



Travelling Tales?

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RESEARCH



ABSTRACT

That narratives play a role in how scientific findings make their way into policy spaces is not perhaps surprising. Maybe less obvious is that sometimes it is the narratives that scientists themselves create in order to make sense of their own research work that carry their findings into policy domains. As a further twist, it may well be the ‘surprise factor’ within certain scientific narratives that makes those ones travel well, get circulated, and perhaps end up prompting policy changes.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The analysis of narrative in this paper draws and extends upon ideas from two previous project grants: the *How Well Do Facts Travel?* project (Leverhulme Trust and U.K. ESRC) and the *Narrative Science* project (ERC). These grants engaged with postdocs from across many domains: historians, sociologists and philosophers of science, and scientists from their own fields, investigating many different examples according to their own interests. My introduction to the *Facts* project book (1, 2) focussed on the various means by which the ‘facts’ produced by scientists travel and the role of various good companions (labels, authorities, well-established pathways, etc.) that helped facts on their way; some of the chapters in that book included policy domain cases (to be discussed here). My introduction to the *Narrative Science* project book (3, 4, 5) proposed a rather broad functional space for narratives in the science, namely that they offer a ‘general purpose technology’ of sense-making for scientists: a tool for putting together various elements (conceptual, theoretical, and empirical) that suggests how those elements are connected. The point now is to see how the ideas and materials from these two projects fit together, to understand the role of narratives in why some bits of science travel into policy domains. Science does not easily make its way into public policy.¹

There are three layers to be pulled apart and analysed. The first is that of ‘outsider’ narratives, where academic researchers have traced how the findings of science make their way into the public policy domains. The second layer is the ‘insider’ narratives that scientists involved in the original research tell about what they consider to be core to their research. Exploring these ‘insider’ narratives helps to understand the qualities of such narratives that might have helped these scientific findings get into policy arenas. These discussions will join up with the third layer in my more general account to recognise the role of narrative in the sciences as a general purpose technology.

2. OUTSIDE AND INSIDER NARRATIVES: CASES TO THINK WITH

CASE 1: WASHING MACHINES

The first ‘travelling facts’ case is about the 1980s period when ‘globalisation’ was presumed to be the future of many manufacturing industries. As mass-production technology developed, a process of globalisation was expected to result in a single large firm producing so cheaply and at such scale that they would dominate the global market, pushing smaller firms out of existence. This was Baden-Fuller and Stopford’s (6) starting point in 1988 (revised in 1991 (7)) in investigating the manufacture of washing machines, where it was widely assumed this scale effect was at work, with one producer expected to flood the European market while national producers lost their smaller national markets. But this was not what happened. Instead, the national producers continued to thrive, creating the puzzle for industrial economists: Why no globalisation? Why no scale effect?

The researchers developed their analysis to create their own alternative insider narrative of what was happening. Their research argued that the critical issue was not supply but demand; their evidence indicated that consumers in different countries across Europe wanted different characteristics in their washing machines. French consumers with small spaces in their bathrooms wanted ‘top-loaders’. German consumers wanted high spin speeds. Italian consumers preferred to dry their washing in the sun and did not care for high spin speeds. And so forth. They did not want one kind of washing machine; they wanted different kinds. No doubt there was also a certain amount of national commitment to their own producers and their brands. The implications of this consumer-side narrative gave good-enough economic reasons (embedded and supported in the detailed analysis of both demand- and supply-side evidence) for the continuation of different national washing-machine designs and so the continued health of their producers. This provided the narrative explanation of why there was no replacement of the various national producers by any single larger-scale producer – why indeed globalisation was not happening, at least in that market.

