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STRATEGY DISCOURSES IN PUBLIC SECTOR ORGANIZATIONS: A QUALITATIVE FOCUS GROUP STUDY

Christian T. Lystbaek, Jens Holmgren and Ole Friis

ABSTRACT

Strategic concerns have spread into public management and fueled the growth of strategic practices. The purpose of this study is to examine strategy discourses in public sector organizations. It describes how strategy is articulated and conceptualized with reference to dominant strategy discourses and identifies the structural tension between these discourses. Based on a deconstructive analysis of focus group interviews, the article identifies four strategy discourses: "rationalist" discourse, "structuralist" discourse, "idealist" discourse and "constructivist" discourse. Strategy makers draw on several or all of the discourses in public sector organizations and the body of literature on strategic management related to them. The discourses are different but not incompatible in practice. Rather, they complement each other in strategic practices. Thus, the article suggests a more nuanced way of strategic discourses in public sector organizations and provides inspiration to other sectors as well. The article concludes by suggesting directions for further research.

Keywords - strategic discourses, public sector organizations, middle managers, strategizing.

INTRODUCTION

Today, strategy is everywhere. All organizations deal with strategy, but organizations operate under different conditions, affecting their understanding of how to do strategy. The public sector is functioning according to a specific set of principles, which tend to be overseen (Frederiksson & Pallas, 2016). These principles can be summarized as political nature with little autonomy to set own goals and to handle problems rather than taking advantage of an opportunity. There are also the challenges of conflicts between democracy, legal certainty and efficiency, the prominent role of professions, the number of stakeholders and the significance of transparency, which involves the challenge of

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completing "their activities according to appropriate rules to ensure predictability and accountability" (Frederiksson & Pallas, 2016, p. 151).

Although many public sector organizations do not exist in markets, they tend to articulate their strategies through private sector strategy terminology regarding competition, ranking, benchmarking, brand identity etc. (Joyce, 2015). However, while in business, profit is the overriding strategic goal to which other goals must be subordinated. In public sector organizations, there are usually several goals, often running into double figures (Eliassen & Sitter, 2011). In addition, there may be no clear hierarchy for the goals of public sector organizations. They are often unclear and contradictory because public sector organizations typically are governed by politicians with differing interests. Thus, it is relevant to explore how strategy in public sector organizations is articulated. We explore how public sector organizations' strategy making is conceptualized with (explicit and implicit) reference to dominant discourses on strategy.

Research interest in the discursive aspect of strategy making has increased over the last two decades (Hardy & Thomas, 2014), especially within the diffusion of strategy-as-practice research (e.g. Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl, & Vaara, 2010). As a general research approach to strategic management, strategy-as-practice has criticized mainstream and hegemonic strategy research, which is dominated by industrial economics and a positivistic mindset (Stacey, 2007). Invariably, dominant strategy research involves applying economic models and running econometric regressions on very large datasets from which generalized rules are constructed. The strategy-as-practice approach focuses instead on the "micro" level (Jarzabkowski, 2005). Strategy-as-practice researchers typically argue that dominant strategy research is overly simple and ignores the complex nature of organizations. They argue that strategy is not only an attribute of organizations but an activity undertaken by people. Strategy is something people do (Johnson, Langley, Melin, & Whittington, 2007). Thus, strategy-as-practice researchers are concerned with what strategic actors actually do and the kinds of activity they carry out when they do strategy (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007).

One of the important things that strategists do is to use the language of strategy (Fenton & Langley, 2011). Talk of strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats, competitors and capabilities etc. is an important part of doing strategy. Such terms, and the analytical techniques and tools that accompany them, render practices meaningful and manageable (Balogun, Jacobs, Jarzabkowski, Mantere, & Vaara, 2014). Thus, an important way to study strategy-as-practice is by attending to the discursive aspect.

The purpose of this study is to examine the discourses on strategy in public sector organizations to help managers and other strategists understand how strategy is discussed and communicated. It is guided by the following research question: How is strategy conceptualized in public sector organizations? Thus, in this article, we describe the linkages between strategy conceptualizations in public sector organizations and discourses on strategy. Bodies of discursive scholarship, such as narrative analysis, metaphorical analysis and critical discourse analysis, have contributed with significant research into important issues in strategy making, such as sense-making, subject positions and power relations (Balogun et al., 2014), but they have not depicted underlying conceptual struc-

tures regarding how strategy making is given discursive legitimacy in public sector organizations. That is what we aim to do in this article.

