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Stories of how to give or take – towards a typology of social policy reform narratives

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ABSTRACT

Narrative stories are crucial to policy change, as they decisively contribute to how policy problems and policies are defined. While this seems to apply for social policy in particular, narrative stories have remained under-researched and not systematically compared for this area. In this article, we theorise on narratives in social policy by focusing on how similarities and differences between narratives in old- and new-social-risks policy reforms can be conceptualised, taking into account expansion and retrenchment. To systematically link those types of social policy reform with narrative elements, we rely on stories of control and helplessness, as well as the deservingness or undeservingness associated with different target populations. Thereby, distinct types of social policy reform narratives are identified: stories of giving-to-give, giving-to-shape, taking-to-take, taking-to-control, and taking-out-of-helplessness. The article concludes with empirical illustrations of those narrative types, which stem from the case studies presented in this Special Issue.

KEYWORDS

Narrative stories; typology; social policy reform; target populations; social risks

1. Introduction

In policy research, it is well known that there is no clear link between social problems and certain policies that are taken in response to them. At least since the argumentative turn (Fischer & Forester, 1993), most policy scholars have shared the view that stories, narratives, metaphors, symbols and the like play an important role for policymaking, which is why they now constitute important concepts in most established theories of the policy process (Weible & Sabatier, 2017). The aim of this Special Issue is to move these ideational concepts in the foreground of policy research by focusing on one central concept, namely that of narrative stories (Stone, 2012). Narrative stories are – often highly-simplified – stories about how (good or bad) things happen. As ‘the depiction of […] a problem strongly suggests a [certain] solution to the problem’ (Birkland, 2007, p. 73), stories about the problem can then be linked with specific policies. When it comes to policy reforms, narrative stories of change are especially important. They can either take the form of stories of decline (making the case that a crisis is likely to occur if measures to prevent this are not undertaken), or the form of stories of rising and progress (Stone, 2012, pp. 160–165).
The ‘narrative’ has long exceeded some more or less defined analytical borders of literary as well as public research (Hajer, 1993; Majone, 1989; Stone, 1989). Being taken up by political advisors and consultancies, the term has moved to politics, and today is an integral part of political commentary in the media and popular debates. Not least, narratives have recently been connected with debates about post-truth politics and ‘the dangers of (deceitful) storytelling’ (Foroughi, Gabriel, McCalman, & Tourish, 2017), so that narratives employed by political actors have become a ‘serious concern in society at large’ (ibid.). However, also a contrary, optimistic view is connected with narratives, stressing their power to foster cohesion – such as EU commissioner Fischler stating what Europe needed for the future was not an institutional restructuring, but a new narrative (Welt, 2016). In post-industrial societies, as McBeth, Jones, and Shanahan (2014, p. 225) highlight, policy entrepreneurs ‘expend considerable energy turning public policy debates into battles over competing narratives’.

This Special Issue focuses on the role of narratives in social policy reform. Social policy is highly important in electoral terms and therefore one of the main fields where political parties compete (Häusermann, Picot, & Geering, 2013). Moreover, it has been an area of fundamental transformation over the past years: Next to the sheer size of its financial budget and continuous costs, it has – at least in Western European welfare states – oftentimes involved significant retrenchment (e.g. in pensions), as well as new, sizable investments (e.g. in childcare). All of those reforms have to be ‘sold’ in the policy process and communicated towards relevant political actors as well as voter groups (König, 2016). Unpopular social policy reforms, especially if not well communicated, can have disastrous political consequences. A case in point are the Hartz-reforms in German labour market policy, where political consequences of welfare state retrenchment have gone ‘far beyond electoral punishment’ (Fervers, 2019).

For all those reasons, we should expect narrative stories to be of particular importance in the area of social policy. Cox argued that successful welfare reform depends on the ‘social construction of the need to reform’ (Cox, 2001, p. 464), i.e. the ability of political leaders to frame issues in a path-shaping way, which generates support for reforms and helps to overcome obstacles. Crucial in this regard is the social construction of target populations, which influences reform, and then also becomes ‘embedded in policy as messages’ (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, p. 334). By giving or taking social rights, social policy regularly involves the distinction of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ groups. Such deservingness constructions are an essential element of reform narratives.

Yet, while ideational concepts are regularly being applied for analysing social policy change (see e.g. Béland & Mahon, 2016), narratives have received less attention (but see e.g. Needham, 2011; Newman & Vidler, 2006). Moreover, up to now, research on social policy has not become a focus within the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) (to our knowledge only with the exception of Xiarchogiannopoulos, 2015). Against this backdrop, in this conceptual article and in the different contributions to this Special Issue of Policy and Society, we ask:

- How are social policy problems constructed through narrative stories?
- How are narrative stories used by policy actors to link specific policies and problems?
Are there systematic narrative differences between old- and new-social-risks policies?

