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Government revival and Public sector employees' agency

Short paper submitted to EGOS 2014

Sub-theme 6 (SWG): Reconceptualizing Contemporary Public Services Organizations

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Abstract:

In the Public management debate on a post/beyond New Public Management phase, there has been a stream of research on public sector employees. Our paper investigates the role of public sector employees in the actual “government revival”. Strategy as Practice appears as a particularly relevant framework to analyze how the study of the micro activity of public sector employees can enlighten our understanding of the making of the public policy strategy making. Our research question is: how do practitioners, middle managers but also employees without a managerial role, individually and as groups, contribute to strategy-making of public policies?

On the basis of an in-depth case study in a public administration in charge of the implementation of environmental public policies, we argue that not only middle managers' agency is crucial to strategy-making but also that of employees. We also propose a complementary understanding of strategic agency as regulated and organized by the group through “areas of discussion”. On this basis, we suggest that the way public sector employees operate in a context of government revival might be key to the reconfiguration of public action, and thus to the reconceptualization of public services.

Keywords: Strategy as practice; Agency; Public Management; Environmental policies; Areas of discussion

1. Public sector employees in government revival

In a review of the debate on public management reforms, Greve (Greve, 2010) summed up some of the major issues faced by the field : are we in a post or a beyond New Public Management (NPM) phase ? And, if so, is there a new model for public action ?

In 1991, Hood (1991) suggested the term of « New Public Management » to describe the insertion of values of efficacy, market and managerialism into public services. Nowadays, there is a debate among scholars on the demise of the NPM model (Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow, & Tinkler, 2005) or, on the contrary on its persistence (Lapsley, 2008, 2009).

Arguing for the demise of the NPM model in the 2000's, several scholars have formalized alternative models to the NPM one: the New Weberian State (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004), New Public Governance (Frederickson, 2005) ; the Digital-governance Era (Dunleavy et al., 2005) or Public Value Management (Alford & O'Flynn, 2009).

On this basis, in this paper, we address the « government revival » issue by replacing it within this debate on a new model for the State, which inevitably questions the concrete modalities of such a potential government revival, and which, we argue, leads to investigate the complementary issue of a possible government « renewal », ie a renewal in the forms of public action.

In studies of the implementation of/resistance to NPM in Public administrations in the 2000's, specific attention has been paid to the issue of how public sector employees were impacted and/or reacted in this new context. Various issues were addressed: the destabilization and transformation of professionals in public service organizations (Bezes et al., 2011; Ferlie & Geraghty, 2005) or the rise of experts as challengers for professionals in control of knowledge (Reed, 2003, 1996).

Our paper **investigates the role of Public sector employees in “government revival”**. It argues that, **in a context of emergence and designing of new activities, public sector employees**, individually and as groups, **contribute in a**

decisive way to strategy making, and thus, induce a « renewal » of public action. Furthermore, our paper aims at a better understanding of *how* these public sector employees contribute to the strategy making of public policies implementation.

2. Environmental public policies as a challenge for public action

Management studies (Aggeri, 1999, 2005) and Political sciences studies (Lascoumes, 2012) have argued that environmental public policies particularly challenge traditional public action. Aggeri (1999) draws the attention to the impossibility for the State to intervene in a « command and control » way since the environmental field is characterized by scientific uncertainty and a wide range of social actors questioning the legitimacy of a form of regulation produced by a single and central authority.

From this standpoint, we consider the study of public action in the environmental field as particularly relevant to the understanding of a renewal of the way public action is conceived in this stream of government revival.

3. The Strategy as practice approach to study the contribution of public sector employees to the strategy-making of public policies

The fundamental assertions of SAP are that strategy is not something firms have but something firms do (Jarzabkowski, 2004). The SAP perspective seeks to understand strategy as the work content of strategists, that is the various practices that strategists engage in (Johnson, Melin, & Whittington, 2003; Mantere, 2005; Whittington, 2003). There is a particular interest in both the micro level of individual activities and the macro level of structures, and in the way practitioners construct the link between micro and macro (Denis, Langley, & Rouleau, 2007; Mantere, 2005), with the idea that practices (routines, tools, techniques) enable and constrain the activity and are in turn reproduced in the micro-activity.

The SAP stream of research thus appears as a particularly relevant theoretical framework to study the strategy making of public policies in the environmental field, and more specifically, the way public sector employees, individually and as a group, contribute to strategy-making.

