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The rise and decline of reform narratives: Evidence from NPM reforms in Germany

Introduction

Narratives are of essential importance for political reforms, especially for mobilizing adequate support for their realization. Narratives name or construct a problem, they outline a solution and they create hope which brings actors to spend resources to implement change. While it is quite common to understand New Public Management (NPM) as a narrative (Lynn Jr, 2006; Ferlie et al., 2008, 2010; Paradeise et al., 2009; Lindquist, 2009; Pollitt, 2013), explicitly narrative-based research on NPM is rare, especially when it comes to questions about the evolution of narratives.

This paper tries to make a contribution to filling this gap by analyzing how a reform narrative is shaped and transformed using the example of NPM reforms in Germany's local governments. The focus of this paper is to build up some hypotheses about how narratives evolve during a process of reform. The methodology uses traditional ideas of narrative research (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990; Riessman, 1993; Roe, 1994; Bauer and Gaskell, 2000; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Llewellyn, 2001; Clandinin, 2007; Copley, 2006; Riessman, 2008): The main narratives of NPM reforms in Germany are reconstructed based on a qualitative content analysis of different kinds of literature on reform issues. Additionally, ideas of the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) and some of the hypotheses developed and tested within the NPF are used for the analysis (Jones and McBeth, 2010; Jones et al., 2014; Pierce et al., 2014; McBeth et al., 2014b, 2014a; Weible and Schlager, 2014; Pierce et al., 2015). Nonetheless, the research presented here is exclusively based on qualitative methods and will emphasize the idea recently developed by Jones and Radaelli (2015,

2016), as well as by Gray and Jones (2016), that the NPF can profitably be combined with qualitative approaches.

An overview of relevant existing literature and the fundamentals of narrative approaches is given in the next section, before the detailed methodology for the paper is set out. Afterwards, NPM narratives are presented in three steps: First, the popular book *Reinventing Government* by Osborne and Gaebler (1992) is used to reconstruct a classic and popular NPM reform blueprint. Second, the narrative of the Neues Steuerungsmodell, the German adoption of NPM ideas for local governments, is presented as it was constructed in the 1990s. Third, post-NSM narratives which were formed based on the experiences of about 10 years of reform activities are analyzed. The discussion of these three narratives brings up two cases to study the emergence and transformation of reform narratives: First, analyzing the case of the transfer of NPM ideas into the German context and second, analyzing the transformation due to experiences from reform activities. Some general hypotheses about reform narratives, their emergence and their transformation, as well as some hypotheses especially related to narratives of public administration reforms, are then developed.

Narrative approaches to studying public management reforms

Traditional narrative research on NPM reforms

Narrative-based research has been well known in public policy and public administration research for years (Stone, 1989; Roe, 1994; Llewellyn, 2001; Feldman, 2004; Ospina and Dodge, 2005a, 2005b; Dodge et al., 2005; Bevir, 2006, 2013; Borins, 2011; Pollitt, 2013; Gray and Jones, 2016). Generally, a narrative is understood as a story which is told using words, pictures or symbols and which includes some kind of a temporal or causal context of persons and events. This is the general understanding of a narrative in this article.

There seem to be two main ideas presented by narrative research: The first idea is that these stories are only loosely linked to an alleged objective reality, an idea which goes back to early theories on ideology by Marx (Marx and Engels, 1845/1969) and Mannheim (1929). The second idea is that these stories

are themselves constructing a (social) reality and therefore have the power to influence and shape future developments, an idea which goes back to theorizing by Thomas and Thomas (1928) as well as Berger and Luckmann (1966). In this tradition, narrative research has been bound to post-positivist foundations of social science, mainly using qualitative methods (Stone, 2002; Riessman, 1993, 2008; Boje, 2001; Wortham, 2001; Clandinin, 2007; Elliott, 2005; Andrews et al., 2013; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2014).

With this kind of traditional, qualitative approach, Llewellyn (2001) has analyzed the importance of narratives for processes of modernization. Modernization is understood as a 'narrative structure' which creates a certain *thrust* as a chance for change in organizations (Llewellyn 2001 quoting Deuten and Rip, 2000; see also Boje, 1991). The modernization narrative does so by construing an actual situation as unsatisfying, compared to a situation that could be reached by a certain effort towards change. Of course, in public organizations, unsatisfying *statu quo* are typically characterized as bureaucratic—in a negative everyday sense—while a possible future might bring well-managed public services. In addition to creating *thrust*, narratives of modernization have to make some suggestions for the process of reform. Furthermore, Llewellyn (2001) develops some ideas about potential post-reform narrative structures. Of course, there are narrative types for successful change, especially a *maintain progress* narrative in his case, which acknowledges some success in change while simultaneously stating that further efforts are necessary. On the other hand, he observes two types of narratives dealing with less successful outcomes: A narrative type of *trying hard but not getting far* and another that might be called *the same old thing (with a different name)*; these are strongly related in his view, but may also be interpreted as distinct stories.