The aim is twofold. First, the Special Issue takes stock of the different ways narratives are used in recent social policy reforms dealing with so-called old and new-social-risks-policies (Bonoli, 2005; Häusermann, 2012), by bringing together case studies from different policy fields and both ‘established’ and ‘emerging’ welfare states. Second, the Special Issue brings together different theoretical and methodological perspectives from policy process research working with narratives as well as ideational concepts in order to explain social policy reform. This enables us to assess how the concept of narratives can be integrated and analysed in different theoretical and empirical contexts. Through this, the Special Issue opens a new comparative angle of the role that narrative stories play in different social policy areas.

2. Narratives of social policy reform – a conceptual framework

2.1 What are narratives?

Ideational and, more specifically, narrative perspectives have a long-standing tradition in policy research, and were firmly established from the late 1980s and early 1990s with major works of Stone (2012, first published 1988), Majone (1989), Hajer (1993), Fischer and Forrester (1993-2003), Yanow (1995), and others. ‘Ideas’ can comprise different aspects and very different types of ideas may be studied (Béland, 2016), ranging from rather broad policy paradigms (Hall, 1993) to narrower concepts such as framing (Rein & Schön, 1993). From an ideational perspective, framing processes and narrative stories are in the foreground of the policy process: Studied as ‘argumentative forms of language’ (van Eeten, 2007, p. 253), they help to understand how problems are defined, how policies are attached to them, and how this ‘normative leap’ (Rein & Schön, 1993) is taking place, i.e. the linkage from description to prescription. Moreover, frames are used by policy actors to legitimise policy proposals, they are thus ‘strategic and political in nature’ (Béland, 2016). Then again, also the label of narrative ‘can be read to imply different methods, units of analysis, and research goals’ (van Eeten, 2007, p. 251), which may be summarised in such different things as the ‘narrative analysis of policy’, the ‘analysis of policy narratives’, or even ‘the narrative of policy analysis’ (ibid.).

Our approach to narratives of social policy reform is rooted in a social constructivist epistemology. While a material reality exists, such as e.g. increasing life expectancy, there can be very different ways of how people – in our case: policymakers – interpret and thus make sense of this reality (Dodge, 2015). Against this backdrop, Stone argued that narratives are ‘the principal means for defining and contesting policy problems’ (Stone, 2012, p. 158). As such, they play at least implicitly a role in many theories of the policy process, such as e.g. the Multiple Streams Framework or the Advocacy Coalition Framework. Within the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), they have relatively recently even been put centre stage (McBeth et al., 2014; Shanahan, Jones, McBeth, & Lane, 2013). The aim of the approach is to be a ‘bridge between postpositivists, who assert that public policymaking is contextualised through narratives and social constructions, and positivists, who contend that legitimacy is grounded in falsifiable claims’ (Shanahan et al., 2013, p. 453). One expression of this approach is that the NPF stipulates policy narratives to
have ‘generalized narrative elements (form) that can be applied across different policy contexts’ (McBeth et al., 2014, p. 228).

Stone highlights that: ‘We don’t usually think of policy as literature, but most definitions of policy problems have a narrative structure’ (Stone, 2012, p. 158), including some type of change, ‘heroes’, ‘villains’ and ‘innocent victims’ as well as some explanation ‘of how the world works’. A narrative portrays a certain issue as a sequence of actions and/or events, thus establishing both a chronological order and a causal relation between them. Narratives therefore present a specific – and, normally, highly simplified – version of the issue (Münch, 2016, pp. 84–85). When analysing narrative stories, attention to the actors who create these narratives is crucial. The NPF in its attempt to systematise the analysis of narrative stories presents a more detailed account of narratives’ core elements, distinguishing setting (e.g. institutional context, economic conditions); characters (which may include victims, villains, and heroes); plot (providing the arc of action); and moral (most importantly: promoting a policy solution). Not all of those elements need to be present at all times, but to qualify as a policy narrative, the NPF holds that at least one mentioning of a character and of a public policy preference or stance is required (McBeth et al., 2014, p. 229). Analytically, narratives can be studied at the micro or meso level; under certain conditions also studies at the macro level are possible (Jones & McBeth, 2010). They are thus set below the level of discourses or paradigms, but of course the identification of narratives can tell something about dominant discourses or paradigms within a society (Hall, 1993). Against this backdrop, we assume that narrative stories may also contribute to paradigmatic change, as they can present some paradigms as normatively adequate while demonising others – especially if these stories are often repeated by powerful actors and, consequently, rigidify in the public discourse (see e.g. Hay, 2001).

The lower analytical level of narrative stories comes along with a valuable analytical advantage, which may even particularly apply to the social policy case: Ideational factors have been increasingly identified as crucial here to understand magnitude and direction of reform. However, the analytical focus is usually on broader ideas and paradigms such as the ‘social-investment state’. These are at the same time criticised for being highly ambiguous concepts, which are understood in very different ways by political actors, and which can principally lead to diverse or even contradictory policy outputs (see e.g. Béland & Mahon, 2016; Garritzmann, Häusermann, Palier, & Zollinger, 2017). In contrast, the focus on narratives as they are used by political actors in the political process are arguably easier to measure, while at the same time they carry high analytical value to understand reform-underlying ideas as well as strategic action.