But there is also a surprising ‘outsider’ narrative about how this piece of research and its narrative explanation travelled into the policy domain, in which the insider narrative did not change, but its audience and its implications did change, with the narrative repurposed to answer a question in a

¹ Thanks to the workshop participants, to my discussant Brian Hurwitz and to Kim Hajek for their very helpful responses to the draft of this paper.

different and major policy dimension (8). The first move in this narrative is that *The Economist*, in an article published on 22 October 1988 (9), took up the piece of research and reported it with an engaging cartoon of washing machines characterised as ‘national consumer’ goods. This was not a headline ‘story’ produced by them, but more a report from named faculty working at a named and reputable business school. Despite this, there was soon direct reference to that ‘story’ on the inside front page of that weekly; now it had become *The Economist’s* own story about how ‘its’ insights were evidence why there never could be one European market in the context of arguments about Britain joining the 1992 ‘single European market’. From there, the story found its way into Parliament, reporting the scientists’ (insider) narrative explanation about the different tastes of consumers in different European countries. While the insider narrative had not been changed, it had become repurposed into a much wider policy argument, relevant in a much broader domain as it travelled from the researchers’ working paper to *The Economist* to Parliament.

CASE 2: INDUSTRY EXIT

The second example, which was reported in the narrative science work (10), started with a policy intervention. There had been a situation of excess capacity in the steel-castings industry in the UK in the late 1970s, and, after a series of plant closures between 1975 and 1981, a government intervention plan was put into place to help ‘restructure’ the industry to make it ‘more efficient’. Baden-Fuller’s question in 1989 (11) asked why this was needed and why the market did not work to solve the problem. According to economic arguments, in normal circumstances, unprofitable firms should leave the market (with those making the most losses ‘exiting’ the market first), so that such excess capacity should not occur. Clearly, in this case, this normal process of ‘exit’ had not happened, thus the need for a policy intervention. The question was why? The research, using a variety of technical modelling approaches and evidence sets, put together a complicated explanation involving two compatible but differently focussed narratives. On the one hand, the loss-making firms were, by and large, small, family-owned firms or, perhaps, long-running specialist firms that did not want to exit the market. They had put all their energies and capital into those firms over a long period and remained committed to them. Consequently, they were reluctant to leave the industry even though they were making losses. In contrast, typically, the bigger firms were not owner-run, had a range of other products or divisions, and were willing to treat past investments in their struggling divisions as ‘sunk costs’ that could be written off. Ironically, even if such steel-casting divisions were making small profits, the market situation motivated them to leave the sector. These two narratives could explain why some profit-making firms were exiting, while loss-making ones were not. But there was still a puzzle. At some point, surely the loss-making firms should have already been forced to close? But no, it cost a lot of money to close; apart from redundancy pay, etc., the site had to be cleared of environmental hazards, and so forth. Only the more profitable firms (i.e., the larger multinationals) could afford to close their steel-casting plants, completing the narrative explanation.

The insider story – the research narrative explaining the puzzling phenomena – held a certain ‘surprise factor’ and was not just referenced but actively used in the arguments that followed. It resulted in 50 odd citations over the next 20 years (8), where the explanation was taken up in theoretical and empirical economics, as well as in practitioner and policy sites in the UK, in the EU and even in Japan.

In these first two cases, we can see how insider narratives apply to different sets of circumstances within a recognised policy space. The problematic exit of the steel-casting industry and its explanatory narrative may be relevant for many old and declining industries, with sufficient similarity in features and circumstances. For economists, it is the details of their models that contain the most interesting scientific contribution and make their casework travel to other science domains, while their own narrative account of their work may well be the element that gets them travelling into the policy eye. For the washing machine case, it is not clear how many industries were contextually similar, but the generic issues of thinking through both supply and demand offer a simple general policy lesson told through a specific narrative that could be relevant for almost any industrial policy space, not just the European single market legislation but also tariff policy, government investment policy, and so forth.

CASE 3: MARKET FOR BANANAS

A backdoor way into policy, and for some economists at least, quite a direct way into a policy space is via legal cases, most often when economic terms need to be defined in legal contexts

and when legal rules need to be interpreted according to economic realities. Here, we consider how legal arguments about the market for bananas in a European case contributed to deciding the relevant market for a fencing company in Australia. The banana case, *United Brands vs Commission of the European Communities* in 1978, was then discussed by Baden-Fuller in a 1979 article in economics (12), and both the case and its reasoning were used as part of the arguments and judgements in an Australian High Court case of 1988/89 on restrictive trade practices (13).

