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The Role of Narratives in Migration Policy-Making: A Research Framework

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Abstract

While debates on migration policy often revolve around rival values and interests, they also invoke knowledge claims about the causes, dynamics and impacts of migration. Such claims are best conceptualised as "policy narratives", setting out beliefs about policy problems and appropriate interventions. Narratives are likely to be more successful where they meet three criteria: they are cognitively plausible, dramatically or morally compelling, and, importantly, where they chime with perceived interests. Increasingly, such narratives are also expected to draw on expert knowledge, although knowledge is often deployed to legitimize particular actors or preferences rather than to enhance the cognitive plausibility of the narrative. The

series of papers in this volume explore how narratives are developed, codified, revised and diffused in policy debates and policy-making. We hope that they contribute not just to understanding migration policy, but also to wider debates on the role of ideas and knowledge in public policy.

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Introduction

Those following public debates about migration in Europe will be struck by the range of apparently factual claims put forward by politicians, the media, interest groups, think tanks and academic researchers. Political debate frequently seems to revolve around different empirical assertions about the causes, effects and consequences of migration. Such assertions may involve claims about the numbers of immigrants entering or leaving a particular country, how long they are staying, what kind of work they undertake, their impact on the welfare system or the ability of migrants to 'integrate' into the societies in which they live. This implies that a substantial element of discussion and deliberation on migration policy involves rival claims about the causes, dynamics and effects of international migration.

The notion that rival claims play a substantial role in policy debates accords with much of the recent literature on public policy. Over the past decade or more, a number of scholars have stressed the role of ideas in shaping policy-making (Schmidt and Radaelli 2004; Bleich 2002; Berman 2001; Goldstein and Keohane 1993). As part of the 'neo-institutionalist turn', these scholars have explored how different traditions of thought, paradigms or frames have influenced public debates and political decision-making. Such accounts stress that conceptions of policy problems do not simply flow from the objective 'facts' of the situation, nor can policy preferences simply be inferred from objective, rational interests. Instead, both problems and preferred solutions are constructed by different actors (politicians, the media, academics), drawing on available ideational resources or patterns of thought.

Such contributions are correct to stress the role of ideas in policy. However, we argue that they nonetheless overlook the very specific role played by *knowledge claims* in shaping policy. By this we mean the role of empirical claims about the causes and dynamics of the phenomena in question, or what a number of scholars have termed 'policy narratives' (Stone 1988; Roe 1994; Banerjee 1998; Radaelli 1999). While such narratives are clearly shaped by broader traditions of political thought, and are influenced by the attempts of rival actors to 'frame' issues to their advantage, they nonetheless have a significant cognitive component which, we argue, creates its own dynamic. As scholars have argued, narratives need to meet certain cognitive criteria. They need to set out causal relations between actions and events (Banerjee 1998; Roe 1994). We would add that in order to be compelling, they also need to be relatively coherent, consistent with available information, comprehensible, and – in the case of narratives that are scrutinised by researchers – to conform to quite strict criteria of scientific validity.

Such knowledge claims can be, and frequently are, challenged in public debates and policy making fora on the basis of their failure to meet these requirements. In this sense, we can say that narratives have a special dynamic which distinguishes them from other sorts of claims mobilised in public debates, notably claims about values or interests. Their credibility depends on the reliability and coherence of different sources of knowledge – whether these be drawn from personal experience, practitioner knowledge or academic research.

