



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

Linda Höglund^{a,*}, Fredrik Svärdsten^b

^a School of Business, Society and Engineering (EST), Mälardalen University, Box 883, SE-72123, Västerås, Sweden

^b Stockholm Business School (SBS), Stockholm University, SE-106 91 Stockholm, Sweden

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Strategic management
Strategy
Public sector
Discursive practices
Interpretative repertoires

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,

[☆] An earlier draft was presented at the IRSPM conference in 2015, panel—Achieving Public Service Performance in a Complex Environment (SIG on Public Servants at Work).

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: linda.hoglund@mdh.se (L. Höglund), fs@sbs.su.se (F. Svärdsten).

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

forms that undergo transformations when put to rhetorical use. Thus, repertoires could be considered one of the major resources used by people when constructing different versions of the world (Potter, 1996) in general and when constructing facts of strategy work in particular Höglund (2013). Following this line of thinking, we view repertoires as localized discursive devices available to speakers when making fact constructs about strategy work (c.f. Burr, 2003; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Potter, 1996). These discursive devices can be understood as a more or less coherent collection of styles and metaphors used to characterize and evaluate actions, events, and actors in the context of interaction (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Moreover, discursive devices can also include broad societal discourses such as gender and race, as well as discourses of interpretative repertoires, i.e. locally produced discourses of values generated by a particular organization.

Drawing on the literature on interpretative repertoires, we take a special interest in the discursive practices of how people draw on repertoires in text and talk. This allows us to study how people construct facts about their strategic work and what interpretative repertoires are used (consumed and produced) in doing so. We are also interested in the power relationships and the competition between multiple repertoires. Thus, as Burr (2003) states, there are power relationships regarding the culturally available repertoires to frame our experience and constrain our behaviors while allowing room for the person to actively engage with those repertoires and employ them in social situations.

Other scholars concerned with discursive practices and how people use discourses in strategy work and its power relationships include Hardy et al. (2000); Hardy and Thomas (2014), and Mantere and Vaara (2008). These authors all take an interest in studying which discourses people draw upon, and they highlight the importance of understanding these discursive practices against the backdrop of multiple discourses that have, as Hardy et al. (2000:1232) argue, “far-reaching effects that are beyond the control of single individuals.” Organizations consist of multiple and fragmented discourses that provide people with choices on which discourses to use. Thus, in text and speech, people actively draw on the available socially constructed discursive devices of repertoires, but—although many repertoires are available to choose from (Edley, 2001; Juhila, 2009)—not all are equally available (Hardy et al., 2000). In effect, some discourses that align with culturally, institutionally, or organizationally accepted norms and ideals exert more influence than others (Larson & Pearson, 2012); since people are neither omniscient nor completely free, the choices available may be limited (Edley, 2001). Thus, from the perspective of interpretative repertoires, power aspects of discourse are concerned with which repertoires are undermined or privileged when used as discursive devices. An analysis of power struggles between discourses on a local level can reveal how strategy work is conceptualized and carried out in practice and in this way contribute to the earlier work of, e.g. Hardy and Thomas (2014), and Mantere and Vaara (2008).

In sum, interpretative repertoires as a discursive device have the potential to help us understand the power relationship between discourses on a localized level of organization. In this way we can address the issue of learning more about the context specifics of strategy work in the public sector and potential power effects in relation to it, which we addressed in the previous section.

4. Method

4.1. Research setting

The research setting is the Swedish Transport Administration (STA), a central government agency that has been applying ideas of strategic management since it was founded in 2010 through a merger of the previous transport agencies. The organization has over 6500 employees managed by an Agency Director General who reports to a governing board. Scandinavian countries are an interesting context of study

regarding the adoption of strategic management, as these countries have large public sectors and have unitary governments with the opportunity to reform the public sector (Johnsen, 2016). The Swedish central government is also relatively unique because it has a history of delegating responsibility for operational matters to central agencies with a considerable degree of autonomy. Direct political control of agencies is limited, as ministerial intervention is forbidden by law. Formal parliamentary and governmental control is mainly carried out through legislation, annual appropriation letters, and the appointment of directors general.

With the establishment of the STA, senior management and the board decided to apply a strategic management approach in which the strategic work and planning aim to incorporate transportation policy objectives and public and industrial needs into the vision, mission, values, policies, and a strategic direction of the STA. Thus, given its mandate and the government's transportation policy objectives, the STA expresses its vision as “all arrive smoothly, safely, and greenly.” The plan includes six strategic challenges with 19 strategic aims and strategies for each objective. The strategic plan was formulated to cover six critical areas where there is a gap between the anticipated development and the desired state. The time frame of the plan is ten years. This forms the framework of the annual operational planning and is to be implemented in the organization through the Balanced Score Card (BSC). The six strategic challenges are intended to help the organization prioritize and provide a future direction for its strategic work in: 1) an energy-efficient transportation system, 2) well-functioning travel and transportation in big cities, 3) efficient transportation chains for industry, 4) robust and reliable infrastructure, 5) better value for the money, and 6) the STA: a modern central agency.