Interpreting British government white papers as narratives, Pollitt (2013) analyzes the history of public service reforms over 40 years. He identifies stories of tension between an 'unsatisfactory past and [a] better future' as an integral part of these papers as well as the promise of a 'happy ending'. Furthermore, 'monsters', 'heroes' and 'villains' are described in these stories. In addition to

analyzing changes in scope and presentation of the papers, Pollitt (2013) describes how stories have changed from a more internal perspective to one with an increasing involvement of citizens and other actors. Of the issues that have remained constant in these white papers, the most interesting is that the growing volume of academic literature on NPM has only been taken into account in very few cases. So, reform suggestions in the white papers have been far away from evidence-based policy making, according to Pollitt (2013).

NPM reform narratives in Germany have been analyzed focusing on framing and the relevance of think tanks by Vogel (2012, 2013 and Vogel and Frost, 2009). This research illuminates the important role of the Kommunale Gemeinschaftsstelle für Verwaltungsmanagement (KGSt, www.kgst.de), a member association for public sector organizations, for NPM reforms in Germany. While the logic of rhetorical strategies is worked out quite well, these contribution does not address the evolution of narratives.

The Narrative Policy Framework and NPF analysis of policy reforms

As a reaction to criticism by orthodox positivist scholarship, the Narrative Policy Framework (Jones and McBeth, 2010; Jones et al., 2014; Pierce et al., 2014; Pierce et al., 2015) developed a methodology for generating empirically testable hypotheses. The NPF focuses on narratives as the stories told by actors which are involved in some kind of policy-making. It's basic premise is that narratives are relevant and powerful in policy-making because actors use stories—deliberately or unconsciously—to transfer information, shape a reality, develop policy targets, build coalitions and affect policy change. Narratives are understood in the NPF as 'some combination of a *setting*, *characters* (heroes, victims and villains), a *plot*, and a *moral of the story* (policy solution)' (Jones, McBeth and Shanahan 2014, 5 [italics in orig.]). Based on these ideas, a number of hypothesis have been developed and tested (Jones et al., 2014).

Gray and Jones (2016) analyze narratives of a campaign finance regulatory reform in the US within a qualitative analysis based on the NPF methodology. Their analysis of two contradictory narratives about campaign financing is

based on the idea to reconstruct a narrative based on a greater number of interviews. This view stands in contrast to the idea that every kind of document may be its own narrative (Pierce et al., 2015). Gray and Jones (2016) suggest to understand a narrative as a typical pattern which is used by a group of people to tell their individual stories. Thus, while this pattern is produced by individual story-telling, the narrative exists on a meso-level of groups or on a societal macro-level (Pierce et al., 2015). The narrative inspires and structures individual stories while it, in turn, is shaped and transformed by individual stories, which may, of course, also be studied with a narrative methodology. Integration into a wider, higher-level narrative strengthens the credibility of individual stories while restricting the variability of individual storytelling. In this sense, a reform narrative is understood here as a specific pattern of reform stories which are told in a society. A lot of individual, 'smaller' narratives could be embedded in this reform narrative.

The model of reform and reform narratives on which this research has been based is very simple, differentiating two reform phases. In the first phase, political entrepreneurs (Dahl, 1961; McCaffrey and Salerno, 2011) pick up narratives or parts of narratives, adjust them slightly and try to establish a new reform narrative. Therefore, they try to optimize credibility as well as maximize the number of their potential supporters. While the first goal can usually be met by citing other popular narratives or 'scientific knowledge', the second can be achieved by promising a certain benefit from reform. If credibility is assured, the promised benefit creates the necessary thrust that triggers reform action. Then the reform and its narrative enters the second phase, in which experiences from the implementation process must be included in the narrative, thus transforming it. Of course, it is crucial if and how the implementation of reform ideas delivers the benefits promised. Reform benefits may be experienced everywhere on a continuum between the point where all reform ideas become successfully realized and the point where the reform is abandoned because its credibility has shrunk so much that no actor would undertake any effort in realizing further reform ideas.

Methodology

Research Issue: Emergence and transformation of NPM narratives

This paper studies the evolution of the NPM narrative in Germany a two-phase model: Receptions and conceptions of NPM reforms were different in distinct countries (Bevir, 2009; Lindquist, 2009; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). In the first step, the phase of constructing a special German reform narrative is outlined and analyzed. The second relevant phase for this research is the transformation of the narrative due to the implementation of reform ideas. Therefore, the research presented here is based on the analysis of the NPM narrative through the phase of its emergence and the phase of its transformation during realization of reform ideas. Three states of the higher-level NPM narrative are identified as the *blueprint NPM narrative*, the *NSM narrative* (explanation of NSM will follow) and the *post-NSM narrative*. While the reform narratives are understood as a pattern of reform stories, this research followed the idea of finding representative individual publications which could be considered as prototypes or blueprints for the stories belonging to the narratives. After understanding these blueprint stories, additional literature was included in the research to reconstruct the narratives in their entirety and to understand their emergence.

