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Narratives: a review of concepts, determinants, effects, and uses in migration research

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Abstract

Narratives are increasingly cited by scholars, international organisations, NGOs, and governments as one of the most powerful factors in migration politics and policymaking today. However, narratives are typically conceptually underspecified, with relatively little known about why some narratives become publicly popular or the nature of their effects. This article reviews recent scholarly advances to specify what narratives are and to offer a novel theoretical framework to better explain variation in their public popularity and effects. It is argued that the popularity of a narrative, defined as a generalisable, constructed and selective depiction of reality across time, is determined by a combination of contextual factors, such as issue complexity and salience, the plausibility of the narrative and the traits of the recipient of the narrative. These findings are relevant for policymakers and, particularly, communicators. However, although significant work has gone into explaining how narratives affect migration policymaking, the often-assumed effects of narratives on attitudes to immigration and migration behaviour have rarely been robustly tested.

Keywords: Narratives, Immigration, Policy communication, Attitudinal formation, Political psychology

Introduction

Narratives are regularly cited by migration policymakers and communicators as some of the most important determinants of public attitudes and behaviour regarding migration and a particularly powerful source of our perceptions and misperceptions. Typically, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR, 2020) argues that migration narratives are important as guarantors or potential threats to human rights: 'How we perceive and speak about migrants and migration – the narrative – plays a fundamental role in guaranteeing equality and the human rights of migrants.' Worryingly, the same office argues that inaccurate and nefarious migration narratives are on the rise: 'Harmful and dehumanising narratives on migration have increasingly permeated political movements, media and other forms of public discourse in many countries. Such narratives have used migrants as scapegoats for deep-rooted societal

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problems and fears, often for political or financial gain.' Accordingly, based on these observations and following earlier meetings that the Office convened, the office has produced an extensive 'Reframing Narratives on Migration' campaign and toolbox for how to speak about migration.

A range of other international organisations take a similar line: in short, that there is an increasingly prominent anti-immigration public narrative that is insidious and dangerous. A recent UNHCR (2020, p. 1) document aimed at young people tells them 'There are powerful voices around the world that are determined to denigrate refugees and turn them into objects of fear and loathing. This is very often the result of narratives and sentiments centred on a phobia of the outsider … and can lead to violence and persecution.' As elsewhere, the UNHCR argues that a different narrative must be spread to counteract ones like the above. It recommends, amongst other things, spreading alternative, 'stories in the media showing the human side of refugees – as unique individuals whose lives have been overturned by conflict or persecution' in order to counter 'the "invasion of hostile aliens" narrative.' Similarly, the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) has criticised the 'toxic narrative' that portrays aid groups as colluding with smugglers (McVeigh, 2018).

However, whereas it is clear that narratives currently hold a significant place in the imagination and workload of migration policymakers and communicators, policy work dealing with narratives often conceptualises narratives, the causes for their relative popularity and their effects on little more than assumption or, ironically, by forming their own narratives such as those above. Understandably, policymakers have rarely given pause to robustly consider what narratives are; how they are formed; what explains variation in their popularity; what effects they have on migration attitudes, behaviour, and policies and why; and how policymakers and communicators can be more effective when dealing with narratives. This review article considers each of the above questions by drawing on existing academic evidence.

The increased prevalence of narratives is not limited to policymakers. The word "narrative" was the Global Language Monitor's 2017 number two "Word of the Year". Furthermore, across most disciplines of the humanities and social sciences, the study of "narratives" has become increasingly common in recent decades 'as the conviction that humans have a natural tendency to think in narrative form has grown (Shenhav, 2006, p. 245).' In particular, psychologists increasingly claim that humans use narratives as a way to consider, imagine and, ultimately, make moral decisions. It is argued that narratives are a way of understanding the world and have an 'important role in shaping and expressing political identity, perspective, and ideology' including in the 'formulation and maintenance of worldviews' (Shenhav, 2006, pp. 245-246; Cornog, 2004), while scholars argue that the fundamental position of narratives in the human mind derives from their evolutionary use as a way to transfer knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Indeed, the pervasiveness of narratives is summed up by Hardy (1987, p. 1) who claims that 'We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative.' Despite these rather grandiose claims, 'the study of political narratives is still at a rather basic stage' (Shenhav, 2005, p. 316). As we will see below, this remains partially true of social science generally and migration research specifically.

