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Developing a Discursive Practice Perspective to the Study of Strategy Implementation in a Local Government Setting

A Developmental Paper for British Academy of Management Conference 2019

TITLE:

Developing a Discursive Practice Perspective to the Study of Strategy Implementation in a Local Government Setting

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

“If you remember just one word from my speech today, I want it to be this one. It begins with an ‘I’... The word I want you to remember is this - inclusion. Inclusion is the guiding principle for everything we do. It encapsulates what we stand for as a party and it describes the kind of country we want Scotland to be.”

Address from the First Minister of Scotland and leader of the Scottish Government, Nicola Sturgeon, to the Scottish National Party Conference. October 2016.

The above statement by Scotland’s First Minister elicits many questions, but those central to this research concern how the Government’s stated priority of inclusion translates into local workplace practices. How is ‘inclusive growth’ as contained in its Economic Strategy, framed, interpreted and translated through the medium of local economic strategies? How are competing discourses manifested in group collaborative practices in local government? How do multiple framings of strategic objectives influence the effectiveness of implementation processes? How are the practices connected with the monitoring of the performance of local strategies understood through a discourse-analytical lens?

With a multiplicity of interpretive frameworks available to address such questions and a lack of discourse- and practice-based studies in local government settings, I face a challenge in constructing a sound methodology. In this developmental paper, I provide a brief overview of the rationale and theoretical framework for the research, review selected findings from my initial literature review, and outline my evolving thinking on methodology. Over the months ahead, I plan to develop this paper through the collection of material from the field of practice and develop the methodology and methods further. I also plan to develop my capacity for self-reflection and address positionality.

2.0 RATIONALE AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

In the wake of the global financial downturn of 2008, political and public concerns about poverty and widening inequality have intensified. (Lee et al., 2014; RSA, 2017; Mazzucato, 2018). In parallel, diverse global and local commentators have drawn attention to the inequitable consequences of the dominant economic system and the need for new and more ‘inclusive’ models of economic growth (Commission on Growth and Development, 2008; Turok, 2011; OECD, 2015). In Scotland, macro-level political movements have created a sense of growing difference between the Scottish and UK Government approaches to the economy (McGarvey, 2011). At the same time, the legitimacy and role of local government continues to be debated (Pike et al., 2011; Bentley & Pugalis, 2013). Into this turbulent environment, ‘inclusive growth’, has become an expressed priority in policy circles (Waite et al., 2017; Lee, 2018). The research therefore begins with a question prominent in the researcher’s own professional field: how is inclusive growth to be implemented?

Inclusive growth is variously defined in a literature which is still limited in scope. The Scottish Government characterise it as: fair work; an inclusive labour market; tackling inequality; and achieving more equal growth (Scottish Government, 2015). This research theorises inclusive growth as an emergent policy discourse overlapping with other, more dominant, discourses. Researchers have already pointed to the potential for conflicting policy narratives (Turok, 2011;

Waite, 2017; Lee, 2018). There is however, a choice of theoretical perspectives on discursive struggle. Inclusive growth, like other solution-oriented policy concepts, can be viewed as a challenge to powerful discourses, but may also be reconciled with them using framing and other rhetorical moves (Howarth and Griggs, 2012; Mckeown and Glenn, 2017).

The research is both exploratory and critical, enhancing existing implementation and practice theory and exploring new directions. I aim to:

- Explore how strategy implementation can be studied as translation, applying translation theory to the study of policy travel from central government, to local government, to local practices
- Expand the range of possibilities for the Strategy-as-Practice field through study within the politicised environment of local government
- Contribute to the emerging critical perspectives on inclusive growth and its relation to other discourses.

3.0 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The approach to the research focusses on how embodied practices are enabled and constrained by the invisible ‘rules’ embedded in discourse, theorised here as a strategic resource (Vaara et al., 2010; Hardy & Thomas, 2014). An important influence is the discourse theory of Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1972 [2002]), emphasising rules and routines, interconnected practices, and power relations within a professional field. Researchers have stressed the usefulness of Foucault’s theory of discursive practices (Bacchi & Bonham, 2014), contrasting with more linguistically-orientated schools of discourse theory (Wodak and Meyer, 2009; Fairclough, 2015). The emphasis on material reality I find compelling as my own professional practice deals with real social problems. I therefore adopt Maarten Hajer’s practice-oriented definition of discourse as “an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices” (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p. 175). This perspective holds that discourse analysis creates the possibility of giving explanatory force to action and non-action (Paul, 2009), hence the connection with implementation.

Adopting a practice-based ontology, the research treats practices as “historically and geographically recurring localized occurrences” (Nicolini, 2013, p.10). The recursive nature of practices has established a literature linking practice theory to discourse and setting it within a diverse family of practice-based approaches stemming from such thinkers as Wittgenstein, Bourdieu and Giddens, as well as Foucault (see for example Reckwitz, 2002; Corradi et al.; Nicolini & Monteiro, 2017, for different perspectives).