Data collection: qualitative content analysis

Data for the reconstruction of narratives was collected by a qualitative content analysis of publications that address public sector practitioners. Data collection began with a general literature research. After developing the idea of discussing three distinct states of the reform narratives, important publications that could serve as a backbone for the narrative analysis were identified. For the *blueprint NPM narrative*, Osborne and Gaebler (1992) *Reinventing Government* was chosen, while for the *NSM narrative*, the publication *Das Neue Steuerungsmodell* by the KGSt (1993) was selected. For the *post-NSM narrative*, two publications on evaluations of the reform, from Bogumil et al. (2007a)

and the KGSt (2007), were chosen as primary sources. After a first review, additional literature has been included, especially for the discussion of the transformations.

The *blueprint NPM narrative* was developed based on the famous book *Reinventing Government* by Osborne and Gaebler (1992). *Reinventing Government* delivers a popular blueprint for NPM reforms and was one of the first books that brought the ideas of NPM to a broader audience in the United States, especially to public service practitioners (Trebilcock, 1994; Pollitt, 1995; Weiss, 1995; Frederickson, 1996; Kamensky, 1996; O'Neill, 2013; Buntin, 2016).

The *NSM narrative* was reconstructed based on German reform literature published between 1993 and 1994. The so-called *Neues Steuerungsmodell* (New Steering Model, NSM) published by the KGSt (1993) was the most important reform concept in Germany (Wollmann, 2000; Reichard, 2003; Kuhlmann et al., 2008; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011; Vogel, 2013). The reconstruction of the NSM narrative in this paper will be mainly based on the original paper by the KGSt (1993).

Since in the 1990s NPM ideas were never picked up by the federal government or the governments of the federal states (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011), NSM reform has only been driven by the KGSt along with some other non-governmental actors (Wollmann, 2000; Vogel, 2013), under which the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the labor union for the public sector—until 2001 named *ÖTV* (Gewerkschaft Öffentliche Dienste, Transport und Verkehr) and then later merged into *Verdi* (Vereinigte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft)—were the most important (Kirsch, 2003; Keller, 2005; Behrens and Pekarek, 2016; Schnabel, 2016). Consequently, early programmatic papers by these actors have been included in this research. These publications include material published by top management of the Bertelsmann Stiftung, namely its former president Reinhard Mohn (1993) and the former head of its public-sector department Marga Pröhl (1993, 1994). Additionally, publications from leading representatives of the *ÖTV*, by president Herbert Mai (1993) and the head of the labor union research foundation Nick Simon (1993; *ÖTV*, 1994), were analyzed. With these sources, most of

the publications on the NSM produced by the identified three major actors between in 1993 and 1994 should be represented.

The reconstruction of *post-NSM narratives*— which, it will be shown, fall into two main variants—is based on publications which discuss outcomes and impacts of the NSM reforms. Again, publications by the KGSt (2007; 2013) and by representatives of labor unions (Frieß, 2001; Mai, 2001; Jensen and von Zglinicki, 2007) as well as academic publications (Bogumil, 2002; Reichard, 2003; Knipp and Beisswenger, 2005; Bogumil et al., 2007a; Bogumil et al., 2007b; Kißler, 2007; Kuhlmann et al., 2008) have been considered. The main publications are evaluations of the NSM reforms by public management scholars Bogumil et al., (2007a; Kuhlmann et al. 2008) and by the KGSt (2007).

In a first step, the primary sources— Osborne and Gaebler (1992), KGSt (1993), KGSt (2007), Bogumil et al. (2007a) /Kuhlmann et al. (2008)—were analyzed with a qualitative content analysis (David and Sutton, 2010; Vromen, 2010; Berg and Lune, 2014). The coding for this was conducted partly manually and partly using MAXQDA software; it was carried out by at least two persons experienced in qualitative content analysis of public management texts.

For the coding, only the six categories suggested by the NPF for the analysis of narratives— *setting*, *villains*, *victims*, *heroes*, *moral of the story* and *plot*— were used as latent codes (David and Sutton, 2010). Following Jones et al. (2014), the operationalization for these six codes was as follows:

1. All text segments describing the policy problem were coded as *setting*.
2. All text segments describing persons or organizations that are described as causing the policy problem were coded as *villains*.
3. All text segments describing persons or organizations that are described as harmed by the policy problem were coded as *victims*.
4. All text segments describing persons or organizations characterized as potential fixers of the policy problems were coded as *heroes*.
5. All text segments describing solutions for the policy problem were coded as *moral of the story*.

6. All text segments describing a process or evolution leading from the stated problem to the suggested solution were coded as *plot*. After summarizing these segments, it was attempted to assign them to plot types suggested by Stone (2002) and Jones et al. (2014). These plots are: *story of decline*, *stymied progress story*, *change-is-only-an-illusion story*, *story of helplessness and control*, *story of conspiracy*, *blame-the-victim story* (Stone, 2002, 138–145).