What are narratives and how are they formed?

Although there are important differences in academic definitions of narratives, and the logical conclusions that can be made from them, they tend to share several key similarities. In short, according to almost all definitions, narratives are *selective depictions of reality across at least two points in time that* (according to most definitions) *include one or more causal claims*. Furthermore, many studies claim that: (1) the formation and selection of narratives is necessary, inescapable and universal to all humans; (2) narratives are generalisable and can be applied to multiple situations, as opposed to specific stories; (3) narratives are distinct from other, related concepts such as frames and discourses; (4) narratives contain some form of implicit or explicit normative—e.g. in terms of efficacy or justice—claims or "lessons"; (5) the potential number of narratives is essentially limitless but only a small number gain popularity, for reasons expanded upon in the next section.

More specifically, political and policy narratives have an additional component that can be characterised as an explicit "so what": the future policies or political changes that should be made once the narrative is accepted as accurate. As such, political and policy narratives often have three points in time: the two points from which a causal claim is made—typically with the former in the past and the latter in the present—and a third point in which the hypothetical future result of the policy change is described.

However, just the core definition of narratives as *selective depictions of reality across at least two points in time* includes multiple components with theoretical consequences. Perhaps the most important of these is their selective nature. Ricoeur (1984, *x*) states that a narrative 'groups together and integrates into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events'. The selective nature of these depictions is a reflection of the limited cognitive capacity of humans and the near infinite complexity of reality. This makes selection, and thus prioritisation, of what is included in the narrative both necessary and subjective, according to the importance given to various facets of reality by those constructing the narrative. Such selection should in theory improve one's understanding of the world—at least compared to pure randomness—both in terms of the causal claim of the narrative and by, implicitly, selecting what is important in terms of the 'events, characters, backgrounds' from which the narrative are constructed (Shenhav, 2006, p. 251). Overall, all 'people weave perceptions of social situations and observable facts together through narratives in order to make sense of reality' (Scuzzarello, 2015, p. 58) yet these narratives are necessarily limited in the extent to which they reflect reality.

Indeed, one of the more powerful roles of narratives is not only in what they explicitly argue but in the implicit assumptions behind their selection of content, 'establishing and fixing the assumptions for decision-making under conditions of high ambiguity' (Dudley, 2013; Roe, 1994, pp. 36–7). As such, the choices over their set-up and what *is* and *is not* included in them often carries the most important (and potentially misleading) theoretical assumptions so that 'narratives, even when they do seem to simply describe states of affairs, are also vehicles of implicit normative presupposition' (Sconfienza, 2017, p. 22). Thereafter, their content may be strictly correct and certainly internally plausible and logical, 'paint [ing] a picture of moving through logical steps from a problematic past, through a transforming present, towards a better future' (Dudley, 2013, p. 1142). The power of narratives is therefore to a significant extent

their power to "set the terms of the debate" about what is desirable in normative terms, either regarding efficacy or justice and often in terms of heroes, villains and victims (Jones, 2010). Research into narratives has therefore been 'useful to understand how certain policies come to be adopted while others are discarded without there sometimes being even a reasoned and principled political debate' (Sconfienza, 2017, p. 22).

