

**How can narratives be traced empirically in which
Europeans are expressing their understanding of
reciprocity, fairness and cohesion?**

HEUREC Discussion Paper 2

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2 Introduction

Narratives play an important role in many disciplines of social sciences and are connected to different theories serving a wide range of research questions. Therefore, we emphasize that we do not address narratives as general concepts in this paper, but we focus on narratives as elements of an analytical framework for research on political science, more especially: in the field of policy analysis. As Blum and Kuhlmann (2021: 339) emphasized, '[a]t least since the argumentative turn (Fischer & Forester, 1993), most policy scholars have shared the view that stories, narratives, metaphors, symbols and the like play an important role for policymaking, which is why they now constitute important concepts in most established theories of the policy process (Weible & Sabatier, 2017).' Particularly since Deborah Stone's work (2012; first edition published in 1988), narrative stories form a crucial part of ideational concepts in policy research.

Because it is assumed that Europeans' understandings of reciprocity, fairness, and cohesion are expressed in narratives, this paper addresses primarily the question, 'How can these narratives be traced empirically?'

Nevertheless, in the first part of this paper, the basic understanding of narratives in ideational concepts of policy research will be presented. In the second part, three different approaches of this school of thought will be considered in more detail which are elaborated in a way that they can be applied for the empirical work within the HEUREC project. The adaptability of the concepts has already been demonstrated through empirical work by proponents of these approaches. One of them has made a name for itself under the label Narrative Policy Framework (NPF).¹ Another approach is anchored in the interpretive school of thought of ideational concepts in policy research. It was developed through various research projects at the Institute of Political Science of the Technical University (TU) of Darmstadt. The third approach, elaborated by Kuhlmann and Blum (2021), started by referring to a crucial element of the conceptual reflections of the NPF – namely the plot – but 'advanced [it] by further theorizing on context-sensitive plots' (Kuhlmann and Blum 2021: 5). Such a context-sensitive perspective on narratives seems to offer a particularly promising appropriate approach (as will be emphasized in Section 4.3).

The paper ends with a section on how these approaches can be applied in empirical studies. Reference is made in this section to the conduct of a study on innovations in cities and it is shown how in this study texts (including transcripts of interviews) were analyzed with the help of MAXQDA with regard to the reconstruction of narrative patterns.

3 What are narratives?

In their article on 'Stories of how to give or take – towards a typology of social policy reform narratives', Blum and Kuhlmann (2021: 341) clearly captured a crucial aspect that also reflects a common and basic understanding related to narratives:

'Narrative stories are – often highly-simplified – stories about how (good or bad) things happen. As 'the depiction of [...] a problem strongly suggests a [certain] solution to the problem' (Birkland, 2007, p. 73), stories about the problem can then be linked with specific policies. When it comes to policy reforms, narrative stories of change are especially important. They can either take the form of stories of decline (making the case that a crisis is likely to occur if measures to prevent this are not undertaken), or the form of stories of rising and progress (Stone, 2012, pp. 160-165).'

1 On the origin of this approach (the 'Portneuf School of Narrative') see McBeth 2014.

Further essential points on which participants in the debate about narratives agree are the following: ‘narratives [...] are essentially stories, either in oral or written form’ (Fischer & Gottweis 2012: 12) which are based on ‘causal stories’ (Stone 1989) ‘that indicate specific views of the world and of the relationship between cause and effect’ (Barbehön et al. 2016: 241) because through ‘causal stories’ different events, experiences or observations are placed in relation to one another. In this sense, the term ‘causal stories’ does not refer to causality in an objective meaning, but to an understanding of relationships between causes and effects that are expressed in narratives. This is related to the assumption that a narrative – like any use of language – does not depict the world neutrally, but rather constitutes it in a particular way, and thus creates possibilities for action and interpretation (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012: 52). Ultimately, what counts is a storyline which is convincing in a given context as a result of being seen as causally correct and normatively appropriate. Moreover, storylines are the medium through which actors try to impose their view of reality on others, suggest certain social positions and practices, and criticize alternative social arrangements (Hajer 1993: 47).

These causal stories are conceived by some participants in the debate as conscious strategies. Deborah Stone (1989) in particular emphasizes these strategic aspects by focusing on ‘crafted arguments’ (see also Fischer 2007: 225) and deliberately developed inventions (Münch 2016: 88). From this perspective, narratives are created by people with certain interests.² However, narratives have to fit into the limits of the available discursive possibilities (Fischer 2003: viii), such as the scope of mutually comprehensible meanings.

Accordingly, causal stories have nothing to do with objectivity – although this is or maybe claimed by those presenting a causal story. To be convincing in communicative interactions, however, they must have what some call ‘generalized narrative elements (forms)’ (McBeth et al. 2014: 228) as well as a content based on generalizable aspects, such as belief systems and narrative strategies used by actors (Shanahan et al. 2018: 177). Others emphasize that a coherent narrative pattern (‘Erzählmuster’; Barbehön et al. 2016) is crucial for being convincing in communicative interactions. These are:

‘regularly recurrent patterns and forms, speech habitualities that emerge from a collectivity of factually uttered statements. From a purely linguistic point of view, these statements could have been made differently than they in fact were; and for this reason, it says a lot about the given propositional and epistemic context that it only works this way and not differently: that then or there one speaks this way and not in another way – and that one cannot speak successfully in any other way’ (Barbehön et al. 2016: 239).