In exploring these narratives, we are very much influenced by recent sociological literature on the changing role of expert knowledge in politics. A number of

sociologists have suggested that political debates increasingly centre on the deployment of competing knowledge claims. This is often linked to the idea that politics has become preoccupied with problems of risk (Beck 1992, 1998; Giddens 1994; Luhmann 1991). In many areas of policy, governments need to take decisions the impacts of which are highly uncertain. Moreover, there is increased acknowledgement of the uncertainty of the knowledge claims on which policies draw. Societies have become increasingly reflexive as they seek to cope with multiple and, at times, conflicting knowledge claims. In this context, the authority and credibility of specific knowledge claims produced by academics and deployed by politicians are not necessarily taken for granted. This cretaes a paradox for governments. On the one hand, many areas of policy require increased use of scientific knowledge to underpin decisions, especially in areas of risk. On the other hand, however, the science offered to address these problems is itself increasingly questioned. Indeed, the very expansion and diversification of science may produce greater uncertainty, and create new challenges that need to be addressed through science – what Jasanoff terms the "co-production" of science and policy (Jasanoff 2004).

Other scholars link the increased prominence of expertise to the demise of traditional ideological politics (Davies, Nutley and Smith 1999; Fischer 1990). Established left/right cleavages have been superceded by more technocratic debates about delivery. Thus policy debate becomes preoccupied with technical issues, rather than questions of values or fairness. Another, related, argument sees the importance of knowledge as a symptom of the growing complexity of the welfare state, which demands ever more sophisticated tools of regulation and steering whose delivery

needs then to be underpinned by research (Luhmann 2007; Ayres and Braithwaite 1992; Moran 2002).

Whatever the reason, it is clear that knowledge claims become key in strategies of political argumentation and policy deliberation. Consequently, exploring the deployment of knowledge claims through narratives can help to map and explain the role of knowledge in politics and policymaking.

Immigration policy in Europe provides an excellent lens through which to explore these trends in the role of knowledge in policy. Many aspects of migration control can be characterized as areas of risk, with policymakers forced to make decisions with potentially beneficial or harmful consequences under conditions of great uncertainty. We can take the example of government decisions about whether to open the labour market to nationals of countries acceding to the EU. If labour markets are opened, there is a risk that there will be an influx of labour, creating downward pressure on wages and triggering public concerns about jobs. If labour markets remain cloased, the government may cut off a vital supply of workers and impede economic growth. Immigration policy also has ramifications that cut across traditional left-right values. In recent times, with a policy focus on 'managed migration', the central issue has become a seemingly technocratic question of how best to steer migration flows or select migrants who can contribute most to productivity and economic growth. Moreover, given the complexity of migration, knowledge becomes crucial in attempts to steer the dynamics of mobility, settlement and integration.

In short, while it is obviously the case that migration sparks often deep-seated conflict over values and interests, we believe that much of the debate on immigration is about a rather different complex of problems: anxiety about states' perceived inability to control migration; uncertainty about its causes and impacts; and doubts about how best to steer it in order to realise social and economic goals. And these three sets of concerns are all likely to invoke knowledge claims, hence involving the deployment of different policy narratives.

The papers presented here draw on public policy and sociological literatures to analyse the role of knowledge claims in migration politics and policy-making. Our focus is on rival narratives within states and at the international level, and related to different types of international migration. Our contributors all focus on the competing claims that develop about the causes and dynamics of migration and the policy interventions to steer these dynamics. We explore how narratives are developed, codified, revised and diffused in policy debates and policy-making. By examining the role of narratives, we also seek to contribute to wider public policy debates on the role of knowledge in policy.

This introduction sets out our conceptual framework. In the sections that follow, we shall elaborate the three main elements of the framework: the concept of narratives that we deploy to make sense of the role of knowledge in policy; theories explaining the persistence and diffusion of narratives; and the crucial but problematic role of research in shaping these narratives.

Narratives in migration policy and politics

The contributions to this special issue all explore different beliefs or knowledge claims about migration and how these impact on policy through the lens of what we term *narratives of steering*. In developing the idea of narratives, we are drawing on a modified version of existing literature on 'policy narratives'. This literature develops the concept of narratives to refer to attempts by actors to develop plausible interpretations of complex phenomena or events. According to Roe (1994: 51) a narrative stabilizes 'the assumptions needed for decision making in the face of what is genuinely uncertain and complex. They can be representationally inaccurate – and recognizably so – but still persist, indeed thrive'.