Stone (2012) distinguishes four types of storylines within stories of change as well as stories of power:

*Stories of change* can be broadly sub-divided into stories of decline versus stories of rising. Both may co-exist in a certain policy sector, and possibly intermingle. Stories of decline are more common, as actors use them to illustrate how things will get worse if nothing is done or rather: if not a certain measure is taken or, vice versa, exactly if it is taken (Stone, 2012, p. 160). There are specific variations of these broader forms, such as the *stymied progress story* (according to which there is no decline (yet), but this will happen if not this-and-that is done) and the *change-is-only-an-illusion story.*
Stories of power may be broadly sub-divided into stories of helplessness and stories of control (Stone, 2012). Again, both are rather two sides of the same coin, as policymakers will, for instance, highlight the strength of their preferred solution to a certain problem (‘control’) by relating it to how we used to think that nothing can be done about this problem, or to how competing proposals are not effective (‘helplessness’). Specific variations of stories of power include the conspiracy, according to which ‘harm has been deliberately caused or knowingly tolerated’ (Stone, 2012, p. 167), as well as the blame-the-victim story.

A precondition for narrative stories becoming powerful is ambiguity – the multiple meanings of social phenomena (Kingdon, 1984). Only if we assume that the reality as we observe it cannot be reduced to one unequivocal meaning, can narratives play a dominant role in the policy process. Ambiguity can then be used strategically to ‘create alliances around a common policy or rule’ (Stone, 2012, p. 181). A ‘fertility rate of 1.3’ in a country, for example, can then be either told as a story of insufficient policies for work-family reconciliation, as a story of structural transformations of educational pathways and family life, or as a story of today’s young generation shying away from taking up responsibility. Against that backdrop, narratives are crucial for the problem-definition process. In politics, ‘we look for causes not only to understand how the world works but to assign responsibility for problems’ (Stone, 2012, p. 207). Accordingly, in our different fertility rate stories, blamed are either politicians, structural conditions – or the childless individuals.

Stone (2012, p. 208) introduces the concept of causal stories as another element of problem definition. With a view to less complex problems, four types of causal stories are distinguished, depending on whether problems are first thought to be subject to purposeful or purposeless action, and second whether their consequences are intended or unintended.1 Many policy problems, however, require ‘a more complex model of cause’ (Stone, 2012, p. 215), of which examples would be blaming complex systems, institutional (such as ‘structural’ unemployment), or historical causes (such as consequences of past policy decisions and path-dependency).

Stone (2012) describes how symbols, numbers and literary devices are used (strategically) within narrative stories to define problems; and Schlaufer (2018) has recently shown how evidence is related to all different narrative elements, e.g. to support a policy solution. Actors use synecdoches (where the whole is represented by one of its parts, such as ‘typical cases’), for instance the ‘Polish plumber’ representing ‘cheap labour’ coming from Eastern European countries. Metaphors go beyond description, as they usually already ‘imply a larger narrative story and a prescription for action’ (Stone, 2012, p. 171). An example is the ‘social hammock’, which indicates too generous social benefits that would prevent beneficiaries from participating in the labour market. In the following section, we look at the role of narratives in social policy more closely.

1Typical accidental causes (purposeless and unintended consequences) are disasters such as floods or earthquakes. Contrariwise, intentional causes (purposeful and intended consequences) shift the blame for the problem to wilful action, such as with blaming-the-victim or conspiracies. Mechanical causes (purposeless, but intended consequences) include e.g. rigid bureaucratic routines. And last, inadvertent causes (purposeful, but unintended consequences) cover unanticipated harmful effects of policies, such as social-assistance programmes giving unemployed an incentive to stay out of the labour market (Stone, 2012, p. 211).
2.2 Narratives and social policy reform

As elaborated in the introduction, we can expect narrative stories to play a particularly important role in the area of social policy. At the core of social policy are social rights, which give a certain entitlement (e.g. to a cash benefit or service) to certain groups, conditioned by specific eligibility criteria. People are thus immediately affected by social policy reforms and, correspondingly, these reforms (especially unpopular ones) need to be well communicated and may otherwise have disastrous political consequences (Fervers, 2019; Häusermann et al., 2013; König, 2016). Thus, the ‘struggle over ideas’ (Stone, 2012, p. 13) that, according to Stone, takes place by making use of narratives, becomes crucial. We hypothesise that narratives show systematic variation for different types of social policy reform. Taking into account Hemerijck’s (2013) distinction of four related dimensions of welfare state recalibration, narratives focus particularly on three of those dimensions. The first is functional recalibration, involving ‘the changing nature of social risks’ (such as altered family structures, unemployment, or population ageing) and ‘the kinds of interventions that are required’ (Hemerijck, 2013, p. 105). The second is distributive recalibration, which focuses on ‘the rebalancing of welfare provision across policy clienteles and organized interest’ (Hemerijck, 2013, p. 110), acknowledging that welfare provision is unequally distributed across social-risks categories, and so are the gains and losses of welfare reform. Third, however in a broader sense, the narratives also shed light on normative recalibration, which depics orientations and adaptive pressures on values, symbols or images of ‘social justice’, involving e.g. equality, redistribution, rights and responsibilities of citizens and the state. Finally, although in a more indirect way, they also speak to institutional recalibration, which concerns reforms in levels or rules of decision-making, institutional re-design or shifting responsibilities of different welfare providers.