Both approaches of ‘the construction of narratives to tell a plausible story about a problem, the development of coalitions of support and the deployment of institutional resources to ensure a response’ (Jacobs et al. 2004: 5) will be elaborated in detail in the following.

4 Two different approaches for conceptualizing and analyzing empirically narratives

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, these approaches will be examined more closely – namely the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) and an approach developed through various research projects at the Institute of Political Science of the Technical University (TU) of Darmstadt. These approaches do differ (as will be shown below) but have also axiomatic premises in common. This applies first of all to the assumption (as emphasized by Egner et al. 2021: x) that:

2 The communicative mechanisms outlined below (in Section 4.2) are crucial when attempts are made to transmit a causal story and, thereby, a narrative strategically.

‘human beings are storytelling animals. [...] And if stories are important for us as individuals, then it also probably follows that stories must play an important role for groups and the collective action in which these groups engage, such as those present in the processes, outcomes, implementation, and design of public policy’ (Jones et al. 2014b: 1).

Both approaches also share the empirically based insight that what proponents of one of these approaches are calling the *form of a narrative* and those of the other a *narrative pattern* can be understood as a structured unity of certain ‘generalized narrative elements (forms) that can be applied across different policy contexts’ (McBeth et al. 2014: 228).

What constitutes the main differences will be shown in the following - from the point of view of what could be of interest for the HEUREC project.

4.1 Distinctive features of the Narrative Policy Framework

As just mentioned, proponents of the NPF assume that narratives have a form or structure that is built by certain ‘generalized narrative elements [...] that can be applied across different policy contexts’ (McBeth et al. 2014: 228). These elements include the following (Shanahan et al. 2018: 176; see also Jones et al. 2014b; 4-7 and Jones & Radaelli 2015: 341):

- ‘Setting: Policy narratives always have something to do with policy problems and are situated in specific policy contexts. As such, the setting of a policy narrative consists of policy phenomena such as legal and constitutional parameters, geography, evidence, economic conditions, norms, or other features that some nontrivial amount of policy actors agree or assert are consequential within a particular policy area. [...]’
- Characters: Policy narratives must have at least one character. As with any good story, there may be victims who are harmed, villains who do the harm, and heroes who provide or promise to provide relief from the harm and presume to solve the problem [. Or there are] ‘beneficiaries’ of a policy outcome [...], ‘allies’ and ‘opponents’ [...], and ‘entrepreneurs’ and ‘charismatic experts’ [...].
- Plot: The plot situates the characters and their relationship in time and space. It provides the arc of action where events interact with actions of the characters and the setting, sometimes arranged in a beginning, middle, and end sequence [...].
- Moral of the story: In a policy narrative, policy solutions are the moral or normative action incarnate. The moral of the story gives purpose to the characters’ actions and motives. As such, in the NPF, the moral of the story is often equivalent to the policy solution [...].’

Although proponents of the NPF emphasize that ‘the NPF does identify these four basic narrative elements, it does not claim to have exclusively mined the truth on this front’ (Jones & Radaelli 2015: 341; see also Jones et al 2014b: 5). Nevertheless, it has also been underscored (Shanahan et al. 2018: 176; emphasis in the original text):

‘Although we do not prima facie reject alternative definitions [of the just outlined elements of the form or structure of a narrative; the authors], should an alternative definition be invoked, scholars must be clear about which definition they adhere to and why. Additionally, if the definition were to fall under the umbrella of the NPF, it must also provide additional theoretical and empirical traction (within the parameters of the NPF assumptions, of course).’

The insistence that the definition of additional elements of the form or structure of a narrative must fit the parameters of the NPF assumptions means, above all, that a core concern of the approach must be shared – namely the avoidance of ‘narrative relativity’ (Shanahan et al. 2018: 175; Jones & Radaelli 2015: 342). Narrative relativity is what ‘scholars such as Emery Roe (1994), Deborah Stone (1989), Frank Fischer and J. Forrester (1993), and Maarten Hajer (1995)’ (Jones et al. 2014b: 3) are accused

of. This ‘brand of narrative scholarship – termed in the policy field ‘post-positive’ – was [sic] primarily interpretative in the sense that it was [sic] highly descriptive, generally rejected scientific standards of hypothesis testing and falsifiability, and thus lacked the clarity to be replicated and allow for generalization’ (ibid.).

To minimize if not avoid the problem of narrative relativity, the NPF not only asserts to have identified generalizable elements of the form of narratives; it also offers two strategies to make generalizable statements about the content of narratives.

