

STRATEGISING, SELF FORMATION AND FOUCAULDIAN ASKESIS: MAKING THE POLICY-MAKERS

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Abstract

This paper uses a Foucauldian discursive approach to shed light into how organisational actors are 'made' to act as strategists, incorporating into their work practices the demands and expectations of what it means to be a strategist in a specific context at a specific time. It draws on a Foucauldian understanding of governing and self formation to explore the ways in which actors work on themselves in order to act meaningfully *as* strategists. I argue that, rather than organisational identities being static or finished, organisational actors actively say and do things in their continual attempts to attain a more complete, acceptable and congruent identity. In contexts with high degrees of uncertainty and heavily power- and conflict-laden relationships, both discourses of how strategy is made and the practices involved in it can be seen as exercises (*askesis*) which strategists actively perform to better embrace their responsibility of rendering the future governable for others. The paper brings together the literatures on identity and on strategic practices to show the dialectic relationship between them.

Introduction

The prevalent view of processes of strategising and policy-making is that, perhaps contrary to the messiness of implementation, they form the epitome of rational and purposeful organisational activity, involving not only a technical/rational approach to the analysis of

the situation at hand, but also the wilful intention to effect some sort of specific and delimited planned change (Colebatch 2002). This premise has been challenged by the increasing literature taking a practice turn to strategy, where the emphasis lies on locating the processes of strategising firmly among other organisational practices that organisational actors undertake. Increasingly, to study strategy means to study what actors actually do, rather to study the strategy as an outcome or as a prescriptive exercise (Chia 2004).

This paper takes a step further and asks how it is that strategists come to understand the legitimate courses of action and how they come to construct their identities *as* strategists in the face of a multitude of demands, visibility, and aspirations of modernity and rationality. The question of construction of identity in organisational settings has been addressed using both discursive and practice lenses (Alvesson 2010). By using a Foucauldian approach, I seek to show that a combined view which takes into account both discourses and the practices, calculations and techniques that support them can yield a more comprehensive view of how organisational actors are 'made' to act as strategists, incorporating into their daily work demands and expectations about what it means to be a strategist or a policy-maker in a specific context at a specific time.

This question becomes especially important if we turn away from the idea of the strategist/policy-maker as making autonomous and independent decisions for the future and instead accept that all actors are embedded in networks of power (e.g. lines of authority, professional standards and affiliations, assumptions of accountability etc.), which have the capacity to create influential images of the types of legitimate behaviour. The case study discussed in this paper is illustrative in this respect. The case examines national strategists in Athens in their ongoing attempts to make strategies, policies and occasionally action plans in order to promote the diffusion of Information and Communication Technologies in the economy and society. Their efforts take place in the context of concurrent European efforts to imagine and bring to life a unified European technological vision.

The paper brings into distinct focus the dynamic and on-going nature of identity formation in the case of subjects who find themselves in the precarious position of being called to govern, i.e. to configure things and make strategies so as to bring about some desired societal changes, whilst being governed themselves, through their embeddedness in an

institutional grid which creates specific aspirations and demands on their performance and on their identity.

Literature review

On identity

The literature on identity extends across numerous disciplines and over great spans of time, so a comprehensive literature review is beyond the scope of this paper. This discussion provides an insight into works that are relevant for the study of identity construction in the context of organisational practices and discourses. What I seek to demonstrate is that despite the interest in identity, there is a dearth of studies on the dynamics of identity formation and in particular on works that focus on the voluntary and aspirational, rather than the disciplinary aspects of power in organisations and identity formation.

A great deal of academic work on identity and organisational identity has been published within disciplines as varied as sociology, psychology, and organisation studies (Hatch & Schultz 2004), with certain scholars critical of the fad-like culmination of interest (Alvesson 2010). The literature on identity is distinct to the literature on organisational identity (Gioia, Schultz *et al.* 2000, Whetten 2006) or organisational identification (Ashforth & Mael 1989, Foreman & Whetten 2002), both of which examine the ways in which organizations are perceived by their members and their environment, although links do exist between them (Humphreys & Brown 2002). Instead, the attention here is drawn to how organisational members make sense and give an account of their actions and identity in the context of their engagement in an organisation or a profession.