This Australian case was about the market for fencing and fence posts and the refusal of one manufacturer to supply a particular product to another. Somehow, the argument and narrative of the banana case turned out to be relevant. And, unlike several other relevant cases, the Australian judgement directly quoted the European finding. The insider economic narrative hinged on whether restrictions in the market are defined only by the supply side (as was the standard norm in judging monopoly power in the legal framework) or, as the economist argued, that the demand side also matters in defining the relevant market (as was taken for granted within the economics community). As outsiders, it is not obvious how the supply and demand for bananas in Europe helps solve the argument about refusal to supply a specific type of fence post in Australia. The point here is that it did – that an insider argument in a European court could make its way into an Australian legal case. Both cases were very much part of the indirect kind of policy-making that could be decided by such insider scientific narrative materials and could become part of the policy framing for such decisions.

These insider scientific narratives might seem to be only relevant or apply to one-off cases, but no. Even when they seem very specific, such as in the case of the banana market, once accepted in the legal context, the reasoning can be extrapolated with enough generality that the narrative argument maintains its grounding. Of course, it can continue to be argued with and about, but that is the point I am making; it becomes a case narrative for a set of circumstances. That, after all, is, I presume, the nature of legal cases, but it is also a characteristic of narrative explanations in the social sciences.

CASE 4: THE ‘BEHAVIOURAL SINK’

Exactly why some scientists’ accounts get taken up in the public policy domain is not at all obvious (Most, of course, do not.) Outsider histories sometimes capture this, as we observe in the example of the ‘behavioural sink’, a phrase that appeared as a *Scientific American* ‘story’ from John Calhoun in 1962 (14). Ed Ramsden’s outsider history (15) followed the fortunes of Calhoun’s rat experiments examining species overcrowding. Calhoun’s article opened with a reminder of ‘Malthus’s [prediction of] vice and misery’ from overpopulation and finished with a reflection on how his rat behaviours might be analogous to behaviour in human populations in dense groups, which proved relevant to how far his facts travelled.

In the wild, it seems that most species avoid overcrowding, for instance, adjusting their behaviours to avoid mass starvation from overpopulation growth. A rat-containment initiative in Baltimore, parallel to Calhoun’s experiment, showed how rat eradication programmes reduce the rat populations in each city block, with the territoriality of rats meaning they kept within their street blocks. When the programme stopped, the rat populations returned to their previous rather stable numbers within each block, yet they did not expand beyond them. These findings were in contrast to Calhoun’s results. In his experimental setup, despite ample food, water and nesting materials, the rat population, as a whole, never reached the stable numbers predicted by the environmental space, and it never reached hugely excessive populations. The design of their living spaces created different groups of rats. Some groups became dominant and continued their population growth in fairly normal ways. But it was the behaviour of the other groups that surprised Calhoun. They were so stressed by the design of their living spaces that they developed some very unusual and anti-social behaviours within their population group, stabilising at quite a low level. There are several narratives here, with the local Baltimore rat-containment narrative contrasting with Calhoun’s insider experimental narratives of rat and mice behaviours, demonstrating both unusual population features and strange behavioural features in his experimental subjects.

The anti-social ‘behavioural sink’ that Calhoun described in his 1962 *Scientific American* article (14) captured the attention of social, behavioural and ecological scientists, as well as those concerned with population explosions in human domains. Indeed, the (relatively) ‘populist’ mode of reporting is perhaps why the notion of the ‘behavioural sink’ made waves across a

range of policy dimensions, from city planning to population problems, and prompted further investigations at a number of public policy institutes. But the most direct and specific policy response to the insider narrative of the lab experiments came from those involved in the designs of prisons, college dormitories and public housing blocks. Their re-designs and rebuilds focussed on improving the social arrangements of those living there by changing the physical designs to reduce tensions amongst the inmates from the lack of personal defensible space, drawing analogies from the rat experiments.

