so by offering more ‘interpretation’ than ‘explanation.’ Note that the studies we are comparing could be either quantitative or qualitative, based on ethnography or statistical analysis: the point is not the method.

One more remark on causality: we just said that NPF researchers have so far engaged with standard notions of causality in the social sciences, and interpretivists are not convinced by classic social scientific arguments for Humean causality (Kurki 2008). And yet, we think most would agree that policymakers often go out of their way to establish (i.e., assert) causality when it comes to public policy. As such, policymaker reliance on causal structuring, at least in their thinking (whether it exists in the ‘real world’ or not), most certainly plays a role in public policy simply by virtue of the beliefs and meanings of the policymaker (i.e., believing poverty leads to crime builds solutions to address poverty as the cause of crime). Both NPF and interpretivists can focus on studying this perception of causality and its role in public policy without violating epistemological guidelines or tenets preferred in their respective approaches. And while focusing on this perception may not resolve the potential epistemological differences between the NPF and interpretivism, it does allow us the pleasure of at least momentarily ignoring it. Moreover, given the recent theoretical developments and the expansion of the menu of options available for causal analysis, including configurational analysis (Rihoux and Ragin 2008) and approaches to causality based on the interplay between context, social mechanisms and inference (Pawson 2013; Reiss 2012), we suspect this avenue of exploration will prove fruitful for both the NPF and interpretivists.

Next, interpretivists could usefully revisit the findings of the NPF using their own criteria for research design, exposing properties of policy narratives that have been so far neglected. In other words, we argue for a coupling of approaches that (a) remain distinct because researchers can only use one or another set of research design criteria in a single project but (b) may shed complementary lights on the same phenomenon. Let us consider the example of narratives of foreign policy rehearsed in parliamentary hearings. Naturalist NPF researchers have told us how these narratives are generated by the interaction of experts and elected politicians in certain fora, and have explained how cognitive heuristics feed into each other to aggravate problems of categorization and stereotypes (O’Bryan, Dunlop, and Radaelli 2014). Most likely, there is much to learn from reflecting on the findings of two studies of the same policy narrative informed by different epistemologies and sharing the same ontology. Thus, an interpretive NPF researcher could argue that the foreign policy discourse of both experts and MPs is cast within a single, narrow meta-narrative of security where the West confronts the ‘other,’ thus silencing and excluding certain issues from the hearings. Or one may take a cultural approach to the characters. Perhaps ‘heroes’ and ‘villains’ is a dichotomy of adversarial western societies – in other cultures (e.g., Eurasian cultures), the policy characters may be less polarized and less individualistic, being defined in relation to their groups and communities.3 Thus, there is room for adding a cultural lens on policy characters, which should suit interpretivists pretty well. Finally, whilst narrative analysis (both in the NPF and interpretivism) is concerned with
storylines and metaphors (Hajer 2009, 61), dramaturgy provides insights for the analysis of staged performances (Hajer 2009, 67). Foreign policy hearings do indeed take place ‘on stage’ and have their own dramatic rules. Interestingly, both scholars like Hajer (2009) and recent NPF studies like Radaelli, Dunlop, and Fritsch (2013) draw attention to the staging of narratives – in turn reconnecting this field with Goffman’s (1959) pathbreaking analyses of ‘back stage’ and ‘front stage,’ as well as with the coordinative and communicative functions of discourse (Schmidt 2008).

NPF scholars should listen to what interpretivists say about the locus of analysis, reflexivity and the researcher’s sense-making (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). A critical interpretivist posture in research design would probably suggest carrying out research among communities of migrants and engage in action research, whereas NPF researchers might be inclined to start from ‘the policy of the government.’ But if we think about it for a moment, there is no reason why NPF researchers should not go into communities of those who are disempowered by dominant (i.e., hegemonic) narratives. And indeed we have NPF studies of narratives that arguably do focus on local communities (McBeth et al. 2010), but do not take important ‘next steps’ suggested by interpretive protocols. At the same time, although ‘replicability’ does not feature in the research design criteria of an interpretivist, in practice, it boils down to massive doses of transparency, such as publishing the coding framework, making the data available and sharing the original texts (e.g., interview transcripts). Transparency is no harm to an interpretivist and has certainly been argued for by interpretivists themselves (e.g., Silbey 2004) – by creating oral archives, video repositories and by sharing data not only with other researchers, but also with the communities where research was carried out.