In a recent attempt to map the field, Alvesson (2010) proposed two dimensions which can be used to re-present the growing literature. The first dimension is the degree to which identity is understood as a coherent and robust reference point which allows the individual to orient herself appropriately within an organisational setting, or whether it is taken as a much more fluid and unsettled point of reference, bringing to the fore change, uncertainty, and fragmentation. The second dimension reflects the degree of agency with which individuals are endowed in constructing their identity, ranging from individuals as autonomous, self-contained meaning-makers to individuals as dupes, puppets, or “corporate duplicates”

(Brown & A. 2011). This perspective, although too simplistic to encompass the nuances of the literature, does point to the variety of assumptions that lie behind the various conceptualisations of identity.

A drive away from grand narratives has been followed by the adoption of practice perspectives to research the ways the individual is implicated in the organisation. Important work on the role of practices has highlighted the effect of mentoring and management by objectives in enveloping subjects into calculations and confessions about how to best behave in order to succeed (Covaleski, Dirsmith *et al.* 1998). Knights and McCabe (2003) explore the identity tensions arising from the attempts to promote practices of team working within a call centre, ultimately affecting other aspects of their personal identity. Further work has sought to explore the effect of organisational control practices on professional identity, by exploring the role of practices of time management and billing as disciplinary devices able to contain the discretion of lawyers as autonomous knowledge-workers (Brown & A. 2011). Such studies have demonstrated both the controlling and the enabling aspects of such practices, which subjects can, to varying degrees, resist or appropriate for differing purposes from the intended purpose of organisational control (Alvesson & Willmott 2002).

An even greater turn has been identified towards linguistics whether through narrative or discourse, which has been founded on the premises of language as constitutive of social reality and of identity as of an inherently communicative nature. Scholars have explored how individuals attempt to form a coherent narrative of themselves within uncertainty and change (Sveningsson & Alvesson 2003, Beech & Johnson 2005, Watson 2009), drawing on occasionally fragmented and antagonistic discourses (Kuhn 2006, Musson & Duberley 2007, Clarke, Brown *et al.* 2009) to situate themselves appropriately within their context (Trethewey 1997). The approach tends to be one of exploring the multiplicity of discourses that operate at organisational level, occasionally to conflicting effect, rather than accepting 'Discourse' as all-encompassing and repressive. Yet in certain cases, discourse is powerful enough to find its way into the way individuals think about themselves, although not without challenge (Doolin 2002).

The question of whether identity is taken as complete and 'finished' or whether it is thought to be in the making is not frequently tackled explicitly. Alvesson and his colleagues

(Alvesson & Willmott 2002, Sveningsson, 2003# 21) [refs] point to the on-going nature of the shaping of identity when they use the term identity work, although this does not provide enough analytical power to explore a process of becoming with regards to identity. Wieland (2010) provides a fascinating account of not only identity at work, but also the evaluative nature of identity, i.e. subjects asking not just “what kind of a person am I?” but also “am I a good enough person?”. By using the concept of the ideal self, Wieland explores her subjects’ interpretations of what they have to do in order to be judged, and more importantly to judge themselves, as ‘good’ organisational members. The recourse to an ideal self is of particular importance as it goes some way into drawing attention to the fact that the making of identity does not happen merely as a response to organisational discourses, but also as a response to aspirations and hopes.

It is in this direction that this paper aims to contribute, by seeking to provide a more fruitful way of understanding identities in the making, by exploring the way in which subjects are brought to conduct themselves in given ways, but also bring themselves to process and reflect on the reasoning of their conduct so that they can give an satisfactory account of themselves. The next section explores the literature on the subject matter of strategy making, which is what the subjects of my study were engaged in. A brief overview of this literature is deemed necessary in order not only to understand the current state of academic thinking on the issue, but also the perspectives that have been long-standing and have had an effect not only on academia but also on the practitioners that this paper is about.

On planning for strategic change

This section provides a targeted discussion of the literature on planning for strategic change. The purpose is to explore recent – and some not so recent – contributions around the actual practices involved in strategy-making to serve as a stepping stone for the analysis into the ways in which practitioners of strategic planning worked on their identities as they engaged in activities that were expected of them.