One of the difficulties here in following the insider narrative into the policy domain was that there were so many policy intersections. This is clear from the longer outsider narrative in Adams and Ramsden's book (16); Calhoun's various experimental results were sufficiently complex that they could speak to many problems across multiple fields and institutions, all vying for attention and funding in the policy domain. Was the main problem the population time bomb (a kind of modern Malthusianism)? Was the big problem that of irrational behaviour of individuals in crowded housing (mental health issues, in Calhoun's time, increasingly being treated by chemical solutions in new drugs)? Or was the real problem an old-fashioned, social-group behaviour problem (recognised as a crime problem in urban riots)? And so forth. From the outsider history of policy usage, another problem arose from Calhoun's own experimental work. As he varied the experimental designs with rats and mice, he came up with further results, with the consequent variation in his designs making it easier for others to interpret him differently and then even to ignore his work as he progressed towards making wider claims of social behaviour beyond his experimental rat and mouse populations.

3. POLICY SPACES?

One of the questions that these four cases open up is how we might define what domains count as policy spaces and where policy 'gets made'. The state has many tentacles, creating an array of spaces for policy discussion and decision-making, to say nothing of the many other spaces in which policy is effectively 'made' in terms of everyday actions, such as in law courts, in administrative decisions and in working rules developed by public bodies in salient national industries such as education and health services. There are no doubt many routes along which insider narratives – accounts not just from within the sciences but also from other relevant professional communities – might make their way into these various policy spaces. In my own attempts at writing an outsider narrative showing how 'glass ceilings' (and related phenomena, such as 'sticky floors') became a policy issue, I encountered a very wide variety of interest groups, legal actors and different arms of the state, as well as different social scientists (17). These various groups used their own experiential and formal knowledge, embedded in narrative as much as in statistical work, in bringing about policy change. The notion of policymaking covers a very broad terrain.

4. NARRATIVE CHARACTERISTICS

The science narratives that get into policy arguments presumably do so because they are 'good' or 'tellable' narratives (see M-L Ryan on 'tellability' (18) and Hajek (19) on narrative qualities). But what makes those science narratives tellable? In a different context of narratives coming into policymaking, individual constituents' stories are brought into parliament, not just as illustrations or for rhetorical flourishes but as ammunition for the teller to push the agenda on that policy issue. In such situations, narratives that are tellable and made relevant to the problem in some specific ways will get remembered and retold. In comparison with these constituents' stories, the insider narratives that come from science potentially carry more general knowledge relevant for policymaking but they too need to be tellable. What does this something more general look like? What makes a good narrative from inside science make its way into the policy spaces? What kind of narrative is most tellable here?

4.1 ANECDOTES AND DETECTIVE STORIES

Anecdotes are one of the most ubiquitous kinds of stories in everyday life, but surprisingly, they also appear in some of the sciences. This genre of stories is generally quite succinct, about one-off events, but they have a certain quirkiness that makes them curious enough to repeat. In *Narrative Science*, Brian Hurwitz (20) retold an anecdote of a doctor sitting in a train carriage

studying a small child opposite him and puzzling over what was wrong with it. Finally, he came up with the answer – nothing! More often, the oddity persists in the second round of the story. Another medical example from Hurwitz recounted how a patient's lung X-ray had a strange line across it that the technicians put down to a one-off problem in that particular X-ray. But the patient said that this fault had happened before, which raised a very different question. Further investigation led to the patient recounting a bike accident and the revelation that the line found in the X-ray was in fact a bicycle-wheel spoke. For Hurwitz, the characteristic of medical anecdotes lies in an 'epistemic switch', where the phenomenon at issue is completely re-interpreted with an element not just of surprise but of confoundment: Who would have ever thought it could be that? In my earlier examples from economics and behavioural science, there is not quite an epistemic switch or reversal as vivid as in Hurwitz's label, but there is some kind of radical reframing going on in their narrative accounts.

