

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

What's the grand story? A macro-narrative analytical model and the case of Swiss child and adult protection policy

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Abstract

This paper expands on the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) by adding a theoretical and empirical exploration into macrolevel narratives. Existing NPF research largely neglects macrolevel narratives, which prevents the NPF from developing its full power. The main contributions of this paper are threefold: (1) It provides a definition of macrolevel narratives by conceptualizing them as the “story form” of a policy paradigm. (2) It proposes a model and an empirical approach, which may lay the foundation for a *standard* macrolevel NPF approach. (3) It contributes to the NPF's aim of connecting the macro and meso level. The paper tests the model in a comparative multi-method design applied to the Swiss child and adult protection policy. The findings show that macrolevel NPF analysis helps understand where mesolevel policy debates come from, namely from an underlying paradigm and its effects on institutions and culture that enable and constrain macrolevel narratives.

KEYWORDS

macrolevel narratives, narrative policy framework, policy paradigm, Swiss child and adult protection policy

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to clarify the concept of macrolevel policy narratives and advance the analytical approach to investigate these narratives and their effect on mesolevel policy debates in a consistent way throughout the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) scholarship. It proposes a model that combines macrolevel narratives with the concept of a policy paradigm.

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The NPF examines how narratives, as cognitive heuristic, tell stories that create causal links between policy problems and solutions, and convince people of a particular policy option. According to the NPF, narratives operate at three interacting levels, micro (individual), meso (group), and macro (institutional and cultural) (Shanahan et al., 2018, p. 334). However, macrolevel narratives remain under-researched. By focusing on the more visible micro- and mesolevel narratives, the NPF has thus far largely ignored whether and how overarching macrolevel narratives influence the other levels (Pierce et al., 2014, p. 36). This weakness prevents the NPF from realizing its full analytical power as a policy process theory. To change this, this paper aims to transform the basic definition of macrolevel narratives provided by the founders of the NPF (e.g., Shanahan et al., 2017, p. 195) into a replicable model to facilitate future uniform and standard macrolevel NPF analysis. I argue that we need to know the *structure* that enables and constrains macrolevel narratives to be able to investigate empirically their *manifestation* and their effects on the subordinate levels. This study shows how a policy paradigm creates such a structure for macrolevel narratives; and it points out how the concept of policy paradigm and the NPF complement each other. An empirical application of the proposed model shows how macrolevel narratives can be identified and distinguished from mesolevel narratives by means of specific *macrolevel key terms*. The paper uses the case of the Swiss child and adult protection policy (CAPP). The CAPP targets people who are unable to assume their rights or control their assets (Germann et al., 2017), such as orphans, abused children, or elderly persons affected by dementia. The CAPP poses a suitable case because it bases on a clear paradigm and its implementation has revealed a split into two geographic patterns of debate along Switzerland's two major language regions. Thus, this case offers an ideal setup for the parallel examination of the effect of macrolevel narratives on mesolevel narratives in two different, yet still comparable, settings. The findings support the usefulness of the model and show that different macrolevel narratives manifest as different combinations of institutional and cultural settings and thus lead to different mesolevel narratives.

The paper employs the following structure: “The NPF and Macrolevel Narratives” section presents the NPF and existing literature. “The Paradigm as Structure for Macrolevel Narratives” and “A Standard Model for Macrolevel NPF Analysis” sections elaborate on the definition of macrolevel narratives and the proposed macrolevel NPF model. The subsequent section presents the case and explains the research design. The “Results” section shows the main findings while the “Discussion” and “Conclusion” sections discuss how they may inform future research.

THE NPF AND MACROLEVEL NARRATIVES

The NPF is an acknowledged policy process theory stipulating that narratives are made up equally of distinct structural components that can be systematically and empirically examined. These components consist of a *setting* that describes the context and policy problem, a *plot* or storyline, a *moral of the story*, which usually corresponds to the policy solution, and *characters* that typically include a villain that causes or perpetuates what the narrator thinks is a problem, a victim that suffers from the problem, and a hero that aims to solve the problem¹ (e.g., Jones & McBeth, 2010, pp. 340–341; Shanahan et al., 2017, p. 176). According to the NPF, policy narratives are simultaneously effective at three levels (e.g., Shanahan et al., 2018, p. 333). While various studies examine micro- and mesolevel narratives and their interplay (e.g., Gottlieb et al., 2018; Gupta et al., 2018; McBeth et al., 2016; Merry, 2018), only a few consider the concept of macrolevel narratives and their potential effects on the sublevels. In addition, these existing macrolevel NPF studies use a variety of inconsistent or implicit definitions of macrolevel narratives and analytical approaches, which do not speak to each other: They define macrolevel narratives as historical narratives (Büthe, 2002), large policy stories (Nie, 2003), macrolevel trends (McBeth et al., 2004), grand or dominant narratives (Knox, 2013), cultural frames (Ney, 2014), expert narratives from international organizations (Veselkova & Beblavý, 2014), or large-scale cultural tales (Danforth, 2016). More recent studies for example understand macrolevel narratives as those diffusing between macrolevel political institutions such as the US presidency or Congress (Peterson, 2019), or examine power dynamics in

policy processes including macrolevel narratives (Sievers & Jones, 2020). To sum up, macrolevel narratives analyses suffer from under-theorization and little empirical attention (Pierce et al., 2014, p. 36; Shanahan et al., 2017; Shanahan et al., 2018). This is despite the fact that the founders of the NPF defined five basic elements of macrolevel narratives (Shanahan et al., 2017, p. 195; Shanahan et al., 2018, p. 334): First, macrolevel narratives are relatively stable over time compared to micro- and mesolevel narratives. Second, macrolevel narratives comprise the same narrative components, beliefs, and strategies as micro- and mesolevel narratives. Third, macrolevel narratives “manifest as institutions, society, and cultural norms” (Shanahan et al., 2017, p. 195). Fourth, a change of macrolevel narratives leads to “marked institutional and cultural shifts” (Shanahan et al., 2017, p. 195). Fifth, macrolevel narratives build the channel within which mesolevel narratives run.

The next section develops a more detailed but still versatile definition of macrolevel narratives by combining these basic elements with the concept of policy paradigm.