‘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 [...] and cultural theory [...] 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. [...] 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 [...], heresthetics [...], the angel-devil shift [...] and the discursive manipulation of costs and benefits [...]’ (Jones & Radaelli 2015: 342; see also Jones et al. 2014b: 7-9 and Shanahan et al. 2018: 177-178).

Certain basic ontological and epistemological assumptions of the NPF thus become apparent, i.e., as revealed by for instance the emphasis on avoiding narrative relativity at all costs, and the insistence that generalizable elements can be found, and have been found, both for the form and especially for the content of a narrative. Although it is emphasized that the ‘NPF is an approach to the study of the policy process that originates from postpositive theory in public policy’ (Jones & Radaelli 2015: 341), it is at the same time underlined that:

‘the NPF also champions so-called ‘positivist methods’ (we would prefer to say ‘an objective epistemology’ [...]) 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 [. However, both] in its quantitative and qualitative modes, the NPF has adopted objective or ‘naturalist’ epistemological standards’ (ibid.).

Against this background it is not surprising that Radaelli (2018) in an article on ‘EU policies and the Europeanization of domestic policymaking’ simply stated:

‘I mean, the major authors in this field use the language of variables, mediating factors, and so on. [...] As I explain in a paper with Michael Jones [i.e. Jones & Radaelli 2015; the authors], my position is that there is a socially constructed reality out there, but this discursively and socially constructed entities can be approached and ultimately ‘known’ with an objective or ‘naturalist’ epistemology’.

4.2 Distinctive features of a particular approach to interpretive policy analysis

A particular approach to the conceptualization and empirical study of narratives developed in Darmstadt³ is based on an interpretative approach which is “framed against the positivist

3 See Barbehön & Münch 2014; Barbehön et al. 2015; Barbehön et al. 2016; Egner et al. 2021; Heinelt 2019; Heinelt & Lamping 2015a; Heinelt & Lamping 2015b; Heinelt & Münch 2018; Stolzenberg et al. 2016.

presupposition that straightforward, matter-of-fact observation would provide ready access to an objective world where meaning was not a problem” (Yanow 1995: 111). Furthermore, meanings are not seen as variables “that are subject to experimental manipulation” (Yanow 1995: 112) but as a result of social construction which cannot “be ‘eliminated’ from policy processes” (ibid.) as it is seen as an integrated part of them.

This approach is also characterized by an understanding of explanations, which is called ‘interpretivism’. For the sake of brevity and given the focus here to clarify its key points and premises, one can refer to Fay and Wagenaar, who define ‘interpretivism’ in the following way:

“This approach to explanation in the social sciences, in which we explain social phenomena through uncovering the intentions of the actors involved, is called interpretivism. Interpretivism ‘may be defined as the view that comprehending human behavior, products and relationships consists [sic] solely in reconstructing the self-understandings of those engaged in creating or performing them’ (Fay 1996, 113). This is a broad definition. It states that interpretative explanations must ‘capture the conceptual distinctions and intentions of the agents involved’ (Fay 1996: 114)’ (Wagenaar 2011: 16).

From this point of view an action (decision) can be interpreted as explained ‘if a reason is cited as a good reason, which, based on deliberations [in discursive interactions] has become the reason that causes the action’ (Nullmeier 2012: 43; emphasis by Nullmeier; translation by the authors). Accordingly, the following applies to an ‘interpretive explanation’ (Nullmeier 2018: 72): ‘When the knowledge and interpretation of the actors are reconstructed, it becomes possible to explain political events as resulting from the interactions of the actors’ (Nullmeier 2013: 24; translation by the authors). However, it is admitted that such a ‘quest for the reconstruction of the ‘causal paths’ is a step in the direction of the modification of our understanding of causality’ (Nullmeier 2018: 75).

As further characteristic feature, this approach conceives discourse through narratives, by which the latter are formed, reproduced and eventually also transformed/changed. In the post-positivist interpretive debate, the notion of discourse is located (and moves) between two poles. The same applies further to the concept of meaning (see Heinelt 2019: 17-18). For proponents of post-structuralism (following Foucault), the world is constituted through the discourse and the language by which it is created. This means that ‘meaning does not reside in the intentions of actors, but in the structural properties of the text’ (Wagenaar 2011: 107) – or in a broader sense the ‘script’ – in which a specific kind of articulation is expressed. In contrast, discourses are understood as forms of narration – or generally narratives – through which different events or observations are placed in relation to each other in a particular context. In this sense narratives or ‘narrative story-telling reveals or conveys an experience structured as a sequence of events or occurrences (e.g. a beginning, middle, and ending) through which individuals relate their experiences to one another’ (Fischer and Gottweis 2012b: 12–13; see also Gottweis 2006). This sometimes happens strategically. Particularly, Deborah Stone (1989) emphasized such strategic aspects – as already mentioned above (in Section 3). The emphasis on the particular context to which discourses are bound makes it quite likely that they vary widely in content. Furthermore, the assumption that actors are able to (self-)reflect on the functioning of a discourse and are therefore able to consciously influence it suggests that discourses and the narratives that emerge from them vary in such a way that no generalizable statements can be made about the content of a narrative.