Subsequently, the identified chunks of the texts were summarized and clustered to form short representations of the content in one or two sentences.

After the first round of content analysis, the additional literature was gradually included. Further publications, or in some cases, distinct chapters of these publications, were also analyzed with qualitative content analysis. Of special interest during this step were possible differences or inconsistencies. Several pieces of advice from reviewers who were involved in the process of working on this paper, mostly administrative science scholars, were also considered. Inconclusive codings have been cleared up using the original sources, mostly in discussions with the person who conducted the control coding. In a final step, the codings were summarized and documented.

After descriptions of the narratives were finished, the literature was analyzed for explanations of narratives' emergence and transformation. In this stage, again, additional publications from the 1990s were identified and included in the analysis. Included in this literature were updates of the NSM reform concepts (KGSt, 1997, 2001, 2013; ÖTV, 1996, 1997) as well as relevant literature about practical issues of implementation and publications by academic researchers (Kißler et al., 1993; Naschold and Pröhl, 1994; Kißler et al., 1997; Reichard and Wollmann, 1996; Bogumil et al., 1998; Sperling, 1998; Wollmann and Roth, 1999; Kißler et al., 2000).

For the selection of all analyzed publications, special attention has been paid to the coherence and comparability of the literature to assure that the literature represents a transformation of the NSM narrative over ten or more years. If narratives told by entirely different actors had been compared, there would have

been the danger of merely analyzing different narratives and not a transformation of the same narrative. The examination of publications by the three main actors—the KGSt, the Bertelsmann Stiftung and ÖTV/Verdi—assures that a continuing evolution of the narrative was analyzed. Especially for Herbert Mai, the former president of the ÖTV, publications from the years 1993 and 2001 could be analyzed, thus guaranteeing a personal continuity. Also for the KGSt, it was possible to assure continuity, at least on an organizational level. Moreover, a detailed analysis of the relevant KGSt working papers shows some personal continuities of authors and collaborators, as for example Gerhard Banner, longtime president of the KGSt (KGSt, 1993; 2007). Another aspect of continuity is brought in by the analysis of publications of the book series *Modernisierung des öffentlichen Sektors* (Modernization of the public sector) edited by edition sigma (Schneider, 2007). Several authors, who were involved in academic research as well as in implementation projects, continually published books or book chapters in this series between 1993 and 2005. Nevertheless, the reconstruction of post-NSM narratives used in the mid-2000s was only possible for KGSt publications and for publications of the academic network that published via the mentioned series in edition sigma. There were not enough publications by the labor union—now Verdi—and the Bertelsmann Stiftung on NSM issues to reconstruct narratives used by them. Of course, relevant literature, especially by Verdi, has been included in the discussion.

NPM reform narratives

The blueprint NPM narrative

The story presented in *Reinventing Government* by Osborne and Gaebler (1992) is quite clear and straightforward. Focusing on the *setting* of the United States at the beginning of the 1990s, the authors state that ‘our governments are in deep trouble today’ (Osborne and Gaebler 1992, xv): Schools, the health system, courts and prisons work inefficiently and ineffectively (ibid., 1). The *victims* of this situation are the citizens, particularly those who need help from the public sector. Osborne and Gaebler explicitly refuse to blame government

staff. In their view, the problem is not the people who work in the government but ‘the system in which they work’ (ibid., xviii). But there are other *villains*, people who want to run government like a business and who are mainly focused on budget cuts (ibid., 20). The *heroes* of their story are entrepreneurial government officers who are ‘innovative and imaginative and creative’ and taking risks to accomplish reform tasks (ibid., 18). While it is clear for Osborne and Gaebler that ‘government can’t be run like a business’ (ibid., 20), they argue for a ‘better governance’ (ibid., 24). The *moral of the story* is as follows: A new ‘paradigm’ or ‘vision’ of government is needed and will be realized by an ‘entrepreneurial (r)evolution’ (ibid. 326). At its heart, this ‘revolution’ relies on the transfer of management concepts and instruments that are thought to have been proven in the private sector and a shift of the incentives for public organizations. Obviously, Osborne and Gaebler create some type of social-democratic view of NPM. While they favor managerialism, they object to ideas of ‘lean’ management and privatization. The *plot* is quite optimistic: With some (easily) realizable changes, a vast majority of citizens and public servants will be better off. This kind of plot seems to be quite popular for reform narratives. It promises that, after some action for change, a situation might be realized in which a vast majority of stakeholders will have realized reform benefits. In addition to the above-mentioned plots, recently used in NPF analysis, this plot is called the *smart reform plot*.