4.2. Data collection

To understand strategy work at the STA, we collected documents and carried out interviews between 2013 and 2016. Our empirical materials comprise more than 100 of the STA's documents, including its mandate, appropriation, presentation documents, strategic and operational plans, BSC, and its website. These documents were used for analysis and also formed the basis for describing the context in which the STA acts, so as to understand the prevailing regulatory conditions and strategic work. The documents also provided us with an overview of the agency's formal governance.

We conducted 54 interviews with different employees at the STA. We began the interviews by asking questions about the organization, its history, and background. Subsequently, we asked how they worked in the organization, e.g. regarding strategy and the performance of everyday work. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. It was not possible to interview all the strategically important people, so a cross-section was taken of different levels in the organization, from senior and middle management to lower management. Also, employees working in such areas as finance, management and control, administration, and operational and strategic developers were included. The interviews lasted 60–120 min.

To complement the document study and the individual interviews, we arranged three group interviews concerning specific topics that we had prepared. For each group interview we prepared broad, open-ended questions, which helped focus the discussions on the specific topic of interest in each interview and throughout the interviews we led and moderated the discussions. The group interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The first two group interviews were organized in 2014. At group interview 1, people working with strategy were invited to talk about the strategy work at the STA. Questions about strategy, its role and function, and the relationship between strategy and STA management control were the main themes discussed. Twenty-five people participated. At group interview 2, people working with management control and strategy were invited to talk about evaluation and monitoring

activities. Questions about performance, output and outcome, as well as the relationship between strategy, evaluation, and monitoring activities were addressed. Twenty-three people participated. The third group interview took place in autumn 2015, when we invited twenty people working with management control and strategy at different hierarchical levels at the STA. In this interview we addressed questions about possible tensions between different management tools at the agency, and the implications such tensions had for the agency's strategy work.

4.3. Analysis

As with most discourse analysis on strategy work and strategy discourse, we began by following an inductive logic, i.e., the analysis started with our empirical material and then moved on to understand the empirics in relation to theory (cf. Mantere & Vaara, 2008); throughout the analysis we moved back and forth between empirical material and theory. The findings presented in this paper are based on a rigorous coding process involving repeatedly listening to recordings of interviews combined with repeated readings of transcripts of the interviews as well as a close reading of documents (Höglund, 2013). This resulted in a twofold analysis where the first part focused on identifying which interpretative repertoires were in use at STA while the second part focused on understanding how these repertoires enabled or constrained strategy work in a public sector context in relation to previous research on strategy discourse.

In the first part of the analysis we began coding the data. Following Potter and Wetherell (1987), the coding stage was a precursor to the analysis, and involved going through a large amount of text searching for instances of strategy work. We managed a large amount of text through thematization, which can be described as an analytic initial preparation. At this first stage, it was important to be as inclusive as possible and we included every instance where the interviews or documents reported something about strategy work. This yielded our first indications of what repertoires might be used at the STA. Thereafter, we focused on moving between an overall understanding of the organizational context of the STA, and trying to understand what repertoires people draw upon as discursive devices when making fact constructs about the strategy work. The aim of the analysis was to identify the discursive practices of how people constructed facts about their strategic work and what repertoires were used (consumed and produced) in doing so.

Repertoires do not originate in a person's private experience, but from the discursive culture of the organization and the wider context of societal life that people experience (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). This means the things people say or write may be understood as examples of repertoires—occasions where particular repertoires have the ability to construct an event in one way rather than another (Burr, 2003). Pieces of speech and writing may be said to belong to the same repertoire because they portray a similar general picture of the object in question. However, the same words, phrases, pictures, and expressions can appear in a number of different repertoires, each time contributing to different factual constructs (Potter, 1996, Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Thus, both variation and repetition were features that we searched for in the empirical material. Variety within a given interview conversation was anticipated, because people may be expected to employ different interpretative repertoires to suit their current purposes. Repetition across different interviews was also anticipated because the same repertoires will be used by different people, but not necessarily in the same way. The findings from the first part of the analysis are presented in the next coming chapter: *Interpretative repertoires in use at the Swedish Transport Administration*. The chapter is also structured on the basis of the seven interpretative repertoires of: “cost savings,” “we need to measure,” “we collaborate,” “societal outcomes,” “respond to customer needs,” “rule of law,” and “steering from the government.”