Such policy narratives acquire particular resonance in situations where it is difficult to make sense of, or agree on, the phenomena in question. In such circumstances, 'policy analysts can think in a narrative form about who should do what, and how, when and why they should do it in order to address policy dilemmas' (Kaplan, 1986: 770). The success of a narrative in influencing policy agendas depends to a large extent on its consistency and, through this, its capacity to 'identify, define and constitute' a policy issue or problem. As Ricoeur (1984: x) puts it: 'The plot or narrative ... groups together and integrates into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events, thereby schematising the intelligible signification attached to the narrative taken as a whole.' Banerjee (1998: 193) emphasizes the ways in which policy narratives are 'put together into a plot in which there are casual relations between actions'.

These accounts all emphasise the potential for narratives to provide a coherent and compelling account of complex phenomena, in a way that can engender support and motivate action. In this sense, they have much in common with the notion of policy frames, which, as Rein and Schön (1994: 23) argue, represent 'underlying structures of belief, perception and appreciation'. However, we would like to highlight another dimension of narratives that is particularly useful for understanding the role of knowledge in policy. This is what we can refer to as the cognitive content of narratives. The focus on the factual or cognitive content of narratives distinguishes it from 'discourses', 'frames' or 'paradigms', which capture a more general perspective or set of ideas. This precision, and the emphasis on cognitive content, makes the concept of narratives better equipped to shed light on how certain factual claims can justify quite specific courses of action.

Our concept of narratives refers to the factual beliefs espoused by policymakers and others engaged in political debate about the causes and dynamics of the problems they are seeking to address, and about how policy could impact these dynamics. It thus refers to a relatively contained and coherent set of knowledge claims. We define policy narratives as containing three components:

- A set of claims about the policy problem to which a policy intervention should address. This will typically involve claims about the nature and scale of the problem, including a delineation of the 'target population' at which interventions are directed (Schneider and Ingram 1993). For example, the problem of illegal immigration could be defined as one of unscrupulous traffickers exploiting victims, or it could be conceptualised as economic migrants exploiting loopholes in migration control for selfish gain.

- A set of claims about what causes the problem and to what extent the problem could be controlled. Stone (1988) writes of 'causal stories' that construct causality in a way that is comprehensible and convincing. Often, such causal stories imply attributing blame to specific factors or actors, for instance explaining the alleged failure of the integration of specific groups with reference to persisting cultural differences.

- A set of claims about how policy interventions have affected, or are likely to affect, these policy problems. Policy narratives not only construct a specific reality, but also call for action upon this reality (Foster and Fischer, 1993). Such calls will be based on more or less grounded assumptions about how interventions will influence the dynamics or groups that are the targets of policy. For example, the narrative might involve claims about how restricting benefits for asylum seekers has led to a reduction in the numbers of asylum applications.

All three sets of claims on the definition of the problem, its causes and its solutions, may draw on a variety of sources, such as lay or populist claims about the phenomena, expert and practitioner knowledge, or academic research.

It should be noted that we do not seek in the contributions that follow this introduction to judge the coherence or empirical validity of the ideas and stories of actors. Thus our analysis does not seek to develop the form of narrative analysis developed by Roe who seeks to reconstruct the policy narratives or 'stories' of policy actors in order to construct meta-narratives that may serve to reduce uncertainty, complexity and prevent polarization (1994: 3-4). In this, Roe focuses in particular on

the narrative structure and content of policy stories, and deliberately tries to construct a 'better' meta-narrative that may help to resolve policy conflict. Instead, we focus on the social and institutional processes that lead to acceptance or rejection of specific policy narratives, and on the effects of such narratives on policy intervention.