The NSM narrative

Most probably, the authors of *Das Neue Steuerungsmodell* (KGSt, 1993) were aware of *Reinventing Government*. The *setting* is of course aligned to some specifically German conditions: At the end of an ‘era of growth’ (KGSt 1993, 7; all translations of German publications by author) and with regard to rising debts, the capacities of local governments to act are threatened. A number of shortfalls in local governments are stated: a lack of strategy and adequate management techniques, a lack of attractiveness as an employer for well-educated staff, and a lack of public legitimacy (ibid. 12). The KGSt holds back from precisely identifying *characters*—especially villains and heroes. Interests of the

main stakeholders, including works councils and HR managers in the administration, are analyzed. It is argued that in every stakeholder group opponents and promoters of the reform can be found (ibid., 25). So, the line between heroes and villains seems to lie between supporters and opponents of the reform in every government. However, at the same time, there is a strong orientation towards public employees, who the KGSt suggests should be intensively involved in reform planning and implementation. Serious investments in training and vocational education for administrative staff are suggested to make the reform successful (ibid., 29). *Mitarbeiterorientierung* (usually translated as ‘employee orientation’) is an important issue in the reform concepts and it is suggested that public service employees may become the heroes of the reform. The *moral of the story* is the following: By adopting the NSM, local governments will be able to modernize themselves and will catch up with public services of other Western countries. The underlying idea is a typical modernization topic that predicts a convergence of formerly distinct organizational structures due to the necessity of increasing efficiency (ibid., 23). The vision for the reform is to strengthen the separation between politics and administration (ibid., 16) and to manage the administration as a ‘service provider’ (ibid., 13). The concept suggests more transparency regarding administration performance and an output-oriented controlling (ibid., 15). A strong participation of public service employees in reform activities is necessary and possible. The *plot* is again a *smart reform plot*. The main difference compared to the blueprint NPM narrative is that, instead of emphasizing the relevance of entrepreneurial managers, the NSM focuses on the relevance of all public employees and suggests a strongly participatory reform concept. The fact that no villains have been explicitly labeled in the narrative may point to a special characteristic of narratives which are trying to find more supporters: This kind of ‘friendly’ narrative is open for new supporters to join and abstains from polarizing the policy arena.

Post-NSM narratives

The reform evaluation made by German public administration scholars Bogumil, Kuhlmann and others (2007a; Kuhlmann et al., 2008) is based on a survey

of about 1,500 participants from local governments as well as additional qualitative research. The *setting* is now, nearly 15 years after the publication of the Neues Steuerungsmodell, described as follows: 'Measured against its initial goals, the NSM reform appears to be a partial failure' which is mainly due to 'various conceptual problems of the NSM from the very beginning' and stated by academics as well as practitioners (Kuhlmann et al., 2008, 859). Most reform ideas have not been implemented and some that have been implemented have been abolished again. Nevertheless, local governments are partly portrayed as *heroes*: Some changes, concerning service orientation, for example, are observable and 'in contrast to the federal and partly the Länder level, they [local governments] have proven to be capable of modernizing their administrations and adapting to new institutional challenges' (ibid., 860). On the other hand, stating that local governments have implemented some instruments 'only formally' (ibid.) seems to point to some villainous aspects. Administrative staff are presented as victims in so far as a large number of employees had been involved in reform activities without an adequate reward. Therefore, it is stated that 'staff members are increasingly tired of reforms and perceive the modernization primarily as downsizing and cutback management' (ibid., 859). The *moral of the story* is that while the NSM with its 'discursive predominance' may have changed cultural aspects in German local governments, it has not led to a managerial shift (ibid., 860). In the end, the authors expect a kind of re-Weberization of local governments. Of course, this narrative has some similarities with the *change-is-only-an-illusion plot*, even so, it seems a bit more optimistic than Stones' (2002) original concept. According to Llewellyn (2001), it will be called the *trying-hard-but-not-getting-far plot*.

The reform evaluation by the KGSt (2007) is based on the data of the research by Bogumil et al. (2007a) as well as that of a second evaluation published in the year 2005 (Knipp and Beisswenger, 2005). The *setting* is described as follows: The NSM has initiated a 'paradigmatic shift' (ibid., 4, translations by author) and this has led to a big reform wave in which 'nearly all' local governments have been participating (ibid., 4). The NSM is broadly accepted by practitioners as well as public management scholars. A significant share of local governments

has implemented ideas of the NSM, even if it must be stated that the implementation was mostly unsystematic as the complete NSM has not been realized (ibid.). Furthermore, a lot of local governments are still engaged in implementation activities so full implementation of the NSM is still on the way. While the mayors seem to be pleased about the changes that have taken place so far, there seems to be a partial lack of acceptance and implementation in the councils. After all, since most of the targets of the reform have been realized, the NSM can be considered as successful (ibid., 60). Aside from some references to the reluctance of politicians to implement the NSM and to the inadequacy of unsystematic implementations—which is obviously a shortcoming of administrative managers—there are no explicit references to real *characters*. The *moral of the story* is that the NSM, after a first phase of successful implementation, will further be the major blueprint for local government reform. The implementation will continue and minor deficits of the concept will be corrected in the future. Following the idea of Llewellyn (2001), this is called a *maintain progress plot*.

Table 1 gives an overview of the reform narratives that have been identified during the research.