Because narratives are by definition selective, they are also inevitably subjective. 'One of narrative's defining features is that it is necessarily the product of particular perspective.' (Shenhav, 2006, p. 248). Moreover, the complexity of the world means that even if a genuinely full account of the world were possible, humans would not have sufficient cognitive capacity to comprehend it all. As such, selectiveness in depictions of reality is necessary and so narratives are inevitable—there is no "correct" narrative, though some narratives—attempting to make sense of the vast complexity of reality—are more verifiable than others. Moreover, the number of potential narratives is essentially limitless. Politically, 'the narrative paints a limited and severely distorted picture of the confluence of causal factors that produced the targeted narrative actions. What is more, the repeated exclusion of perfectly legitimate causes—political causes, for example—may yield grounds for misgivings about the worldview that governed the choice of admissible explanations … [yet] … Selection in narrative is unavoidable, and the selective discriminations in a particular history, fictional or non-fictional, may be altogether sound and proper' (Wilson, 2005, p. 12).

Furthermore, because narratives are necessarily selective, they are also often assumed to have relativistic tendencies. Politically, this has given observers additional cause for concern in case the relativistic nature of narratives is used to undermine the certainty and absoluteness of fundamental rights or values (Shenhav, 2006). This fear became, arguably, more pertinent as observers (e.g. Lyotard, 1984) argued that, from the mid twentieth century onwards, mankind entered a "postmodern" age in which a single, overriding narrative of human history in western societies, arguably, split and frayed into multiple narratives and, thus, depictions and perceptions of reality. This arguably left the individual with greater freedom to pursue life as they see fit but in a context of less certainty and greater angst and vulnerability to manipulation as the nature of reality becomes increasingly contested with multiple narratives from which to choose. That said, as pointed out by Shanahan et al. (2011, p. 540) the fact that narratives must be *generalisable* means that—although a narrative never truly disappears—its overall validity can be tested *and* the extent to which it can be relativistic is thereby limited.

The depiction of two or more points in time is also widely argued to be fundamental to narratives, which are 'the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate reference' (Ricoeur, 1980, p. 169). Within these two points of time must be two or more phenomena that, at least to some extent, should be independent objects: 'narrative is the representation of at least two real or fictive events or situations in time sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other' Prince (1982, p. 4). This is closely linked to the causal claim component of a narrative, which theoretically links together two otherwise at least partially independent phenomena and from which much of a narrative's use—and persuasive power—lies. This is because one of the criteria of causality—an intuitively simple concept but the identification of which always remains contested and allusive—is temporal ordering; i.e. the proposed cause must take place before the effect. And it is this causal component that most scholars argue to be at the

heart of narratives, defined in these terms, variously as: 'frameworks that allow humans to connect apparently unconnected phenomena around some causal transformation' (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 5); 'knowledge claims that include empirical claims about the causes and dynamics of the phenomena in question' (Boswell et al., 2011, p. 2); 'causal models that map actions to consequences …. such that the narrative does not describe a single historical episode. Instead, it addresses numerous historical episodes, alerting the public's attention to long-run correlations between adjacent variables along the causal chain and offering a particular causal interpretation of these correlations' (Eliaz & Spiegler, 2020, p. 3787); and constituted of 'at least three elements: an original state of affairs, an action or an event, and the consequent state of affairs' (Czarniawska, 1998, p. 2).

In this sense, narratives are different from discourses, frames or paradigms in that, first, they have 'a strong factual or cognitive element' (Dudley, 2013, p. 1143) and, second, unlike frames that are concerned only with the present, they have a dynamic element. Furthermore, whereas narratives link two phenomena causally, a discourse is broader and defined as 'an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena' so that a discourse separates what is normal from what is not (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p. 175). Narratives are an increasing part of the current discourse on the politics of migration. Narratives also differ from other related concepts, such as hypotheses—testable propositions about highly specified relationships rather than generalisable depictions of reality that are argued to hold true over multiple contexts—or propaganda—the function of which is to persuade and influence rather than make sense of complex reality by emphasising the importance of certain causal relationships—or indeed fake news—false or misleading information presented as specific context- and time-specific news, unlike a narrative which may be partially verifiable and is applicable to many situations. However, narratives may inform and motivate the creation of hypotheses, propaganda, and fake news in a similar way to theories, which differ from narratives in that they are formal and abstract rather than applied to multiple situations via informal, often normatively loaded, stories.