The construction and diffusion of policy narratives

Clearly, for most policy issues there are many competing narratives jostling for centre stage. So what features make particular narratives more compelling or enduring then others? One simple answer is that they match pre-determined interests. Theories of knowledge utilisation ranging from rational choice (Pfeffer 1981, 1984; Nordlinger 1981; Amara et al. 2004) to Gramscian and Foucauldian accounts (G. Smith 2002; Sinclair 2000) would all concur that actors choose narratives that best advance their interests. We see these accounts as overly-reductionist. They fail to attribute any power to ideas in their own right, precluding the possibility that they can shape beliefs or interests (Radaelli 1995). That said, we do not deny that interests play a key role in shaping how different actors select and use knowledge about migration and integration. A better way of conceptualising the relationship might be to understand the two as mutually constitutive. Knowledge and beliefs clearly shape perceptions of interests; but these interests in turn influence how knowledge is produced and deployed. The question then becomes how to understand this process of mutual constitution for the various actors engaged in policy processes, such as politicians, bureaucrats, practitioners, the media and researchers.

There are two further conditions that appear to influence which narratives are more appealing. One of these is the cognitive features of the narrative. A narrative must meet certain basic conditions of consistency, coherence and plausibility. Above all, it must 'fit' with available facts about the case. The final criterion is that the narrative must be persuasive: the narrative needs to be understandable, compelling and sufficiently plausible for the actors in question. The persuasiveness of policy narratives does not necessarily mean that actors agree on a coherent set of policy beliefs. In fact, research has shown that it is often a policy narrative's 'multi-interpretability' that provides its appeal to various actors (Hajer, 1995). It is thus quite possible that it is precisely the appeal of a policy narrative to actors with varying policy beliefs that makes one policy narrative more persuasive than another. For example, a claim that terrorism and asylum are linked will not be sustainable if police intelligence reveals that most terrorist susects are nationals of that country.

What seems to emerge, then, are three sets of conditions - interests, cognitive features and persuasiveness – each of which will influence the appeal of a narrative to a particular set of actors.

These criteria for what constitutes a successful narrative will also influence the extent to which narratives are diffused. Policy narratives can spread across different policy sectors, regions, or countries. This type of diffusion can occur through regional fora such as the EU, media reporting, or international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Centre for Migration

Policy Development (ICMPD). Different actors may also embrace new narratives to secure legitimacy or resources.

We understand diffusion as 'a pattern of successive or sequential adoption of a practice, policy or program either across countries or across sub-national institutions such as states and municipalities' (Freeman, 2007). A strand of work in sociological debates about policy diffusion points to the roles that information, ideas, technologies and practices have on transnational learning (Freeman, 2007: 371). Diffusion can thus involve learning, which, as a social process, can take 'simple' or more 'complex' forms (Rogers, 2003).

It is an open question whether the diffusion of policy narratives about migration in Europe conforms with a teaching or a learning model. This distinction can be conceptualised as one between "mimetic" and "coercive" isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Mimetic isomorphism refers to adaptation based on a desire to mimic practices perceived to have been successful elsewhere; while coercive isomorphism involves adjusting policy because of external pressures to change, often implying that the government or organization in question is dependent on the norm-exporting body for resources or legitimacy. In the context of EU accession, for example, is it the case that potential member states have learned about EU migration policy, and adjusted it because they think it is more effective, or have they simply been told what to do? Schön (1973: 90) notes that diffusion is 'more nearly a battle than a communication' and can encounter resistance (Schön, 1973: 90). The centre-periphery model developed by Schön (1973) also challenges catch-up accounts and points to the ways in which the meaning or content of policy can itself develop or be

re-invented during the diffusion process. This centre-periphery model also challenges the idea of the 'stable state' and more rational models of knowledge accumulation and diffusion, where knowledge from a previous instance can be applied to the next.