In the following section, we describe the methodology of the study. This is followed by an analysis of strategy discourses in public sector organizations. We identify different conceptualizations and discuss how these relate to and draw on discourses on strategy in the body of literature on strategic management. Then, we analyze these based on two conceptual structures, which allow us to identify fundamental tensions between the strategy discourses. Finally, we conclude by presenting directions for further research.

METHODOLOGY

In general, discourse analysis consists of analyzing or breaking down concepts into their constituent parts in order to gain knowledge or a better understanding of a particular issue in which the concept is involved (Wood & Kroger, 2000).

As mentioned above, bodies of discursive scholarship have contributed with significant research into important issues in strategy making (Balogun et al., 2014); however, they have not depicted underlying conceptual structures revealing how strategy making gains discursive legitimacy in public sector organizations. Thus, the current study departs from previous discursive strategy research in that it focuses on depicted conceptual structures in order to see how strategy making is given discursive legitimacy in public sector organizations.

As we are interested in how strategy making is given discursive legitimacy in public sector organizations, we have chosen a qualitative approach for data collection. More specifically, we collected data from five focus group interviews.

We want to obtain sufficient data to yield such discourses. Focus group interviews are very suitable for such studies, because of the group interaction and dynamics in the group, which (if properly moderated) provide researchers with elaborated perspectives on the topic under discussion (Wilkinson, 2004). Compared with individual interviews, focus group interviews are more likely to challenge the articulated views, as participants bring forward issues that are important to them, argue for them and maybe change their views. Thus, focus group interviews reflect the process through which meaning is constructed in everyday life (Bryman & Bell, 2011). For the interaction to succeed, participants should be selected carefully in order for the group dynamics to work. The quality of focus group data is very much affected by the extent to which focus group

participants feel comfortable about openly communicating their views, experiences and opinions (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). "Naturally forming groups", i.e. groups of people who already know each other as friends, colleagues or through a common hobby are particularly found to be relaxed and at ease in conversation (Bryman, 2004).

Thus, for the current study, five groups of six to ten middle managers and management consultants working in municipality departments in Denmark were selected for focus group interviews. The main inclusion criterion for participants of the focus groups was employment as HR consultant and middle manager in a municipality. Further selection criteria were "maximum variance" in terms of educational background, years of employment, age and sex. From the perspective of more conventional research, the collection of data involved in qualitative research and particularly in discourse analysis is often viewed as problematic, largely because the sample size is thought to be too small to permit generalization of results beyond the sample (Bryman & Bell, 2011). However, since the focus of discourse analysis is language use rather than language users, the most likely problem for the discourse analyst is that the sample is too large rather than too small (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Thus, while discourse analysis gives careful attention to questions of sample identification, sample size and generalizability, it considers these aspects in relation to criteria for warranting the research and thus differs from more conventional research.

The focus group interview followed an open-ended interview structure allowing for follow-up questions that involve and invite elaborations and comparisons (Wood & Kroger, 2000). The interviews lasted approximately between one and two hours. The researcher moderating the focus group interview emphasized before and during the interview that all views, experiences and ideas were welcome, since the purpose of the interview was to explore the articulation and conceptualization of strategy in public sector management in its diversity.

Since the current study focus is on depicting underlying conceptual structures and revealing how strategy making is given discursive legitimacy in public sector organizations, we have taken a deconstructive approach to the analysis of the focus group interview data (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Borrowing the idea of "deconstruction" from Derrida—i.e. a combination of destruction and construction, this

approach involves destruction of a dominant understanding of a text and allowing for constructions of alternative understandings.

Generally speaking, deconstruction is an approach to critical analysis of texts that emphasizes inquiry into the variability of meanings and messages as well as the assumptions implicit in specific forms of expression (Wood & Kroger, 2000). In a deconstructive analysis, language is not considered a neutral medium of description but comprises institutionalized structures of meaning that prescribe thought and action in certain directions. Thus, a deconstructive analysis does not search for a genuine or stable meaning of such a concept as strategy but reveals the presuppositions and normative assumptions of specific concepts and conceptions (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006).

A deconstructive approach, therefore, does not follow pre-specified procedures. Consequently, deconstruction is not a method in terms of a set of mechanical operations or procedures, as this would reduce deconstruction to a prejudicial procedure that only finds what it sets out to find (Derrida, 1981; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). A guiding principle, however, is to look for tensions within concepts. Thus, a deconstructive analysis concentrates on tensions and breaks in discussions and texts, and on what specific concepts purport to say as well as what is not said because of being excluded by the use of specific concepts and conceptions (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). By continuously seeking differences, counter-perspectives and alternative conceptions—not with a view to suggesting ideals, but to provide meaningful contrasts—it is possible to identify different discursive strategies in the way in which empirical phenomena are conceptualized and interpreted.