As mentioned above, political and policy narratives have a further component beyond other narratives in that they describe what, because of the inner logic of the narrative, should be done in the real-world, in terms of, for example, policy changes. 'In the political context, narrative forms of thought and expression, which are based on stringing events together into chains, carry another advantage: they are consistent with the political logic of trying to shape the present [or perhaps more accurately, the future] in light of [causal] lessons learned from the past' (Shenhav, 2006, p. 246).

Boswell et al. (2011, p. 4) delineate between three types of policy narratives in the field of migration. First, there are those that narrate the nature of a policy problem. For example, the "problem" of irregular immigration could be narrated as "unscrupulous traffickers exploiting victims" or, on the other hand, "economic migrants exploiting loopholes". Both of these focus on irregular migration, conceptualise it as a problem and do so in normative terms, though tell a very different story comprised of different characterisations (see Schneider & Ingram, 1993, on target populations of narratives). Second, there are those that narrate about the causes of a problem, often with broader "lessons" for future action. For example, the "problem" of non-integration of migrants could be explained as the result of "persisting cultural differences". Third, there are those that focus on the effects of (extant or proposed) policy interventions or solutions,

for example, claiming that "restricting benefits for asylum seekers has led to a reduction in the numbers of asylum applications".

Overall, narratives— *selective depictions of reality across at least two points in time that include a causal claim* —are used by all humans to understand an effectively infinitely complex reality. These depictions select various objects within that reality—people, events, trends, phenomena, etc.—and make claims about how they relate to each other. We all construct such depictions in our mind using our imagination as well as evaluate those that are told to us. Because causality in reality is highly complex—particularly in the social world of humans, where narratives are especially common—such claims are usually simplistic, even when true. Therefore, whereas X may indeed have caused Y to some extent (as a narrative might argue), reality may be more complicated: other factors may also have caused Y (potentially overshadowing the importance of X); the effect of X may be contingent on some other factors, such as Z; and Y may *also* partially explain X in a form of reverse causality, ad infinitum. These various causal paths—potential narratives in their own right—are indeed effectively infinite. Some may be true, and some may be false, or at least unverifiable, while some may be exaggerated or downplayed for political reasons or only applicable in certain circumstances that are not mentioned. In the next section, we consider why some narratives become popular and some do not.

Explaining variation in the popularity of narratives

This section outlines the key explanations for variation in the popularity of narratives, both over time and relative to each other. It is argued that, whereas narratives vary over time according to the need to make sense of a phenomenon and the narrative's external, empirical support, they vary according to each other more according to their internal logical coherence, material interests, psychological traits of the receiver of the narrative and the way in which the narrative is presented.

Necessity

The processes of considering and forming narratives is typically a result of it being necessary or desirable to make sense of a situation. Sociologists have argued that the increasing pervasiveness of narratives in policymaking is a reflection of greater preoccupation with risk that results from a more interconnected, complex and, thus, unpredictable world (Beck, 1992 and 1998; Boswell et al., 2011; Giddens, 1994; Luhmann, 1991). According to this view, narratives arise when they are *necessary* to make sense of this complexity because a narrative stabilises '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' (Roe, 1994, p. 51). This is more fundamentally reflective of the human need to make order out of chaos: 'we typically impose an order on discontinuity and change, so that the search for understanding ends by reducing a complex multiplicity of narratives to a monolithic entity (Bevir & Rhodes, 2003, p. 107).'

As such it is possible—even likely—that multiple, competing narratives will grow in popularity simultaneously, as the necessity for *some* narrative grows due to (1) the growing salience of an issue and (2) a concurrent growing demand for some way to

make sense of that issue, particularly if it is (3) novel, complex and not widely understood (see Dennison, 2019; Dennison, 2020a; Dennison & Geddes, 2019). Moreover, the longer an issue spends on the political agenda, the more likely it is that politicians and policymakers will have to justify their own actions to the public and media, which they will often do in the form of narratives (Boswell et al., 2011, p. 12).