In the context of medicine, anecdotes like this and their related puzzles are often joined together to frame a more complex narrative and, thus, a diagnosis. In *Facts*, Rachel Ankeny (21) recounts how the first cases of what became known as HIV-AIDS were treated as oddities; these patients had many ill-health features that had no particular fit and no obvious 'explanation'. The defining element of recognition that the patients shared homosexuality as a trait was an important breakthrough moment in defining the general illness. It was not a starting point, but once noticed, it prompted the kinds of questions and investigations that led to characterising the overall condition. Ankeny tells a parallel story about a series of one-off cases of sudden illness and death of teenagers, but it took a significant length of time for sufficient cases to demonstrate 'toxic-shock-syndrome'. Another example follows the stringing together of cases of caffeine overdose (from energy drinks), which then made its way into the CDC record.

In medical fields, these one-off cases and little runs of cases carry a particular salience in the diagnostic space; they are matters of import to various medical 'public authorities', not just because they are odd and unexplainable, but because they might not be oddities at all. As Ankeny's account suggests, these anecdotally reported cases contain a number of reported accompanying facts about the cases but not necessarily all the relevant ones. Often, the factors that are relevant only become apparent once a certain threshold of cases is met for potential diagnosis. She has a useful analogy to convey the diagnostic cases for the early cases of new diseases. She portrays the factors that accompany a medical case report as fellow passengers in a train carriage; over time, as more information and more cases emerge, some of the factors prove irrelevant and no longer appear in the case report (they leave the train), but other factors get reported (they join the train). Some of these factors might be medical qualities (particular conditions that may or may not be part of the main disease condition), and others might be patient qualities (for example, that the HIV cases were predominantly young gay men or that the toxic shock syndrome cases were mainly menstruating teenage girls). The point at which a condition is named and diagnosed marks the recognition of a more stable set of characteristics of the disease and patient class, while at the same time those factors provide evidence that may lead to a tentative narrative account of the causal factors involved, and so of why patients acquire such a disease.

One might be tempted to remark that these outsider narratives of defining and diagnosing medical conditions are akin to detective novels. They are, insofar as multiple clues have to be followed up, but there is rarely that final 'twist' which proves the single guilty party. While Ankeny provides one unusual example of a single cause, a diagnostic run of cases rarely identifies a single guilty cause; more usually, a disease condition is characterised by providing generic information about the causal patterns and various elements involved. Following Ankeny's train analogy, the usual narrative of a diagnostic run of cases for a new condition is less like the typical detective novel with a single guilty party who has to be revealed and more akin to Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, where many passengers are involved, and the challenge is to clarify and understand which ones and how they are related to the murdered person.²

Accounts of other particular cases (as in the economic ones above) do not fit the genre of anecdotes, but they do create narratives worth telling – narratives with some puzzles and

² Not all medical narratives are diagnostic ones. I thank Brian Hurwitz for suggesting that the narratives of the path of disease might be characterised rather differently from those of diagnosis; for example, the narrative of the onset and progressive aspects of Parkinson's Disease might be better characterised by the genre of a documentary or longer sentimental story. I thank Brian Hurwitz for this interesting observation (24), or perhaps it could be more like a long serial in a weekly magazine such as Dickens wrote.

narratives with an unusual combination of factors, including some surprises. This brings me to broader questions of narrative and its characteristic qualities and to delve more deeply into what narrative accounts are doing for science and for their role in the policy arena.