Policy Narratives and Expert Knowledge

In many immigration countries, there have been growing expectations over the past decade that policies should be 'evidence based', as in the UK and Netherlands, or rationally grounded, as has been the case in Germany (Boswell 2009). This expectation shapes, and is in turn propelled by, growing expertise within the policy community. It is increasingly common for interest groups to have research officers, and for government ministries and agencies to have a dedicated research unit (for example, the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, the UK Home Office, or the European Commission). This emphasis on research is further underpinned by international fora such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, or the World Bank, which produce comparative studies of migration dynamics in different countries. Such analyses make it even more important for national ministries to demonstrate they are collecting the right kind of data and information and are sufficiently knowledgeable about trends in migration and integration.

Corresponding to these developments, research on migration studies has truly burgeoned in the past decade, with scholars producing huge quantities of studies on all aspects of migration. Universities increasingly offer graduate programmes on international migration while research councils and foundations direct funding to

projects that seek to cast new light on migration processes. 'Brokering' organizations such as the 'Metropolis' international network of researcher and policy-makers, the Washington DC-based Migration Policy Institute and the Brussels-based Migration Policy Group make it their job to 'transfer' this knowledge from research to policymakers and vice versa.

The increased centrality of knowledge in policy does not necessarily mean that policymaking is 'technocratic'. A large part of migration policy still involves responding to popular pressures, or sticking with the received wisdom of practitioners or bureaucrats, rather than drawing on research or evidence. Nonetheless, there is a strong expectation that policymakers have expertise or research available to inform their choices and justify their decisions. This influences how arguments are framed in discussion, and thus many of the ideas generated by experts and researchers seep through to influence perceptions about policy problems and appropriate solutions (Carole Weiss's 'enlightenment' notion of knowledge use – see Weiss 1977).

Expert knowledge can play an important role in the construction and reproduction of policy narratives. In fact, most countries in Europe have witnessed expert councils, research committees and even interventions by prominent public intellectuals that have played a key role in the crafting of specific policy narratives. In France, for example, public intellectuals have played a central role in keeping the French Republican model alive in public debate as well as in French politics. In the Netherlands, science-based advisory bodies such as the Scientific Council for Government Policy have had a significant influence at several critical junctures in Dutch migration policy over the past decades. In Great Britain, the Home Office has

established its own Migration Advisory Committee to advise on labour migration and a (short-lived) Migration Impact Forum to provide a forum for local authorities and other stakeholders to debate the effects of migration on particular localities.. In Germany, many of the changes during this decade were crafted by the Süssmuth Commission, which leaned heavily on expert knowledge and provided the basis for the establishment of a special unit for migration and integration research within the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees.

Nonetheless, the ways in which expert knowledge contributes to the construction of policy narratives can vary significantly. Certainly, the relationship is no-where near as straightforward as Wildavsky's notion of 'science speaking truth to power' (1979). In many cases, research is overlooked, and even government-commissioned studies end up gathering dust on a shelf. Even when expert knowledge is put to use, it is now always applied to adjust policy outputs. Instead, it often has more symbolic functions: providing political ammunition for specific actor's policy narratives (Sabatier, 1987), or deployed to enhance the legitimacy of particular actors or organisations (Boswell, 2009). Moreover, advisory bodies or expert communities can can provide venues for introducing new issues into the agenda (Timmermans and Scholten, 2006), and 'softening up' actors to accept controversial ideas (Majone 1989).

Given the various ways of deploying knowledge, it seems important to investigate why research is sometimes overlooked, why and how it is deployed for different political ends, and what sorts of venues are chosen for dialogues between researchers and policy-makers. Our objective is thus to reconstruct how and why migration policy narratives in Europe have been constructed and diffused, and the role that research has

played in this process. The analysis includes narratives about migration control and integration, and it looks at sub-national, national and supranational levels. Our concern is not with whether narratives are 'better' or 'more effective'; rather, we aim to understand how and why specific migration narratives develop in the face of often multiple and conflicting knowledge claims. By doing this, we hope to enhance understanding of migration policy-makingWe also hope this framework can have relevance beyond the scope of migration policies. A better theoretical understanding of how and why policy narratives are constructed in policy situations characterized by uncertainty and conflict can, we believe, contribute to a better understanding of policy-making in other apparently intractable policy domains.