That said, although necessity and salience can explain variation in the popularity of narratives over time, they do not explain why some narratives and more popular than others. In short, not all narratives are created equal, in terms of their potential or actual popularity—the extent to which the public believes that a narrative is accurate—at a specific time and place. A number of factors have been theorised—and less commonly, tested—to explain the popularity of one narrative relative to others.

Interests

A wide range of theoretical approaches focus on the role of interests in explaining the popularity of narratives. For rational choice theorists, the *actual* interests of the individual determine the narratives that they choose to believe in (Amara et al., 2004; Nordlinger, 1981; Pfeffer, 1981, 1984). However, this view has the theoretical shortcoming that individuals have only a limited ability to measure their own interests, their measurements are affected by biases and the empirical shortcoming that there is significant variation in the narratives that individuals with similar interests believe. On the other hand, critical theorists—inspired by Gramsci and Foucault (see Boswell et al., 2011, for review)—argue that the interests of the "ruling class" or similar dictate the popularity of narratives, which the former propagate and "the masses" internalise as their own interests. Boswell et al. (2011, p. 5) argue that this conceptualisation is overly simplistic because it fails to 'to attribute any power to ideas in their own right, precluding the possibility that they can shape beliefs or interests … a better way of conceptualising the relationship might be to understand the two as mutually constitutive.' Moreover, the reliance on interests to explain narratives overlooks the utility that human derive from personal deduction rather than simply advancing their own interests or uncritically adopting external narratives.

Plausibility

The aforementioned use of deduction by humans when assessing narratives brings us to the next important determinant of a narrative's popularity: its plausibility. A narrative's plausibility is determined by its congruence, both internally—the extent to which it makes sense theoretically—and externally—the extent to which its claims align with available—including previous—information about the real-world (Lodge & Taber, 2005; Taber & Lodge, 2006) Notably, the internal plausibility of a narrative is relatively fixed over time, whereas its external plausibility can quickly change according to available information about the world. Boswell et al. (2011, p. 6) group 'consistency, coherence and plausibility' together, though we may see the former two as determining the latter. A further determinant of its plausibility may be the credibility of the messenger of the narrative, again both internally—the extent to which, theoretically, the messenger seems like reliable source—and externally—the extent to which, empirically, the

messenger has been a reliable source in the past (see Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Olson, 2003). This plausibility, however, goes beyond simply objective criteria.

Imagination, consonance and "transportation"

Narratives are more likely to be believed when they activate one's imagination, the 'cognitive process where the mind uses previously acquired information to simulate what is or what might be (Oatley, 1995)' … that people rely on … 'to learn about, and make sense of, the social world and picture what will happen if they take certain actions (Strauss, 1959)' (McLaughlin & Velez, 2019, p. 24). Because the human mind 'constantly gathers, stores, and organizes incoming information to create cognitive representations of the world', resulting in imagination, the latter is more likely to be activated when the narrative at least partially aligns with the individual's pre-existing conception of the world, thereby maintaining cognitive consonance. If the narrative does not do so, the individual will have a harder time cognitively simulating—"imagining"—the narrative and is more likely to feel dissatisfaction or distrust—emotions typical following cognitive dissonance—afterwards. That said, as mentioned, individuals are not closed to new information and, indeed, are constantly updating their understanding of the world based on new information that they deem to be accurate.

Furthermore, when narratives affirm, rather than threaten, one's self-identity and meta-cognition moreover (their sense of themselves), they are more likely to be successful (Shanahan et al., 2011). For example, Krebs (2015) argues that American foreign policy narratives are derived from the self-understanding of "American exceptionalism" that sees the United States as a heroic champion of democracy in a world of tyrannical governments. From these two key elements, endless narratives can be easily derived that make sense of a vast array of foreign policy issues. Similarly, the extent to which a narrative aligns with one's personal values affects the extent to which someone is predisposed to believing that narrative (Dennison, 2020b).

