



Strategy work in the public sector—A balancing act of competing discourses[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This study uses the concept of interpretative repertoires, i.e., localized discourses, to examine how facts are constructed about strategic work in a central government agency. It analyzes strategic work in relation to the public sector context and draws attention to power struggles among different discourses in this context. The identified repertoires can be related to wider public sector management discourses that civil servants need to balance in their strategic work. These discourses can both enable and constrain strategy work, and we conclude that strategy in the public sector needs to be understood in relation to these discourses.

1. Introduction

The past two decades have seen growing interest in the discursive aspects of strategic management (Balogun, Jacobs, Jarzabkowski, Mantere, & Vaara, 2014), especially in strategy-as-practice literature (Dick & Collins, 2014; Hardy & Thomas, 2014). Strategies and strategy work have come to play a significant role in businesses and such other organizations as universities, hospitals, schools, and central agencies (Pälli, Vaara, & Sorsa, 2009). However, so far not much work has been done from this perspective as regards public management (Pollitt, 2012), with the notable exceptions of Brandtner, Höllerer, Meyer, and Kornberger, (2016), Kornberger and Clegg (2011); Sorsa, Pälli, and Mikkola, (2014) and Vaara, Sorsa, and Pälli, (2010). Apart from Brandtner et al. (2017), these studies do not explicitly address the specifics of the public sector context in their analysis, even though this could be an important area of study. As argued elsewhere, we need to understand the unique traits of the public sector to understand strategy work there (cf. Andrews & Van de Walle, 2012; Elbanna, Rhys, & Pollanen, 2016; Ferlie & Ongaro, 2015; Hansen Rosenberg & Ferlie, 2016; Weiss, 2017). For example, previous research has shown that public organizations act in a pluralistic context where multiple internal and external interests must be met at once (Jarzabkowski & Sillince, 2007; Jarzabkowski, Lê, & Van de Ven, 2013; Johnsen, 2016), creating tensions within the organizations (Jarzabkowski & Fenton, 2006; Höglund, Holmgren, Mårtensson & Svärdsten, 2018).

Studying discourses and discursive practices in relation to strategic management is important since strategic management—from a

discursive perspective—can be understood as an assemblage of discourses about strategy work that “make up” particular versions of strategic activities and how they should be conceptualized and performed (Hardy, Palmer, & Phillips, 2000). As such, discourses contribute to the fact that a particular picture is painted of strategy and strategic work; a particular way of representing it (and its practices) in a certain light (Höglund, 2013). Some discourses also come to be privileged over others (Dick & Collins, 2014; Hardy & Thomas, 2014; Potter, 1996), to the degree of marginalizing or excluding other discourses (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). This, in turn, has direct consequences for strategic work, and therefore it becomes important to study what discourses are privileged over others in organizations. Berglund and Johansson (2007):79) argue the following:

By way of communication we produce different “pictures” of the world, which makes language—in a figurative sense—our primary means of construction. However, there is always a diversity of versions, each telling a different story about the object in question. Some versions tend to become more dominating, fixed, and taken-for-granted than others. Simultaneously a dominating version can be challenged, questioned, and opposed by other alternative versions.

In line with these ideas some discourse analyses within strategy research focus on the power of strategy discourse that influences the way people talk, think, and act (cf. Balogun et al., 2014; Carter, Clegg, & Kornberger, 2010; Dick & Collins, 2014; Hardy et al., 2000; Hardy & Thomas, 2014). This is also the case when it comes to the study of strategy discourse in a public sector context (cf. Kornberger & Clegg,

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2011; Sorsa et al., 2014; Vaara et al., 2010).

In the study of discursive practices and strategy work, the most common approach is to do a critical discourse analysis based on the ideas of Fairclough (cf. Hardy et al., 2000; Pälli et al., 2009; Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Vaara et al., 2010; Vaara, 2014). The Foucauldian approach is also quite common (cf. Ezzamel & Willmott, 2008; Hardy & Thomas, 2014), while others mix the two (Mantere & Vaara, 2008). Still others, such as Dick and Collins (2014), introduce discursive psychology in combination with a Foucauldian approach, while Höglund (2013) studied discursive practices and the use of interpretative repertoires. If the Foucauldian approach tends to study what discourses are doing to people, the discursive psychology approach and interpretative repertoires focus instead on what people are doing with discourses, while CDAs are often a mix of both. However, so far there are few studies of the discursive practices of what people are doing with discourse, despite the fact that a number of scholars (cf. Dick & Collins, 2014; Hardy et al., 2000; Hardy & Thomas, 2014; Mantere & Vaara, 2008) have highlighted its importance.

