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- **Teil A Grundlagen/**
  Part A Fundamentals

- **Teil B Forschungsüberblicke und einzelne Ansätze/**
  Part B Research Overviews and Specific Approaches

- **Teil C Exemplarische Anwendungen/**
  Part C Exemplary Applications

- **Teil D Diagnosen – Diskussionen – Perspektiven/**
  Part D Diagnoses – Discussions – Perspectives

# Inhaltsverzeichnis

## Teil C  Exemplarische Anwendungen/Part C Exemplary Applications

## Teil D Diagnosen – Diskussionen – Perspektiven/Part D Diagnoses – Discussions – Perspectives

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# The politics of narrative (research): A »success story«

**Abstract:** The notion of »narrative« has become ubiquitous in media coverage, political speeches and programs over the past years, in addition to being a prominent concept in discourse analysis. This article scrutinizes this current trend by asking how »narrative« is utilized and what symbolic functions it fulfils in public and political debates. We reflect on what »narrative's success story« can tell us about the political culture of which it is part and what role it plays for the (changing) socio-political environment of our times. Finally, we discuss how the field of discourse studies might be involved in the increasing importance of »narrative«.

Keywords: narrative, political communication, political culture, social theory, interpretive research, double hermeneutic

**Zusammenfassung:** Der Begriff des »Narrativs« ist in den letzten Jahren in der Medienberichterstattung, in politischen Reden und Programmen allgegenwärtig geworden und auch in der Diskursanalyse ein wichtiges Konzept. Dieser Artikel beleuchtet diesen aktuellen Trend und fragt, wie der Begriff verwendet wird und welche symbolischen Funktionen er in öffentlichen und politischen Debatten erfüllt. Wir zeigen, was uns die »Erfolgsgeschichte des Narrativs« über die politische Kultur, in der sie auftritt, sagen kann, und welche Rolle sie für das (sich wandelnde) soziopolitische Klima unserer Zeit spielt. Schließlich diskutieren wir, inwiefern die Diskursforschung an der zunehmenden Verbreitung des »Narrativs« beteiligt ist.

Schlagwörter: Narrativ, politische Kommunikation, politische Kultur, Gesellschaftstheorie, interpretative Forschung, doppelte Hermeneutik

In recent years, »narrative« has emerged not only as a major issue of discourse-analytical research in the social sciences in general and political science in particular, but seemingly also in public and political debates. A brief glance at (German and British) media coverage substantiates this impression: While between 1992 and 2001, the term »narrative« appeared only 74 times in the German daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, this number rose to 1.085 for the timespan between 2012 and 2021. A similar growth could be observed for UK's *Daily Telegraph*, where the numbers increased from 504 to over 10.000 during the same period of time. Moreover, while in the 1990s »narrative« was typically used in the papers' feuilleton, today it is increasingly applied when addressing and reflecting upon socio-political issues. This presumably mirrors the inclusion of the term, which was originally used in literary studies, in the repertoire of the social sciences. As Blum and Kuhlmann observe, the term has been »taken up by political advisors and consultancies, […]

moved to politics, and today is an integral part of political commentary in the media and popular debates« (Blum/Kuhlmann 2019, p. 340).

For discourse studies, this development is important in at least three ways. *Firstly*, it raises the question how the notion of narrative works and what symbolic functions it fulfils in public and political debates. *Secondly*, we may reflect on what »narrative's success story« can tell us about the political culture of which it is part and what role it plays for the (changing) socio-political environment of our times. *Thirdly*, it raises the question how a paradigm that is based on the premise of language performativity could deal with this instance of a double hermeneutic (Giddens 1987, pp. 15 ff.), as it is to be assumed that the field of discourse studies, where the notion of narrative has also gained prominence (e.g. Viehöver 2011; Gadinger/Jarzebski/Yildiz 2014), is somehow involved in the increasing importance of »narrative« (without of course implying a linear causal relationship). In this contribution, we want to share some thoughts as regards these three questions.

## I

Apparently, the notion of narrative answers to a specific need and fulfils specific functions in public and political discourse, as it would not have gained such prominence if other already established terms would be able to do the same job. A simple reference to a fashion or zeitgeist does not help in this regard, as it raises the follow-up question which symbolic gap had to be filled. A cursory and unsystematic look at recent media coverage and political communication leads us to a couple of insights and theses as to how »narrative« is applied in public debates and which political tasks it performs.