The ability of a narrative to engage an individual's imagination and emotions is also reliant on the quality of storytelling; narrators must avoid breaking the "suspension of disbelief"—typically unnatural or jarring reminders that the narrative and reality are, of course, not in actual fact the same, for example clichés or overly-transparent attempts at persuasion—and instead must 'execute the normative leap in such a way as to make it seem graceful, compelling, even obvious' (Dudley, 2013, p. 1142). The process of reaching this "suspension of disbelief" has been termed by academics "transportation", the process by which 'all of the person's mental systems and capacities become focused on the events occurring in the narrative' (Green & Brock, 2002, p. 324) and, even, they envisage themselves within the story as the protagonist, leading to empathy (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008).

When this transportation is achieved, individuals are more likely to believe additional premises of the narrative *and* more likely to view the events and outcomes in the narrative as personally relevant (McLaughlin & Velez, 2019). However, individuals are also more likely to be 'transported' into the narrative when its initial assumptions align with their own beliefs, attitudes, experiences and worldviews *and* when they view it as personally relevant. Recent research has shown that citizens may become entirely immersed in a political narrative but the predisposition for citizens to be 'transported'

in this manner varies considerably, moderating their susceptibility to the persuasive power of narratives (Lee & Shin, 2014; McLaughlin & Velez, 2019; Wojcieszak & Kim, 2016).

Overall, the extent to which a narrative is widely accepted is defined by the extent to which a narrative: (1) is needed to make sense of an issue, defined by the issue's novelty, complexity, risk, uncertainty and salience (this means that competing narratives may become popular simultaneously); (2) aligns with individual interests; (3) is plausible, both in terms of its internal logic and the extent to which external evidence supports the narrative, as well as the credibility of the messenger; (4) engages one's emotions and imagination; a function of cognitive consonance, self-identity and metacognition, personal relevance and the quality of storytelling, which can "transport" receivers of the narrative in a way that makes them accept the selective inclusion of objects and the claims about relationships between them as legitimate. These criteria are summarised in Fig. 1, below. Examples of specific migration narratives are outlined in the following section.

The effects of narratives and their use in migration research

The effect of narratives on public attitudes and behaviours remains less explored in the academic literature than their roles in organisations and policy-making circles, as well as their effect on policy outcomes. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s scholars (Berman, 2001; Bleich, 2002; Goldstein & Keohane, 1993; Schmidt & Radaelli, 2004) increasing turned to the role of narratives in explaining policy outcomes as a part of a broader—