Nevertheless, in contrast to the content of a narrative, proponents of the mentioned approach of interpretive policy analysis have empirically identified certain dimensions or elements which allow for generalizable statements about the form of a narrative. However, in contrast to the propositions of the NPF, these dimensions or elements are not necessary for the form of a narrative in general: They may or may not appear, and the form of a narrative is only built as a distinctive mixture of them – called narrative pattern. Or in other words: These elements of narratives are mixed according to a particular context to yield a certain narrative pattern. Such a context can be located at different territorial levels

(local, regional, national or even the EU), but also in individual policy fields (of these territorial levels).

Narrative patterns provide ‘basic communicative infrastructures that enable specific narratives or lines of argumentation in the sense of concrete articulations and make others appear inappropriate or implausible’ (Barbehön et al. 2015: 41; translation by the authors). The communicative construction of challenges or problems can be understood as a central component (element) of any narrative pattern. This applies not least, as the construction of a problem also indicates the need for action because to label something as a problem implies an expectation or demand for something new which will be better. Furthermore, consideration of appropriate problem-solving perspectives does not come without an interpretation of the causes of the problems.

Based on the study by Barbehön et al. (2015; 2016) it seems reasonable to infer that narrative patterns are formed by the following elements:

- As already outlined just before, to tell a plausible story about opportunities or even the need for action, the cause of challenges that are to be addressed as well as possible courses of action have to be constructed.
- A plausible story usually implies that past, present, and future (antecedent developments, the current challenge as well as activities addressing it, and the improvement envisaged) are convincingly related.
- Knowing the cause of the challenge also means that either structural conditions or actors can be identified as the source of challenges or, to quote Stone (2012: 206), ‘we look for causes not only to understand how the world works but to assign responsibility for problems.’ At the same time, when responsibility for a problem and the resulting challenge have been identified, the capacity and willingness to address it have to be assessed.
- Identifying the capacity and willingness of actors to address a challenge may imply that certain actors are ascribed either the role of the main ‘drivers’ or (usually) hesitant sceptics.
- Attributing the responsibility for a challenge to certain actors and identifying the ability to meet the challenge may imply a distinction between ‘we’ and ‘they’ (the others) – or the opposite ‘Let’s stand together and work together!’

Depending on the thematic focus of a narrative, not all of the above five elements may play a role. This applies, for instance, to the study of Egner et al. (2021) on local innovations, which revealed that neither local politicians, the municipal administration nor the local community (civil society) were ascribed the role of the main ‘drivers’. This may be due to the fact that, while responsibility for solving problems (a core topic of the study of Barbehön et al.) is attributed to certain actors or groups of actors, everyone wants to be responsible for the implementation and, above all, the success of innovations. Furthermore, proponents of this approach of interpretive policy analysis readily admit, as do proponents of the NPF, that they have not mined the truth on this front. For the thematic field of European (dis-)integration - and therefore for the HEUREC project – this means being open to the discovery of further elements.

Furthermore, generalizable statements can be made, however, in that certain narrative patterns (or the form of a narrative, in the terminology of the NPF) affect the content of a narrative in a particular way. As far as local innovation is concerned (see Egner et al. 2021), it has become empirically manifest in all case study cities that among local actors a narrative is dominant according to which they have or can develop the capacity to successfully meet local challenges – even in the face of unfavorable structural conditions. This means that actors perceive causes of challenges in a way that they can be addressed by particular courses of action. The same is true for narratives about municipal budget debt and possible measures to overcome it. Only if the reasons for debt are thematized in such a way that it can be overcome by certain courses of action, will actors start to solve this problem themselves (as shown by Stolzenberg et al. 2016). If, however, a narrative prevails among actors that they are in a

‘hopeless trap’ (‘Vergeblichkeitsfalle’) with regard to this problem, they will not try to solve it themselves (because this is perceived as futile). In a similar way, Barbehön et al. (2015; 2016) detected a wait-and-see attitude or an attentism in the city of Dortmund⁴ because a local narrative prevails according to which there were (are) many problems; however, they were (are) not seen as local ones but rather societal problems that manifested themselves in the city but could not be effectively addressed at local level. If at all, something could only be achieved through action by upper-local government – or even through a change in the political or social order. The opposite could be shown by Barbehön et al. (2015; 2016) for the city of Frankfurt. Because all the problems that have been thematized as such were seen as results of the city’s growth, which has been considered, in sum, successful, problems are seen as those of the city, which must and, above all, can also be solved by it – which leads to a can-do mentality.

The elements by which narrative patterns are formed are similar to the ‘generalized narrative elements’ or ‘elements comprising the form of a narrative’ elaborated by proponents of the narrative policy framework (see above). However, in the study of Egner et al., not all of the ‘generalized narrative elements’ that are central to the narrative policy framework could be clearly empirically identified. More importantly, based on this study on local innovations and the particular underlying narratives in the different cities, it was also not possible to empirically confirm the assumption of the narrative policy framework that generalized statements can also be made about the content of narratives – with the exception of what has been outlined immediately prior as results of particular narrative patterns. The large variation in contents of the narratives, indeed case-specific, rather precludes the ability to make generalized statements about them.