Organisation studies have long been interested in the ways through which planned change is brought about, focusing on processes of strategy-making at the organisational level within

the discipline of management, and policy-making at the societal level within the discipline of government and policy (Mintzberg). Although the boundaries between the two have been permeable, the two strands have followed distinct, if parallel, courses. Comprehensive literature reviews conducted in the domain of policy (Colebatch 2006) and in the domain of strategy (Eisenhard & Zbaracki #42, Hart 1992, Hendry 2000) show that, the specificities of the contexts they research notwithstanding, both fields have developed broadly along three directions: the linear technical-rational, the incremental, and the interpretative and critical. Out of these research directions, a wealth of models has emerged, ranging from linear, to incremental, processual, garbage can, and more recently discursive (Fischer & Forester 1993, Rein & Schoen 1994, Fischer 2003).

The turn towards language and the way it constitutes reality has meant that research has sought to deconstruct strategies and policies and point to the intricacies of framing for the results, rather than narrate their neat construction. The perspectives of Foucault and Habermas are occasionally used in this approach, but their contribution has so far been limited. A frequent criticism is that the primacy given on language tends to disregard the material arrangements and practices which are at work and which provide an anchor or a counter-balance for the discursive construction of social life.

A promising research approach addressing this criticism has emerged from the midst of strategy scholars looking at exactly what it is that strategists do when they 'make' strategy. The strategy-as-practice literature seeks to move away from preconceptions about that it is that strategists are supposed to do, and look at what it is that they actively do in their job, including the discourses that they reproduce, the technologies they utilise, and the practices they engage in (Richard 1996, Hendry 2000, Samra-Fredericks 2003, Whittington, Jarzabkowski *et al.* 2003, Chia 2004, Jarzabkowski 2004, Whittington 2004, Wilson & Jarzabkowski 2004, Mantere 2005, Samra-Fredericks 2005, Whittington 2006, Chia & MacKay 2007, Whittington 2007, Carter, Clegg *et al.* 2008, Jarzabkowski & Seidl 2008, Jarzabkowski & Paul Spee 2009, Rasche & Chia 2009, Fenton & Langley 2011). In so doing, they pay attention to the everyday work that is done in order to accomplish the strategic decision-making. Narrative, conversation analysis, discourse, as well as ethnomethodological approaches that look to micro-activity, tools, and techniques are used to reach arguments about the nitty-

gritty of talking and acting strategically. Although the settings that have been researched have been in their majority corporate, there is no reason why emphasis on the actual work done cannot be taken into account when researching organisational settings which fall in the public sphere.

Even in this research direction, however, there is a notable absence of interest into how these discourses and practices penetrate the strategists themselves; how the strategists form or reiterate their identity through their engagement in the discourses and practices; or what it is that their actions tell us about their aspirations and the demands of the setting they operate in (Jarzabkowski & Paul Spee 2009). Indeed, with its emphasis on micro-practices, the literature on strategy-as-practice has been criticised that it fails to take into account the broader environment in which these practices take shape. In addressing this concern, this paper takes a multi-level perspective, using the same theoretical concepts to address the micro and the macro level, by understanding the macro level as another micro-context which manages to make its effects felt at a distance. The question becomes: how do strategists work on their identities *as* strategists and what role do the practices and discourses they engage in play in their continuous efforts to make their identities coherent?

Governing, discourse, and care of the self

It is often thought that Michel Foucault's post-structuralist account leaves subjects with very little control over their destinies. This does not however adequately represent his later works, which extensively treat the question of how subjects come to comport and account for themselves. Placed within a range of discourses and material arrangements, subjects are both enabled and constrained to act by situating themselves appropriately in relation to the dominant ways of thinking and doing of their time. They do that by drawing on the available discourses and by partaking (or not) in the kinds of material arrangements (practices, techniques, processes) which embody the discourses and make them have effects. This is however a "regulated freedom" (Rose & Miller 1992, p.174): subjects cannot easily escape their own "make-up", their upbringing, education and general socialisation, all of which are part of what they are and of how they perceive themselves. There is however space for reflexivity and contestation, which is where critique can grow.