In the second part of the analysis, we focused on trying to understand how the repertoires could enable or constrain strategy work in a

public sector organization context from a theoretical perspective. The results from this analysis are presented in the concluding discussion. Drawing upon the data analysis by Hardy and Thomas (2014), we tried to understand the repertoires in a context of broader societal discourses of strategy work in the public sector. The aim here was to understand how some repertoires are privileged over others and the possible consequences of this. From this analysis we ascertained that the repertoires used to make fact constructs of strategy work were associated with three main discourses within scientific work, which we refer to as public administration (PA), New Public Management (NPM) and New Public Governance (NPG).

Our analysis suggests that the repertoires of “cost savings” and “we need to measure” are built on assumptions in the discourse of NPM. Common features of the NPM discourse are an emphasis on decentralized decision-making, cost-effective production of measurable outputs, and a strong demand for performance measures (Almqvist & Wällstedt, 2013; Osborne, 2006). However, some have argued that NPM generates a number of dysfunctional consequences, such as fixation on internal efficiency and short-term measurable results at the expense of long-term objectives (cf. Bevan & Hood, 2006; Diefenbach, 2009; Hood & Peters, 2004; Lapsley, 2008). The repertoires of “we cooperate,” “societal outcomes,” and “respond to customer needs” could be argued as building upon assumptions made in the NPG discourse. The NPG discourse can be described as a shift towards a new perception of public management emphasizing collaboration between public sector organizations for the common good of society (Almqvist & Wällstedt, 2013; Osborne, 2006; Osborne, Radnor, & Nasi, 2012). NPG first emphasizes the trust in networks and interdependence between public sector organizations, with the aim of producing long-term value to society and the customer (Osborne et al., 2012). Thus, compared to NPM, the NPG discourse heavily emphasizes outcome, which is to say long-term effects in society generated by the activities of the public sector. Lastly, we have the repertoires of “rule of law” and “steering from the government”, which build on assumptions in the PA discourse. The PA discourse has been described as a celebration of the idea of bureaucracy and is characterized by a dominance of rule of law, clear administrative rules and routines, and detailed financial steering (Almqvist & Wällstedt, 2013; Osborne, 2006). As such, PA underlines the rule-oriented nature of public sector management, as well as the strong position of the politicians as the “owners” of public resources in deciding on public sector ends and means (Lane, 2008) (Table 1).

5. Repertoires in use at the Swedish transport administration

5.1. Cost savings

In explaining the strategic work of the STA, the repertoire of “cost savings” (in both documents and interviews) shows an intrinsic repeatability. The first example of its use appeared earlier in the contextual description of the agency under the fifth strategic challenge (better value for money), since this challenge was largely based on the fact construct of cutting costs in the organization. This also came across in one of the interviews with a senior executive manager who, with the help of the “cost savings” repertoire, reported that the STA had been

Table 1
Summary of findings.

Interpretative Repertoires used at STA	Relation to discourses of
Cost-savings	NPM
We need to measure	NPM
We collaborate	NPG
Societal outcomes	NPG
Respond to customer needs	NPG
Rule-of-law	PA
Steering from the government	PA

successful as they had significantly exceeded the cost-saving goal of 150 million kronor (approximately €15 million). A similar statement was also made in the agency's annual report of 2013:

In 2013, we achieved our goal of freeing up funds in our internal efficiency measures. The year's goal for freeing up funds for external productivity was also met and even exceeded by several hundred million kronor.

In contrast to the strategy documents, when employees used the repertoire of “cost savings,” it was mostly to build factual constructs about a number of negative organizational impacts. One example was supplied by a middle manager at group interview 2, who explained that the reduced costs of managing the agency had deleterious consequences for its strategic orientation:

In 2010, we started the work of improving internal efficiency, and with good reason. But now that we've significantly reduced the organization's management costs, we can see that this “liposuction” also went into the brain and central nervous system, costing us our guidance.

5.2. *We need to measure*

The repertoire of “we need to measure” was used in all the interviews, the group interviews and quite a few of the documents. Several factual constructs were made with this repertoire in relation to implementing the six strategic challenges in the organization through the scorecards. However, these factual constructs tended to show a slight variation in use, especially in the interviews and group interviews where the measurements in the scorecards were highly questioned by the use of the repertoire. Ideally, the strategic goals should translate to measurable goals on the scorecards as a means of ensuring that the organizational activities are aligned with the strategic goals. For example, one of the senior managers said the following about the goals on the scorecard:

The balanced scorecard is more about, well, operational goals... it tends to be like... anything we can measure, we put on the scorecards.

Thus, what is measurable goes on the scorecard, not necessarily what is important to the organization or society, as the scorecard tends to focus on operational goals and not strategic ones. A lower-level manager made a similar fact construct, reporting that what is easy to measure is what is put on the scorecard:

Measurement [...] is highly important but sometimes one makes the mistake of measuring what is possible to measure instead of thinking about it, I mean, sometimes it is more important to formulate the goal first because sometimes we establish a goal because it is easy to measure.