4.2 NARRATIVE PUZZLES AND SURPRISES

Each of the individual medical cases was framed within a narrative in order to identify and diagnose the individual case of disease. However, as soon as the cases are combined, labelled and provided with some kind of causal account, the narrative account becomes generic for the condition, just as we found with the economic cases of steel castings representing a declining industry and washing machines as an example of a demand-side industry. The use of narrative in other sciences is, however, more usually found at a later stage, as a way of making the connections between the various factors at play in researching a scientific problem and context. In the *Narrative Science* volume (3), I characterised narrative as a general purpose technology (a GPT) for sense-making in science, a tool for putting together various elements (concepts, theories, causes, multiple kinds of evidence, etc.) and suggesting how they are connected by forming a narrative account in which they are all considered. As a tool promoting explanation and understanding, narrative-making, or narrativising (to stress the verbal form), is associated with scientists' claims that their accounts are plausible, reasonable and credible to their fellow scientists – that is, to those who share similar knowledge sets (as argued in Morgan (22)). Narratives are not tools that prove theories, nor are they thin and technical objects like models, nor highly specified combinations of characteristics like categories, nor very general like laws. Instead, creating narrative accounts entails making sense of phenomena by relating elements of a particular problem together in ways that can be understood as potentially generic. Perhaps this combination of particular and generic is why these narrative accounts can be seen as relevant to a specific policy problem/question, which by definition needs to be seen as relevant to more than one case.

Yet there is still the question as to why certain narratives make it into policy domains. Here, I am going to be more speculative about the qualities that matter and consider the 'tellability' that is required to get the insider narrative to permeate into the making and designing of policy. Here is where Hurwitz's ideas about anecdotes come back, for as our narrative examples in this paper suggest, those that make it into policy spaces do have some of the characteristics of anecdotes. But there is more involved. Tellability relates here to four characteristics.

First, there is a factual element and a puzzle that gets unravelled in those narratives, such as Calhoun's rats, the case of the steel industry exit and the demand for washing machines. The 'switch' therein is found in a new account for something puzzling that was previously taken for granted under an account that did not fully cover the problem (see Morgan (10)) for a broader account of the puzzle element in narratives).

Second, they are not simple and short narratives like anecdotes. Rather, these science narratives are complex with more elements involved, and they are also 'woollier' in the sense of being more fully clothed with details which serve to enhance their tellability. This latter woolliness is not indicative of uncertainty but comes from the kinds of factual aspects they carry, more evidence giving them a level of verisimilitude compared to the abstractions in other scientific representations (models, equations and statistics, for example). M-L Ryan's account of tellability – the elements of a plot that make a narrative worth retelling – comes in here, for as she writes, "tellability is at least partly a matter of conceptual and logical complexity ... of a situation or of a sequence of events" (18, pp. 319–20). This fits nicely for our science narratives in suggesting why it is that the insider accounts can become 'embedded, or nested into the policy frame'.³

Third, the complexity matters, for it is what happens in that middle of the narrative that matters because the switch is in there; in the story, the surprise or puzzle comes from unravelling the middle of the account, not just a funny quirk at the end. But there does need to be a reversal of sorts. There has to be a new sense out of the puzzle, not just the old one repeated; something has to turn around, maybe a new element in the story, maybe elements put together in different ways or maybe a new framing.

³ I thank Kim Hajek for seeing where Ryan's tellability comes into the policy discussion (in personal communication, July 2025).

Fourth, if the insider narrative is to travel, it has to be relevant beyond the simple and individual site of the anecdote. As we have already noticed, anecdotes are one specific case, whereas the science narratives here tell about something specific that can be seen as relevant beyond that specificity at some generic level or applicable to a kind of case. It needs to carry credibility as science, be reasoned as science and be plausible as science but also to be seen and understood as directly relevant to some generic policy question or problem. But it won't travel without a tellable middle, a reasoning that can engender policy action.

Finally, there is a major issue not addressed here, which goes back to the notion of the state. The state and its policy spaces in a democratic regime are more like an open sieve than a closed book. At least in the social sciences, it is very difficult to find the evidence trail to write outsider narratives – that is, to define the possible routes and trace the multiple connections by which insider narratives come into policy actions. The importance of the many different 'knowledge brokers' and their roles in policymaking is undeniable. This is examined recently in the context of economics by Forget (23), where she argues that knowledge brokers go beyond journalists, policy journals and official and outsider lobbying reports to include everyone in society as a potential knowledge broker in the policy work of economy and society.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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