PARADIGM AS STRUCTURE FOR MACROLEVEL NARRATIVES

Shanahan et al. (2017, p. 195) acknowledge that “macrolevel research (should) address (...) questions such as how such narratives are created.” This is the starting point of this paper that suggests employing the concept of policy paradigm to specify the *structure* for macrolevel narratives. The model proposed here argues that a paradigm simultaneously enables and constrains macrolevel narratives – or in other words, what macrolevel narratives tell are policy paradigms. The conceptualization of higher levels (here a policy paradigm) constraining lower levels (here macrolevel narratives) is acknowledged in other policy studies theories; especially in the Advocacy Coalition Framework and its tripartite hierarchical belief structure where deep core beliefs constrain the policy core beliefs, which in turn constrain the secondary aspects (e.g., Sabatier & Weible, 2019, pp. 194–195). Following this principle, this study establishes the relationship between policy paradigm² and macrolevel narratives: First, a policy paradigm enables and constrains macrolevel narratives because it is an interpretive framework of socially rooted ideas “about how the world works and should work in a policy domain” (Skogstad & Schmidt, 2011, p. 6). It defines “the boundaries of what is thinkable, possible, or acceptable” and thereby “helps impose order on a chaotic environment” (Carson et al., 2009, p. 17). Thus, policy paradigms and macrolevel narratives are both relatively stable over time. Second, the structural NPF components of macrolevel narratives complement the policy paradigm concept in an empirically meaningful way: A paradigm establishes consensual beliefs among policymakers about the relevant problems in a policy domain, the goals of a public policy, and the appropriate means or policy instruments to realize them (captured by the NPF *setting and moral*). A paradigm also defines roles and identifies actors capable of addressing a problem (captured by NPF *characters and plots*) (Carson et al., 2009, p. 25; Hall, 1993, p. 279). Thus, in an almost natural way, macrolevel narratives seem to be the empirical “narrative form” of a policy paradigm. Third, a paradigm explains the complex relations between institutions and culture (Carson et al., 2009, pp. 18, 26) and therefore, again, corresponds to macrolevel narratives, which manifest themselves precisely in these. For a paradigm to prevail, it needs corresponding institutions that embody and apply its core ideas (e.g., Ackermann, 2001; Hall, 1989, pp. 370–375; Kern et al., 2014; see also “**Institutional Macrolevel Narratives**” section). At the same time, institutions are intertwined with a socially rooted cultural context. This is a cyclical relationship (e.g., Almond, 1987; Fuchs, 2007, p. 17; Westle, 2010, p. 313) where institutions may influence the cultural context and, vice versa, cultural norms may accept certain paradigms and corresponding institutions more willingly than others (e.g., Almond & Verba, 1963; Fuchs, 2007; Gabriel, 2008; Westle, 2010; see also “**Cultural Macrolevel Narratives**” section). Finally, policy paradigms can and do change over time and thereby may lead to major institutional and cultural changes (Hall, 1993; Skogstad & Schmidt, 2011, pp. 10–16). Its operationalizability, due to these specifically defined elements, clearly constitutes a strength of the policy paradigm concept (see e.g., Carson et al., 2009, p. 26).³ To sum up, a policy paradigm creates the *structure* simultaneously enabling and constraining macrolevel narratives. The structural NPF components of

macrolevel narratives allow for systematic empirical analysis. Subsequently, mesolevel narratives run within the boundaries provided by the macrolevel story.

Derived from this relation between a policy paradigm and macrolevel narratives, this study defines the latter in more detail. Therefore, [Table 1](#) presents their ideal type features and contrasts them with mesolevel narratives.

As the focus of this study lies on macrolevel narratives, their features are described in more detail here: Macrolevel narratives are constrained by a policy paradigm and tell stories about this paradigm and/or its effects on the institutional and/or cultural setting. Thus, they are told at a higher level of abstraction than mesolevel narratives and can be divided into three analytical categories: *Paradigm macrolevel narratives* tell stories about a paradigm per se; *Institutional macrolevel narratives* and *Cultural macrolevel narratives* refer to the institutional and cultural setting (see examples in [Table 1](#)). Actors at all levels of politics can tell macrolevel narratives, but they may be more common among government officials, experts, and others who are familiar with the policy paradigms and the institutions on which macrolevel narratives are based. They tend to be fewer in number than mesolevel narratives because they typically focus on one dominant paradigm. However, it is conceivable that paradigms overlap or that paradigm shifts occur incrementally (Skogstad & Schmidt, 2011, pp. 10–16) and that macrolevel narratives refer to two or more paradigms. They take a positive or negative form by featuring the structural NPF components, such as a hero for positive narratives or a villain for negative narratives. However, given the

TABLE 1 Ideal type macro- and mesolevel narratives

	Macrolevel narratives	Mesolevel narratives
What are the stories about?	Macrolevel narratives are about a policy paradigm and its effects on institutions and culture. They may focus on three aspects: (1) on the paradigm, that is, they tell the story of a specific policy paradigm (e.g., the principles of Keynesianism or monetarism (Hall, 1993, p. 284); (2) on institutional matters, that is, they tell stories about the institutional setting related to the paradigm (e.g., about “modifications made to the system of monetary control”) (Hall, 1993, p. 283); (3) on cultural matters, that is, they tell stories about values related to the paradigm (e.g., the role of and trust in the financial sector, the private sector or the labor market) (Hall, 1993, pp. 284–287).	Mesolevel narratives are about a specific policy, for example, the problem definition, solutions, and instruments (e.g., Shanahan et al., 2017, pp. 187–189). As mesolevel narratives run within macrolevel narratives, they may for instance tell that a paradigm – or the macrolevel narratives told about it – leads to a right or wrong policy goal, or to right or wrong policy measures. They may tell that affected target groups benefit or suffer, respectively, from a policy.
Level of abstraction	Relatively high	Relatively low
Typical narrators	Macrolevel actors, for example, governmental actors, experts; but also MPs, interest groups, civil society, street-level bureaucrats.	Mesolevel actors, for example, MPs, interest groups, civil society, street-level bureaucrats; but also governmental actors, experts (e.g., Shanahan et al., 2017, pp. 188–189).
Number of possible co-existing narratives	Few, normally a dominating one	Many competing, not necessarily a dominating one
Connotation	Positive (supporting a paradigm and its effects on institutions and culture, e.g., using hero narratives), negative (opposing a paradigm, e.g., using villain narratives), or neutral (e.g., explaining the principles of a paradigm).	Positive (supporting the macrolevel narratives and thereby the policy, e.g., using hero narratives) or negative (opposing the macrolevel narratives and the policy, e.g., using villain narratives).

presumption that macrolevel narratives originate from a set of fundamental and high-level ideas, they may instead tell a story in a more neutral or explanatory way.

Based on these conceptual clarifications, the next section sets up a macrolevel NPF model and formulates propositions.