Consequently, deconstruction is not an analysis in the traditional sense of breaking up a text into its elemental component parts, since in a deconstructive analysis there are no self-sufficient units of meaning in discussions or texts. Instead, differences govern the production of textual meaning. Words can never fully summon forth what they mean, but can only be defined through appeal to additional words from which they differ. This is because individual words or sentences can only be properly understood in terms of how they fit into the larger conceptual and discursive structures (Wood & Kroger, 2000).

A TYPOLOGY OF STRATEGY DISCOURSES IN PUBLIC SECTOR ORGANIZATIONS

The participants in the focus group interviews draw on a complex network of concepts when they talk about strategy making in public sector organizations. Our analysis of the focus group interviews indicates numerous conceptualizations of strategy and strategy making, i.e. conceptualizations that are cultural tropes which influence the ways in which specific articulations are constructed in such a way as to provide order and reinforce a truth (Boje, 2001). Often, however, they are not presented as "chronotopes", i.e. as specific articulations of narrative such as romantic, chivalric, idyllic etc., but rather as an "ante-narrative", i.e. as a fragmented articulation of narratives that may or may not reproduce or create meanings in a given context (Boje, 2001, 2008).

In the first step of our analysis, we identify four different ideal strategy discourses. We label these a "rationalist" discourse, a "structuralist" discourse, an "idealist" discourse and a "constructivist" discourse shown in table 1.

Tabel 1: Types of strategy discourses in public sector organizations

	A rationalist discourse	A structuralist discourse	An idealist discourse	A constructivist discourse
Character	Rational activity	Structural response	Organizational commitment	Corporate identity
Focus	Internal dynamic	Structural forces	Organizational ideals	Identity construction

A "rationalist" strategy discourse

A dominant discourse on strategizing often expressed in the focus group interviews is a story about strategy in public sector organizations as being necessary, as it expresses a

rational response to the dynamic forces within public service. Talking about strategy in public management in general, one of the interviewees states that:

A sound strategy is supposed to lead the organization through changes and shifts to secure its future growth and sustainable success. It directs an organization toward citizens' needs and wants in the future.

(Consultant A)

In this quote, the interviewee expresses the view that strategizing in an elderly care organization is a rational activity, because it is—and should be—driven by the internal, dynamic logic of public sector organizations. Public services typically involve knowledge-intensive work and high-tech equipment; thus, they continuously change in both their goals and means, due to changes in professional competencies and technological opportunities. Consequently, public managers have to make a strategic effort. For instance, an interviewee states that:

Our elderly care centers are facing changing times. The group of elderly people is changing and their needs and wants are changing too. Thus, elderly care centers have to consider the needs and wants of the elderly people of the future and respond strategically. The centers cannot let things stay just as they are today, but have to be prepared for the elderly of tomorrow.

(Consultant B)

In this quote, the interviewee expresses the view that public managers in elderly care centers continuously seek to take appropriate action to reconfigure the organization in order to make it suitably aligned to its changing organizational niche. Again, this draws on a rationalistic discourse on strategizing in public management. Put simply, changes in public services such as elderly care create a need for new strategies regarding organizational processes, technologies and competencies. Strategy in an elderly care organization should focus on the

continuous development and effective exploitation of the resources and competencies in the organization.

This view draws on what we label a "rationalist" discourse on strategy in public sector organizations. According to this discourse, strategizing in public management is a rational response to the dynamic logic of public services. What counts as a "rational" response and a "sound" strategy may be subject to debate, but generally, it is regarded as a matter of being grounded in analyses of the productivity and efficiency of the performance of the organization. As such, it can be analyzed and decided rationally, for instance by applying strategic techniques such as performance measures and evaluation of competencies. Such strategic techniques are rational in the sense of being objects of rational analysis, decision-making and monitoring.

This strategizing discourse, then, highlights the importance of a fit between changes in public services and the internal capabilities of public sector organizations. Strategizing in a public sector organization should guide the effective exploitation and continuous development of resources and competencies in the organization. This discourse is thus very functionalistic, i.e. it suggests that the strategy drives, dominates and determines an organization. The chain of cause and effect is conceived to be linear and simple.