This discussion should be seen in the context of governmentality, a neologism which Foucault coined in order to explain the way subjects come to govern themselves and others, not through the use of punishment, but rather through norms, procedures, tools, technologies, fears and aspirations (Foucault 2007). Governmentality studies have found fertile ground in the examination of neo-liberal and advanced liberal forms of governing, stressing the role of targets, contracts, comparisons, self-motivation and initiative in producing the desired effects for the governing of all sorts of people, from the poor, to the single mothers, the doctors and the civil servants (Miller & Rose 1990, Rose & Miller 1992, Cruikshank 1993, Cruikshank 1999, Rose 1999, Fraser 2003, Merlingen 2003, Larner & Le Heron 2004, Larner & Walters 2004, Inda 2005, Walters & Haahr 2005, Rose, O'Malley *et al.* 2006, Miller & Rose 2008).

To signify the interwoven nature of discourses with the material arrangements on which they rely and which they render legitimate, Foucault uses the notion of technologies (1994). Technologies in the Foucauldian sense draw together discursive and non-discursive, i.e. material, elements. This is particularly important as a way to address a frequent criticism levied against discourse studies that they focus exclusively on utterances and can neglect the world of material things. For Foucault, what is said or written cannot operate independently from the means by which it acts as true. Discourse requires its inscription on all sorts of material arrangements, calculations, devices, procedures, mechanisms, instruments, visions, models and documents to allow it to have effects.

Technologies of power or government subject the conduct of individuals to scrutiny and control according to certain ends which are considered desirable. Examples include the use of statistics to identify 'normal' behaviour and treat 'abnormal' behaviour, the designation of realms of visibility, and the use of expert knowledge to promote appropriate ways of life. Miller and Rose put it thus:

authorities of various sorts have sought to shape, normalize and instrumentalize the conduct, thought, decisions and aspirations of others in order to achieve the objectives they consider desirable (Miller & Rose 1990, p.8).

On the other hand, technologies of the self move into the realm of ethics and self formation, by exploring the practices and discourses through which subjects attempt to "give their

existence the most graceful and accomplished form possible" (Foucault 1987, p.251). Subjects seek to shape their conduct, by reflecting and working on their thoughts, needs, wishes and bodies, in such a way so that so that they can attain a level of happiness, wisdom or fulfilment, a particular type of morality, which is context- and time-specific.. A kind of stylization of conduct is required to allow the individuals to make their lives meaningful and coherent according to a specific morality, which Foucault calls aesthetics of existence, or care of the self (Foucault 1988, Foucault 1990).

Technologies of the self are thoroughly productive: they constitute subjectivities, identities and particular forms of being; they define areas of problematization, i.e. questioning of one's circumstances and life options; and they involve practices, which Foucault conceives of as exercises, or *askeses*, which one should undertake in order to better one's life. Askesis, appears in Foucault's later lectures as a way to indicate the ongoing care that is needed for subject to attain a coherent and meaningful existence. That ongoing care or involvement with oneself includes mind and body, thinking and doing, developing a relationship to the truth embedded in the discourses and enacting the techniques and technologies which materialise them. It can give us a more dynamic view of the active work that is required for subjects to fully embrace their desired identity. This is not however a purely personal endeavour, it is a social one insofar as it is always with reference to a given context that the problematisations take place. Gros highlights the relationship between the subject and the world around it:

the care of the self is [...] what encourages us to really act, it is what constitutes us as the true subject of our actions. Rather than isolating us from the world, it is what enables us to situate ourselves within it *correctly*" (Gros 2001, p.538, emphasis added)

Existing research on the care of the self has taken a fairly placid view on what it takes for subject to situate themselves correctly within their world. Indicative of this assumption is Miller and Rose's hint at the need for actors to "construe their goals and their fate as in some way inextricable" (1990, p.282), i.e. for subjects to have relative harmony, convergence or close linkage between their aspirations and the choices available to them. What has been neglected, I suggest, is that when this is not the case, i.e. when the demands and goals are not in inextricable harmony with 'fate', or a personal understanding of a good life, a much more dynamic process of bringing the two closer together is needed.

The question then becomes: how can begin to dissect situations where there is much more disharmony and incongruence between the subject's desires to govern themselves and their role in governing others? Existing literature looking into discourse and identity at work tends work at one level: how do subjects appropriate available discourses when performing their identities? The question becomes more interesting when we look at subjects in positions of governing others, such as strategists in public and private office, especially ones facing great demands and significant resistance.