Egner et al. (2021) could also not clearly empirically identify all of the ‘generalized narrative elements’ of the form of a narrative that are central to the narrative policy framework. This applies first of all to ‘characters’, i.e. individual humans (such as ‘heroes’, ‘villains’ or ‘victims’), but also to ‘anthropomorphized abstracts or broad categories’ (Jones et al. 2014b: 6). Instead, the acting characters to be traced in detail were too disparate and diverse to be grouped into such abstractions or broad categories. Similarly, while plots of local narratives could be elaborated,⁵ they were not shared by all actors who otherwise supported the narrative being identified. Meanwhile, according to the narrative policy framework, what is called ‘setting’ and ‘moral of the story’ corresponds to what Egner et al. (2021) or Barbehön et al. (2015; 2016) consider to be the most general elements of a narrative – namely problems or challenges that must be addressed and particular courses of action.

Another (significant) difference between the NPF and the interpretive approach presented in this section is that the latter also addresses the question of how narratives develop and, more importantly, can be changed – namely, through particular communicative mechanisms (see Egner et al. 2021 and Heinelt and Lamping 2015a; 2015b). Not all of these mechanisms will play a role in the HEUREC project, as it is not likely that the participants in focus group discussions play a decisive (active) role in the development and change of the narrative they will present. Therefore, only those communicative mechanisms are considered that can come into play in everyday conversations in order to defend or enhance a narrative put forward by a participant in such communicative interaction. This applies first of all to the communicative mechanism of immunization. By using this mechanism, the prevailing understanding of what can meaningfully be achieved and carried out is protected (immunized) from other ideas. Furthermore, issue relabeling can play a role in everyday conversations by rethinking a narrative, particularly through looking at matters from a different perspective than usual.

4.3 Distinctive features of narrative plots

4 On the ‘revolutionary attentism’ of German Social Democrats on the eve of the First World War, see Groh 1973.

5 See https://www.politikwissenschaft.tu-darmstadt.de/media/politikwissenschaft/ifp_dokumente/arbeitsbereiche_dokumente/methoden_files/cici/CICI_Practitioners_Handbook_20201103.pdf.

In a contribution to a special issue of the journal *European Policy Analysis* on the application of the NPF, Johanna Kuhlmann and Sonja Blum presented ‘a typology of plots by linking their universal and policy-specific themes’ (Kuhlmann and Blum 2021: 1). They started by emphasizing ‘while the plot constitutes a core element of narrativity, it has received less attention vis-à-vis other narrative components’ (ibid.). This is indeed true and quite astonishing insofar as not least, representatives of the NPF emphasize that a plot ‘provides the arc of action where events interact with actions of the characters and the setting [...]’ (Shanahan et al. 2018: 176).

Furthermore, Kuhlmann and Blum stress (2021: 1): ‘Existing classifications of plots have been proven to possess a great ability to capture “universal” policy stories, but not the specific variations of different types of policies.’ Although this article of Kuhlmann and Blum is empirically focused on different types of policies – namely regulatory, distributive, and redistributive policies (see on the debate about the distinction of these policies Heinekt 1993 and Heinekt 2007) – as well as on ‘policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and their political communication’ (Kuhlmann and Blum 2021: 2), it can be helpful for the conceptual reflections on narratives.

This is because Kuhlmann and Blum (2021: 5) argue ‘that the plot as a narrative element can be advanced by further theorizing on context-sensitive plots.’ They did so by referring to Stone’s seminal work on narratives (1989; 2012) and emphasised one crucial aspect of her thinking – namely that ‘policy stories, like fairy tales, have universal themes and culturally specific variations’ (Stone’s 2012: 164). As Stone herself did consider ‘universal themes’ more than ‘culturally specific variations’, Kuhlmann and Blum (2021: 5ff.) tried to close this lacuna in the research empirically with reference to the before mentioned topics. Although the results of the empirical work of Kuhlmann and Blum are not directly transferable to the research of the HEUREC project, they should inspire to look for linkages between ‘universal themes’ and ‘context-sensitive themes’ in the understanding of reciprocity, fairness and cohesion by Europeans – expressed in certain plots.

How this could be achieved will be outlined in Section 5.1. This will be done together with an operationalization of the narrative elements and some of the communicative mechanisms (those particularly relevant for the HEUREC project) elaborated by those whose work is presented in Section 4.2. That both - the elements of narratives and communicative mechanisms as well as the connection of ‘universal themes’ and ‘context-sensitive themes’ in certain plots - are conceptually connectable is well founded given that also proponents of an interpretive approach will agree that a plot provides the arc to which individual narrative elements (e.g. the construction of challenges and their causes [causality], possible courses of actions, relations between past, present and future, and a distinction between ‘we’ and ‘they’) must be connected or in which they must be fused.