Table 1: NPM/NSM reform narratives, own source.

	blueprint NPM narrative	NSM reform narrative	post-NSM narratives	
			(Bogumil et al., 2007a)	(KGSt, 2007)
setting	governments are in deep trouble, working inefficiently and ineffectively	local governments' capacities to act are threatened, thus they have to overcome a number of bureaucratic shortfalls, especially a lack of strategy and of adequate management techniques	'Measured against its initial goals, the NSM reform appears to be a partial failure', which is mainly due to 'various conceptual problems'	the NSM has initiated a 'paradigmatic shift' which has led to a major reform wave; NSM is broadly accepted, and implementation is still underway
victims	citizens	-	-	-
villains	people who want to run government like a business	supporters and opponents of the reform in all stakeholder groups	local governments have acted as villains and heroes	(politicians, unsystematic administrative managers)
heroes	entrepreneurial public managers			-
moral of the story	a paradigm shift is needed and will be realized by an 'entrepreneurial (r)evolution'; it will increase public organizations' efficiency and effectivity	by adopting the NSM, local governments will be able to modernize themselves; participation of public service employees is needed and will improve their work satisfaction	while the NSM with its 'discursive predominance' may have changed cultural aspects in German local governments, it has not led to a managerial shift	after a first phase of successful implementation, the NSM will further be the major blueprint for local government reform; implementation will continue
plot	smart reform	smart reform	trying hard but not getting far	maintain progress

Understanding the evolution of the NPM/NSM reform narrative

The NSM narrative as a base for a reform coalition

The *blueprint NPM narrative* and the *NSM reform narrative* do not differ much in their principle structures. They advocate for a transfer of management ideas proven in the private sector into the public sector. The main element of their settings is a critique of bureaucratic structures. The morals of both stories are built around the typical idea of modernization concepts that envisions public organizations converging to a single and efficient model of operation very close to those seen in private enterprises (Hood, 2000; Llewellyn, 2001; Newman, 2002; Pollitt et al., 2007; Goldfinch and Wallis, 2010). Of course, the most remarkable difference between these narratives is the accentuation of employee participation and self-modernization in the NSM. This variation can be understood by a study of the additional literature. As mentioned before, the NPM ideas have never been enforced by the authorities of the German states. Therefore, the plan for reform via the voluntary adoption of reform concepts by autonomous local governments needed a strong network of supporters. The core of this network was build up in the early 1990s with a coalition between the KGSt, the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the ÖTV, the labor union for the public sector.

The link between the NSM concept by the KGSt and the program of the Bertelsmann Stiftung is most strikingly manifested in two publications documenting the Bertelsmann award for ‘democracy and efficiency in local governments’ (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 1993; 1994). Reinhard Mohn, then chairman of the supervisory board of the Bertelsmann AG and CEO of the Bertelsmann Stiftung, and Marga Pröhl, senior manager for ‘state and administration’ issues of the Bertelsmann Stiftung, shared the view that there was serious pressure for reforms in local governments, caused by financial problems and an increasing citizen demand for modern administrative services (Mohn, 1993; Pröhl, 1993). Additionally, both stated a ‘desire of [public] employees for self-realization’ (Mohn, 1993, 8) and ‘meaningful work’ (ibid., 28). While the Bertelsmann Stiftung does not present an elaborated narrative, the reform suggestions completely follow the structure of KGSt’s NSM. Moreover, Gerhard Banner, then

the CEO of the KGSt, contributed articles for both publications, manifesting the strong link between the reform agenda of the KGSt and that of the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

Presumably, the accentuation of employees' relevance in the NSM, supported by the idea of the Bertelsmann Stiftung that public employees should support a reform, was an intentional offer to the labor unions and an invitation to participate in the reform process. ÖTV accepted this invitation. While in most countries public sector labor unions have tried to resist NPM reforms (Foster, 1993; Teicher et al., 2006; Gill-McLure, 2007; Gill-McLure and Seifert, 2008), in Germany, the main labor union in the public sector, ÖTV, joined the narrative coalition for NSM. The influence of labor unions in Germany's public sector is traditionally strong because of the relevance of collective bargaining and a special law of co-determination in the German public sector (Bach, 1999; Keller, 2005; Page 2011). With an organizational level of 38% in the 1980s and about 25% at the beginning of the 2000s (Schnabel, 2016), ÖTV was by far the largest labor union in the public sector. Consequently, support of reform ideas by labor unions has been a serious advantage to implementation.

In 1988, ÖTV had already launched a reform program called 'A Future through Public Services' (Zukunft durch öffentliche Dienste) which was driven by the main idea that modern, participative structures in the public sector would improve working conditions and thereby serve public employees (Mai, 1993; Simon, 1993). The publication of the NSM reinforced the ÖTV initiative. Several initiatives for local reform projects were triggered by ÖTV (Simon, 1993; 1996; 1999) and the Hans Böckler Stiftung, a union-linked research foundation, was involved in the scientific monitoring of these projects, in which several academic scholars were engaged (Schneider, 2007). The experiences of these projects have regularly been published in the above-mentioned book series *Modernisierung des öffentlichen Sektors*.