This observation on engagement and impact on the community leads us into the final category of normative standards. Regrettably, there isn’t any ‘NPF for democracy’ – to paraphrase the landmark Public Policy for Democracy by Ingram and Smith (1993). Not yet. But interpretivists have the right sensibility and experience to discuss engagement and the impact of knowledge utilization among stakeholders and beyond. In the past, Emery Roe (1994) provided examples of how to intervene in controversies and use narrative analysis to design processes of social learning. These design implications of narrative analysis are under-explored. In some countries, like the United Kingdom, the nationwide assessments of research include social impact as one of the indicators for the allocation of funding (http://www.ref.ac.uk) – hence, there are also practical reasons to bring this set of considerations into the research agenda. There is no reason why the notions of engaging communities and being explicit about the normative implications of policy research should not enter the NPF from the main entrance and become prominent in the next generation of research.

5. Conclusion
This article has explored the relationship between the NPF and interpretivism. To do this, we contested the view that the world of social science is unidimensional: either there is a ‘Real World (big R, big W),’ independent of our experience of this world, or we move to the interpretivist pole. Instead, the world of social science contains at least two dimensions, ontology and epistemology. Although not all 2 × 2 combinations produced by intersecting these two dimensions make sense (think of a social epistemology combined with an objective ontology), both the social ontology/social epistemology and social ontology/objective epistemology combinations have citizenship in social scientific research. Interestingly, we found that ‘the methods’ per se are not a useful place to look at to find the key differences in narrative approaches to public policy, although a given
method may have a different status and rationale in one type of epistemology or another. Thus, to argue that the NPF is ‘positivistic’ because it has often used quantitative methods misses the point completely: it’s not the method that defines the meta-theoretical posture of an approach, it’s the opposite. At the same time, the cumulative findings at the micro–meso–macro level produced by the NPF should not be discounted by critical policy scholars simply because they have been obtained mostly using quantitative methods.

We recognize, however, that the argument presented here is a mere step in the direction of a conversation between NPF and interpretivist approaches to narratives. And while we believe we have made a plausible case that at least at the assumption level the two have a family resemblance, the nuance of that connection – as we climb down the ladder of abstraction to operational definitions and concerns of field research – will require both thoughtful critique and careful refinement. Next steps will most certainly require side-by-side assessments of the NPF and interpretative approaches such as the recent network-narrative approach of Lejano, Ingram, and Ingram (2013), Hajer’s discourse coalitions model (1993) or narrative inquiry (Ospina and Dodge 2008). Such comparisons are likely to elaborate and improve upon the rather abstract argument made here by providing a more refined and practical sense of how and when the NPF might be useful to interpretivists.

In closing, we would like to emphasize that we understand there is already a rich literature on narratives within interpretivism. The NPF is born of this literature and offers dozens of empirical studies across more than a decade that – in our view – should be seen as complimentary to what has already been going on in interpretive narrative analysis for quite some time. At the same time, interpretivism opens up dimensions of the NPF that have been so far neglected or not fully explored. In a different context, several years ago, Johan Olsen (2001) reminded us that tribal warfare is unproductive, especially in science, where dialogue ought to be the norm. Dialogue begins when we reject stereotypes and categorizations like ‘this is a monster.’ We hope that this article will create a dialogue, beyond categorizations.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors
Michael D. Jones is an assistant professor at Oregon State University’s School of Public Policy. His research focuses on policy theory, with recent publications appearing in the Policy Studies Journal, Political Psychology and Social Science Quarterly. He is the editor, with Elizabeth A. Shanahan and Mark K. McBeth, of The Science of Stories: Applications of the Narrative Policy Framework in Public Policy Analysis (2014, Palgrave Macmillan).

Claudio M. Radaelli is professor of political science at the University of Exeter, where he directs the Centre for European Governance. His research interests include theoretical policy analysis, regulation and the European Union. He is the author, with Martino Maggetti and Fabrizio Gilardi, of Designing Research in the Social Sciences (2012, Sage) and editor, with Claire Dunlop, of The International Handbook of Regulatory Impact Assessment (2015, Edward Elgar).

Notes
1. Smith and Larimer use the term rationalist; we use positivist instead. We substitute positivist in the interest of preserving the consistency of our argument and while our substitution is consistent with Smith and Larrimer’s use of rationalist (i.e., they would likely agree positivism would be captured by their category of rationalism), we recognize that rationalists and positivists exhibit important differences.
2. See, for example, Moses and Knutsen’s (2012, chapter 12) illuminating discussion of interpretive experiments as a possible illustration of how this might be done.
3. We are grateful to Milly Zimeta, who made this observation in an NPF class in Astana, Kazakhstan on 14 February 2015.

References