A "structuralist" strategy discourse

The rationalist discourse described above is very dominant in the interviews. However, the interviewees do not only talk about strategy in public sector organizations in accordance with this rationalist strategizing discourse. The focus group interviews also entail an alternative discourse, according to which strategizing is necessary because of the response to structural forces outside public sector organizations that they have to adapt to. For instance, one of the interviewees states that:

For several years now, we have been witnessing decreased budgets in the municipality sector. And we are expecting continuing decreases in budgets in the coming years. Thus, our organizations must prepare for this. […] Managers

should respond strategically to changes in the economic and political situation.

(Consultant A)

In this quote, the interviewee expresses the view that strategizing in public management is a necessary response to the external structures of an organization, for instance changing economic and political structures. When the economic cycle generates growth or new political ideas grow—or the opposite—managers must be prepared for this and respond strategically. This view draws on what we label a "structuralist" strategizing discourse in public sector organizations. According to this discourse, strategizing in public management is a structurally necessary response to external forces that the individual manager cannot influence, such as economic and political structures. Such structural necessities follow structural patterns, for instance a pendulum pattern, as structural forces shift back and forth.

Thus, in the structuralist discourse, it is not internal organizational factors but external structural factors—external conditions and constraints in the environment—that are considered to be vital. The potential and possibilities of public sector organizations are determined by the structure of the public economy and the political environment within which it is operating. The external structures set the limits for what public managers can do. Public managers must thus understand the structural forces that impinge upon them, and they must adapt to them strategically. Although public sector organizations such as elderly care centers typically do not exist in competitive markets, they must nonetheless consider the external structures in their environment. Furthermore, they have become subject to marketization and ranking in league tables, which have the effect of a market. Only organizations that operate along strategies for adapting to their environment can remain successful.

There is a strong Darwinian flavor here. Only those organizations that respond in an appropriate way to the changing structures of public sector organizations are sure to survive. Organizations that do not have a (sound) strategy will fail and eventually die out.

An "idealist" strategy discourse

The focus group interviews show that not all strategy making in public management is based on an idea of logical analysis of forces, either internal dynamics or external structures. On the contrary, in the face of the very strong value base of many public professionals, especially within health and elderly care, strategizing in elderly care centers is based on a commitment to specific (professional) values and visions. Talking about strategizing in public management in general, one of the interviewees states that:

> Strategy is about articulating and creating enthusiasm about the work. It is about having a drive and inspiring professionals with this drive, thus spreading it in the organization. It is about articulating the values and visions that professionals are working—sometimes fighting—for.

> (Middle manager B)

In this quote, the interviewee expresses the view that strategy in public sector organizations does not (only) require logical analysis of internal or external forces, but rather involves ideals, i.e. values and visions. This view draws on what we label an "idealist" strategizing discourse in public sector organizations. According to this discourse, strategizing is about relating to the ideas and ideals of professionals in order to engage and commit them to the organization. For instance, elderly care involves basic ideas and ideals about care, quality of life, respectful relationships etc. The task of a strategy in public sector organizations, then, is to provide meaning, not only literary meaning, but a "deeper" meaning as well, by formulating mission and vision statements.

According to this idealist strategizing discourse, strategy making in public sector organizations is about managing meaning, i.e. about presenting and promoting a mission and vision. Public managers do not achieve their strategic goals in isolation. They need to engage and commit the members of the organization. Persuading organization members to adopt a particular strategy often relies on the presentation of the strategy. The character of the presentation (and presenter) is critical to successful strategies. One interviewee states that:

Professionals have to believe in a strategy if it is to work. Thus, strategy is about belief—not only belief in the strategy, but also and maybe more importantly belief in the strategist, that is, the manager. To follow the strategy, you have to want to follow this person.

(Consultant D)

In this quote, the interviewee expresses the view that the public manager as a person is trustworthy. Following a strategy is about exactly that: being a follower, being a believer. Why you believe and follow is not important. The important thing is that you believe. Thus, strategy in public management in this discourse is basically about belief, i.e. conviction and commitment.

A "constructivist" strategy discourse

Finally, the interviewees also talk about strategy in public management in a way that is tightly associated with identity construction, i.e. with creating a distinct identity or a brand value. For instance, one of the interviewees states that:

Strategy is about showing the world who you are and what you want. It is about giving the organization a distinct identity.