All interviews brought up the necessity of measurement in order to manage the agency. However, at the same time they constructed measurement as something problematic, because measurable goals might steer the organization away from the important things and make the agency lose its strategic focus. A good example is this middle manager who reported:

The goals on the balanced scorecards are supposed to be measurable. We try to translate [the strategies] into something measurable, and what happens at times is that we measure things, but not necessarily the important things.

5.3. *We collaborate*

The repertoire of “we collaborate” is used to construct facts about collaboration with various actors in society, with other key agencies

and between departments in the STA. This repertoire is used in numerous steering documents and was also frequently drawn on by the employees at the STA. The repertoire is also imposed on the agency in appropriation letters from the government. One could say that this repertoire is one of the most used in the agency when it comes to talking and writing about strategy work.

An example of how the repertoire was used in documents could be seen in the National Plan 2014–2025 for the Swedish transport system:

The transport system's needs for change and development are captured through close collaboration between players in the community and above all at early community planning stages in local authorities and regions.

Moreover, several fact constructs are made in relation to the intentions of meeting the strategic goal of becoming a modern central agency and the agency's collaborative activities. An example of this is given by a lower-level manager who constructed the fact that “being modern” is equal to collaboration:

A modern central agency is very much an agency that is able to cooperate with other organizations [and] knows how to collaborate.

In strategy documents, strategic “goals” relate to long-term impacts on society, and the repertoire of “collaboration” is often used to argue for the necessary achievement of such goals.

The employees often used the repertoire of “we collaborate” in conjunction with the repertoire of “we need to measure.” They used these two repertoires to build fact constructs to report the problems of strategy work in relation to the difficulty of measuring collaboration, meaning that it is hard to show results. When used together, the repertoire of “we collaborate” tends to be undermined by “we need to measure.” One of the lower-level managers made the following fact construct, which exemplifies competition between the two repertoires:

How many hours do we have to spend to save one life? This is impossible to measure and demonstrate. It is dependent on the quality of collaboration [...] we try to explain that [collaboration] is absolutely necessary if we are to have a well-functioning transport system [...] but some don't think you should engage in [collaboration], because they don't understand the link; they don't see it.

5.4. *Societal outcomes*

The repertoire of “societal outcomes” is drawn upon in all of the empirical data and it is constructed on the facts of long-term goals, efficiency, and value creation for society. The repertoire is often used in constructing facts about the STA and the strategic challenge of becoming a modern central agency. For example, one of the senior managers reported that a modern central agency equals an agency that knows how to create value in society. Thus, the agency should not exist for its own sake; it has a purpose, and the purpose is to generate desired outcomes in society. During the period of this study, and by the order of the government, the agency also developed a specific “governance framework” for the Swedish transport system. This strategic work was largely constructed using the repertoire of “societal outcomes.” An example can be seen in the operational plan of 2013–2015:

At the government's request, efforts are underway to develop a governance framework for strategic management of operations and maintenance. Within this framework, it will be defined how activities, conditions and outcomes can be linked to and described in terms of quality in the transportation system, i.e. delivery qualities.

However, most of the time, the repertoire of “societal outcomes” is used in conjunction with “cost savings.” An example was given by one of the middle managers:

We should, as far as possible, ensure that we establish links between

our activities and their outcomes, and be sure that we first and foremost carry out the cheapest [activities], or those that generate the most value for money.

Similarly, another manager reported that costs are still highly important, but that they must be put in the context of long-term outcomes in society:

For a long time, there have been discussions about value creation in relation to costs in our maintenance activities. This area has been called “the black hole” because it consumed half our budget, [and] is devoted to an area that is unable to account for the outcomes it generates.

The extracts construct the fact that efficiency and costs are important, but the use of resources is related to the value generated by the agency’s services to society, rather than to the services themselves. Thus, in these cases the repertoires of “societal outcomes” and “cost savings” do not compete. Instead, one could argue that the repertoires support each other, since the employees construct the fact that costs have to be motivated by the outcomes they generate, and that outcomes have to be evaluated with respect to their costs.

Generally, however, if we look at the material as a whole, the “cost savings” repertoire tends to construct facts that outcompete the one of “societal outcomes” when used together. As one example, one of the participants in group interview 2 made the following statement:

We have a very strong focus on costs. But even if we stay within budget, this does not say anything about what we have achieved for the money. [...] The reason for staying within budget could be that you’re delivering less value [to society].

The repertoire of “societal outcomes” is also often used in conjunction with the repertoire of “we collaborate,” and in these cases the two repertoires tend to support each other rather than compete. This is exemplified in the following statement from one of the senior managers:

It is a prerequisite for all our activities that we do it in collaboration with society, otherwise we won’t achieve the impacts. And I think that’s how we manage our assignment, through collaboration.