To begin with, it is striking that »narrative« is predominantly, though not exclusively (see below), used to describe the political practices of »the others«. This is currently particularly the case in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine where there is much talk about »Putin's narrative« that he uses to justify the Russian invasion (e. g. Bewerunge 2022). In these instances, »narrative« is applied as a technique of othering, i.e. as a symbolic practice that establishes a difference between those who are telling (one-sided, distorting, false) stories and those who are not.[1] To do so, labelling certain discursive practices as »narrative« articulates the established distinction between story and truth. This connotation is of course a significant deviation from notions of narrative in discourse theory which build on the assumption that as *homo narrans* we always and necessarily tell stories (e.g. Koschorke 2012). In contrast, in public and political discourse those who narrate are the others, just as »ideological« reasoning is always located on the other side of the political spectrum.

However, the notion of narrative does more than that. As compared to a »lie« which also gains its meaning in relation to »truth«, »narrative« allows for more complexity and ambiguity. Whereas claiming that a certain statement is a lie evokes the dualism between correct and false, the use of »narrative« highlights that in political discourse we are typi-

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1    See also Foroughi et al. (2017, p. 639) on Trumpism and »the dangers of (deceitful) storytelling«.

cally dealing with complex configurations of facts, beliefs, assumptions, values and evaluations which may have some truth to them or which are not objects of truth claims at all, so that the narrative configuration as such eludes from a binary classification as either »right« or »wrong«. Here the usage of »narrative« articulates that the world is more complex than binary distinctions can grasp. In this respect we encounter »narrative« as a way to illustrate the importance of different cultural constellations and heritages for making sense of political positions, for instance when an article reflects on the »fundamental differences in narratives between Central Europe and the old member states of the EU« about Russia (Dempsey 2022). Here, the notion of narrative conveys that different perceptions and communications are embedded in culturally and regionally specific worlds of experience and (hi-)stories.

Moreover, we encounter a manner of use in which »narrative« is applied somewhat neutrally, i.e. without all too obvious connotations. In these instances, the notion indicates that politics has to do with persuasion and performance, for instance when it is reported on how in the *UN General Assembly* there is a »struggle over the global narrative« (Wiener Zeitung 2022), or when it is criticised that the *German Social Democrats* are in need of a »convincing narrative« (Weidenfeld 2021). Here the notion of narrative is not applied for the purpose of othering, but to illuminate how political actors approach the task of gaining support for their proposals. In a way, this usage tends to transcend the established difference between »symbolic« and »substantial« politics (Edelman 1964) and acknowledges that political struggle (in a democracy) is essentially about convincing stories. This use of the term also indicates another function of »narrative«, which is the communicative and public production of legitimacy. The possibilities for political action in general or policy reforms in particular are closely related to the public debates and discourses that accompany them. In this sense, talking about narratives can serve the purpose of either justification or legitimacy politics (»Legitimitätspolitik«) as those »conscious efforts« that actors make »to establish, secure, criticize, or destroy the normative acceptability of an order, a decision, or even an actor« (Nullmeier/Geis/Daase 2012, p. 13). Picking up on this, Yildiz, Gadinger and Smith (2018, p. 136) explicitly stress how in controversies, legitimacy politics are shaped to a particular degree by the universal cultural technique of narration, an everyday practice shared by political elites and ordinary people alike.

It is also this recognition of storytelling as ubiquitous and somewhat egalitarian that leads to more frequent explicit notions of »narrative« in political and administrative communication. Various publications from the Governmental Research Agency of the *German Federal Ministry of Housing, Urban Development and Construction* reflect on this (Willinger 2019, 2022; Gadinger/Jarzebski/Yildiz 2022). In their publications, the authors very explicitly address the use of the concept of narrative, which they introduce as perhaps »unusual or confusing«. According to Willinger (2022, p. 8), »narrative« supplants an older concept like guiding principle (»Leitbild«) that the author perceives as elitist and technocratic. By replacing this instrumental use of communication in urban planning, an explicit focus on »narrative« is perceived as a path to more cooperative and participatory practices (Willinger 2022, p. 11): »In the act of storytelling as a social practice, it becomes

apparent that every citizen can become an urban development policy actor simply by raising their voice« (Willinger 2019, p. 101). Drawing from narratives as »small stories« is intended to overcome the lack of resonance of well-established ideas among planners, like the »European City« or the »Social City«, by ousting these grand yet aloof narratives with citizens' »small stories« that are better suited to scrutinize the inconsistencies and contradictions in local contexts (ibid., p. 104).

