P163 / Narrative Policy Analysis in Critical and Interpretative Perspectives

Topic : Policy Process Theories

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Narratives are a crucial element in the dynamics of the policy process and in the underlying rationalities of decision-making. A policy narrative is a story that frames a policy problem, stabilises the assumptions behind it, and justifies the policy decision. Scholars whose works speak to narrative and interpretive policy analysis show that policy narratives can be stories about the policy problem, about the alternatives for addressing it, about the consequences associated with each alternative, and about the trade-offs between those alternatives (Rhodes, 2018; Roe, 1994; Stone, 2011; Yanow, 2000). In diverse, highly unequal, and uncertain contexts, public policy is never a purely technical exercise. Narrative policy analysis is particularly valuable in such settings because it acknowledges the plurality of policy stories. It looks past political motivations, expert opinion, and the hyped appreciation of numbers and technical computation used to support and legitimise decisions.

We acknowledge that narratives, as popularly operationalised in public policy studies, most prominently through the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), are approached by classifying a story's characters (heroes, villains, and victims), setting, plot, and moral (the proposed policy solution) at the macro, meso, and micro levels. This approach is appealing because its scientific conceptualisation of stories makes it user-friendly and amenable to hypothesis testing with measurable variables. Its underlying logic, however, may leave the normative, ideological, and emotional elements of policy narratives largely unexamined. A critical and interpretive lens directs attention to how policy narratives are political, foregrounding the power of storytellers and the knowledge politics of silenced and untold stories.

We therefore turn to the deeper layers of narrative, which concern various modes of knowing and are best understood within the realm of knowledge politics. Policy narratives are never value-neutral, and inequalities run through who tells them and whose stories are heard. Whose stories become authoritative policy narratives, and whose are silenced, marginalised, or left untold? How are contextual experiences and local, situated knowledges accounted for in the empirical and factual dimensions of policy narratives? What normative assumptions and ideological commitments animate the narratives through which advocacies are pushed? And what emancipatory potential lies in understanding emotional expression as a source of authentic perspective in policy analysis?

Guided by these questions, the panel aims to expand the understanding of the policy narrative as a meaning-unit embedded in policy discourse and tied to specific policy frames. It seeks to extend narrative analysis from the classification of story elements to an account of the power relations and knowledge politics that shape whose stories count. It also brings the normative, ideological, and emotional dimensions of narratives into the core of policy analysis. Finally, it fosters methodological reflection on how critical and interpretive approaches can surface situated knowledges, particularly from the Global South.

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel invites papers that examine policy narratives through critical and interpretive perspectives, treating narratives as sites of knowledge politics where voice, authority, and legitimacy are contested. We welcome theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions from any policy domain and region, particularly from the Global South. Potential topics include, but are not limited to:

- Power and the politics of storytelling in policy processes
- Silenced, marginalised, and untold stories in policy discourse
- Epistemic injustice and the hierarchy of knowledges in policy narratives
- Local, indigenous, and situated knowledges as counter-narratives
- Emotions, affect, and embodied experience in the making and reception of policy stories
- Normative and ideological commitments in advocacy and coalition narratives

- Diverse narrative devices of legitimation
- Narratives of crisis, risk, and uncertainty in climate, disaster, and environmental governance
- Narrative contestation in urban governance, health, education, social protection, and migration
- Narratives of informality, marginality, and everyday resistance to policy
- Policy narratives in digital media, popular culture, and public communication
- Gendered, feminist, and decolonial readings of policy narratives
- Critical engagements with narrative policy analysis and its assumptions
- Interpretive, ethnographic, discursive, and deliberative methods for narrative analysis
- Positionality, reflexivity, and the ethics of collecting and representing others' stories
- Comparative and cross-regional studies of policy narratives
- Narrative policy analysis as practice: lessons for policy design, deliberation, and teaching

We are especially interested in papers that move between theory and empirical cases, and in work that reflects on how critical and interpretive narrative analysis can be practised in diverse, highly unequal, and uncertain contexts. Contributions from early-career researchers, practitioners, and scholars working across disciplinary and regional boundaries are warmly encouraged. By bringing these perspectives together, the panel seeks to advance narrative policy analysis as a critical and interpretive practice attentive to power, voice, and situated knowledge, and to open conversations on how policy stories might be told, heard, and analysed more justly.