4.0 STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

An early issue in my research was how the distinction between strategy and policy in the government field should be addressed. There are extensive literatures on both strategy and policy, yet little overlap. Although Joyce (2015) suggests interchangeability of terms, I contend that the meanings associated with ‘strategy’ and ‘policy’ are discursively different. This is at least in part due to the ‘importation’ of strategy as part of the ‘new public management’ paradigm (NPM) which encourages ‘business-like’ behaviours in government (Hansen & Ferlie, 2016; Bryson, 2016). Therefore, theorising strategy as a discourse, suggests that local government strategies not only hold symbolic importance (Stewart, 2004) but also legitimize certain practices, for example the setting of targets and measurement of ‘results’. Strategy as discourse also constructs practitioner subject

positions through performative practices. (Rasche & Chia, 2009; Jarzabkowski et al., 2015). Reflecting the terminology in use by government, I therefore frame the research as a local government *strategy* process rather than a *policy* process. Notwithstanding, I draw on literatures from both the Strategy-as-Practice tradition (Barry & Elmes, 1997; Whittington et al., 2003; Carter et al., 2007;) and the interpretive policy analysis school (Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003; Colebatch, 2009; Fischer & Gottweis, 2012).

Strategy in this context concerns ‘place-based’ (as opposed to ‘place-neutral’) strategies which have become associated with the principles of inclusive growth (Barca et al., 2012). The content of local government economic strategies tends to reproduce a standard repertoire of topics: business support; skills development; growing local capital, and attracting investment (Travers, 2011; Baars, 2014). Increasingly, what might be considered social policy is appearing in the narratives. Importantly for this research however, the discourse of place competitiveness has been consistent and remains dominant (Bristow, 2005; Etherington & Jones, 2009; Cochrane, 2011; O’Brien & Pike, 2015). Consequently, researchers have argued that the tendency of governments is to construct dual objective policies aimed at reconciling conflicting objectives (Howarth & Griggs, 2012). This is exemplified in the Scottish Government’s expressed intent to increase competitiveness *and* tackle inequality. (Scottish Government, 2015). It reflects the suggestion that part of the inclusive growth narrative is to avoid the need for difficult trade-offs (Lee, 2018). Whether the translation of inclusive growth is indeed changing discursive practices or having little impact, is an interesting question for my research.

In choosing an appropriate theoretical lens through which to study strategy implementation, my initial review of the concept of translation appears to hold considerable promise in illuminating how policy ‘travels between different levels of government. (Waldorff, 2013; Mukhtarov, 2014; Allouche, 2016). In Richard Freeman’s useful exploration of translation, he notes considerable overlap with implementation, if implementation is regarded as “a process of evolution, mutual adaptation, even exploration”. (Freeman, 2009, p. 431). Authors agree that translation goes well beyond policy transfer or interpretation, encompassing meaning and sense-making in local contexts (Yanow, 2004; Lendvai & Stubbs, 2007; Freeman, 2009). The links between translation and discourse are underdeveloped, although translations may reproduce or change dominant discourses (Freeman, 2009).

5.0 EMERGING METHODOLOGY

Researchers have argued for discourse perspectives to be applied more frequently in the public policy field. (Sharp & Richardson, 2001; Hewitt, 2009; Paul, 2009). While there have been useful discourse-analytical studies on strategy, approaches tend to focus on the firm (Samra-Fredericks, 2003; MacIntosh & Beech, 2011), or language-in-use in the Critical Discourse Analysis tradition (Flowerdew, 2004; Mantere & Vaara, 2008). This has led to calls for practice-based studies to employ a wider range of resources than language (Fenton & Langley, 2011; Jarzabkowski et al., 2015); and to make more use of ethnographic approaches (Rasche & Chia, 2009; Czaraniawska, 2014).

The literature gaps in methodology and local government settings therefore offer a wide range of options. The questions in this research involving the study of a new phenomenon - inclusive growth - and the aim of uncovering tacit practices in implementation, suggest the suitability of ethnographic methods, particularly as they are underused in public administration (Boll & Rhodes, 2015; Capellaro, 2016). The emerging methodology therefore preferences ethnographic approaches for the collection of field material, informed by the perspectives outlined earlier on translation and discourse-informed theory. Theory and method are intertwined and the research methods will

necessarily be iterative. My own ‘insider knowledge’ brings advantages, risks and ethical issues which are integral to the methodology (Bruskin, 2018).

6.0 CONCLUSIONS

By focusing on ‘how’ questions, rather than causality or linear processes, this research sets out to reach a different kind of understanding of strategy implementation in local government. The theoretical framework is suited to the contextual complexities of strategy implementation processes in the politicised environment of local government where practices may be contradictory and interpretations divergent.

Given its topicality, inclusive growth, understood as an emergent discourse, provides an appropriate lens through which to study strategy implementation practices. The blending of discourse, practice, translation and framing theory, and use of organisational ethnographic approaches are rare in this context. Consequently, there are few similar studies on which to draw and the developmental challenge is to construct a coherent methodology and methods which will inform the ongoing literature review and help achieve focus.

(1762 words)

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