A STANDARD MODEL FOR MACROLEVEL NPF ANALYSIS

As elaborated above, macrolevel narratives carry the story of the relationship between a paradigm, institutions and culture to the public policy debate, which can be captured empirically by a standard mesolevel NPF analysis. Figure 1 illustrates how the elements come together to form a standard macrolevel NPF model. The model views the macrolevel structure as the independent variable, operationalized through three analytical categories of macrolevel narratives (paradigm, institutional and cultural), and the public policy debate as the dependent variable, operationalized through mesolevel narratives. In addition, external events can shape the meso level (see the “Robustness of the Model: External Events” section). The focus of this paper, however, is on the first part, that is, the macro level.

Regarding the first analytical category, that is, *paradigm macrolevel narratives*, I derive the following proposition based on the “Paradigm as Structure for Macrolevel Narratives” section:

P1: If a policy paradigm is supported (e.g., by political actors, the civil society, the public), positive macrolevel and subsequent mesolevel narratives dominate. If a paradigm is opposed, negative macrolevel and mesolevel narratives dominate.

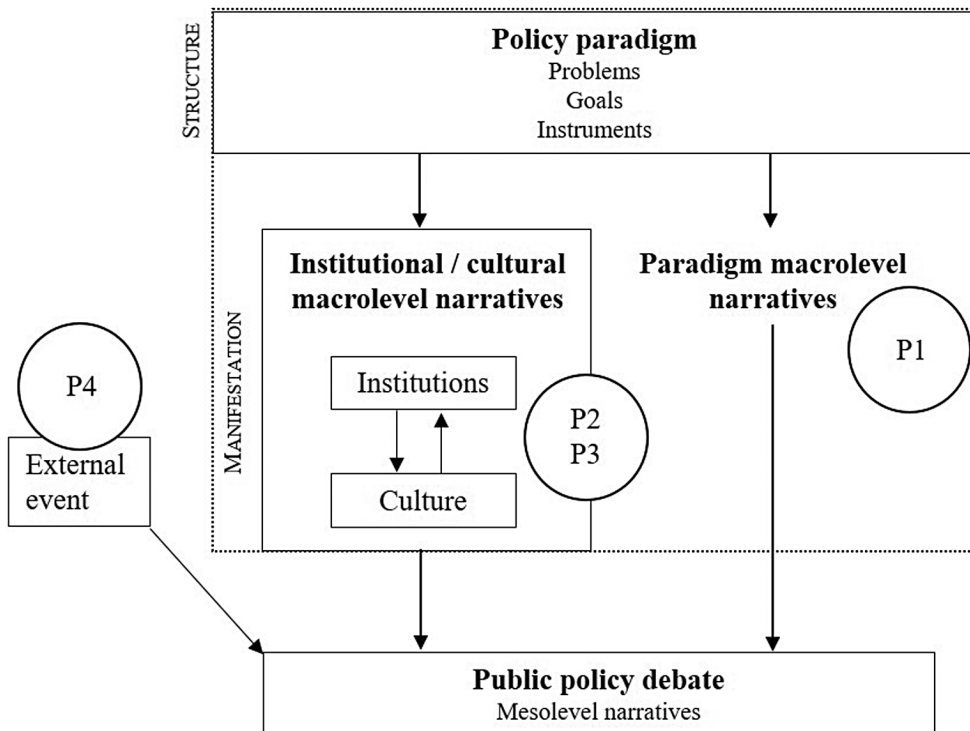


FIGURE 1 Macrolevel narrative model. Key: P1–4 = Propositions 1–4

The following sub-sections focus on the *manifestation* of macrolevel narratives as institutions and culture. Despite the cyclical relationship mentioned, the mechanisms in this model are split into separate propositions to conduct a viable analysis.

Institutional macrolevel narratives

From a neo-institutionalist perspective, institutions are formal and informal processes, social practices or legal rules that shape a political system and determine access to decisions. Historical institutionalists acknowledge the power of ideas (or paradigms) in shaping institutions. Their concept of policy learning claims that institutional change occurs when policy actors are willing and capable of initiating it in favor of new ideas. Hence, change ultimately begins when sufficiently powerful policy actors discredit an existing paradigm in favor of a new set of ideas (Hall, 1993, pp. 280–281; Steinmo, 2008, pp. 130–133). At the same time, institutions have a stabilizing effect (Hall & Taylor, 1996, pp. 937–940). The concepts of path dependence and positive feedback examine how policy decisions set an institutional path and how earlier decisions influence later options. Deviating from this path entails learning and coordination costs as well as adjustment efforts, which makes changes less likely to materialize (Ackermann, 2001, pp. 97; Pierson, 2000, 2004, pp. 23–25; Steinmo, 2008, pp. 127–128). Proposition 2 states:

P2: If a policy paradigm and existing institutions coincide, positive macrolevel and subsequent mesolevel narratives dominate. If a paradigm and institutions do not coincide, that is, if institutional changes have to be made to adjust to a paradigm, negative macrolevel and mesolevel narratives dominate.

Cultural macrolevel narratives

In addition to the institutional structure, a policy paradigm also affects and is affected by cultural values related to a particular policy. Political culture research is a vast field that broadly branches into two areas: First, scholarship that focuses on the structural features of a political system. This branch bases on the fundamental thesis by Almond and Verba (1963), which claims that a persistent democratic system requires congruence between institutions and culture; a cyclical relationship (Almond, 1987; Fuchs, 2007, p. 17; Westle, 2010, pp. 307, 313). Second, research that addresses citizens' individual orientations vis-à-vis the political system. This typically includes, among other variables, measuring their satisfaction with and trust in the system (Freitag, 2017, p. 99, 112–130). The cyclical relationship between institutions and culture becomes apparent once again: The functioning of institutions influences citizens' trust in them. Conversely, institutions can only fulfill their tasks effectively if the population trusts them (e.g., Gabriel, 2008, pp. 185, 207–208; Westle, 2010, p. 318). To sum up, there is a tendency in the relationship between institutions and culture to resolve longer-lasting incongruities, as these can endanger the persistence of the political system (Almond & Verba, 1963; Fuchs, 2007, pp. 3, 19; Westle, 2010, pp. 313–314). Proposition 3 states:

P3: If a policy paradigm and existing cultural norms are compatible, positive macrolevel and subsequent mesolevel narratives dominate. If a paradigm and culture are incompatible, that is, if a paradigm leads to incongruence with cultural values or between institutions and culture, negative macrolevel and mesolevel narratives dominate.