5.5. Respond to customer needs

Another repertoire in use, especially in relation to the strategic challenge of becoming a modern central agency, is “respond to customer needs.” Several documents note the importance of who the customers are and the agency’s ability to deliver services that meet customers’ requests—by being responsive, innovative, holistic, and flexible. For example, when the interviewees were asked what a modern central agency is to them, almost everybody used “respond to customer needs” to build different factual constructs. As an example of how the repertoire was used, one middle manager explained that they are supposed to:

Take the customers seriously and meet them with respect and humility. We should not be hectoring people and telling them how things should be. We should be able to act based on customers’ needs.

Another example comes through in the STA’s “quality policy” document:

We shall achieve success by creating the greatest possible value for citizens and the business community, and by meeting the requirements and objectives of the principal by approaching our customers and stakeholders in a sensitive, professional manner and choosing our solutions based on the customers’ needs.

One of the most recurrent factual constructs concerns the importance of acting on the needs of the customer and being available

whenever citizens require information. A majority also tended to use the repertoire to construct the fact that customer service requires something different from the civil servant than acting as a bureaucrat. As an example of this, one lower level manager said that a modern central agency must:

Be receptive to its surrounding environment [...] and sensitive to [customer] needs. The opposite of a rigid bureaucrat who is inflexible and so on.

By building a factual construct about bureaucrats as inflexible, the manager distinguishes a modern agency from a bureaucracy, stating that bureaucrats are not sensitive to customer needs.

5.6. Rule of law

The repertoire of “rule of law” is present in various steering documents, working descriptions, and strategy documents. It is also used in those interviews where factual constructs were made stating that as civil servants they must act in accordance with the laws and regulations. This is the only repertoire that is not used with any significant variation, indicating a clear position that the law must prevail above anything else. For example, a senior manager stated:

There are three watchwords—democracy, rule of law, and efficiency—and these words are still alive. Regardless of all theoretical models, whatever their names are, we are a central agency. [...] We have to take the law seriously. Things have to be managed correctly, things should be recorded. This is important and we must never compromise on this.

When making this factual construct of the importance of democratic values, the manager draws upon “rule of law” to explain what a central agency is and what must never be forgotten in managing an agency. The emphasis on following the rules set out by the government and managing processes “correctly” is constructed as a valid fact and is something that civil servants must follow. In this way it has a direct impact on the work of strategy and its possibilities. One lower-level manager exemplified this by using the repertoire to defend the existence of the agency and its responsibility to society by following the law:

We have a responsibility towards society. [...] We are supposed to carry out a certain assignment. We are not supposed to give everyone a driver’s license, for example. You have to pass the test; that is our requirement. If we could just give them [driver’s licenses] out, then we wouldn’t need a central agency [...] we don’t have freedom of choice in our conduct.

5.7. Steering from the government

The repertoire of “steering from the government” appears in documents, interviews, and group interviews. In the documents, it is often used in conjunction with the repertoire of “rule of law.” In the interviews, a dominant fact construct is that detailed steering from the government has increased, especially when it comes to appropriation of finances. Even though ministerial intervention is forbidden by law in Sweden, the interviewees explain that the financial management of the agency is a channel through which politicians can micromanage the STA’s activities. In relation to this, plenty of fact constructs are made that this detailed financial management has a direct impact on long-term strategy work as well as the agency’s focus on societal outcomes and long-term value creation in society. One of the participants in group interview 1 gave a good example, reporting that it is difficult to exercise long-term planning when financial allocation takes place once a year:

We receive money one year at a time. [...] Now, we are trying to plan for three years in a row but the money is allocated annually; it

steers our priorities.

Another example was stated by a lower-level manager:

Of course we would like to have more freedom in how we spend our resources, [...] but it is not up to us to decide, the politicians decide very much how the financial management should be carried out, and we just have to conform to it.

The repertoire of “steering from the government” is also used in conjunction with “we collaborate.” An example of this appeared in an interview with one of the operational developers, who constructed the fact that the government’s financial steering leads to a situation where funds are tied up for specific activities and departments, which makes the allocation of resources inflexible:

To maximize the benefits of money and other resources, allocation needs to be more mobile. We have lock-in effects as funds are allocated once a year. [...] These funds are somehow tied up for a particular activity, and there might be another area of activity with a huge need for them, meaning, of course, that it would be very desirable to be able to move it [the money] between organizational departments.

This employee further constructed the fact that the inflexibility of the financial resources makes the agency’s departments preoccupied with their particular activities and that this, in turn, limits the departments’ ability to collaborate with each other.

6. Discussion

Drawing on the previous work of [Hardy and Thomas \(2014\)](#) in our analysis of the discursive practices at the STA, we discovered that the repertoires used to make fact constructs of strategy work were associated with the public-context-specific discourses of public administration (PA), New Public Management (NPM), and Public Governance (PG). When these discourses are used together, some discourses tend to be privileged whereas others are undermined. We will further elaborate on this below.