(Consultant E)

Here, the interviewee expresses the view that strategy in public management is oriented toward externally, emotionally driven processes of identity construction. This view draws on what we label a "constructivist" strategizing discourse in public sector organizations. It stresses strategizing as a means of constructing a distinct image and identity that distinguishes an organization. Identity construction is tightly associated with distinguishing or distancing oneself from others. What strategizing may do is provide an organization or a manager (or both) with a clear identity that is distinct and distances the organization from others—or a previous one. Such a strategy offers the possibility of establishing or maintaining a distinct identity that clearly distinguishes an organization from others. In this case, strategy making is not based on logical analysis,

but on more or less emotional identity construction processes that are primarily externally oriented.
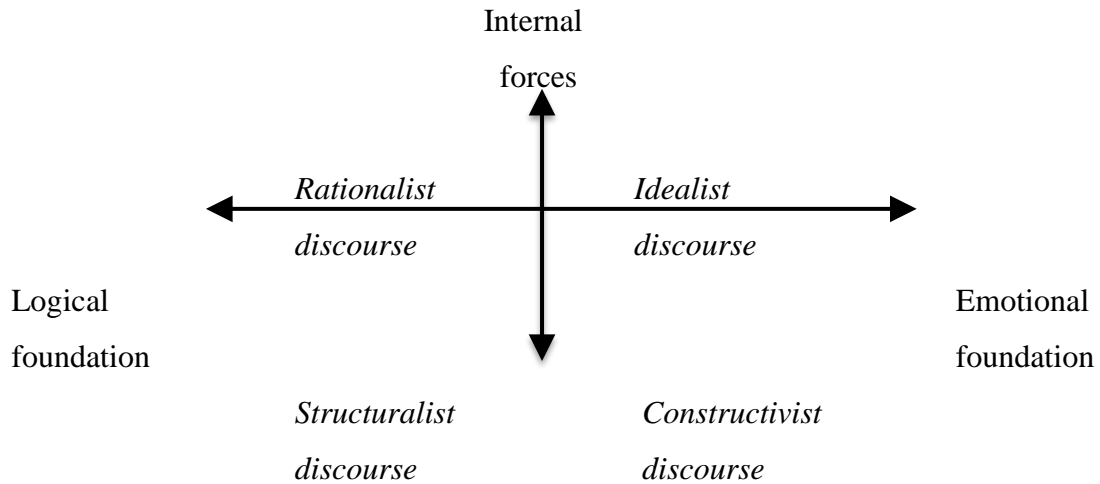
Strategizing offers possibilities to maintain—or re-establish—some distance between oneself and others or a previous version of oneself. Strategizing offers the opportunity to present an organization or a person as "the leading edge". Sometimes the identity is simply having a strategy at all. In that case, it is not the importance of the strategy, but the image of a strategic and innovative organization with the ability to change direction when the management finds it necessary.

Thus, according to this discourse, strategy is made for the sake of strategy. Public managers engage in strategizing, because they want to differentiate the organization and themselves. Therefore, paradoxically, we have seen strategizing in public sector organizations increase in tempo as differences between organizations have decreased, and the urge to define a distinct identity and create distance from other organizations through strategy continuously emerges.

TENSIONS IN STRATEGY DISCOURSE IN PUBLIC SECTOR ORGANIZATIONS

Having identified four dominant strategy discourses, the second step in the analysis involves seeking differences and counter-perspectives. In keeping with the deconstructive approach taken here, we identify two dimensions. One dimension is based on a distinction regarding the character of the foundation of strategy. This is a distinction between a focus on "logical" or "emotional" foundations. Another dimension is based on a distinction regarding the character of the forces that drive strategy development. This distinction is between an emphasis on internal forces or external forces. Combining these dimensions as axes in a matrix, we get the following model of discursive structures of strategy in public sector organizations (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Strategy discourses in public sector organizations

Internal
forces

Rationalist   Idealist
discourse   discourse

Logical   Emotional
foundation   foundation

Structuralist   Constructivist
discourse   discourse

According to the structuralist discourse, strategizing in public sector organizations is legitimized by the need to adapt to changing external forces, for instance economic and political structures. This way of thinking about strategy is concerned with what an organization *should* do. What matters is to understand and exploit the opportunities and limitations in the field. Although such public sector organizations as elderly care centers typically do not exist in markets, they must, according to the focus group interviews take into account the structures of the field in which they operate. This way of thinking is related to New Public Management (NPM), i.e. the incorporation of private sector principles, such as competitiveness into the public sector (Hood, 1991; Lane, 2000). According to this discourse, elderly people—like primary school pupils, hospital patients and train passengers—have become customers. Many public sector organizations, such as elderly care centers, hospitals, schools, councils etc. articulate strategies using private sector strategy terminology. They have become subject to competition through marketization and ranking in league tables, which have a market effect.