Research design

This paper is part of a larger piece of research which was interested in the processes which allowed policies to be made in multi-layered contexts of governance. The paper draws on more than 40 semi-structured interviews with individuals in the higher ranks of a range of public organisations, which were collectively tasked with the formulation and implementation of strategies and programmes of action for the diffusion of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Most of the interviewees worked in the Greek administration, whilst a number of them worked for the European Commission.

I took a pragmatic view on whom could be regarded as participating in practices of strategising. The participants were not involved in politics or law-making. They were instead writing policy documents and action plans, leading consultations, translating regulations, interpreting visions and policy documents into concrete projects, mobilising interest, coordinating the implementation, monitoring and evaluating the progress. They identified themselves as policy-makers, advisers or administrators. Their official titles varied widely, but their actions contained elements of what in the literature of strategy-as-practice is understood as strategising activity, and thus I employ the term strategists to refer to them on the basis of the nature of the work they are involved with.

The semi-structured interviews, lasting from one to two hours, revolved around a number of pre-selected themes but also followed the issues that the interviewees felt were important. Extensive notes were taken shortly after each interview. Furthermore, extensive secondary material was gathered, including policy documents, action plans, monitoring and evaluation matrices and documents, newspaper clippings and articles, presentations for internal

consumption etc. The analysis then followed multiple iterative 'readings' of the data in light of multiple 'readings' of the theoretical framework. Contrary to most studies on identity, which discuss the subjects' sense of identity, my approach resembled detective work: what do their actions, as well as their discussions and talk reveal about how they perceive their lives and purpose?

Case study and analysis

The subjects

At the heart of this paper lie a number of national strategists in Athens in charge of devising and implementing national policies for the diffusion of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in the society and economy. The perceived importance of ICTs for economic and social development increased dramatically in the past two decades. Discourses linking the diffusion of ICTs with higher productivity and competitiveness, greater inclusivity, and reduced structural and geographical barriers to participation in economic and political life gained momentum both in academia and public life. They formed the background against which numerous national and supra-national authorities mobilised in promoting ICTs as a solution to underdevelopment, poverty, corruption, lack of civic participation and others. Terms such as the 'information society', the 'knowledge economy' or the 'digital economy' came to encompass a wide and shifting array of expectations and programmes of action (Mansell 2009). Thus, the strategists of my story were tasked with making policies for the information society at various points in time over a long period spanning almost two decades.

The scope of their authority included successive programmes which included actions over the funding of sectors of the economy in order to accelerate adoption of new technologies, the creation of appropriate infrastructures, the computerisation of the public administration and the electronic delivery of services, the provision of appropriate training and education, the digitalisation of national cultural heritage etc. The strategists were unsurprisingly highly educated and had an intense interest in issues of development, which they demonstrated through their participation in formal and informal fora, physical and well as digital. The nature of their positions varied: some of them were civil servants with long careers in

numerous positions of authority within the public administration; others held politically appointed posts above the civil servants, but their positions were precarious – cabinet reshuffles and elections frequently brought the end of their tenure.

Over a period of twenty years, the organisational structures which enveloped the decision-makers became increasingly formal and specialised. By 2004, there existed a secretariat which was closer to the political decisions, a management authority in charge of the administrative side of the programme (funding, monitoring, bidding, etc.), a project management company to assist with the implementation of the individual projects, and an observatory to gather up-to-date data. This “institutional artillery” was meant to address issues of lack of legitimacy and power in the face of more established domains of government. Instead, it was the access to significant funding from the European cohesion funds, particularly from 2000 onwards, aimed to address the widening technological gap among European economies, which allowed the strategists in question to act decisively and with some authority.

The broader context

The European Commission indeed took a keen interest the diffusion of new technologies in the midst of similar efforts by governments around the world, as well as by a host of international organisations (Kubicek, Dutton *et al.* 1997, Mansell & Streinmueller 2000). It was thought to be a way to strengthen European competitiveness at the global level and improve cohesion at the regional level. A stream of policies and action plans raised visibility and set out common targets for all European states to pursue (Berleur & Galand 2005). Funding from a variety of European funds was directed towards those member-states felt to be most lagging behind. The funding was parcelled in consecutive six-year long programmes with specific targets and implementation procedures. Along with the stream of policies, action plans and consecutive funding programmes, a benchmarking mechanism was instituted to monitor and evaluate the progress of member-states over the agreed targets. A centralised information system assisted in the collection of information which was accessible by strategists in the central administration and the European Commission.