Two crucial dimensions of reform type for the corresponding narratives that we expect are expansion versus retrenchment, as well as old- versus new-social-risks policies. It is well established in the welfare state literature how expansionary versus retrenching measures require differing (communicative) strategies from policymakers, most notably characterised by the concepts of credit-claiming and blame avoidance (Green-Pedersen, 2002; Pierson, 1994). Furthermore, social policy reforms have to deal with two kinds of policies, namely policies of old and new social risks (Borosch, Kuhlmann, & Blum, 2016). Old-social-risks policies are at the core of the traditional welfare state: They primarily focus on the (monetary) compensation of risks over the life course, such as old age, unemployment and illness. In contrast, new-social-risks policies are rooted in the transformation of the traditional male-breadwinner principle as well as the tertiarisation of employment; they address issues such as work-family balance or lone parenthood (Bonoli, 2005). Häusermann (2012) convincingly argued that social policy fields cannot be generally distinguished into ‘old’ and ‘new’ but that rather policy instruments directed at old and new social risks can be found in all social policy areas (though to differing extents). While there is a shared intersubjective understanding in the academic discourse that there are systematic differences between

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2Our thanks go to one of the reviewers who pointed us to these types of welfare state recalibration and how they relate to narratives of social policy reform.
old- and new-social-risks policies, these categories themselves can of course also be portrayed as result of academic-discursive practice.

In this Special Issue, we are interested in the question how policymakers construct different narratives to justify reforms in what we consider systematically different policy areas. In fact, although the strict dichotomy of old and new social risks can be questioned, especially with the sharp increase in mass unemployment since the financial crisis (Hemerijck, 2017, p. 8), few scholars would deny that policies addressing old or new social risks assign rather different roles to the welfare state, and that political actors need to take this into account when conducting reforms. For instance, policymakers may use similar narratives to ‘sell’ the retrenchment of public pension schemes and the retrenchment of unemployment benefits (which are both considered old-social-risks policies, albeit in different policy fields). In areas of new-social-risks policies, such as childcare or active labour market policies, we frequently find expansionary measures, which may be linked to shared narratives relating to the paradigm of a ‘social investment welfare state’ (Morel, Palier, & Palme, 2012). Finally, it is interesting to see how narratives connected to ‘old’ and ‘new’ social policies in one particular policy field interact, such as the retrenchment of contribution-based pension schemes and the expansion of universal minimum pensions (see Blum, in this volume).

What are now the elements along which narratives for the different reform types systematically differ? One crucial element of narratives is that they imply causes – to provide meaning, but also to ascribe responsibility for problems (Stone, 2012, p. 206). With social risks and social problems, Stone (2012, p. 223) highlights that people will have, to a certain extent, ‘stable, overall outlooks on responsibility’, related also to the role of different welfare providers. To argue for social policy reform, narratives can essentially contain a story about who should get (or lose!) what and why, which is a question that is linked to the different dimensions of welfare state recalibration (Hemerijck, 2013). In fact, the social construction of target populations (Schneider & Ingram, 1993) is at the core of politics, consisting of ‘shared characteristics that distinguish a target population as socially meaningful’, and ‘the attribution of specific, valence-oriented values, symbols, and images to the characteristics’ (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, p. 335). Constructions of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ groups are key here, and they are also an important construction criteria in the social policy literature (van Oorschot, 2000). Deservingness criteria relate to a number of other criteria, such as ‘intelligent/stupid’, ‘honest/dishonest’, or ‘public-spirited/selfish’ (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, p. 335). In sum, they result in ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ constructions of groups, which are based on general ascriptions which serve to legitimise policy reforms (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, p. 339), and are being constructed and maintained through narrative stories in the public discourse. Combined with reflections on the power of these groups (e.g. size, voting strength, or organisational capacity), Schneider and Ingram identify ‘four types of target populations’ (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, 2017) and provide examples for each of the four types. We can call the different types the main characters of the narrative stories, and their associated constructions of ‘deservingness’ and ‘undeservingness’ can take the place of the distinction between heroes, villains, or victims:

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Social investment focuses on policies for ‘simultaneously promoting competitiveness and growth, employment and quality’ (Morel et al. 2009, p. 10) by investing in human capital in the long run (Hemerijck, 2017, p. 19), thus stressing the productive potential of social policy.
(1) **Advantaged**: powerful and positively constructed (e.g. the elderly, middle class, soldiers/military)
(2) **Contenders**: powerful but negatively constructed (e.g. the rich)
(3) **Dependants**: weak but positively constructed (e.g. mothers, children, poor families)
(4) **Deviants**: weak and negatively constructed (e.g. welfare cheats, undocumented immigrants, drug addicts)

The social construction of target populations will differ between countries (see e.g. van Oorschot, 2006 for European countries); and constructions may be more or less disputed/consensual. Locating groups – and, importantly, not individuals! – between positive and negative social constructions is thus a matter of empirical research (Schneider & Ingram, 2017). The perception of who is considered deserving and who is not can of course be subject to change, pointing to distributive and particularly normative recalibrations of the welfare state. For instance, Hemerijck (2013, p. 108) concludes that under ‘neoliberalism virtually all welfare beneficiaries were seen as “undeserving”, unwilling to work, social profiteers’.