5 How to capture and analyze narratives empirically?

This section is divided in two parts. In the first part, we make suggestions on how to apply the elements of the approaches presented before (in Section 4) to the empirical work within the HEUREC project. Admittedly, this is not done separately for the components of the NPF, but only for the approaches presented in sections 4.2 and 4.3 – for two reasons. Firstly, generalizable elements of narratives elaborated by proponents of the NPF are also dealt with in sections 4.2 and 4.3, and secondly, as we previously made clear, the authors of this paper are skeptical about the possibilities of making general statements about the content of narratives.

The second part of this section shows how the operationalized components of the concepts discussed can (and should) be dealt with empirically. This applies especially to the analysis of the transcripts of the focus group discussions, but also to the development of a topic guide with the help of which the focus group discussions are to be guided and structured.

5.1 How to operationalize the approaches discussed

For applying and operationalizing the elements of narratives as well as the selected communicative mechanisms presented in Section 4.2, we suggest using the following list of expressions as examples for the corpus analysis:

Narrative elements	
Construction of challenges	<p>'The EU resembles an unfair system of redistribution.'</p> <p>'My country/group gets back less from the EU budget than it pays into it.'</p> <p>'Domestic policies lack funding due to our contributions to the EU.'</p> <p>'The EU uses our money to do the wrong things.'</p> <p>'The priorities for which our money is spent are not clear.'</p> <p>'The EU is a wasteful and inefficient bureaucracy.'</p> <p>'The EU needs to be more than an economic union, but also a [e.g. social union; union of values]</p>
Construction of temporality (a relation between past, present and future)	<p>'My country has always paid, pays now and will pay forever.'</p> <p>'We are proud to develop from the role of a beneficiary to the role of a payer.'</p> <p>'We were helped in the past and now we're helping others.'</p> <p>'We have helped in the past and expect to receive help in return if we need it.'</p> <p>'Solidarity has always been the cornerstone in post-war Europe.'</p> <p>'Experience shows that ...'</p> <p>'We need European solidarity to prevent wars coming back to Europe.'</p>
Construction of 'we' and 'them'	<p>'Other countries are paying less and get more.'</p> <p>'There is a risk that beneficiaries dominate the redistributive process.'</p> <p>'Within my country, some groups take advantage from the EU at the expense of others.'</p> <p>'Our taxpayers are financing dolce vita in the Mediterranean countries.'</p> <p>'Some member states exercise more power than others in the EU'</p>
Construction of courses of action	<p>'We should re-structure the European redistributive model.'</p> <p>'The focus of measures paid by EU funding should be tightened.'</p> <p>'Transfers to other European countries must end.'</p> <p>'Let's create a common social security scheme for all Europeans.'</p>
Attributing roles to certain actors/'characters' (e.g. as main 'drivers', hesitant sceptics or blockers of reforms)	<p>'We need a visionary leader as the head of the Commission – like Delors.'</p> <p>'The same member states [which one?] always block reforms for achieving a European Union which could meet standards of reciprocity, fairness and cohesion.'</p> <p>'Politicians as well as the public in certain member states [which one?] are only looking for economic gains of their country and are not willing to support further reforms.'</p> <p>'The lazy Southerners are trying to get their hands on our money.'</p> <p>'The wealthy member states of the North have too much power in the EU.'</p> <p>'More solidarity and/or fairness in the EU would be possible, if the EU institutions had more/less powers.'</p>
communicative mechanisms	
immunization	<p>'If we change the EU redistributive system now, it will become unfair.'</p> <p>'We have agreed to the rich helping the poor a long time ago.'</p> <p>'Ending support for beneficiaries will void all efforts from the past.'</p>
issue relabeling	<p>'The payers pay for their own purpose in remote countries, not for the beneficiaries.'</p> <p>'We distribute EU funding for infrastructure formally, but we all know it is welfare.'</p>

Table 1: Conceptual combination of narratives and communicative mechanisms

For applying and operationalizing Kuhlmann's and Blum's reflections on narrative plots, we propose using the following table of **universal themes** related to the core topics of the project and corresponding textual expressions as a starting point for analysis. These universal themes are elaborated in detail in the discussion paper written by Jared Sonnicksen (2021).