Robustness of the model: External events

To test the robustness of the model, an additional proposition on external events or shocks is included. Political science widely investigates the effect of such events on policy processes using various concepts;

focusing events is one of them. Focusing events are sudden, relatively uncommon, attention-grabbing, and mostly harmful events (Birkland, 1998; Kingdon, 1995) that have the potential to change dominant ideas or attitudes toward policies (Birkland, 1998, p. 55). Focusing events typically lead to an expansion of a mesolevel policy debate; usually accompanied by a more negative assessment of the policy because pro-change actors argue that the event is evidence of a policy failure (Kingdon, 1995, pp. 94–96). These arguments increase the pressure to initiate change. However, the response to a focusing event depends on its tangibility. Focusing events only trigger change when there is relatively high interest, it is easy to mobilize around it, or when there are obvious harmful consequences (Birkland, 1998, p. 73). Proposition 4 states:

P4: Several external factors, including focusing events, can change a public policy debate, that is, mesolevel narratives after an external event may start opposing the macrolevel narratives about a policy paradigm and/or its corresponding institutions and culture.

The next section introduces the comparative multi-method design used to apply the model and examine the four propositions.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design combines a synchronical comparison of the effects of macrolevel narratives between two geographic regions (French- and German-speaking Switzerland) with a diachronical comparison of the mesolevel narratives over time. In addition, it combines quantitative and qualitative approaches, the latter uncovering and refining inference and underlying causal pathways (see Seawright, 2016). Thus, this design minimizes the weaknesses of applying standalone quantitative or qualitative approaches. Subsequently, this section presents the case of the CAPP, the data and methods.

The Swiss CAPP...

... and its paradigm

Child and adult protection is a relevant policy field for many countries, especially where there have been historical reviews of past injustice, for example in the area of forced placements (see e.g., Wright et al., 2018). In Switzerland, a comprehensive revision of a hundred-year-old Guardianship Law culminated in a new Law on Child and Adult Protection (LCAP) that came into force in 2013. A policy paradigm shift was at the origin of this revision: While the old Guardianship Law originally had a paternalistic and disciplinary character (Federal Social Insurance Office, 2016), allowing state interventions in the family in the name of morality and order (Voll, 2013), the LCAP clearly puts the right to the protection and self-determination of vulnerable persons at the center. The LCAP sets requirements for the new implementing agency, the Child and Adult Protection Agency (CAPA): It must be organized on a regional, professional and interdisciplinary basis and assure procedural transparency and tailor-made protection measures (Federal Department of Justice and Police, 2011; Häfeli, 2013; Noser, 2017; Strebel, 2010; Swiss Federal Council, 2006). I call this the *paradigm of professionalization*.

The implementation of the LCAP has yielded two different public debate patterns along the two major language regions: German-speaking Switzerland experienced a massive controversy that heavily criticized the CAPA's approach. Within the first three years of its existence, it became “the most hated public agency”⁴ (Dorer, 2017). Numerous media stories were published about people suffering from CAPA decisions. Interest groups mobilized to demand its abolishment and parents joined forces on social media (e.g., the Facebook group “CAPA Switzerland! Wrong judgments - Wrong re-placements”⁵; Murmann, 2015). The public outcry culminated in death threats to CAPA employees who required

police protection. Conversely, in French-speaking Switzerland the reform led to a less prominent public debate.

... and its institutional and cultural setting

To examine how these differences, this paper investigates macrolevel narratives that, by definition, are constrained by the professionalization paradigm and manifest as institutions and culture. The paper takes advantage of institutional and cultural differences between the two Swiss language regions that are still units within one national political framework and share many characteristics. This and other comparative studies among Swiss cantons or language regions therefore benefit from conditions that come relatively close to a most-similar systems design (Przeworski & Teune, 1970; Vatter, 2007, p. 150). The institutional path of child and adult protection in German-speaking Switzerland had historically been built on the responsibility of local lay authorities for more than 100 years while French-speaking Switzerland granted this responsibility to the professional courts. The new paradigm thus required a departure from the previous institutional path in German-speaking Switzerland and the establishment of entirely new agencies. In contrast, the professional court system in French-speaking Switzerland met the requirements of the LCAP's paradigm and could remain in place.⁶

In terms of culture, Switzerland's political system enjoys strong popular support and trust (Eurostat, 2020; Linder & Mueller, 2017, p. 76). Federalism constitutes a central part of this system. In international comparison, the Swiss cantons and municipalities enjoy a uniquely strong position within the federal state and benefit from a large degree of autonomy in the design and implementation of public tasks (Vatter, 2014, pp. 427–437, 466). Switzerland's deeply rooted reverence for “non-centralization” is reinforced by its system of non-professional self-administration. Volunteering in the political system and the participation of lay agencies has a long tradition (Linder & Mueller, 2017, pp. 90–97). However, a vast majority of the existing literature agrees that Switzerland does not have one homogeneous political culture; it has different cultural profiles that correspond to language regions and have grown historically (Linder et al., 2008, pp. 41–44; Steiner, 2001, p. 145).⁷ German-speaking cantonal political structures and citizens possess stronger direct democratic and participatory features and values. Consequently, the German-speaking region highly values the local decision-making power of cantons, municipalities, and citizens, and the preservation of regional characteristics. Excessive influence of the state is met with skepticism. On the contrary, the cantonal structures and citizens of the French-speaking region rather delegate decision-making power to the state and prefer representative democratic values; a perspective that puts more faith in the state (Bühlmann et al., 2013; Kriesi et al., 1996; Ladner, 2007; Linder et al., 2008; Vatter, 2002). To sum up, in German-speaking Switzerland the professionalization paradigm led to a major institutional change in a cultural setting that reinforced an atmosphere of skepticism toward the new policy. Conversely, in the French-speaking region, the paradigm only led to a minor institutional change in a cultural setting, which allowed for a mitigated public perception of the new policy.