### 2.3 Four types of social policy reform narratives

In the following, we aim to theorise how group constructions are incorporated in different narratives of social policy reform.

Relating the stories-of-change to the social policy case, it is crucial to note that Stone (2012, pp. 160–161) describes stories of decline as more common than stories of ‘progress alone’, and that this has later been confirmed by NPF research (Shanahan et al., 2013, p. 468; Schlaufer, 2018). With a view to the welfare state literature, it is plausible that ‘decline stories’ are particularly dominating in social policy cases in established welfare states, given the need to construct reform imperatives, and that ‘crisis narratives’ (Kuipers, 2006, p. 33) help ‘undermine the mechanisms of institutional reproduction and thereby create opportunities to establish new parameters and a new institutional framework’ (ibid.). Mostly, facts and figures will be recited in the beginning to diagnose a certain problem, to which the reform solution can then be narratively linked, often as a means to regain power or even return to a story of progress and things getting better again (Stone, 2012, p. 160). As Goerres, Kumli, and Karlsen (2019, p. 4) have recently highlighted, *all* intended reform policies will be legitimised by explaining how they alleviate the ‘unsustainability brought on by reform pressures’. Some differences according to reform type may exist, as e.g. Social-investment reforms sometimes entail a ‘pure’ story of progress (see below). Yet overall decline narratives can be considered prevalent in most sorts of social policy reform, and are thus ill-suited to distinguish different stories.

Rather, to link the named narrative elements systematically with the type of social policy reform, we rely on the construction of (un-)deservingness by Schneider and

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4 Indeed, the whole story of Western welfare state development since the 1970s may on a general level be characterised as delineating a story of decline, where the ‘golden age’ of the welfare state has given way to a long era of fundamental socio-economic transformation and welfare retrenchment.
Ingram combined with Stone’s stories of control and helplessness. As explained above, we also follow Schneider and Ingram by highlighting different target populations to which the different stories refer, which can be defined as the main characters of the respective narratives. Thereby, narratives are distinguished for four ideal reform cases, namely: (I) expanding old-social-risks policies; (II) expanding new-social-risks policies; (III) retrenching old-social-risks policies; (IV) retrenching new-social-risks policies.

Table 1 summarises how narratives may be expected to systematically differ for those four reform types, and which characters we are most likely to find.

We assume that expanding social policies is generally easier to communicate to the public than retrenching them (Pierson, 1994). With regard to narrative stories, we argue that expansion is preliminary legitimised by constructing groups as deserving. These groups do however differ when it comes to old and new social risks/policies.

(I) Regarding expansionary reforms in old-social-risks policies, the dominant understanding in the literature on established welfare states indicates that those are currently few. The narrative context is mostly one of decline, where pension or unemployment policies are under pressure. Yet key characters are the advantaged here (Schneider & Ingram, 1993), meaning that those groups are not only seen as deserving, but also powerful, with pensioners being a case in point. Thus, if expansion occurs, it seems most likely to be argued for by pointing to the deservingness of the reform beneficiaries. An example is ‘people who have worked hard their whole life’ deserving an increase in pension levels as an acknowledgement of their life-time achievements. In some cases, there can also be more progress-inspired stories, where due to positive economic and fiscal conditions, expansionary reforms for deserving groups are appropriate. We should find for this reform type also attempts to defend the status quo, i.e. not to cut back on existing benefits and therewith accept rising costs without any ‘expansionary’ effort as such, e.g. due to rising unemployment or increasing number of pensioners. Again, narratives can be expected to draw on the deservingness of the affected groups (‘We can’t take from them what they have earned!’). Narratives can thus be labelled as ‘stories of giving-to-give’, where, in view of a particular problem, spending to the affected, deserving group is described as a positive thing. Based on Green-Pedersen’s (2002, pp. 39–40) analysis, this may particularly be found in the fields of pensions or health.