The rationalist strategizing discourse differs from the structuralist strategizing discourse by emphasizing the internal dynamics of public sector organizations as the primary strategic concern. According to this discourse, strategizing in public sector

organizations is legitimized be the continuous need to develop professional competencies and technological opportunities. Public services continuously change, in both their goals and means, due to changes in professional competencies and technological opportunities. Consequently, public managers have to make a strategic effort to secure this development. This way of thinking argues that internal resources and capabilities determine competitive advantage far more than external structures and market position. It is thus concerned with what an organization *can* do in order to secure an appropriate development of competencies and technologies.

The idealist strategizing discourse, on the other hand, differs from the rationalist strategizing discourse by emphasizing the commitment to specific (professional) values and visions as an organization's primary strategic concern. According to this discourse, strategizing in public sector organizations is legitimized by the values and visions of professionals. The development of a shared vision is seen as an important strategic task in order to create commitment and consensus in the organization. This way of thinking about strategizing is concerned with what organization members *value* doing. What matters is that people are emotionally engaged, that they believe in and value what they are doing, and that the contribution they make brings psychological satisfaction, something more than simple basic rewards.

Finally, the constructivist strategizing discourse differs from the idealist strategy discourse by emphasizing strategy as a means of constructing a distinct or separate identity that distinguishes an organization. According to this discourse, strategizing in public sector organizations is legitimized be the new terrain, new possibilities and new realities it creates for the organization´s stakeholders. This way of thinking about strategizing is concerned with what the stakeholders in an organization *want* to do. What matters is to be unique and different. Identity construction is characterized by ideologically based choices. Strategy is an identity story that articulates answers to the question: Who are we striving to be, i.e. what do we want to become? Strategizing in this case is about constructing appearances.

In the following, we discuss, in terms of the main concerns, the linkages between the strategy discourses in public sector organizations and in the body of literature on strategic management. We conclude the section by presenting directions for further research.

CONCERNS OF STRATEGY IN PUBLIC SECTOR ORGANIZATIONS

This study set out to explore how strategy is conceptualized in public sector organizations. The findings lay out a discursive structure of strategy discourses that illuminates how specific discourses stress certain aspects more than others do. Thus, the discourses complement each other, but they are at the same time contradictory and competing with regard to how to understand and approach strategy in public management. This does not mean, however, that the discourses are incompatible in practice. Public managers can draw on several or all of the discourses when talking about strategy making.

As mentioned above, the participants in the focus group interviews refer to the body of literature on strategic management, especially the more popular and practically oriented parts of the literature. Most notably, the participants make explicit references to the work of Michael Porter (Porter & Caves, 1980; Porter, 1998) and the so-called positioning school (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 2008). In particular, Porter´s model of the five forces that determine the success of an organization in its environment is mentioned in relation to the "structuralistic" strategy discourse we describe above. This way of thinking about strategy offers some of the key concepts associated with strategic management in the dominant literature. It represents the strategic management orthodoxy (Carter, Clegg, & Kornberger, 2008). More specifically, it represents the dominant rhetoric of economics, which takes the view of the "gnomic present" (McCloskey, 1985), a present tense in which time and place are irrelevant, as the laws of economics are considered universal. Framing an organization´s strategy according to the structures of its environment assumes that the environment is relatively static or fixed. While this might be the case in some sectors, it is not the case in others. The purpose of strategy is to secure competitive advantage that will optimize the organization´s position. This way of thinking about strategy in public management can thus be characterized as an outside-in approach. An essential requirement for an effective strategy is the availability of descriptions of the environment and forecasts of future changes and the consequences of proposed actions to deal with these changes.

The participants also make explicit references to other bodies of literature. Especially, in relation to the "rationalistic" strategy discourse described above, several interviewees

make reference to the resource-based view (Penrose, 1959) and the VRIN-model developed within this school, which suggests that the strategic concern of an organization is to develop valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable and not easily substitutable resources and capabilities (Barney, 1991). Like Porter and the positioning or "structuralistic" way of thinking, this resource-oriented or "rationalistic" way of thinking has had a significant impact on strategizing. However, it represents a counterpart to Porter´s and other economics-based approaches. It is not external industry factors but internal organizational factors that are vital. Internal capabilities are what enable an organization to exploit external opportunities. In other words, competitive advantage is a matter of superior ability to develop and exploit core competencies and resources. Strategy, however, is not simply about matching resources to the requirements of the environment, but about creating environments by using resources creatively and continually renewing and transforming the organization. This way of thinking about strategy is concerned with what an organization *can* do. What matters is exploiting and developing the resources of an organization. Strategically driven organizations seek to develop an irreplaceable array of competencies. Instead of focusing on the external conditions and constraints in the environment, this view suggests that strategy should be concerned with organization´s core competencies. Accordingly, an organization´s strategy focuses on its unique, internal resources. The internal resources produce the products and services and, hence, determine the performance of an organization.