Against this backdrop, »narrative« not only fulfils strategic-rhetorical functions that help to market planning practice more effectively, but it also exercises a normative function that can mobilise alternative and as yet unknown planning ideas. When, in a different policy area, the *German National Action Plan Integration* (»Nationaler Aktionsplan Integration«) was crafted, federal government, federal states, municipalities and civil society utilized »narrative« in a similar way:

> »For a strong integration policy, commonalities and the normality of living together in diversity must also become visible and communicable. Municipal narratives create a capacity to speak that is suitable for everyday life, that translate guiding principles or diversity concepts in a comprehensible way and that can be told in everyday life.« (Die Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Migration, Flüchtlinge und Integration 2020, p. 63)

This optimistic assumption that narratives can foster cohesion is also conveyed in EU commissioner Fischler's verdict that it was not an institutional restructuring that Europe needed for the future, but a new narrative (quoted in Blum/Kuhlmann 2019, p. 340).

## II

How can we theorise these observations? We shall argue that the use of »narrative« is linked to the larger socio-political environment which both allows for and is simultaneously reproduced by the appearance of this notion. »Narrative« is not simply a symbolic instrument that can be applied for certain communicative purposes; it is also, like every énoncé, performative in that it is involved in the construction of the phenomenon it refers to. In this sense, »narrative's success story«, we contend, has its share in current transformations towards a culturalization of political culture.

To develop this argument, we draw from Andreas Reckwitz's (2017) attempt to grasp the profound changes that are taking place in the political landscapes around the world. In his book *Society of Singularities*, the German sociologist maintains that since the 1970s, and further amplified since the new millennium, we have been witnessing how the emergence of the logic of the particular replaces the logic of the general. With the latter, Reckwitz refers to the principles of standardization and mass production which had been characteristic for industrial society and which are increasingly challenged and superseded by processes of singularization and culturalization. This transformation culminates in a late-modern praise of the (alleged) singularity of subjects and objects which

obtain affective value beyond strictly functional categories. In the political realm, Reckwitz (2017, pp. 371 ff.) also observes tendencies of singularization and culturalization, which, according to him, have led to the emergence of an »apertistic and differential liberalism« in which cultural differences are considered a resource for the quality of life and economic competitiveness.[2]

Taking this (certainly not uncontroversial) perspective as a reference point, we may interpret the rise of the notion of narrative in public and political discourse as both an expression and a driving force of the culturalization of political culture. While Reckwitz argues that in the society of singularities a new line of conflict about the meaning of »culture« has emerged, we may interpret culturalization also as a transformation of political forms and symbolic practices. Starting out from the conceptual pair general/particular, the (now vanishing) political rationale of industrial society could be seen in the standardization of social complexity with the help of general categories. Here, political struggles take the form of a clash of »interests« which more or less directly result from societal (particularly class) positions and which are represented by mass political parties and organizations. In the course of late-modern individualization, these abstract and unifying forms are less and less able to capture the manifold realities of life and to satisfy the individual's aspiration for singularity (cf. Rosanvallon 2022, pp. 76 ff.).

In this socio-political environment, the form of narrative could be seen, on the one hand, as a search for a common ground in situations where no common ground is quasi-naturally given. This seems to be the case for instance in the abovementioned media comment reflecting on the need of the *Social Democrats* to find a convincing narrative, e.g. a story which weaves together a multiplicity of different life-worlds which are not bound together somewhat automatically by »a working-class reality«. In addition, »narrative« is also a technique of a »politics of cultural diversity« (Reckwitz 2017, p. 382) in that it allows for a symbolic performance which actively nourishes singularities, up to the point that everyone has their own »life story«. As compared to traditional cleavages resulting in (seemingly) given and static interests and norms, a narrative is able to act out »the entire person« with all its individual traits, experiences and competences (cf. ibid., p. 194). In this sense, »narrative« is, paradoxically, both a compensation for and a driving force of the culturalization and singularization of politics.