The field of SAP is often presented as a focus on 3 concepts: Practices, Praxis and Practitioners (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007; Whittington & Vaara, 2012).

Empirical studies centered on Practitioners have been recently developed, with a focus on the role and identity of middle managers (Hoon, 2007; Laine & Vaara, 2007; Mantere, 2005; Mantere, 2007; Rouleau, 2005). Some of these studies highlight two specific aspects: first, not only top managers but also middle managers have key roles in strategy-making, and particularly in the implementation of strategic change (Hoon, 2007; Rouleau, 2005); second, these middle managers have an agency that is crucial to their contribution to strategy-making (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Balogun, 2005; Mantere, 2007; Regner, 2003).

In their review, Vaara & Whittington (Whittington & Vaara, 2012) underline the state of current research on the role of managers in strategy-making and call for further research into the way other organizational actors might also contribute. On the issue of agency, they propose to « develop a nuanced understanding of strategic agency as taking place in a web of practices ».

In this context of uncertainty in public management reforms, with a specific interest in the way public sector employees operate in this situation, our research question is : **How do Practitioners (middle managers, but also employees without a managerial role), individually and as groups, contribute to strategy-making of public policies ?**

We argue that, in an emergent activity, not only do middle managers but also employees with no managerial role contribute to strategy-making. We also argue that practitioners' agency is essential to this contribution, but needs to be organized. We propose to highlight how, in the emergent phase of a new activity, « areas of discussion » (Detchessahar, 2003) in which practitioners develop a reflexive approach of their praxis enable the regulation and organization of this agency and thus, its full exercise in strategy-making.

4. Method

Our research was conducted in a Public Administration in charge of the implementation of environmental public policies (anonymized here as AdmiEnv). In an in-depth case study approach (Yin, 2003), we focused on the study of a new activity for AdmiEnv (established since 2009, anonymized here as ActEnv), and more specifically on the public sector employees in charge of this new activity (from 110 to

190 people, depending on the period and the inclusion of boundary employees) : their careers, their role, their practices and their vision of the activity.

Research settings:

ActEnv consists in a group of public sector employees in charge of evaluating if new projects of infrastructures (a road, a harbour, a mall etc.) or new plans for the territory (ex: strategic development plan of a city) take into account environmental issues and propose satisfactory solutions. The activity is an *ex ante* evaluation, concretely prepared by public sector employees, published on behalf of the « Environmental Authority ». The aim of the activity is to provide some information regarding projects' environmental issues to all stakeholders: the public, NGOs, authorities in charge of a approving or forbidding the project etc.

Act Env is a recent activity for AdmEnv: its current juridical basis was developed between 2005 and 2009 and it has been carried out in its current form since 2009.

Nonetheless, ActEnv falls within the scope of two important processes of regulation in Europe: first, a regulation that enable governments to be important actors in the protection of the Environment¹; second, the rise of the right of the public to be informed and to participate in decisions on environmental issues².

Insofar, this activity is characteristic of a government revival, through the attribution of new and increasing responsibilities to the State in Environmental protection. It is also characteristic, according to us, of a « government renewal » as it is not based on a « command and control » approach but on the public services producing information for stakeholders and in turn, inducing better projects form an environmental point of view.

Data Collection:

First, we interviewed employees in charge of ActEnv: managers, middle managers and employees with no managerial role (15). We also interviewed other civil servants of AdmiEnv, related to ActEnv but not directly in charge of this activity (11). All interviews were taped and transcribed. Interviews lasted on average about 2 hours.

On the basis of these interviews and the issues they raised, we surveyed all the employees in charge of ActEnv with questions on their role, their practices and their

¹ Maastricht Treaty (1991) (principle of high protection of the environment), Convention on Environmental impacts (ESPOO 1991), etc.

² Directive 2003/4/CE et Directive 2007/2 INSPIRE (public access to environmental information) etc.

vision of ActEnv. We also collected their resumes. We collected 70 answers and resumes (out of 110 to 190 potential answers).

We also documented the activity itself through juridic texts and internal notes.

In addition, public sector employees working on ActEnv have bi-annual meetings in which they exchange over their practices and invite other agents of AdmEnv in relation to their activity. Each meeting lasts for 1 or 2 days. We collected the proceedings of 13 meetings since 2009 and we observed one meeting.