(II) Turning our eyes to expansionary reforms in the field of new-social-risks policies, these seem – in the current climate – potentially easier to narrate than could be expected for

Table 1. A typology of social policy reform narratives.

| Context           | Expansionary                                      | Retrenching                                      |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Old-social-risks  policies | (I) Stories of giving-to-give                      | (III) Stories of taking-to-take or taking-to-control |
|                   | • Deservingness and acknowledgement               | • Undeservingness and Self-Responsibility (Deviants; Contenders) |
|                   | (Advantaged)                                      | • Helplessness and control (Advantaged)           |
|                   |                                                   | (IV) Stories of taking-to-take or taking-out-of-helplessness |
|                   |                                                   | • Undeservingness (Deviants; Contenders)           |
|                   |                                                   | • Helplessness (Dependents)                        |
| New-social-risks  policies | (II) Stories of giving-to-shape                    |                                                  |
|                   | • Deservingness and empowerment                    |                                                  |
|                   | (Dependents)                                      |                                                  |

Source: Own table, drawing on Stone 2012; Schneider and Ingram 1993
the affected target population of dependants, which is politically weak (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Yet the groups affected by new-social-risks policies are also seen as highly deserving (e.g. children, single parents) and, what is more, corresponding problems are more and more understood to be not sufficiently covered in traditional welfare states (e.g. work-family reconciliation, care needs in old-age). On a more meta-level, indeed the whole paradigm of a ‘new welfare state’ (Esping-Andersen, Gallie, Hemerijck, & Myles, 2002) can be seen as reallocating resources through the expansion of new-social-risks policies, where beneficiaries are constructed as ‘deserving’ (in these sense of: under-protected) and thus in need of empowerment through social policy. Such empowerment e.g. happens through redefining care work from a private to an (also) public responsibility (normative recalibration). Correspondingly, narratives to defend the status quo and not retrench new social-risks-policies can also be expected to reply strongly on the deservingness dimension (‘we can’t take from the most needy’). Social-investment policies can also give example of (pure!) stories of progress, where not always problem pressure or even a ‘crisis narrative’ (Kuipers, 2006) is constructed, but sometimes reform-related progress itself spans the ‘reform imperative’: Then, social policy is described as a productive factor, which can prepare for the knowledge-based economy and lead to economic growth (Morel et al., 2012, p. 12).

In the field of expansionary social policies, we have thus hypothesised deservingness to be the central criterion. Narratives between old- and new-social-risks policies are distinguished by different political rationales and normative assessments (acknowledgement/empowerment) as well as related target groups (advantaged vs. dependant). Vice versa, when retrenching social policies, which is politically more risky and thus more challenging when it comes to reform legitimisation, we hypothesise deservingness, but also control and helplessness as defining features, which are again related to different target groups.

(III) When it comes to retrenching old-social-risks policies, first of all, undeservingness constructions become important. Green-Pedersen (2002) argued that benefits related to labour-market participation and social security are regarded as less ‘deserving’ per se than in other areas, such as old-age security or family policy, where benefits are more widely accepted. Constructions of certain groups as ‘undeserving’ and norms of ‘individual responsibility’ are thus particularly present in labour-market-related reforms, whereas they are less important e.g. in pensions: ‘Benefits are given to the unemployed because they cannot find a job, not because they deserve it’ (Green-Pedersen, 2002, p. 40). If certain groups are marked as ‘undeserving’, it can be avoided to give benefit cuts a negative connotation. The notion of undeservingness often corresponds to the ‘blaming the victim’ narrative (Stone, 2012, p. 212), which suggests that e.g. ‘many poor people calculate the economic returns of receiving welfare versus the returns from working at low-wage jobs, find welfare yields higher returns, and so choose to take welfare and remain poor’ (ibid.). In the case of blaming-the-victim stories, control is regained – after a constructed situation of helplessness – by assigning the power to control to the individuals themselves (Stone, 2012). However, those taking-to-take narratives can only be employed if the target groups are constructed as deviants (e.g. welfare cheats) or possibly contenders (e.g. the rich). For the advantaged as traditionalprotégés of old-social-risks policies it would be politically too risky to describe beneficiaries as undeserving in order to legitimise retrenchment. In those cases, we should expect the construction of helplessness. In other words, the reform narrative is likely to be focused on how a situation is worsening through a situation one says one
is unable to change (e.g. rising pension costs due to population ageing). Still, political control may also be regained by assigning some of the power to control the situation to advantaged individuals, e.g. through constructing situations requiring everyone to ‘tighten their belts’ and urging them to take their share as a matter of fairness (e.g. through making private pension provisions). Narratives for retrenching old-social-risks policies can therefore avoid the blame in different ways, either by shifting it to the affected group or to some ‘external developments’, which can possibly be controlled through joined responsibility.