ÖTV organized conferences in cooperation with the KGSt (ÖTV, 1996), officially supported the NSM (ÖTV, 1997) and launched several reform projects in cooperation with the KGSt and the Bertelsmann Stiftung (ÖTV, 1997; Mai, 2001). An alliance for local government reforms between the KGSt and the Bertelsmann

Stiftung had already been built up in the early 1990s (Banner, 1993, 1994; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 1993, 1994). Also, a cooperation agreement focusing on the modernization of the public sector was signed between ÖTV and the Bertelsmann Stiftung in the early 1990s (Naschold and Pröhl, 1994). ÖTV adopted the NSM narrative in its above-analyzed structure and—for some years—became a main driver of the reform.

The transformation of NPM ideas for an implementation in Germany surely brought some other changes due to the institutional setting and the historical structure of public services in Germany. But the major conceptual difference that emerged was the strong emphasis on employee participation, which became an important part of reform activities. This variation was due to the need to build up a strong coalition of non-governmental actors to support the reform. Regarding the strong position of labor unions and works councils in the public sector, the NPM blueprint narrative was extended by the idea of a win-win employee participation: Employees should engage themselves in reform activities and would thus earn more work satisfaction. Obviously, this extension was a normative, purely narrative innovation without a real conceptual base. But it was the core of the coalition which drove the NSM reforms in the 1990s.

The divergence of post-NSM narratives as caused by experiences from implementation

As table 1 shows, the two identifiable post-NSM narratives differ clearly in the evaluation of the reform. This is interesting, especially because both narratives rely in part on the same empirical data. The main promises of the NSM were to modernize public administrations, making them more efficient and effective, and to provide, via NSM reforms, better working conditions in the public sector. These hopes were at least partly deflated at the beginning of the 2000s: from 1991 to 1999, local government's debts had risen by approximately 40%, from 71 billion euros to 101 billion euros (DESTATIS 2014b). Simultaneously, the number of employees in the local government had decreased by about 22%, from 1.9 million in 1991 to approximately 1.5 million in 1999 (DESTATIS 2014a), which was partly an effect of the reorganization of public services after the German reunification. Data from the above-mentioned surveys (Knipp and

Beisswenger, 2005; Bogumil et al., 2007a;) showed that while a relevant number of local governments had tried to implement some ideas of the NSM, a large number had abstained. Experiences from those who had tried to implement NSM ideas varied strongly. While some ideas about a better service delivery for citizen were quite successful, core ideas of better management and controlling hardly worked (Bogumil et al., 2007a; Kuhlmann et al., 2008). Of course, the proportion of NSM supporters was high within the members of the KGSt network and some of these supporters were satisfied with their benefits from the reforms. Consequently, the idea of ignoring the unsatisfying empirical results was somehow rational for the KGSt. It focused on its members, slightly edited its reform suggestions, and advocated for an ongoing reform process. In the year 2013, the KGSt presented a revised concept named *Das Kommunale Steuerungsmodell* (KGSt, 2013), which still prominently suggests a modernization of management and controlling but is much broader and assembles many different reform concepts such as E-Government and Open Government.

For ÖTV/Verdi, the mentioned developments of public deficits and reduction in the number of public employees had harsh consequences. From 1995 to 2000, ÖTV lost around 15% of its 1.7 million members (Schmid, 2003). After the merger into Verdi in the year 2001, the decline went on, with another 19% loss of members by 2016 (Keller, 2005; 2007). After the year 2000, it became more and more clear for ÖTV that the expected benefits for public employees had not been realized. At a conference, former ÖTV chairman Mai (2001) tried to defend the idea of self-modernization and co-management in local government reforms by stating that at the beginning of the 1990s there had been 'no alternative' to a cooperative and reform-oriented course. Now a slight 'devil shift' (Sabatier et al., 1987) appeared: Public authorities and local government leaders became villains in the labor union's reform narrative. From the union's view, its cooperation in reform projects had been exploited by the government for an enforcement of cost cutting and a reduction of employment (Mai 2001; Frieß, 2001). As Kißler (1997) stated, orientation towards the needs of employees had only been a type of reform marketing while the expected surplus for the employees that would be generated by the reforms (*Reformdividende*) had never

materialized. Around the year 2005, Verdi stopped promoting any kind of NSM-related modernization activities and took a position which focuses on defending employees against consequences of further public management reforms.

The cooperation between ÖTV/Verdi and the Bertelsmann Stiftung ended in 2007, when Verdi accused the Bertelsmann Stiftung of supporting public outsourcing deals of Arvato, a corporation of the Bertelsmann Group, after an internal discussion within Verdi in which the Bertelsmann Stiftung became framed step-by-step as a neoliberal think tank (Jensen and von Zglinicki, 2007). Remarkably, there is a lack of publications by the Bertelsmann Stiftung dealing with any kind of post-NSM narrative. Today, the Bertelsmann Stiftung is still engaged in promotion of local government modernization but does not promote NSM or the KSM in any particular way.