Data analysis:

Initial analysis of the interview material was conducted in a emergent way. This is how the theme of the heterogeneity of the positions held by individuals emerged. We then explored this heterogeneity in the survey and realized an emergent coding of data to identify three different categories of positions among individuals.

To study the meetings, in an approach close to that developed by Hoon (2007) and Rouleau (2005), an analysis of the strategic conversations that have occurred in these meetings is currently in progress.

5. Findings

We do not present complete findings in this section due to the size of the short paper and the data analysis still in progress.

a) Heterogeneity in the position adopted by individuals

On the basis of the survey of 70 public sector employees in charge of ActEnv, we observed that there was heterogeneity in the positions adopted to carry out the mission.

- a. Some public sector employees consider that their role is purely to evaluate if the project took into account and proposed satisfactory solutions to environmental issues (19%).
- b. Others consider that their role is to improve the projects on environmental issues, and thereby, that they have to provide assistance in the upstream work (68%). We note here that such assistance refers to different meanings and practices depending on individuals.
- c. Others insist on their educational role, which would not go as far as assisting but would definitively be more than a final evaluation (12%).

Each of these positions can in fact be related to a strategy to achieve satisfactory projects regarding environmental issues: in the first case, the strategy is to rely on bad evaluations and their consequences to convince project leaders that they should take environmental issues more seriously; in the second and third cases, the strategy is to intervene upstream and to provide help to ensure a better management of environmental issues during the conception of the project.

Data analysis is still in progress, preliminary results show that this choice cannot be explained by the teams the employees belong to nor by their educational background. Therefore, the agency of actors might be an explanation to this heterogeneity. Further analysis is necessary here.

b) Meetings as areas of reflective approach on the praxis and strategy-making

Besides this heterogeneity, we observed the creation of an “area of discussion” between these actors, through the creation of regular meetings in which they precisely discuss on their praxis.

In the full paper, we will build on the conversations in a workshop through which public sector employees identify that they have a strategic decision to make at a specific moment of their work process and make the nature and the consequences of this decision explicit for the group (reflective approach of their praxis), then they vote to choose (virtually) among the two strategies and present to a larger group their decision and the implied strategy (strategy-making).

6. Preliminary discussion

a) The role of the agency of public sector employees in strategy making

The issue of the role of agency in strategy-making has been explored in several studies in SAP (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Balogun, 2005; Mantere, 2007; Regner, 2003). One of their main contributions is to highlight that middle managers' agency has an impact on strategy-making (and not only seniors' or top managers'). Our first findings on the heterogeneity of positions among ActEnv civil servants show, first, that the choice of position is not dependent on the status of manager or employee, and, second, that employees do not determine their position in relation with the

position of their manager and that this choice of position determines in fact a different strategy in the protection of the environment.

Thereby, we argue that, in an emergent activity, not only is middle managers agency crucial in strategy-making but also that of employees.

b) An « organized » agency?

Our preliminary findings on the reflective and collective approach of their praxis and their contribution to strategy-making in public policy implementation highlight the way Practitioners exercise their agency in and through strategy-making (Whittington & Vaara, 2012), in particular practitioners who do not have a managerial role.

More specifically, we shed light on the fact that, in a context of emergence in which they apparently have some leeway in the way they exercise their agency, individuals participate in meetings which purpose is to « organize » their agency through discussions, enlightenments, and collective incitation. Voluntary participation to these meetings suggest a need for the civil servants to « organize » their agency through the elaboration of practices. Thus, we propose a complementary understanding of strategic agency as regulated and organized by the group. We also argue that organizing “areas of discussion” (Detchessahar, 2003) plays a crucial role in this process.

c) Public sector employees praxis as key in the reconceptualization of public services organizations

Our findings also lead to question the meaning of this form of work in a new activity, characteristic of government revival. Aggeri’s argument that a command and control approach for environmental public policies is inefficient challenges public action to elaborate new forms of action (Aggeri, 1999). In the case of ActEnv, we observe that public sector employees have a crucial role in the « creation » of new forms of action and that this creation is achieved through the activity, ie « in the detailed processes and practices which constitutes the day to day activities of organizational life and which relate to strategic outcomes » (Jarzabkowski, 2005).

This suggest that the way Public sector employees actually operate in a context of government revival might be key to the reconfiguration of public action, and thus to the reconceptualization of contemporary public services.

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