(IV) Finally, the comparative welfare state literature indicates that in new-social-risks policies, retrenchment reforms are less likely, but they do occur (see e.g. Borosch et al., 2016; van Kersbergen, Vis, & Hemerijck, 2014). As for retrenchment in old-social-risks policies, we should expect stories of undeservingness to be present as far as the target groups can be constructed as deviants (e.g. illegal immigrants) or contenders (e.g. the rich). Though the latter phenomenon may be not too frequent, there are cases where e.g. ‘super-rich’ have been excluded from benefit access (e.g. making parents with household income over 500,000 euro ineligible to parental leave benefits in Germany since 2011). Yet when dependants are affected by retrenchment reforms (e.g. children), we should expect helplessness constructions to be prominent. Policymakers would want to describe themselves as unable to do anything else but cut back on benefits or services, particularly in the context of (economic) crisis conditions. Even more than in the third reform type, the narrative may here include labelling reforms as ‘without alternative’ (König, 2016), since in contrast to old-social-risks protégés, no ‘power to control’ can be shifted to the recipients themselves (e.g. by ‘becoming active’ or taking self-responsibility). In the welfare state literature, this has been described as a ‘playing the crisis card’ strategy (see Goerres et al., 2019, p. 3; Kuipers, 2006); and in terms of respective stories, blame is here less shifted than it is constructed to be ‘absent’ (in the sense of: ‘no one is to blame, it’s the crisis, and our hands are tied’).

Admittedly, we have at times drawn with a broad brush here in order to distil the ideal types. The dichotomy of expansion and retrenchment – as that of old and new social risks – does not always hold, and might sometimes be better described as restructuring of welfare. Nevertheless, we assume that our typology captures a wide range of reform efforts with regard to narrative strategies. Still, it may be objected that some empirically relevant cases, such as expansion of social policies for traditional ‘deviants’, are neglected, and also that sometimes different constructions of target groups might be found in empirical settings. For instance, the contribution by Galanti and Sacchi (2019, in this Special Issue) shows how expansion of unemployment benefits for young people (who are typically constructed as dependants) was narrated as a story of giving-to-give. Thus, most importantly, the outlined ideal types of social policy reform narratives need to be qualified in empirical application.

5Newer research has indicated that negative images of reform pressures and cutbacks may also be altogether avoided (or remain implicit), focussing on the more positive claims such as fairness (Goerres et al., 2019, p. 4).
3. Narratives of social policy reforms: evidence from the special issue contributions

The contributions of this Special Issue study the role of narrative stories in three different policy fields, namely pension, labour market, as well as child and elderly care policy, which are all characterised to a different degree by a mixture of old- and new-social-risks policies (Häusermann, 2012). The contributions show that different types of narrative stories can indeed be identified in processes of social policy reform. Moreover, they show that the analysis of narratives is highly compatible with established concepts and theories of the policy process. For instance, Béland (2019, in this volume) argues that narrative stories and the strategic use of these narratives by actors interact with political institutions in order to bring about policy change, while Galanti and Sacchi (2019, in this volume) combine the Multiple Streams Framework with the concept of narrative stories. As Schneider and Ingram (2017, p. 333) put it, their theory of the social construction of target groups was meant to complement other theories, explicitly addressing Stone’s, by ‘unpacking’ the details of how issues are framed and making explicit the elements of policy design.

The contributions by Béland, Hagelund and Grodem, and Blum engage with the field of pensions. Béland (2019) analyses narrative stories in pension policy in Canada and the US in the last 25 years. With the narrative story of a demographic time bomb, Béland identifies a story of decline for justifying the retrenchment of old-social-risks policies, pointing also to how narratives can spread across borders. While in Canada incremental reforms of the existing pension system took place, in the US attempts to reform the pension system failed, which can be traced back to distinct national decision-making rules. The contribution illuminates the importance of taking policy legacies and institutional factors into account when analysing narrative stories, particularly when it comes from problem definition to policy adoption. Comparing two policy sectors in one country, Hagelund and Grodem (2019) analyse the different outcomes of occupational pension scheme reforms in Norway in the private and the public sector: While in the private sector, negotiations between the social partners and the state led to fundamental policy change, such an agreement could not be reached in the public sector. Relying on discursive institutionalism, Hagelund and Grodem show that the ability or inability to establish a strong coordinative discourse among the core actors can explain this outcome. Within both discourses, a rhetorical figure of the ‘toiler’ was present, highlighting the deservingness of old-age pensioners. However, when negotiations moved to the public sector, the metaphor was not sufficiently adjusted and ended up as a ‘cognitive lock’, hampering reform rather than promoting it. Blum (2019) studies how the taking-to-control narrative employed for the far-reaching German pension reform of the early 2000s was (at least partly) deconstructed again, and which alternative narratives were told for pension reform proposals in recent years. In particular, Blum is interested in the argumentative couplings of those narratives, i.e. how the linkage between a problem, a certain policy proposal, and its strategic-political functions were argumentatively achieved. In quintessence, the study shows how a giving-to-give narrative was successfully employed for a pension reform in 2014, which mainly build on the deservingness of affected groups and was politically driven. By contrast, the varying, and contested deservingness of the affected groups made it much more difficult to establish a new narrative for the more ‘problem-solving’-driven
proposal of a minimum-pension scheme, a reform which has not found agreement to date.