Contributions to the volume

The papers in this collection provide an excellent illustration of the varying ways in which policy narratives are deployed to construct and respond to different aspects of migration. The first paper, by Christina Boswell, elaborates some of the theoretical aspects of policy narratives on migration, focusing in particular on problems of complexity. She argues that the complexity of migration processes creates huge problems for policy makers in their attempts to understand, let alone manage, migration. Policy narratives about migration therefore drastically simplify the phenomena they are seeking to steer. The problem is exacerbated by the political and organisational dynamics of policymaking, which place policymakers under pressure to develop simple and often dramatised narratives about policy. The implication is a structural tendency for policy to short-circuit the complexity of migration proceses.

Boswell illustrates this tendency by looking at th ecase of attempts to steer illegal migration.

The paper by Alex Balch and Andrew Geddes elaborates on the organisational context of policy narratives, showing how from a crisis in 2006 in the UK immigration control system there emerged opportunity for new ways of working, organisational change and innovation in relation to the issue of human trafficking.

Joergen Carling and Maria Hernandez-Carretero offer another example of policy narratives about migration control, in this case focusing on the case of emigration from West Africa to the Canary Islands. They analyse how different narratives about irregular, high-risk emigration based on notions of, respectively, security threats, cooperation, and protection of migrants have shaped the mechanisms employed to manage migration. They argue that policies seeking to externalise migration control to countries of origin or transit have been successful precisely because they are compatible with multiple narratives about migration control. However, they also demonstrate how such narratives tend to simplify the complexity of high-risk migration, producing a number of unanticipated and negative consequences.

Erik Bleich's paper focuses on the role of social research in migration policy-making in Britain and France, two countries known for their very different narratives of immigrant integration. Bleich shows that social research did play a role in policy-making, but that its impact was less direct than might be assumed. In the UK case, researchers drawing on the US experience with race relations influenced policymakers indirectly, through socializing key policy experts. In France, the role of researchers

also seems to have been limited, though research did help underpin the Republicanist model of integration during the 1990s and appears to be increasingly important in the reframing of policy currently taking place. Both cases show, however, that expert knowledge has not been sufficient for triggering frame change, which is more contingent on political factors.

The paper by Peter Scholten also examines on the role of expert knowledge in the construction of migration policy narratives. Dealing with the case of Dutch immigrant integration policy-making, Scholten shows that there has been strong variation in how the relationship between social research and policy-making was configured over the past three to four decades. Moreover, these different ways of configuring research-policy relations are correlated with the rise of different narratives of immigrant integration. This shows that the social sciences do much more than 'speaking truth to power', but can play very different roles in the construction of policy narratives. Moreover, Scholten underlines the relevance of looking at policy narratives or 'frames' rather than for instance at policy models, in order to capture the strongly dynamic character of migration policy-making.

Martin Bak Jorgensen's paper takes this analysis of the role of expert knowledge in policy-making a step further for the Swedish and Danish cases. He too finds evidence that social scientists do play a role in the construction of policy narratives, but that their role can be very different. Whereas in the Swedish case, social scientists have been influential in agenda-setting and the conceptual rethinking of immigrant integration policies, in Denmark social science research has been utilized in a more selective 'pick-and-choose' manner for providing legitimacy to government policies.

This also seems to be reflected in how research-policy relations were organized in both countries, with the Danish developing a more institutionalized research-policy nexus and developing 'in-house' research capacities within government, whereas the Swedish case shows a more prominent role for independent advisory bodies. Finally, the paper by Christina Oelgemöller introduces the concept of informal plurilateralism and shows how ideas and practices that develop in secretive and technocratic international fora feed-back into the domestic politics of migration management and control in immigrant-receiving states in Europe and North America.

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