Data and methods

To empirically investigate the phenomena just described, this paper analyzes macrolevel narratives on the CAPP and their effect on the mesolevel policy debate. Therefore, two types of data were used: All articles on the CAPP published in the first three years of its implementation, that is, 2013 to 2015, in the six newspaper outlets with the highest circulation in French- and German-speaking Switzerland (see Online Appendix 1),⁸ and transcripts of nine in-depth expert interviews that were conducted in October 2019 and in September, October and November 2020 and took on average approximately one hour (see Online Appendix 2). The interviewees cover a representative sample of the Swiss expert scene in the policy field. Open-ended questions allowed the experts to talk as freely as possible about their views (see Patton, 2015,

pp. 636–648, 655–656). The expert interviews help validate the links postulated by the model. First, to ensure that macrolevel narratives were captured, and distinguished from mesolevel narratives, a codebook was developed that includes a list of specific *macrolevel key terms* – in addition to the standard NPF components. These key terms mirror the definitions of policy paradigm and macrolevel narratives provided above and include relevant topics of the three analytical categories of macrolevel narratives related to the case: As described in “*The Swiss CAPP and its Paradigm*” section, the paradigm was clearly defined in official documents and secondary literature. To capture it, I used key terms such as “experts”, “self-determination”, and “tailor-made”. For the institutional setting, key terms capturing the different types of institutions in the two language regions were used such as “lay authority”, “court”, and “municipality”. For the cultural setting, the key terms included “state trust”, “federalism”, and “municipal autonomy”. Thus, I defined the coding unit thematically and it consisted of single or multiple consecutive sentences capturing at least one *macrolevel key term* and, if present, at least one NPF character (see Krippendorff, 2003, pp. 105–109; Shanahan et al., 2017, p. 176). Paragraphs served as the unit of analysis, which allowed a single article or interview transcript to feature multiple narratives. Online [Appendix 3](#) depicts the codebook and full search terms. Second, I coded the data accordingly. The *macrolevel key terms* allowed to conduct an automatic dictionary search, followed by a manual coding to validate the relevant narratives (see Mayring, 2015, pp. 97–114; Patton, 2015, pp. 790–818). The manual coding also included the NPF characters villain, victim and hero. The coding led to a total of 371 macrolevel narratives. Third, I analyzed the identified macrolevel narratives with descriptive statistics and qualitative content analysis. The latter allows narrative scholars to get closer to the core of narratives, that is, the content of the stories they tell.⁹ [Table 2](#) and Online [Appendix 4](#) provide more information on the identified macrolevel narratives. Finally, I conducted a standard mesolevel NPF analysis to provide the full picture of mechanisms from the macrolevel narratives all the way to the mesolevel policy debate. The data for this part of the analysis are based on the CAPP dataset (Kuenzler & Stauffer, 2021), which comprises all mesolevel narratives on the CAPP published between 2013 and 2016 in the same six newspaper outlets as mentioned above. Two researchers coded the articles based on the standard NPF codebook (Online [Appendix 3](#)). Intercoder reliability, calculated by Krippendorff's Alpha, yielded solid values ($\alpha > 0.800$; see Krippendorff, 2011 and Online [Appendix 5](#)). The data used here cover the period from 2013 to 2015, and thus include a subset of the CAPP dataset of 995 narratives, 361 French-speaking, and 634 German-speaking ([Table 3](#)). Because of the macrolevel focus of this paper, I only conducted a limited mesolevel analysis by calculating the devil shift¹⁰ and χ^2 -tests for the characters villain, victim and hero.

In the following, the main findings of the empirical analysis are presented.

RESULTS

The analysis reveals that macrolevel narratives tell the story of the institutional and cultural differences between the two language parts, based on the paradigm, and thereby help explain where mesolevel narratives come from and what form they take.

Macrolevel NPF analysis

[Table 2](#) summarizes the findings of the macrolevel NPF analysis. The figures should be viewed within the context of the specific nature of macrolevel narratives. That is, due to the interlinkages between policy paradigm, institutions, and culture, some of the narratives identified fall into several categories. A standalone quantitative analysis is therefore inconclusive and is complemented by a more in-depth qualitative content analysis. While all of the 371 identified macrolevel narratives refer to the CAPP, 71.4% feature at least one NPF character ([Table 2.1](#)). The remaining 28.6% are more neutral or explanatory and the characters used are only weakly developed or non-existent. Still, these narratives refer to at least one of the three analytical categories and are therefore relevant for this analysis.

Looking in more detail at those narratives including at least one character (Table 2.2), it becomes evident that the majority of them is negative, that is, they tell stories of villains (56.6%). Over two thirds are from the German-speaking media (37.7%). Also, German-speaking Switzerland uses most victims (17.7%), which can typically be related to the villain narratives as a villain-story often also contains a victim.

Regarding the three analytical categories of macrolevel narratives, Table 2.3 shows that the majority of French- and German-speaking *paradigm narratives* in the media contained a villain (13 of 19, and 17 of 23 narratives). The following narratives are illustrative examples:

Cantonal Councilor Barbara Steinemann (Regensdorf, Zurich) called the new, professionalized CAPA a "flaw in the system": they prescribe overpriced measures whose effect cannot be verified.
(NZZ, 18/10/2014)

A father is cited as follows:

We must give the power back to the municipalities, which are smaller and know us. To finish with these "professionals", hisses Daniel. (...) We have created a monster, he says angrily.
(Le Temps, 11/06/2015)

Experts instead, most clearly portray the paradigm positively, that is, as a hero (10 of 16 narratives), as the following example shows:

For me, it is important that the population understands what a great right the new adult protection law in particular, but also the child protection law, is, how modern it is, how self-determined it leaves people (...).
(Expert 9)

The analysis also reveals that macrolevel narratives *manifest* in the institutional and cultural setting. Twice as many *institutional narratives* tell a rather neutral or explanatory story (49) compared to those that contain at least one character (24). Experts most often use the former (37 of 49 narratives). Illustrative examples are the following:

In French-speaking Switzerland, the change to the new law has not brought about any changes at all. Because the exact same agencies remained (...). (...) they had a well-established, institutionalized system there, which we (...) do not have or do not have yet in German-speaking Switzerland.
(Expert 3)

(...) this difference is mainly explained by the age of the practice in French-speaking Switzerland. "Our professionalized system has existed since 1910. In the German-speaking part, this dates from 2013 only" [explains the head of a French-speaking CAPA].
(Le Matin, 11/01/2015)

While the findings demonstrate the greater challenges faced by the German-speaking region due to its greater institutional adjustment in a rather explanatory way, the incongruities between the paradigm and the cultural setting in this region brought emotions into play. These manifest in almost one third (30.6%) of negative *cultural narratives* containing a villain character (81 narratives). Again,

many narratives include a victim (17.4%, 46 narratives). Most of the cultural narratives either deplore the loss of power of the municipalities and of the local knowledge of the former lay authorities,¹¹ or criticize the power of the CAPA,¹² its interference in family affairs,¹³ its position as too distant from citizens,¹⁴ and its professional decisions as arrogant and inhuman.¹⁵ The narratives typically feature the state, the CAPA or their employees as villains and municipalities and citizens as victims. For instance, newspaper articles state that “the current system degrades municipalities to payers without a say” (Tages Anzeiger, 25/09/2014), “the CAPA has too much power” (NZZ, 22/09/2014), “the agency acts with unbelievable arrogance and terrorizes the municipalities” (Tages Anzeiger, 06/01/2015) and the employees “are heartless bureaucrats who treated the case like a building permit application” (NZZ, 21/04/2015). A national MP says, “once you are in the CAPA's clutches, you cannot get out” (Blick, 06/01/2015) and a colleague of his “criticizes the power of an agency which, on behalf of the state, can massively interfere with the personal freedom and privacy of those concerned” (NZZ, 11/08/2015).