Seen in this light, the increasing frequency with which »narrative« is used in public contexts may indicate that in late modernity there actually are more stories being told in politics. This is of course not to say that there is a form of »purely substantial« politics functioning without symbolic components. It rather means that a specific type of narrative has developed in which the narrators themselves take centre stage in their stories. An individualizing and culturalizing narrative seems to emerge in which political actors present themselves not as formal office-holders who disappear behind abstract institutions and procedures, but as »singular human beings«, for instance when Federal

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2   This dominant regime is accompanied and challenged, Reckwitz argues, by a »cultural essentialism« in which culture functions as the foundation, and serves the separation, of historical or ethnic communities.

President Frank-Walter Steinmeier provides insight into his (emotional) struggles when looking back on his relationship with Wladimir Putin (Der Spiegel 2022), or when Federal Minister for Economic Affairs Robert Habeck presents himself as someone constantly wrangling and battling with how to take political decisions (cf. Müller/Séville 2022). To be sure, every act of political communication has a narrative side to it; yet this specific variant more directly reveals its narrativity as it presents the characters in their individual emotional states, perceptions and everyday struggles. An important structural and technological condition for the emergence of this narrative type is of course social media in which (political) subjects are able and urged to present themselves in their individuality (Reckwitz 2017, pp. 244 ff.), thus further intensifying the general tendency of political personalisation.

## III

As we have seen, the narrative turn in the social sciences in general and political research in particular is accompanied by an increasing use of the notion of narrative in public and political debates. This is no surprise given that the *double hermeneutic* is a constant companion of our trade. This concept refers to the fact that everyday terms and theories that »ordinary« people use to make sense of their worlds, on the one hand, and the conceptual language of the social sciences that is applied for analysis and interpretation, on the other hand, do not operate in isolation from one another. Not only is the former defining for the practices of the latter, but also does the latter rebound on the former. According to Giddens (1987, p. 71), this two-way relationship is essentially inevitable, and thus »social scientists cannot but be alert to the transformative effects that their concepts and theories might have upon what it is they set out to analyse«. While a sensitivity for the performative effects is important for any kind of social research, for a reconstructive perspective like in discourses analysis this situation is of particular significance as the very rationale of this paradigm is not to lose touch with the analysed symbolic practices by way of conceptual abstraction and generalization. In this sense, a close and two-way relationship between analysing and analysed, e.g. through »member-checking« of findings, is at the heart of discourse analysis in particular and interpretive research more generally (cf. Schwartz-Shea/Yanow 2012, pp. 100 ff.).

In addition to this, we can also speculate on the extent to which discourse analysts themselves have been more directly involved in the success story of the term »narrative« in political and public language use. First, we could follow Kauppi's (2014, p. 331) dictum that »the social sciences provide the main training ground for global elites«. Even if this judgement refers to the field of global governance, it can be generally assumed that there is a revolving door effect from social scientists into consultancies, politics and administration. This is also true for interpretive or argumentative policy analysis as the current that has moved this sub-discipline towards a turn to narratives, even though it is likely to be considered theory-based rather than application-focussed. However, the argumentative turn has triggered a lively debate, especially in the US, because here, unlike

in Germany, policy research is not only a sub-discipline but a profession whose commissioned work is perceived not only by clients but also by affected citizens. Accordingly, the programmatic questions posed by the editors of the foundational work of the argumentative turn, Fischer and Forester (1993), were initially aimed at the role of researchers. In their redefinition of the policy scholar, they emphasise his or her task of stimulating the political processes of deliberation rather than providing proposed solutions to the social problems of modern societies. What is needed, therefore, is a reorientation of the field towards what it can achieve, namely to improve the quality of policy argumentation (Fischer 1998, p. 2).

As political scientists, we can easily forget that the »argumentative turn« has been proclaimed not only in our discipline, but also in the field of planning. The fact that, at least in a German context, there is talk of »narratives«, especially in governmental research on urban development policy, seems hardly surprising against the background of the development of a »communicative planning« paradigm (on this also Willinger 2019, p. 101). Ironically, then, it could be that a current that emphasises how interpretive work does not carry the definitions and concepts of its own community »into the field« has nevertheless shaped the practice discourse much more strongly. Perhaps it is not scientific knowledge that is adopted by policymakers without ado, as has been known since the early days of research on knowledge utilisation, but rather that policymakers adopt our diction.

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