When it comes to power effects and the use of discourses in strategy work, one can note that it is important in a public sector context to understand the relationship between the PA, NPM and NPG discourse in relation to how the strategy is enabled or constrained. For example, the NPG discourse is more frequently drawn upon in text and speech than the PA discourse. However, in the fact constructs about strategic work, the power of the PA discourse becomes important in the sense that it tends to undermine the NPM and NPG discourse. For example, by using repertoires of “rule of law” and “steering from the government,” civil servants made fact constructs about how they must, above all, obey and enforce the law and that detailed financial management is a constraining factor for achieving several of their strategic goals, such as collaboration and long-term societal outcome. In drawing upon the “rule of law” repertoire, all the employees interviewed constructed the fact that there are aspects that can never be compromised on, regardless of strategic ambitions, and one of these aspects is the law.

Moreover, the strategic idea of “a modern central agency” was often constructed using the repertoire of “respond to customer needs.” When, for example, the employees draw on this repertoire, a central part of the factual constructs was to explain what customer service (and hence also a “modern agency”) is *not*. A customer-oriented civil servant is *not* a bureaucrat, and in this sense the bureaucratic ideal embedded in the PA discourse became important to understanding what customer orientation is. This means that the PA discourse and its bureaucratic ideal, with its solutions to administrative problems in the public sector, creates competition with the NPG discourse and its business-like focus on customers.

At the same time, in both text and speech, fact constructs were made by using repertoires that build on assumptions within the NPM and NPG

discourses, such as demands for cost-effectiveness, measurable outputs and receptiveness to customer needs. There are some significant differences between the NPM and the NPG discourse, but there are also some similarities, such as the articulated need for post-bureaucratic structures, decentralization, and management models from the private sector. However, there is a tendency for the NPM discourse to dominate over the NPG discourse. For example, in making fact constructs about strategy work, the repertoire of “cost savings,” which in most cases draws on the NPM discourse, is privileged over “societal outcomes,” which draws on the NPG discourse. However, we can also see that these discourses at times when used together do not outcompete one or the other. Moreover, when used together, the repertoire of “we collaborate” is often undermined by “we need to measure,” as the constructed fact is that what we measure is what we perform.

Finally, the study of interpretative repertoires embraces not only an interest in studying how repertoires are used, but also with what function they are used (cf. [Potter & Wetherell, 1987](#); [Whittle, 2006](#)). In relation to this, we have shown that “cost savings” are mostly used with the function to report on negative organizational consequences. Similarly, “rule of law” is mostly used with the function of reporting on the obligations of a public agency. Steering from the government is also used in a more negative context, as the function is to critique the government and their detail steering. “We need to measure” is mostly used with the function of questioning the measurements in the scorecard and how to make the strategic goals measurable. The repertoire of “we collaborate,” in turn, is mainly used with the function of stating that working with others is the only way to meet the strategic goals. Similarly, “societal outcome” and “respond to customer needs” are used with the function of stating how the strategic goal of becoming a modern agency is met.

7. Conclusions

Against the background of the importance of studying context in relation to discursive practices of strategy work in the public sector, in this paper we used the concept of interpretative repertoires, i.e., localized discourses, to examine how facts are constructed about strategic work in a central government agency. This allowed us to study the discursive practice of how people construct facts about their strategic work with the help of repertoires and what repertoires are used (consumed and produced) in doing so. In line with this, our aim with the paper was 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.

Like [Mantere and Vaara \(2008\)](#), and [Hardy and Thomas \(2014\)](#), we show that strategy work involves alternative and even competing discourses that have fundamentally different kinds of consequences for strategic work in practice. We add to this research by studying the specific context of the public sector (cf. [Balogun et al., 2014](#)). Moreover, building on the ideas of [Hardy and Thomas \(2014\)](#), we were able to make both a theoretical and a practical contribution, by showing that strategy work is situated in multiple discourses and how discourses are used in the work of strategy that brings on power relationships and competition (cf. [Dick & Collins, 2014](#)). In this way we also contribute to research on power and performativity of strategy discourse in the public sector (cf. [Kornberger & Clegg, 2011](#); [Sorsa et al., 2014](#); [Vaara et al., 2010](#)) by examining what discourses are privileged or undermined in strategy work. We also show that in the competition between discourses, one discourse could outcompete another in one fact construct about strategy work, but in another fact construct the same discourses are used together in cooperation (cf. [Kornberger et al., 2017](#)).