concept	dimension	typical expression
nature of social relationship	fairness	'I as an individual deserve to be treated equally with other individuals.' 'Each human being holds the same rights.' 'We cannot afford inequitable public action.' 'Citizens should treat each other as equals.' 'A just society means being on par with all others.' 'Member states should be treated as equals within the EU'.
	solidarity	'I always aim at helping my fellow citizens.' 'I expect other citizens to help me if I am in trouble.' 'States should always help each other out.' 'I want other states to back my state when there are difficulties.' 'I expect my state to help other EU member states in need.' 'A group of people is as strong as its weakest member.'
	reciprocity	'When I give to others, I expect them to give back.' 'After receiving help from somebody, I want to return the favor.' 'Favors between states balance over time.' 'Countries who are contributors now may be beneficiaries in the future.'
type of duty	fairness	'You have to play by the rules to prohibit inequality/discrimination.' 'Like things should be treated alike.' 'Exceptions from rules must be rare and well justified.' 'No country should dominate the others.'
	solidarity	'A society should guarantee minimum standards of living.' 'It is the interest of rich countries to help the poor countries.' 'Member states must recognize each other as equal in worth.'
	reciprocity	'People should treat each other as equals, because all do.' 'All countries should treat each other as equals.' 'If people enter in an agreement, it should be give and take for both.' 'Countries should profit equally from contracts made.'
rights and duties based on ...	fairness	'Citizens owe each other respect.' 'A government should not treat citizens different.' 'Member states owe each other respect.'
	solidarity	'People who own more than others should also contribute more.' 'People who are able to pay more should pay more.' 'A function of the state is to ensure that the rich help the poor.' 'Resourceful states should support states facing challenges.'
	reciprocity	'If people are respected, they also should show respect.' 'Entitlements should be based on contributions in the past.'

Table 2: Universal themes of narrative plots and example expressions for coding

Besides these universal themes, there need to be two additional tables for possible (expected) **context-related themes** because they are likely linked to concrete experiences of the participants in focus group discussions. It is expected that participants will use examples to substantiate the relevance of these context-related themes.

One set of context-related themes may **refer to the respective country or region** of the participants in focus group discussions:

concept	dimension	typical expressions for countries
nature of social relationship	fairness	'My country deserves to be treated equally with other countries.' 'The EU should treat countries as equals.'
	solidarity	'Countries within the EU should always help each other.' 'I want other countries to back mine when there are difficulties.'
	reciprocity	'When my country gives to others, we expect them to give back.' 'Favors between EU member states balance over time.'
type of duty	fairness	'My country always plays by the rules to prohibit inequality/discrimination.' 'Other countries cheat the rules in order to get more funding.'
	solidarity	'EU redistribution guarantees standards of living throughout the EU.' 'It is the interest of my [rich] country to help the poorer counties.'
	reciprocity	'In the EU, it should be give and take for all countries.' 'Some countries are 'free riders' and live at the expense of others.' 'Countries should profit equally from the EU.'
rights and duties based on ...	fairness	'Countries owe each other respect.' 'My country is treated fair/unfair by the EU.'
	solidarity	'Countries that are better-off than others should also contribute more.'
	reciprocity	'Entitlements should be based on past contributions.'

In addition, other context-related themes may be presented by the participants which are related specifically to their social group or social milieu:⁶

Concept	dimension	typical expressions for groups
nature of social relationship	fairness	'My group [e.g. the unemployed] deserves to be treated equally with the same group in other countries.' 'We cannot afford inequitable programs of the EU in different countries.' 'There must be no difference in treatment between a rich person in a rich country and a poor person in a poor country.'
	solidarity	'My group is willing to contribute money for helping the members of the same group in other countries.' 'I expect other groups to support my group.'
	reciprocity	'When my group gives to others, I expect them to give back.' 'Favors between groups of people balance over time.'
type of duty	fairness	'You may not claim welfare by the EU in excess.' 'My group deserves exceptions from rules only because of extraordinary circumstances.'
	solidarity	'The EU should guarantee minimum standards of living for all citizens.'
	reciprocity	'We should treat people from other counties and groups as equals.' 'Groups should profit equally from the EU.'
rights and duties based on ...	fairness	'All groups should contribute to the aims and efforts of the EU.'
	solidarity	'Groups who own more than others should also contribute more.' 'Resourceful groups should pay more to the EU to support those groups who face challenges.'
	reciprocity	'Entitlements should be based on past contributions.'

5.2 How to apply empirically the operationalized components of the approaches discussed

In order to be able to comparatively assess the narratives in the HEUREC project, we propose the usage of maxQDA as a tool to mark and categorize text blocks from the focus group discussions. The general

⁶ In each of the selected member states, three focus group discussions will be conducted with people from three different social milieus (see pp. 5 & 6 of the project proposal).

approach is to use the predefined elements of narratives (as outlined just above; in Section 5.1) which are taken from our reading of the literature. Some pre-defined elements of narratives may be identified by looking into the corpus of the focus group transcripts, while other pre-defined elements of narratives may not occur in the real-world debates although they could exist from a theoretical perspective. Additional (elements of) narratives could also show up which have to be checked for integration into the analytic framework or which could also lead to an adaptation of the framework itself. The key concept is to identify general elements of narratives and particular narrative patterns across focus groups and/or countries as well as variation in reasoning over the European Union and causal inference between the focus group participants' perception of the EU and their proposed courses for action. Narratives may be grouped into different categories which have to be developed before the actual analysis starts.