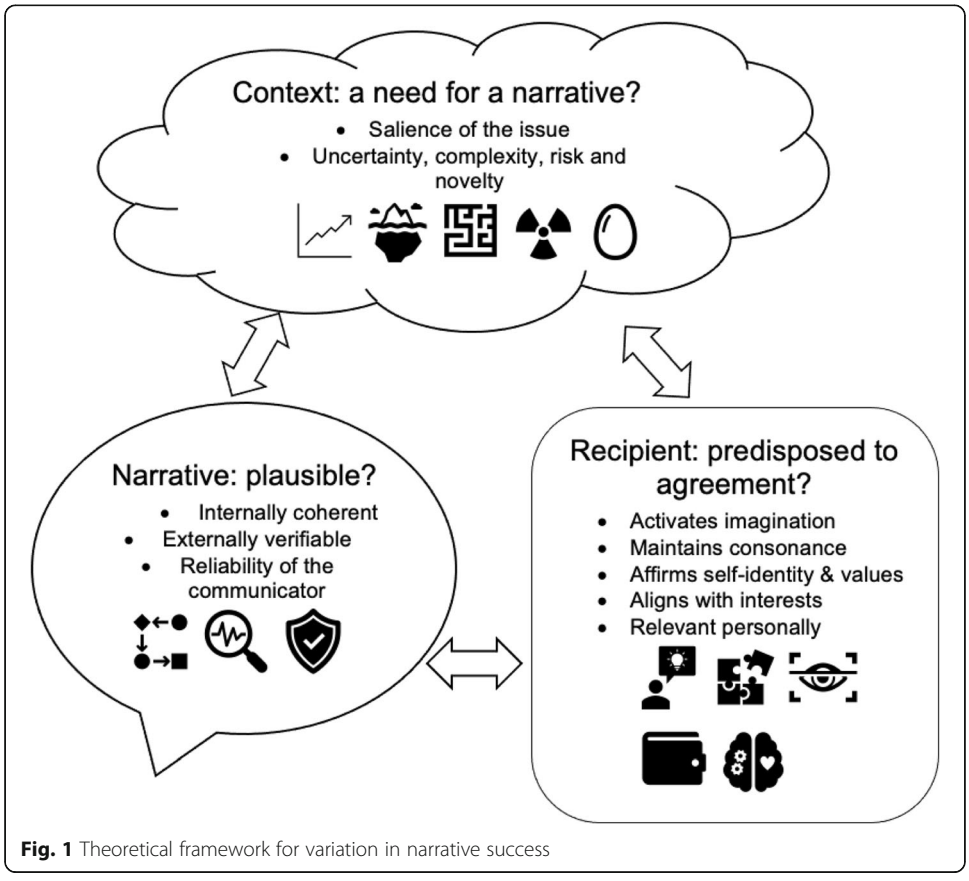

Fig. 1 Theoretical framework for variation in narrative success

and possibly insufficiently critically considered—acceptance that neither "facts" nor "interests" can sufficiently explain variation in decisions by policymakers (Boswell et al., 2011). This led to the theoretical advancements of Narrative Policy Framework (NPF; Jones, 2010), designed to capture and describe policy narratives as well as their effects. Migration researchers have applied NPF to immigration narratives deployed the Donald Trump U.S. presidency, described as a postmodern threat (Jones & McBeth, 2020; see also Estrada et al., 2020). In terms of public attitudes, Jones (2010) shows that narrative structure, in terms of affect for characters, affects public opinion in an experiment on attitudes to climate change. Moreover, psychological studies have repeatedly shown that narratives are more persuasive than bare facts or technical information (Golding et al., 1992; Ricketts, 2007) while climate change narratives based on individual responsibility, efficiency, and good business are more convincing than those based on thinking globally.

In migration research, narratives have been argued to have several effects, particularly on policy outcomes. Researchers have considered how a "securitisation" narrative that focuses on the various threatening aspects of migrants and migration and an atmosphere of unease and exceptionality towards the issue as policy—fuelled by negative attitudes and opportunistic actors—lead to the adoption of stricter border policies, the use of detention centres, a focus on the supposed criminal aspects of migration and so on (Balzacq, 2010; Bigo, 2002; Buzan, 1991). In recent work, Bello (2020) argues that, as a result, narratives do not even need to be explicitly believed by actors to have an effect, as jobs and roles increasingly reproduce the narratives, leading to a self-perpetuating cycle that can be broken only by the introduction of alternative narratives. However, it has also been argued that such a "securitisation" understanding of trends in migration policymaking is itself a selective narrative with at best mixed supportive evidence (Boswell, 2007; Caviedes, 2015; Messina, 2014). Several other well-known migration narratives have been argued to have had policy implications, such as regarding its effects on public safety, well-being, crime, terrorism or broader "apocalyptic" or "nation under siege" narratives (e.g. Mamadouh, 2012; Stewart, 2012). Generally, less research has considered how positive—or at least normatively relatively neutral—migration narratives have affected policy such as greater cultural richness, economic contribution, human freedom, and humanitarian and developmental effects.