[Brandtner et al. \(2017\)](#); [Kornberger & Clegg, 2011](#); [Pälli et al. \(2009\)](#); [Sorsa et al. \(2014\)](#) and [Vaara et al. \(2010\)](#) have all made significant contributions to our understanding of power and strategy discourse. We add to this work by not only highlighting the specific context of strategy work in the public sector, but also that there are

significant challenges in strategy work when people draw on multiple discourses and different levels of discourse. Our results indicate that striking a balance between demands rooted on a level of different management discourses can be a significant challenge for public sector employees (Head, 2010). This study shows that several competing repertoires on a localized level are drawn on when constructing facts about strategy work in a public-sector organization. The identified repertoires can be related to a higher level of public sector management discourses, PA, NPM, and NPG. These discourses can both enable and constrain strategy work, as they build on different assumptions and ideas and may thus be viewed as competing (cf. Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Hardy & Thomas, 2014). As a result, civil servants must balance these three discourses that can be seen as contradictory in terms of how to work with strategy and what to prioritize. Therefore, we suggest that strategic management and strategy work in the public sector need to be further understood in relation to the discourses of PA, NPM, and NPG. In particular, further studies are needed on how these discourses constrain and enable strategy work in the public sector.

Funding

This work was supported by the Swedish Transport Administration [2012-2016] and the Jan Wallander and Tom Hedelius Foundation [2014-2017].