Between 1993 and 2011, seven ‘cycles’ of policies emerged from the European Commission and five emerged from the Greek policy makers, the Greek ones appearing with a time lag of

a few months to a year compared to the European ones. Previous research has shown that the discourse is remarkably similar, highlighting the fact that at a discursive level the European policies provided a template to reproduce nationally, or in Foucauldian terms constructed a regime of truth which became dominant in policy circles in the European community (Chini 2008, Chini 2009). Simultaneously, a number of material practices of monitoring, evaluation and financing sustained the dominant discourse by providing routines, documents, and figures which embodied its central message.

But what about the Greek strategists themselves? Did they passively consume and reiterate the European discourses? Did they submit themselves to the technologies which enveloped them into the particular discourse of the time? How can we better understand their position of being in charge of providing meaningful direction, i.e. with governing in the general sense, whilst simultaneously finding their autonomy restricted by the policies and practices of the European Commission. The following examples will demonstrate how a range of discourses and material practices enabled the strategists to rationalise the environment they operated in and to act meaningfully within it *as* strategists.

The rational strategist

Existing literature has examined the changing terms of reference with regards to how the European information society was conceived and portrayed in European visions and policies, with frequent criticisms that the economic aspects were given primacy over cultural and social concerns (Kubicek, Dutton *et al.* 1997, Niebel 1997, De Miranda & Kristiansen 2000, Goodwin & Spittle 2002, Berleur & Galand 2005). I have also elaborated on other publications how the constant stream of visions, strategies and action plans discursively constructed the European information society shifted through time, and how the emphasis on how and by whom the information society was to be governed also changed (Chini 2008). The information society became from an ungoverned and unstoppable tide which held economic benefits for businesses in the early texts, to a domain to be governed by the state in order to mitigate the consequences of societal change, to a global phenomenon requiring a coordinated global response in the later ones. The terms of discourse and associated practices of visibility meant that the locus of governing was moved to the international and supranational organisation with the European Commission well in the centre of it.

It is in this context not only of technological uncertainty over the future, but also of changing legitimate approaches to handling it that the strategists operated when they drafted and produced their stream of strategic documents. The European strategists produced detailed action plans, with specific targets, deadlines, and requirements on other actors to act. Their role was to present the information society as an object which was knowable and thus programmable, and to also set in operation technologies of government which would enlist others into a particular view of speaking and acting on it. In contrast, the Greek strategic documents were high-level visions, with no action lists, deadlines or targets. They did not attempt to represent the information society as a knowable and thus governable object, and thus could not function as means to govern the conduct of others. What was their *raison d'être*?

Interviews with Greek strategists revealed deep contradictions as to the reason for creating these documents. An example of this can be investigated in the case of the creation of the strategy of 1999, called the White Bible. A key strategist behind the drafting of the White Bible found it “disgraceful” that before its creation, Greece was the only European country not to have an information society strategy. It was as if it highlighted a shortcoming of policy attention or lack of shrewdness on the part of Greek strategists, as if it showed that they had failed to appreciate the magnitude of the impending change. When I pointed out that the White Bible was not the first Greek information society strategy, as another one preceded it in 1995, he dismissed the older one as inappropriate. At one level, the 1995 strategy had by then gone out of tune with the prevalent discourses about what kind of object the information society was and how it was meant to be governed. At another level, and perhaps more importantly, failing to create an up-to-date strategy was incongruent with the expected national policy response to the object of the information society. They pointed out that they felt they were expected to write something resembling a roadmap. Producing the White Bible in 1999 was understood to demonstrate a rational and purposeful approach towards planning and investing in ICT, having been created by a team of specialists after long deliberations. They contrasted this to the creation of the 1995 strategy, which was written by a single person within a single ministry, i.e. in a way which was a far cry from how rational strategic decision-making was meant to happen. Thus, when a new Greek strategy appeared in 2006, the strategists proudly stressed that the writing of the strategy

was preceded and informed by a public consultation and a fact-finding exercise, which they called “the diagnosis” (of the challenges in the adoption of new technologies in the country). They were also very keen to point out that their strategy had been published before the European one, demonstrating how good strategists they had become, no longer publishing their strategies years after the European ones but actually a few months beforehand. There was a palpable desire to do better each time round, which was evident in the way they stressed the differences in the process they followed compared to the previous cycles, even when these changes bring about significant differences to the outcome.