A third body of literature that is referred to in relation to the "visionary" strategy discourse is however only implicitly part of the literature. It focuses on vision and mission statements (e.g. Scott, C., Jaffe, D. & Toke, G. (1993)). This part of the strategic management literature questions the rational techniques of decision-making and control, and points to the importance of motivation and beliefs, thus stressing the importance of leadership, collaboration and organizational culture based on common values and visions. Their prescription is to paint an attractive vision of the future, promote a few common values and convert people to believing in the vision and sharing the values. What matters is having a clear mission and being visionary. At the heart of an organization is a core labor force that can be more or less committed to the work. A strategy has to appear reasonable and be acceptable if it is to succeed. The strategy must make sense and the consequences must be attractive, or at least acceptable, for powerful

groupings within an organization. Thus, strategies are a means of orientation—not in the simple way that they tell you exactly where you are and where you should go—but in the way that they can give confidence and commit people, i.e. make them want to go in specific directions.

The fourth and final strategy discourse identified from the focus group interviews is concerned with externally oriented identity construction. This discourse is related to the part of the body of literature that emphasizes corporate identity (e.g. Ackerman, 2000), strategy concerned with imposing (new) identity. Through strategy, an organization can present itself. This way of thinking is marked by the use of binary categories targeted at disestablishing the other—either other organizations or the history of the organization itself. A recent example of this way of thinking is Tom Peters' *Re-imagine* (2003). Peters presents a "revolutionary" approach as a process of intuitive leaps of understanding to combat established social hegemony. Peters accentuates a "them and us" dualistic mentality: "Out with the old, in with the new"—new technology, new people, new organization, new markets, new customers etc. Such a process of articulation of binary categories is subject to renegotiation and a contestation of meaning. Rather than strategy being able to determine an organization´s future, the usefulness of a strategy rests more in its capacity to provide symbolic manifestations that frame and shape the dominant identity of the organization, generating distinctions and discriminations. Such a symbolic order is never stable and fixed but always an effect of previous and current relations in which actors seek to define their identity.

PRACTITIONERS, PRACTICES AND THE PRAXIS OF STRATEGY IN PUBLIC SECTOR ORGANIZATIONS

The linkages between strategy discourses in public sector organizations and discourses on strategy in the body of literature on strategic management are discussed above. The result is a complementary and contradictory set of discursive structures subject to continuous negotiations as to their meaning and application. In this section, we suggest directions for further research.

First, further research should be conducted to elaborate the preliminary theoretical framework presented here. The focus group presents a limitation in the methodology of the study. Future research would benefit from using a multi-method approach, for

instance including observations on how strategy making is given discursive legitimacy in public sector organizations.

Second, further research should be conducted to elaborate on strategy *making* or strategizing. As mentioned in the introduction, researchers in strategy have begun to draw on theories of practice to re-evaluate the way in which strategy has been researched to date and to consider strategy as a human activity through the lens of social practice. As a general research approach, strategy-as-practice research has taken issue with traditional views on strategy and suggested that it should be thought of as something that people *do* (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Johnson et al., 2007). Taking this approach, Whittington (2006) has developed a conceptual framework spanning micro and macro levels of organization. He argues that a practice perspective on strategy should incorporate consideration of how strategy makers or "practitioners" (e.g. senior managers and consultants) draw on more or less institutionalized strategic "practices" (e.g. techniques and tactics) in idiosyncratic and creative ways in their strategy "praxis" (e.g. such strategy activities as meetings and retreats) to generate what is conceived of as strategy. This conceptual framework can be used to guide further research into the different notions as well as the linkages between them. Thus, further research into strategy making in public sector organizations should draw special attention to the key roles of *practitioners*. The focus group study presented here draws attention to middle managers and HR consultants as strategy makers; however, strategy practitioners are a wide-ranging group of actors who are involved in some way in the process of defining and carrying out strategy within their organization. Traditionally, the strategy literature has looked at the top of organizational structures, at the corporate management level, to locate strategists; but if we take a strategy-as-practice approach to strategy making in public sector organizations, who exactly are these people and how do they come to understand their role? Discourse analysis suggests that the traditional strategy literature is contributing to reproducing hierarchy in organizations (Fenton & Langley, 2011). More broadly, it suggests that discourse creates or implies "subject positions" associated with certain power and knowledge claims. However, more research is needed into both individual´s articulations of strategy and broader organizational conceptualizations surrounding the notion of strategy making in public sector organizations in order to gain a better understanding of *who* is being constructed as a legitimate strategy maker or practitioner and what this means. This kind of research

addresses such questions as: Who are strategy makers in public sector organizations? How are the roles of strategy makers in public sector organizations constructed, defined and reinterpreted?