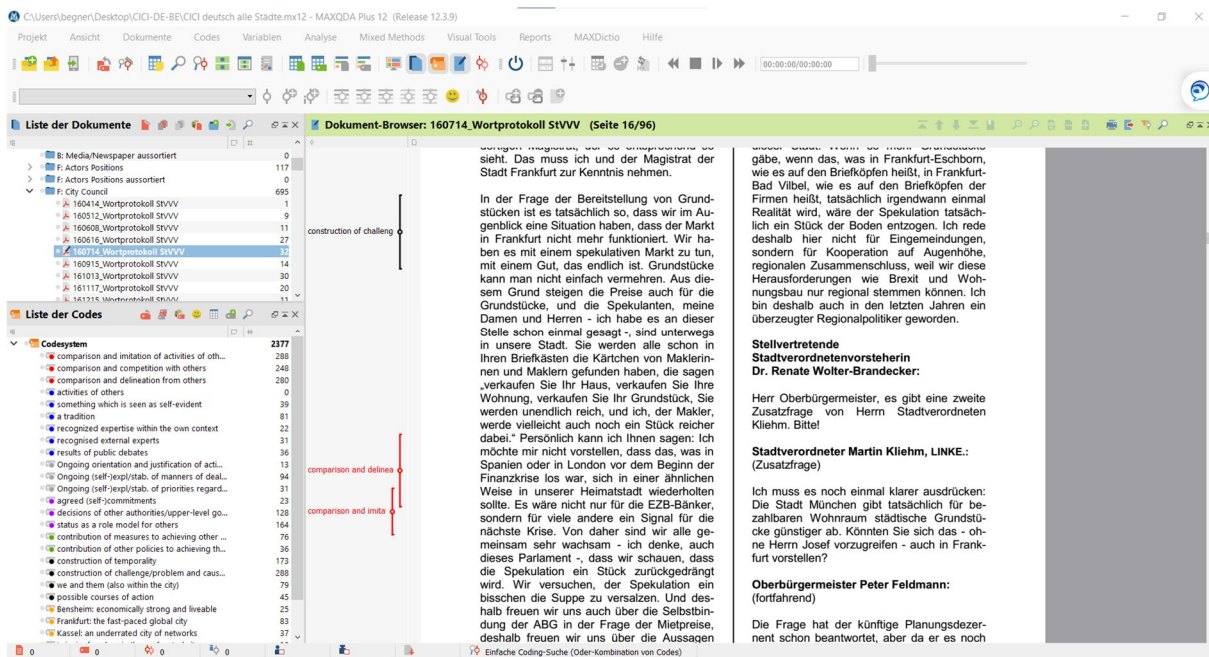


Figure 1: A screenshot of corpus coding in maxQDA

The result of the analysis could be twofold for each categorization scheme:

First, codes could be counted across the transcripts of focus group discussion and transformed into figures allowing quantitative comparative analysis across countries and focus groups. For instance, we could compare the frequencies of elements of narratives showing up in different groups and different countries. This could help to outline a general overview about a) which narratives are really used in the real world, b) which are the dominant narratives for groups, countries and different perspectives on the key issues at hand and c) if certain combinations of narratives are typical.

Second, the usage of maxQDA allows us to condense the corpus of focus group discussion transcripts to a much shorter list of categorized text blocks which are easier to access for the purpose of qualitative comparisons, e.g. a reconstruction of causal connections between group belonging, self-image, problem perception, suggestions for action and expected outcomes and impact.

6 Concluding remarks

Both approaches presented in Section 3 agree that humans have to be conceived of as ‘storytelling animals’ – as noted by Jones et al. (2014): People have to convince each other by means of communicative exchange that political changes are necessary and in certain ways also possible. However, the second approach presented, i.e. the interpretative approach, is not only skeptical regarding generalizable statements about the content of narratives. Although it has empirically identified certain dimensions or elements which allow for generalizable statements about the form of a narrative, it emphasized that some of these dimensions or elements may or may not appear, and that the form of a narrative is only built as a distinctive mixture of them – called narrative pattern. Nevertheless, as shown by the studies of proponents of this approach, two of these dimensions or elements can hardly be missing in a narrative – namely, on the one hand, a certain understanding of problems or challenges (i.e. their underlying causality) that need to be addressed and, on the other hand, the perception of having found an appropriate and feasible course of action – or not. These two dimensions of narratives may be complemented by others, each in a specific form – namely, how and to what extent in narratives

- past, present, and future are related to each other,
- a distinction is made between ‘we’ and ‘they’ (the others), and
- which (collective) actors or institutions the capacity or even the responsibility are assigned to achieve the changes considered necessary.

Unlike the construction of problems or challenges and the outline of a course of action, these dimensions take on different salience in the narratives.

While forms and contents of narratives are from an interpretive approach anything but uniform, they do unequivocally share the feature of context dependence. The features of and dynamics involved in narratives have been extracted from theories and respective research states of the art, for one, and a range of own research projects, which have even led to an own nuanced ‘Darmstadt’ interpretive approach, for another. While the latter have predominantly examined local level units, they have been approached likewise with a view to multilevel settings and in multiple European countries. Against this backdrop, we hope to provide for an insightful and suitable approach that can be adopted for individual case and comparative analysis of narratives in the context of European cohesion, fairness and reciprocity in European member states.

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