Experts mostly use villain and hero characters (12 and 8 narratives). This is illustrated below where they confirm the villain role of the state and the deep roots and hero character of self-administration:

And then the CAPA arrive, it is a huge state machine with a lot of power (...) and it is disturbing. It concerns the citizens who are not used to this way of state action and who demand a discreet positioning of the state (...).

(Expert 8)

(...) we also have this reflex in Switzerland, especially in rural areas, to give lay people a very high profile. (...) this rooting of lay agencies, of the non-professional self-administration, of the state's reluctance to intervene in the family, are simply very different in German-speaking Switzerland.

(Expert 6)

Conversely, in French-speaking Switzerland, the CAPP is mentioned much less in the media (48 narratives vs. 168 in German-speaking Switzerland) and the narratives are more balanced in number, that is, 19 about the paradigm, 12 and 17 about the effects on institutions and culture, respectively. The narratives are also more balanced regarding the characters. Most negative narratives in the French-speaking media present the CAPP in German-speaking Switzerland as the villain (see “**Discussion**” section) or refer to a local regulation in the canton of Vaud through which citizens could be obliged to assume a guardianship. The national parliament debated this regulation in 2014, which the cantonal government perceived as an intrusion on its autonomy. Therefore, the media used narratives depicting the national parliament as villain and the canton as victim:

(...) the [cantonal] Council of State is critical of the proposed amendment (...), which “represents an attack on cantonal sovereignty.” It would prefer the canton to be able to change its practice without being forced to do so by federal law.

(24 Heures, 08/07/2014)

This narrative shows that certain cultural elements, in particular the strong anchoring of federalism, exist equally in both parts of the country. However, it is the institutional differences that are decisive in this case. Since the institutional system in French-speaking Switzerland hardly needed to change because of the new paradigm, the federalist cultural values were not challenged. In contrast, in the German-speaking region there was a challenge given that the municipalities were deprived of a part of their autonomy. Experts explain:

Simply because of this change of institutions... I think it will take (...) another generation until it is accepted.

(Expert 3)

What model was used before and whether something was taken away from the municipalities, these are the decisive factors (...).

(Expert 5)

To sum up, the macrolevel NPF analysis corroborates propositions 1–3. It reveals a majority of negative paradigm, institutional and cultural narratives. While the negative trend is relatively clear for paradigm and very clear for cultural narratives, the institutional narratives are more balanced in their use of characters and the analysis identifies more explanatory stories. However, P2 can still be corroborated, as the narratives demonstrate the greater institutional tension in German-speaking Switzerland.

These macrolevel narratives, mirroring the more or less pronounced incongruities between paradigm, institutions, and culture, subsequently served as channel for the mesolevel narratives.

Mesolevel NPF analysis

The mesolevel NPF analysis confirms a significant unequal intensity of the public debate in the two language regions measured by the three NPF characters (Table 3). Not only did the German-speaking media use almost twice as many narratives related to the CAPP as the French-speaking media did (634 vs. 361 narratives), villains also clearly dominate, rendering the German-speaking debate more negative. This is also confirmed by the results of the devil shift.

The portrayal of the victim is more mixed. While a victim's main quality is weakness, Smith-Walter (2018) shows that victim narratives can be used just as strategically as hero and villain narratives. In classic drama the victim often arouses compassion (Terry, 1997). CAPA-as-victim narratives are more frequent in the French-speaking debate. This portrayal may indeed evoke compassion for the CAPA's challenging task, or at least render the overall debate more mitigated. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate

TABLE 3 Use of characters in mesolevel narratives

	Characters	French	%	German	%
Total no. of narratives	–	361	–	634	–
All narratives	Villains	210	43	515	68
	Victims	175	36	176	23
	Heroes	102	21	71	9
	Total	487	100	762	100
Chi ² – test	$\chi^2(2) = 77.06, p < 0.05, \text{Cramer's } V = 0.25$				
CAPA narratives	CAPA as villain	74	63	197	87
	CAPA as victim	20	17	13	6
	CAPA as hero	23	20	17	7
	Total	117	100	227	100
Chi ² – test	$\chi^2(2) = 25.66, p < 0.05, \text{Cramer's } V = 0.27$				
All narratives	Devil shift	–0.35	–	–0.76	–
CAPA narratives	Devil shift	–0.53	–	–0.84	–