Moreover, several migration narratives from an internationalist perspective, with various proposed effects, have also been considered. A pro-development return migration narrative (Akesson & Baaz, 2015) claims that returning migrants act as positive agents of development via acquired capital, skills, networks and otherwise. Pecoud (2015, p. 51) argues that international organisations have converged upon a depoliticised, deterministic set of "international migration narratives" in which migration is presented as comprehensible, categorizable and problematic only insofar as a federated approach is not taken, with the effect that although the narratives 'do not change reality, they nevertheless create the conditions for states to meet and discuss'. Akanle (2018) argues that many contemporary international migration narratives are reliant on somewhat dubious frames, such as the "global north" and "global south", despite migration between these two loosely defined areas being a minority of global international migrations, with one effect being that actors in the latter often see migration to the former as a panacea and another being that increasingly coalesced negative narratives in the

former and positive ones in the latter preclude true global agreements on migration via the formation of common narratives.

By contrast, relatively little research has considered how narratives about migration affect immigration policy preferences, or *vis versa* (though see e.g. Cattaneo & Grieco, 2020). Quantitative social and electoral surveys such as the World Values Survey, European Social Survey (ESS), the various world regional "barometers" and national electoral surveys often include measurements of preferred immigration policy or some measure of xenophobia (e.g. "how would you feel about having an immigrant as a neighbour?") in addition to questions asking respondents about their perceptions of the effects of immigration—essentially narratives—such as "do you believe that immigration …. enriches [your country's] culture or undermines it?" or "is good for [your country's] economy or bad for it?". Two waves of the ESS included special immigration modules that also asked about the effects of immigration on quality of life, jobs, taxes and social spending, terrorism, and crime. However, rather than critically or respectively consider the significance of responses to these questions, researchers have typically collapsed responses to these questions into broader factor or index variables, alongside policy preferences, to measure attitudes to immigration *en toto* – despite evidence showing that such responses are multidimensional (Dennison & Geddes, 2021; Sobolewska et al., 2017). One potential to reverse this trend has been presented by the most recent 2017–2020 wave of the World Values Survey (Haerpfer et al., 2020) across 47 countries, which asks about agreement with ten migration narratives: the extent to which immigration in one's country has "filled important job vacancies"; "strengthened cultural diversity"; "offered people from poor countries a better living"; "given asylum to political refugees who are persecuted elsewhere"; "increased the crime rate"; "increased the risk of terrorism"; "increased unemployment"; and "lead to social conflict". This data could be used to analyse both the determinants of narrative popularity and its effects.

Conclusion

Narratives are increasingly cited by international organisations, NGOs and governments as one of the most powerful factors in migration policymaking today. However, the concept of narratives is typically underspecified, with relatively little known about why some narratives become publicly popular. This article reviews recent scholarly advances to specify what narratives are and to offer a novel theoretical framework to better explain variation in their publicly popularity and effects. It is argued that the popularity of narratives, defined as *generalisable selective depictions of reality across time*, is determined by a combination of contextual factors, such as issue complexity and salience, the plausibility of the narrative and the traits of the recipient of the narrative. Narratives have been repeatedly shown to have effects on policy—both related to migration and otherwise—particularly via the Narrative Policy Framework and 'securitisation theory'. Although oft-postulated theories about the persuasive power of narratives have intermittently been tested robustly, more could be done in this area to avoid potential sources of endogeneity.

Narratives are a key part of humanity's attempts to understand reality. As such, policymakers and communicators must prioritise the effective use of narratives in their work to be understood and believed. As demand for understanding an issue increases, multiple, competing narratives may simultaneously become popular. As such, the

popularity of migration narratives must be used as a gauge of public opinion with extreme caution. A narrative's popularity is partially reliant on its plausibility: both in terms of being internally theoretically logical and supported externally with evidence. In short, facts—when combined with compelling logic—*do* matter. However, other factors matter too: communicators and policymakers must construct their narratives and make their points around the recipients' own pre-existing cognitive pillars rather than challenge them or try to recreate them from scratch. Individuals are likely to agree with most *plausible* positive and negative narratives on migration simultaneously. Future research should robustly test the effects of migration narratives on political attitudes, behaviour, and policies (including *emigration* preferences and behaviour), particularly via the use of experimental evidence.

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