Further research should be conducted to elaborate on the various strategic *practices* that strategy practitioners engage in. Whittington (2006, p. 619) defines strategy practices as "shared routines of behavior, including traditions, norms and procedures for thinking, acting and using things." Practices, then, are forms of behavior with regard to strategy that have become institutionalized, such as the SWOT analysis and various competitive analyses, as well as various practices of mission and vision formulation. Such practices have become embedded in mainstream strategy making. They can therefore be seen as having a degree of stability and routineness in an organizational setting that legitimates certain ways of doing strategy, although they may vary in their specific performance. More research into strategic practices in public sector organizations is needed however, in order to gain a better understanding of *what* is being constructed as a legitimate strategic practice and what this means. This kind of research addresses such questions as: What does strategy making in public sector organizations involve? How are strategic practices in public sector organizations constructed, defined and reinterpreted?

Finally, further research should be conducted to elaborate on strategizing as a specific form of *praxis*. Strategy praxis refers to what practitioners actually do in their particular everyday activities as they engage in strategic practices. Strategy *praxis* is strategy making *in vivo* and thus differs from strategy practices by being context-specific (Fenton & Langley, 2011). This *praxis* involves interactions and conversations among strategy makers in strategy meetings, seminars, sessions and informal settings. The complexity of interactions and conversations makes it evident that capturing all of what is actually done in strategy making *in vivo* is elusive (Samra-Fredericks, 2004). However, more research into strategy *praxis* in public sector organizations is needed to gain a better understanding of *how* strategizing is being constructed as a legitimate strategy *praxis* and what this means. This kind of research addresses such questions as "When and where is strategy making in public sector organizations legitimate?" and "How is strategy *praxis* in public sector organizations constructed, defined and reinterpreted?".

CONCLUSIONS : CONTRIBUTION AND LIMITATIONS

During recent decades, strategic concerns—along with other private sector principles and policies—have spread into public sector management and fueled the growth of strategic practices in public sector organizations. Today, strategy is generally considered vital to effective and efficient public service delivery and successful leadership. Thus, management in schools, hospitals and councils now invest much effort into strategizing.

This study's aim is to examine the discursive structures of strategy discourses in public sector organizations. It studies the linkages between strategy discourses in public sector organizations and discourses on strategy. As we are interested in how strategy making is given discursive legitimacy in public sector organizations, we have used a qualitative approach to data collection. More specifically, we collected data from five focus group interviews. Using a deconstructive approach, i.e. by focusing on tensions and breaks, counter-perspectives and alternative conceptions, we identify how strategizing in public sector organizations is legitimized in different ways with reference to (more or less) logical or emotional foundations as well as to (more or less) external or internal forces. Combining these dimensions in a simple matrix, we can identify and classify four different (ideal typical) strategy discourses in which strategic communication can take place. We label these "rationalist" discourse, "structuralist" discourse, "idealist" discourse and "constructivist" discourse. The discourses complement each other; they are not necessarily incompatible in practice. Rather, strategy makers can draw on several or all of the discourses in public sector organizations as well as the body of literature on strategic management related to them.

The study thus makes a first contribution to an analysis of the discursive structures of strategy in public management by suggesting a framework and thereby a first step toward a more coherent body of knowledge concerning how internal constituents create and exchange meaning among each other. Further research should be conducted to elaborate the preliminary theoretical framework presented here. First, future research would benefit from using a multi-method approach, for instance including observations

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on how the discursive structures of strategy are made available as resources in strategy practices. Second, further research could benefit from exploring the framework developed by Whittington (2006), spanning the practitioners, practices and *praxis* of strategizing in public sector organizations. Thus, further research should explore *who* is being constructed as a legitimate strategy maker; *what* is being constructed as legitimate strategic practice; and *how* strategy making is being constructed as legitimate strategy *praxis*. This could lead to a better understanding of how strategy is made, implemented and discussed in public sector organizations and maybe inspire strategy work in general.

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