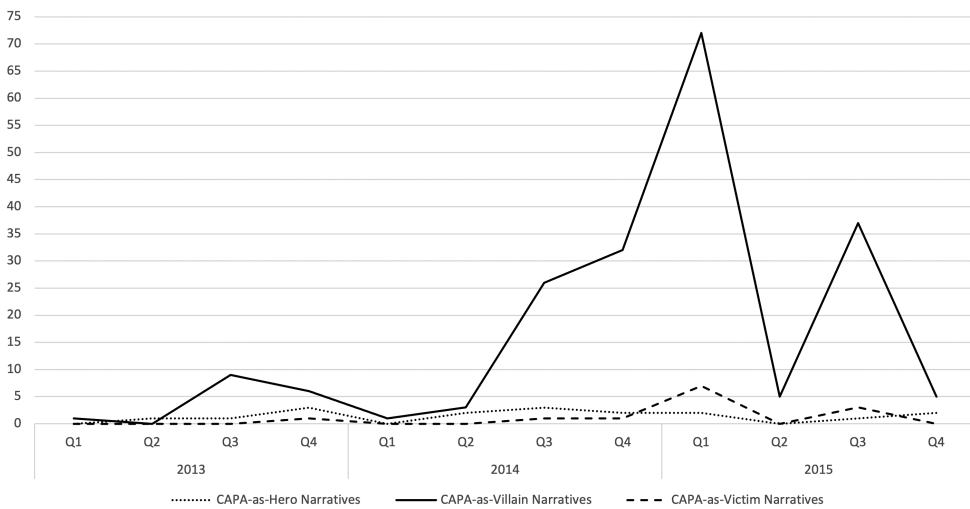


FIGURE 2 Mesolevel narratives in German-speaking Switzerland

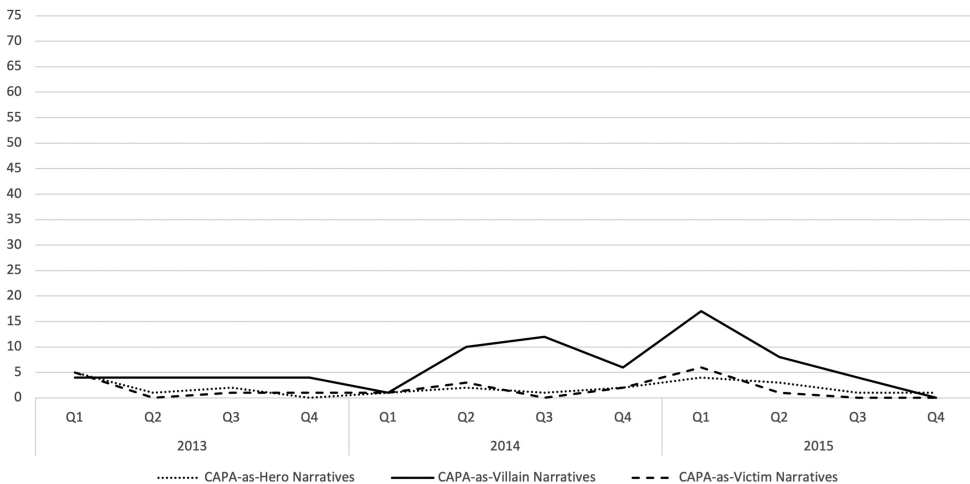


FIGURE 3 Mesolevel narratives in French-speaking Switzerland

the more negative trend over time in the German-speaking mesolevel debate compared to the rather mitigated French-speaking narratives.

To conclude, this analysis shows that the macrolevel narratives laid the foundation for the mesolevel narratives. In German-speaking Switzerland, where the former were more negative, so were the latter, whereas both types of narratives remained relatively mitigated in French-speaking Switzerland.

The next section presents the results related to proposition 4.

Robustness of the model: The role of external events

Two external events confirm the solid connection of the elements that make up the model proposed here. One event took place in German-speaking Switzerland in 2015. A mother killed her two children for fear that the CAPA would send them to a home. The other event took place in 2018 in French-speaking

Switzerland.¹⁶ A father who abused his eight children for over ten years, despite CAPA's supervision of the family, was sentenced to 18 years in prison. Although the first event led to a busier policy debate, that is, mesolevel narratives increased, and there was a more negative assessment of the policy, that is, CAPA-as-villain narratives increased (see peak in Figure 2 in Q1 2015), it did not reverse the dynamics that had already developed. Thus, the significantly more negative debate in German-speaking Switzerland and the more mitigated narratives in the French-speaking region persisted (Figure 3). The same is true for the second event, which led to some media reports but did not change the more moderate mesolevel debate in French-speaking Switzerland (experts 4¹⁷ and 5¹⁸). In other words, the two external events provoked different reactions, despite their similar levels of gravity. As Birkland (1998) puts it, the response to a focusing event depends on whether it hits fertile ground, which was the case in German-speaking but not in French-speaking Switzerland. As a result, the analysis does not corroborate proposition 4. Instead, it demonstrates the robustness of the model.

While the findings allowed addressing the four propositions, some aspects require a closer look, which is explored in the following section.

DISCUSSION

The application of the model revealed findings regarding three important aspects of macrolevel and mesolevel NPF research, which this section discusses in more detail: The understanding of the policy paradigm concept, the mutual interaction between a paradigm, macrolevel and mesolevel narratives, and the possible diffusion of narratives. First, within the context of a macrolevel NPF analysis, the case of the CAPP represents an intensive case, meaning that it explicitly states the paradigm and shows institutional and cultural differences within a common national setting. Thus, the case provides a strong informative context and facilitates the observability of the phenomenon under study (see Patton, 2015, p. 422). I think that the model developed here is also applicable to less obvious cases. According to Hall (1993, pp. 291–292), only some policies truly constitute a fully formed paradigm. Nevertheless, virtually all policy processes take place within a set of overarching ideas that prioritize certain narrative configurations, which capture interests, over others and determine the boundaries of what is right or wrong. With this in mind, I argue that the concept of a policy paradigm can facilitate a wide variety of macrolevel NPF research. Key is that researchers capture the ideas that guide beliefs among policymakers about the relevant policy problems and solutions. These ideas build the *structure* that simultaneously enable and constrain macrolevel narratives. They allow to empirically concretize the link to institutions and culture – and thus to detect macrolevel narratives that so far remained too abstract in their conceptualization. Second, the model does not yet elucidate all possible connections between a paradigm, macrolevel and mesolevel narratives. The findings confirm the original NPF definition, that is, macrolevel narratives clearly seem to dictate what goes on in a mesolevel policy debate; they provide the channel for mesolevel narratives. This result is reinforced by the additional consideration of external events. However, the model does not yet consider the possibility of reverse influence, for example, the questions of whether and how macrolevel narratives may shape policy paradigms, or mesolevel narratives influence macrolevel narratives. In addition, it is also conceivable that macrolevel and mesolevel narratives change simultaneously. Future NPF research should further investigate these relations. Third, geographic diffusion of policy narratives could be a promising avenue for future macrolevel and mesolevel NPF research. Although no full-scale analysis was conducted here, the findings reveal a trend of the French-speaking media mainly using stories from the German-speaking regions when telling negative narratives about the CAPP. Research on policy diffusion, that is, a process where policies from one national or subnational area move to another because of interdependence between the areas or states (see e.g., Braun & Gilardi, 2006; Jahn, 2015, pp. 259–260), identifies four main mechanisms explaining diffusion – that may also be linked to the change of overarching ideas or paradigms: Learning processes, that is, policy actors acquire new information from other states and thereby change their beliefs; competition, for example, the *race to the bottom* in tax competition; imitation, for example, states

adapt to international norms; or coercion, for example, EU accession candidates must meet strict requirements (Schimmelfenning & Sedelmeier, 2005; Jahn, 2015, pp. 255–258; Braun & Gilardi, 2006, pp. 305–313). Systematic investigation of the role of narratives in such processes could make valuable contributions to a better understanding of policy diffusion mechanisms.