Finally, the conflict between the two post-NSM narratives led to a discussion between public management scholars in *Verwaltung & Management* (www.vum.nomos.de), a German journal which addresses public management scholars as well as practitioners (Bogumil et al., 2011; Reichard, 2011; Bogumil et al., 2012; Bogumil and Holtkamp, 2012; Proeller and Siegel, 2012; Fischer, 2012; Beutel and Pook, 2012). The identified plots—the *trying-hard-but-not-getting-far plot* and the *maintain progress plot*—were slightly changed and sharpened in this discussion. Supporters of the NSM reform again pointed out the successes of the reform and asked for more patience (Reichard, 2011; Proeller and Siegel, 2012; Fischer, 2012; Beutel and Pook, 2012). The skeptics accentuated the conceptual defects of the NSM and worked out the complexity of the model as one of its biggest weaknesses (Bogumil et al., 2011; Bogumil et al., 2012; Bogumil and Holtkamp, 2012).

Discussion

The presented findings and interpretations allow the development of some hypotheses and questions which may be relevant for further research about reform narratives, especially in the public sector. The emergence of the German

NSM narrative could be understood as intentionally constructed by three actors, with the KGSt in a leading position. Apparently, the main aim when constructing this narrative has been to assure adequate support for the reform by recruiting the labor union into the reform coalition. The NPF has developed and tested some hypotheses about how actors can expand narratives to increase the size of their coalitions (Barthel, 1993), and these also point out the relevance of narrative shaping for mobilizing support. A first hypothesis that may be helpful for further research would be that (1) variations of a policy narrative in a situation in which the narrative is introduced to another environment could mainly be explained as an adaptation to the new setting by relevant actors, their interests and their power. This hypothesis would stand against the possibility that the story of the narrative evolves in this situation due to two internal dynamics of the narrative.

From today's view, it seems curious that a reform idea that suggested implementing management instruments from the private sector and that was therefore understood as a right-wing or neoliberal idea by many scholars (Bevir and Rhodes, 1998; Ferlie, 2010; Lorenz, 2012; Bevir, 2009; Hood and Dixon-Mueller, 2015), became associated with the idea of stronger employee participation and ideas of co-management in the reform. Obviously, the range of interests which must be taken into account grows with the inclusion of additional actors. An interesting hypothesis for future research would be that (2) the more heterogeneous the narrative coalition is, the more remarkable the inconsistencies in the reform narrative should be. The case of German NSM seems to be an example in which the narrative seems to have been *overstretched*, at least when viewed in hindsight: The expectations that were generated in the 1990s have not even been partially realized. As a consequence, the process of Verdi turning away from the narrative coalition and from the reform narrative was harsh, including a devil shift against public service employers and former allies. A further hypothesis would be that (3) the more remarkable the inconsistencies of a narrative are, the higher the probability should be that the evaluation of re-

form outcomes is different even between the members of the narrative coalition and that the narrative coalition may potentially break apart, with a devil shift among allies leading them to turn against each other.

Evaluation of the impact of NPM is still under discussion (Hood and Dixon-Mueller, 2015; Hood and Dixon, 2016; Kristinsson et al., 2016; Carter-Davies and Martin, 2016; Breidahl et al., 2017). But even if there were objective and generally accepted data from such evaluation, it is clear, not only from findings in this article, that assessing the impact of reform is itself a narrative-building business. In addition to getting a clearer view on this point, narrative analysis of the counter-narratives that public services produce to resist reforms could perhaps bring important insights here as well.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to develop a dynamic view of reform narratives, drawing on the example of German NPM reforms. It was shown that structures which were suggested by the NPF to analyze narratives could be used within a qualitative framework. Three NPF reform narratives were reconstructed by a qualitative content analysis of publications which were relevant in the development, implementation and evaluation of reform ideas. Three hypotheses for further research were developed: First, that variations of reform narratives in the first phase of their creation are mainly about organizing adequate support; second, that narratives can conflict with experiences from the process of reform implementation; and third, that the more remarkable the inconsistencies of a narrative are, the higher the probability that the narrative coalition may break apart.

Narrative research can make a clear contribution to research about policy reforms in general as well as to research on public sector reforms by explaining the emergence of reform narratives, reconstructing their content, analyzing their inconsistencies and observing their transformations. All these aspects can be achieved by means of a qualitative methodology using an adequate framework as is, for example, provided by the NPF.

The most interesting questions to be worked on in further research lie between credibility and 'truth'. The first question is about what the main factors are which determine whether or not people or collective actors believe in a reform narrative. The second question is about how the relation between a narrative and 'reality' or 'truth' can be understood. The case analyzed in this article shows that a narrative is transformed through experiences from reform implementation but that changes in this transformation—the 'lessons learned'—can be very different.

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