Bandelow and Hornung, Vogeler, as well as Galanti and Sacchi focus on the role of narrative stories in the field of labour market policy. **Bandelow and Hornung** (2019) compare the role of narratives in the recent French labour market policy reforms and the German *Hartz* reforms. They identify a similar narrative in both countries that puts forward overregulated labour markets as a key problem for long-term unemployment, and suggests deregulation as a solution. The structure of the narrative stories resembles taking-to-control stories, constructing a necessity to reform in the wake of an economic crisis. What is more, by relying on Discourse Network Analysis, Bandelow and Hornung show that instead of legitimising reforms to the public, narratives were rather a strategic means of programmatic elites to strengthen in-group identification.

**Vogeler**’s (2019) contribution also analyses an encompassing labour market reform that aimed to achieve a greater deregulation of the labour market, namely the 2017 Brazilian labour market reform, which was rooted in a neoliberal policy paradigm. Vogeler argues that the political process accompanying the reform was characterised by competing policy paradigms, that party competition was crucial for understanding this process, and that supporters and opponents of the reform used narrative stories in order to strengthen their preferred policy paradigm. Her analysis especially illuminates the different stories of change and stories of power that were used by supporters of the reform to strengthen the neoliberal policy paradigm. Combining the Multiple Streams Framework with narrative stories, **Galanti and Sacchi** (2019) analyse the reform process of the Italian Jobs Act (2014–16). They show the role of narrative stories in constructing labour market problems by focusing on both supporters and opponents of the reform, and highlight how the Prime Minister Renzi as policy entrepreneur made use of narrative stories. Galanti’s and Sacchi’s analysis shows that the reform process was characterised by different narrative stories, and that the supporters of the reform relied on both stories of giving-to-give and giving-to-shape. What is more, they show that during the reform process, the narratives more and more focused on Renzi’s policy style, and less on the policies that were being implemented with the Job Act. Related to that, they conclude that the Job Act lacked a narrative that was able to successfully convey a new understanding of social policy; a finding that can be paralleled with Bandelow’s and Hornung’s analysis in this volume.

Finally, two contributions deal with child and elderly care policy. **Van Gerven** (2019) analyses narrative stories in the recent political processes connected to population ageing in China, thus expanding the geographical scope of this Special Issue to an Asian country. The contribution identifies two types of stories when it comes to constructing policy problems: While stories of ‘giving-to-give’ are related to inequality and health care policies, stories of ‘giving-to-shape’ are linked to long-term care policies. The latter focus specifically on the deservingness of the elderly and are embedded in a larger story of decline that legitimises the limited role of the state. **Nygard, Nyby and Kuisma** (2019) study narrative stories used to legitimate Finnish family policy reforms in the period between 2007 and 2017. They state that family policy can generally be linked to both old- and new-social-risks policies. Furthermore, similar to Vogeler’s contribution in this Special Issue, they link the narrative stories more broadly to paradigmatic changes following a social-investment perspective (new
social risks), a more traditional redistribution perspective (old social risks), or a neoliberal austerity perspective. In their analysis of Finnish family policy over time, they identify a paradigm shift – which also conforms to a narrative shift – from the paradigms of social investment and redistribution to austerity. Reform legitimisation drew on different kinds of stories, including all stories of giving-to-shape, of taking-to-control and of taking-out-of-helplessness.

For old-social-risk policies, the contributions show stories of taking-to-control, such as the ‘demographic time bomb’ argument told to legitimise pension retrenchment (Béland; Hagelund and Grodem) or the narrative of too generous benefits in labour market policies (Bandelow and Hornung). Yet stories of giving-to-give are also to be found, putting the deservingness of reform-affected groups at centre (Blum; Galanti and Sacchi). Where the deservingness of the targeted groups is less believed in, it can prove difficult to construct a narrative for expansionary old-social-risks policy reform (Blum). Different narrative strategies are employed for legitimising new-social-risks policy reforms, such as giving-to-shape stories in Chinese long-term care policies (Van Gerven) or stories-of-progress in (at least former) Finnish family policy reforms (Nygard, Nyby and Kuisma).

If we finally abstract from the very different narrative stories to the overall rationale of the concept of narrative stories, we see that all contributions share the assumption that social policy reform is not an exercise in rational problem solving: Rather, it is a fight over the construction of dominant problem definitions and policy solutions that are deemed appropriate. The concept of narrative stories enables policy scholars to analyse how these constructions take place, and how they are used in social policy reform. Narratives also have strategic functions here in face of ambiguity (Stone, 2012, p. 181). Linking this to the welfare state literature, it has been pointed out how the ambiguity of social-investment ideas opens room for ‘ambiguous agreements’ (Palier, 2005), where actors pursue different goals with the same policy instrument (Häusermann & Kübler, 2010), and hence narratives can particularly be used strategically to build modernising reform coalitions (Garritzmann et al., 2017, p. 15). The systematic linking to the notion of constructed targeted populations (Schneider & Ingram, 1993) contributes to explaining the increasingly realised phenomenon that significant welfare state reform is not only happening through defensive ‘blame avoidance’, but that even retrenchment and painful reforms ‘may be successfully legitimised, such that decision-makers want to publicly take responsibility for them’ (Goerres et al., 2019, p. 2).

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