CONCLUSION

This paper expands on the NPF by adding a theoretical and empirical exploration into macrolevel narratives. Its main contributions are threefold: First, it provides a versatile definition of macrolevel narratives by conceptualizing them as the empirical “story form” of a policy paradigm and introducing three analytical categories. This kind of definition, while being adaptable to different policy contexts, allows for a unified analysis of macrolevel narratives, which has been lacking in existing research. Second, the paper proposes a model for a standard and replicable approach of macrolevel NPF analysis that has equally been missing in existing research. The model specifies the relationships between a policy paradigm as the *structure* for macrolevel narratives, and institutions and culture as their *manifestation*. Third, the paper contributes to the NPF’s aim of finding connections between the macro and meso level. It shows that macrolevel NPF analysis helps scholars understand where mesolevel narratives come from.

A comparative multi-method design applied to the case of the Swiss child and adult protection policy demonstrates that macrolevel narratives indeed tell the story of the respective policy paradigm and its effects on the institutional and cultural setting. If incongruities occur, the macrolevel narratives and subsequent mesolevel narratives turn negative. This happened in the German-speaking region but not so in French-speaking Switzerland. Despite external events in each region, the links proposed by the model remained stable.

This analysis has some limitations: First, the empirical application of the model needs further testing and refinement. The fact that mesolevel narratives run within the boundaries of macrolevel narratives and the resulting intertwining of the two types of narratives is a particular challenge of macrolevel NPF analysis. A clear-cut empirical distinction is key to further strengthen macrolevel narrative research. This paper strives to address this challenge by establishing an analytical model and conducting a transparent analysis, including extensive definitions and a detailed codebook that allowed identifying macrolevel narratives by using specific *macrolevel key terms*. Second, the scope of this analysis did not allow including all NPF components and strategies. This is rather common for NPF analyses, which typically focus on a selection of these theoretical elements. Nevertheless, future macrolevel NPF research may investigate the role of additional components such as the moral or the plot, or the use of strategies, for example the devil-angel shift. Finally, the explorative character of this study did not allow including additional data sources, for example, direct communication channels like websites or social media pages from interest groups. Instead, the main contribution of this paper, that is, the proposed standard model to investigate macrolevel narratives in a consistent way throughout the NPF scholarship, will hopefully inspire a wealth of future narrative research. From paradigms and macrolevel narratives in refugee policy or in the handling of gun violence to the phase-out of nuclear energy, (medical) Marihuana or same-sex marriages legalization, a plethora of meaningful research areas awaits NPF scholars.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Empirical applications of the NPF show that narratives only rarely feature all of the structural components mentioned. Thus, NPF scholars have set a minimal threshold: To count as a narrative, a statement must contain “at least one character and (...) some public policy referent” (Shanahan et al., 2017, p. 176).
- ² There exist several other concepts that could be considered as a basis for building a macrolevel NPF model. Among them are the policy regime by May and Jochim (2013) or the policy image by Baumgartner and Jones (1991). However, I consider them less precisely conceptualized than the policy paradigm and therefore more challenging in their operationalization.
- ³ Existing studies confirm this by applying the concept to various cases such as for instance the US social security system's change from a family protection paradigm that emphasized redistribution to a financial paradigm that emphasizes privatization BÉLAND (2007), the development of Germany's traditional family policy to one that recognizes same-sex unions KOLLMAN (2011), or the transition of immigration policy paradigms in Canada and the United States from racially biased to non-racist TRIADAFILOPOULOS (2011).
- ⁴ The author translated all subsequent statements from the media and the expert interviews.
- ⁵ Private Facebook group, title translated by the author: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1567197100161712/> (last accessed: 11/08/2020).
- ⁶ These institutional differences have been acknowledged when the government and parliament discussed the LCAP (Swiss Federal Council, 2006).
- ⁷ A few studies come to different conclusions, see for example, Brunner and Sgier (1997) or Scheidegger and Staerklé (2011).
- ⁸ The selected newspapers are: Neue Zürcher Zeitung (<https://www.nzz.ch/>), Tages Anzeiger (<https://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/>), Blick (<https://www.blick.ch/>), Le Temps (<https://www.letemps.ch/>), 24 Heures (<https://www.24heures.ch/>), Le Matin (<https://www.lematin.ch/>). More information on the selection criteria is provided in Online Appendix 5.
- ⁹ There is emerging research in the field of qualitative NPF analysis, see for example, Gray and Jones (2016) or McMorris and Jones (2019).
- ¹⁰ The devil shift depicts policy actors' strategy of demonizing others, while the angel shift measures these actors' glorification of themselves. The value is calculated using the formula described by Heikkilä, Weible, and Pierce (2014, p. 192) and Shanahan et al. (2013, p. 465): $H - V / H + V = \text{devil-angel shift}$. Where:
H = number of references to heroes in a policy narrative
V = number of references to villains in a policy narrative
The formula produces a value ranging from -1 to 1. Negative values are indicative of the devil shift and positive values of the angel shift.
- ¹¹ For example, NZZ, 22/02.2014; Blick, 18/09/2014; NZZ, 27/09/2014; Blick, 07/10/2014; Tages Anzeiger, 24/11/2014; NZZ, 07/01/2015; Tages Anzeiger, 23/01/2015; Tages Anzeiger, 25/04/2015; experts 3, 5, and 6.
- ¹² For example, Blick, 05/01/2015; NZZ, 09/01/2015; NZZ, 11/08/2015; experts 3, 6, and 8.
- ¹³ For example, Blick, 07/10/2014; Blick, 23/03/2015; Tages Anzeiger 29/07/2015; Blick, 03/08/2015; expert 6.
- ¹⁴ For example, Tages Anzeiger, 09/01/2015; Tages Anzeiger, 13/01/2015, experts 3, 7, and 9.
- ¹⁵ For example, Blick, 05/01/2015; Tages Anzeiger, 21/04/2015; experts 3 and 9.
- ¹⁶ This event is not covered by the CAPP dataset; however, several of the experts interviewed had good knowledge of it to validate this analysis.
- ¹⁷ *In this case, everything went wrong (...). That can happen, OK (...) What I want to say with this example, (...) there is a content-related debate [in French-speaking Switzerland] in the areas of abuse, individual cases, highly contentious separations. Then people are not satisfied and say it in the social media and the press. But nothing more than that. And not at all comparable with the CAPA bashing in German-speaking Switzerland.*
- ¹⁸ *A few years ago, this super abuse case was uncovered, where a father abused his children in the worst way, where there were CAPA guardians who knew about it... Nothing happened with this CAPA. Zero. (...) the CAPA was not accused.*

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