References

- Almqvist, R., & Wällstedt, N. (2013). Managing public sector organizations: Strategic choices within changing paradigms. In L. Strannegård, & A. Styhre (Eds.). *Management: An advanced introduction*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Alvesson, M., & Kärreman, D. (2000). Varieties of discourse: On the study of organizations through discourse analysis. *Human Relations*, 53, 1125–1149.
- Andrews, R., & Van de Walle, S. (2012). New public management and citizens' perceptions of local service efficiency, responsiveness, equity and effectiveness. *Public Management Review*, 15, 762–783.
- Balogun, J., Jacobs, C., Jarzabkowski, P., Mantere, S., & Vaara, E. (2014). Placing strategy discourse in context: Sociomateriality, sensemaking, and power. *Journal of Management Studies*, 51, 175–201.
- Berglund, K., & Johansson, A. W. (2007). Constructions of entrepreneurship: A discourse analysis of academic publications. *Journal of Enterprising Communities: People and Places in the Global Economy*, 1, 77–102.
- Bevan, G., & Hood, C. (2006). What's measured is what matters: Targets and gaming in the English public health care system. *Public Administration*, 84, 517–538.
- Brandtner, C., Höllerer, M., Meyer, R. E., & Kornberger, M. (2017). Enacting governance through strategy: A comparative study of governance configurations in Sydney and Vienna. *Urban Studies*, 54, 1075–1091.
- Burr, V. (2003). *Social constructionism* (Second edition). New York: Routledge.
- Carter, C., Clegg, S., & Kornberger, M. (2010). Re-Framing strategy: Power, politics and accounting. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, 23, 573–594.
- Dick, P., & Collins, D. G. (2014). Discipline and punish? Strategy discourse, senior manager subjectivity and contradictory power effects. *Human Relations*, 67, 1513–1536.
- Diefenbach, T. (2009). New public management in public sector organizations: The dark sides of managerialistic “enlightenment”. *Public Administration*, 87, 892–909.
- Edley, N. (2001). Analysing masculinity: Interpretative repertoires, ideological dilemmas and subject positions. In M. Wetherell, S. Taylor, & S. J. Yates (Eds.). *Discourse as data: A Guide for analysis*. London: Sage.
- Elbanna, S., Rhys, A., & Pollanen, R. (2016). Strategic planning and implementation success in public service organizations: Evidence from Canada. *Public Management Review*, 18, 1017–1042.
- Ezzamel, M., & Willmott, H. (2008). Strategy as discourse in a global retailer: A supplement to rationalist and interpretative accounts. *Organization Studies*, 29, 191–217.
- Ferlie, E., & Ongaro, E. (2015). *Strategic management in the public services. Organizations concepts, schools and contemporary issues*. Abingdon: Routledge Taylor & Francis.
- Hansen Rosenberg, J., & Ferlie, E. (2016). Applying strategic management theories in public sector organizations: Developing a typology. *Public Management Review*, 18, 1–19.
- Hardy, C., & Thomas, R. (2014). Strategy, discourse and practice: The intensification of power. *Journal of Management Studies*, 51, 320–348.
- Hardy, C., Palmer, I., & Phillips, N. (2000). Discourse as a strategic resource. *Human Relations*, 53, 1227–1248.
- Head, B. W. (2010). Public management research. *Public Management Review*, 12, 571–585.
- Höglund, L. (2013). *Discourses and repertoires in two firms. Dissertation in Business no. 5. Discursive Practices in Strategic Entrepreneurship*. Örebro University. ISBN.
- Höglund, L., Holmgren Caicedo, M., Mårtensson, M., & Svärdesten, F. (2018). Strategic Management in the Public Sector – How tools enable and constrain strategy-making. *International Public Management Journal*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10967494.2018.1427161>.
- Hood, C., & Peters, G. (2004). The middle aging of new public management: Into the age of paradox? *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 14, 267–282.
- Jarzabkowski, P., & Fenton, E. (2006). Strategizing and organizing in pluralistic contexts. *Long Range Planning*, 39, 631–648.
- Jarzabkowski, P., & Seidl, D. (2008). The role of meetings in the social practice of strategy. *Organization Studies*, 29, 1391–1426.
- Jarzabkowski, P., & Sillince, J. (2007). A rhetoric-in-context approach to building commitment to multiple strategic goals. *Organization Studies*, 28, 1639–1665.
- Jarzabkowski, P., Lê, J. K., & Van de Ven, A. H. (2013). Responding to competing strategic demands: How organizing, belonging, and performing paradoxes coevolve. *Strategic Organization*, 11, 245–280.
- Johnsen, Å. (2016). Strategic planning and management in local government in Norway. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 39, 333–365.
- Johnson, G. L., Melin, L., & Whittington, R. (2003). Micro-strategy and strategizing. *Journal of Management Studies*, 40, 3–22.
- Juhila, K. (2009). From care to fellowship and back: Interpretative repertoires used by the social welfare workers when describing their relationship with homeless women. *British Journal of Social Work*, 39, 128–143.
- Kornberger, M., & Clegg, S. (2011). Strategy as performative practice: The case of Sydney 2030. *Strategic Organization*, 9, 136–162.
- Kornberger, M., Meyer, R., Brandtner, C., & Höllerer, M. A. (2017). When bureaucracy meets the crowd: Studying “Open government” in the Vienna City administration. *Organization Studies*, 38, 179–200.
- Laine, P.-M., & Vaara, E. (2007). Struggling over subjectivity: A discursive analysis of strategic development in an engineering group. *Human Relations*, 60, 29–58.
- Lane, J.-E. (2008). Strategic management for public services delivery. *The International Journal of Leadership in Public Services*, 4, 15–23.
- Lapsley, I. (2008). The NPM agenda: Back to the future. *Financial Accountability & Management*, 24, 77–93.
- Larson, G. S., & Pearson, A. R. (2012). Placing identity: Place as a discursive resource for occupational identity work among high-tech entrepreneurs. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 26, 241–266.
- Mantere, S. (2013). What is organizational strategy? A language-based view. *Journal of Management Studies*, 50, 1408–1426.
- Mantere, S., & Vaara, E. (2008). On the problem of participation in strategy: A critical discursive perspective. *Organization Science*, 19, 341–358.
- Osborne, S. P. (2006). The new public governance? *Public Management Review*, 8, 377–387.
- Osborne, S. P., Radnor, Z., & Nasi, G. (2012). A new theory for public service management? Toward a (public) service-dominant approach. *American Review of Public Administration*, 43, 135–158.
- Pälli, P., Vaara, E., & Sorsa, V. (2009). Strategy as text and discursive practice: A genre-based approach to strategizing in city administration. *Discourse & Communication*, 3, 303–318.
- Pollitt, C. (2012). The evolving narratives of public management reform. *Public Management Review*, 5, 1–24.
- Potter, J. (1996). *Representing reality – Discourse, rhetoric and social construction*. London: Sage Publication Ltd.
- Potter, J., & Wetherell, M. (1987). *Discourse and social psychology*. London: Sage Publication Ltd.
- Rouleau, L., & Balogun, J. (2011). Middle managers, strategic sensemaking, and discursive competence. *Journal of Management Studies*, 48(941), 953.
- Samra-Fredericks, D. (2003). Strategizing as lived experience and strategists' everyday efforts to shape strategic direction. *Journal of Management Studies*, 40, 141–174.
- Sorsa, V., Pälli, P., & Mikkola, P. (2014). Appropriating the words of strategy in performance appraisal interviews. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 28, 56–83.
- Spee, A. P., & Jarzabkowski, P. (2011). Strategic planning as communicative process. *Organization Studies*, 32, 1217–1245.
- Vaara, E. (2014). Struggles over legitimacy in the Eurozone crisis: Discursive legitimation strategies and their ideological underpinnings. *Discourse & Society*, 25, 500–518.
- Vaara, E., Sorsa, V., & Pälli, P. (2010). On the force potential of strategy texts: A critical discourse analysis of a strategic plan and its power effects in a city organization. *Organization*, 17, 685–702.
- Weiss, J. (2017). Trust as a key for strategic management? The relevance of council administration relations for NPM-related reforms in German local governments. *Public Management Review*, 19, 1399–1414.
- Whittle, A. (2006). The paradoxical repertoires of management consultancy. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 19, 424–436.
- Whittle, A., Mueller, A., & Mangan, A. (2008). In search of subtlety discursive devices and rhetorical competence. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 22, 99–123.