By examining the discursive practices of what people are doing with discourses, we can gain an enhanced understanding of which discourses are in use that potentially enable and constrain strategy work. However, as Hardy et al. (2000) argue, if we want to explain how discourse operates locally in practice, we also need to understand the broader context in which discourses enable and constrain strategy work. People both consume and produce discourses to make fact constructs and make sense of strategy work. In so doing, a complex relationship emerges as people produce discourses, and these discourses also shape people's actions when consumed (Hardy & Thomas, 2014). This means that to further enhance our understanding of strategy work and discursive practices, we need to understand how discourses are consumed and produced in organizations. Here, the notion of interpretative repertoires could be helpful. As interpretative repertoires are context-specific, locally produced discourses (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), it helps us to understand how strategic initiatives in certain contexts are enabled or constrained on an organizational level (Höglund, 2013). As Laine and Vaara (2007) argue, we need more studies on how certain discourses are privileged and used, while others are not. Hence, we need to examine how the different power effects of strategy discourses and/or repertoires are privileged or undermined (cf. Dick & Collins, 2014; Mantere & Vaara, 2008), as this has direct consequences for strategy work in organizations.

Against the background of the importance of studying context in relation to discursive practices of strategy work in the public sector, we constructed the following research question: What interpretative repertoires are privileged when it comes to strategy work in public sector organizations? By addressing this question, we aim to examine which discourses are privileged in a public sector context and the possible consequences this has for the strategic work in public sector organizations.

2. Discursive perspectives on strategy and the public sector

Previous studies of discourse and strategy are primarily found in strategy-as-practice literature (Dick & Collins, 2014; Hardy & Thomas, 2014). This research field, which grew out of a dissatisfaction with traditional strategy research (Johnson, Melin, & Whittington, 2003), takes a special interest in practice and the micro activities of people in relation to strategy. In this view, strategy is understood as “something people *do* rather than something that firms in their markets *have*” (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008, p. 1391).

In studies of discursive practices, researchers such as Spee and Jarzabkowski (2011) conceptualize strategic planning activities as constituted within a communicative process of talk (spoken discourse) and text (written discourse). Mantere (2013) views strategy as a language game highlighting the understanding of strategy on different levels of institutional, network, organizational, and micro practices.

Others have examined how people reproduce and resist strategy in organizations through their discursive activities (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011), linguistic skills (Samra-Fredericks, 2003), and rhetorical resources (Hardy et al., 2000; Jarzabkowski & Sillince, 2007). Such studies provide a valuable set of theoretical and methodological resources that significantly add to our understanding of how discourse and language use shape strategic work. However, this literature does not place discourse in context, as studies of discourse and strategy to date are mostly on the language of strategy and its communication per se (Balogun et al., 2014). In this paper we attempt to address this shortcoming through a study of the specific context of the public sector.

So far, the relatively few studies of public sector discourse and strategy have drawn our attention to the power and performativity of strategy in various ways (cf. Kornberger & Clegg, 2011; Pälli et al., 2009; Sorsa et al., 2014). One example is Brandtner et al. (2017), who show how strategy texts can enact government configurations and reforms as they analyze strategy documents as distinct discursive devices through which government bodies can realize their agendas by describing desirable futures, arranging people's objects and topics in a desirable way, and proposing courses of action. Another example is Vaara et al. (2010), who studied the power of strategy texts in city organizations from a critical discourse analysis approach. These authors show how different discourses are written into strategy and how such texts consequently become a powerful management device with performative effects. Mantere and Vaara (2008) also focus on the power aspects of strategy discourse and are among the few scholars who examine how different power effects of strategy discourses contradict and undermine each other using cases from both the private and public sectors. Similarly, Kornberger, Meyer, Brandtner, and Höllerer, (2017) use a case from the public sector and address the competition between multiple discourses, and that discourses could be used together in a cooperative manner.

In sum, previous studies of discourse and strategy in the public sector have shown how strategy may have significant performative effects and how strategy discourse can be understood as a powerful means of achieving public sector agendas. The public sector tends to be used as an empirical phenomenon that provides theoretical insights into how, e.g., strategy documents can promote reforms (cf. Brandtner et al., 2017) or affect power relations (cf. Kornberger & Clegg, 2011). However, we still know relatively little about the implications of the specific characteristics of the public sector context for strategic public sector work.

3. Interpretative repertoires and discursive practices

Interpretative repertoires can be described as localized discourses that are used in a specific context. Thus, interpretative repertoire is a concept that draws attention to the organizational level of discourse (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). Whittle, Mueller, and Mangan, (2008) argue that talking and writing are understood to actively constitute and reconstitute organizational reality as descriptions are constitutive of their objects. Nevertheless, talk does not bring things into the world; rather, those descriptions are categorizations, repertoires, distinctions, contrasts, etc., and there are always relevant alternatives available (Juhila, 2009). In this way, descriptions become performative. Through the study of interpretative repertoires, the researcher can study how people in action make fact constructs with the function to e.g. report, describe, explain, justify, request, command, influence, and make sense of their work (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Whittle, 2006).

To distinguish interpretative repertoires from the broader, more abstract and reified phenomenon of discourse, Potter and Wetherell (1987) prefer to use the term interpretative repertoires instead of discourse. However, they emphasize that the term “discourse” can be used to describe the same process. As flexible resources, interpretative repertoires are, at the same time, context-specific identifiable entities that represent distinct ways of giving meaning to the world, and malleable

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