What becomes visible is that the discourses which the strategies promoted through their carefully selected content were less significant than the perceived symbolic value of the strategies themselves as the outcome and instrument of rational deliberation. The content was less important than what was perceived to be appropriate for a responsible, strategising policy-maker to do in the information society. They constituted products of a self-governing process. More than “being seen to do the right thing”, it was a question of “being the right kind of strategist” in the fast-changing technological conditions. Walters and Haars argue that the particular view of government as a strategic activity confronts European member states “with an *obligation* to govern strategically” (2005 p.128, emphasis in the original). It was not however just an obligation; it also came to represent an aspiration, an ideal which represented a break with past practices. This obligation and aspiration to govern strategically was a continuous accomplishment for the Greek strategists. It involved a process of ongoing and active engagement with, and assimilation of, the European visions and discourses, the reproduction of these discourses in national policies, and the continuing attempts to infuse these documents with legitimacy in an otherwise unsympathetic local context. It involved ongoing thinking (interpreting, adopting) and doing (writing documents, holding consultations, diagnosing), which became progressively more complex and encompassing as the strategists came to aspire to become better as strategists.

The above then highlights the way in which the strategies and action plans, in their materiality and visibility as official EU documents, operated as devices of self-government for the Greek policy-makers. But was there any other way which demanded a certain course

of action to be taken? Was there any other mechanism which helped define the acceptable responses of national policy-makers to the changes associated with the information society?

The know(ledge)able strategist

A persistent problem over the years was the conspicuous lack of up-to-date, adequate and reliable information about the production of innovation and the adoption and use of new technologies in the country, as well as about the effectiveness of the programmes that had been implemented with state and European funding. Several of my interviewees lamented the limited “objective” information and absence of any kind of feedback to act as input into each new cycle of decision making. They explained, for example, that studies were commissioned but were never taken into account. And when trying to locate the evaluation reports of past programmes, we discovered that all the paper copies were stored in an asbestos-ridden basement of a central administration building which had been sealed to the public and the employees.

Of course, many of the strategists had an in-depth and intimate knowledge of past efforts, successes and challenges, ways of making things happen, and people to contact to make things happen. But they felt they lacked the legitimate, objective, documented knowledge which is appropriate for strategists to use. To address it, an observatory was established in 2000, although its operation did not start until late 2005. However, by 2010 it boasted an impressive online repository of studies on a wide range of topics. It was still however deemed not to inform strategy, and no practices were traced in which the observatory acted as a think tank feeding into the strategies.

On the other hand, detailed and aggregated progress data with regards to the financial side of the projects was continuously gathered and made accessible to Greek and European strategists. This information was consistently damning, showing slow progress and missed targets, causing significant friction with the European counterparts who were pushing for faster progress. It was however treasured by the Greek strategists: it was reproduced in graphs on the main page on their website, and was used extensively in the annual monitoring committees to justify the stumbling blocks, and to occasionally draw attention to the culprits by ‘naming and shaming’ the lagging organisations. They may not have been able to use information as input into their strategy making, but they were able to engage in

practices of monitoring of the implementation, another aspect of what a good strategist was supposed to be able to do. It is not surprising that the strategists felt emboldened by their newfound access to up-to-date information. As Rose and Miller explain,

The accumulation of inscriptions in certain locales, by certain persons or groups, makes them powerful in the sense that it confers upon them the capacity to engage in certain calculations and to lay a claim to legitimacy for their plans and strategies because they are, in a real sense, *in the know* about that which they seek to govern (Rose & Miller 1992, p.186, emphasis added)

What is however interesting is how they sought to govern others (the lagging organisations, the implementation of the projects) through being “in the know”, whilst simultaneously being scrutinised and judged on the basis of the same knowledge. It points directly to the contradictions which are inherent in being in the middle in a context of multi-layered governance. Knowledge has come to represent a certain freedom, an autonomy, or a capacity to act. What this case shows is that the same knowledge which can allow strategists to act as knowledgeable strategists rendered them knowable as well, open to scrutiny and judgement in their identities as good strategists.

I argue that it is this gap between the demands and goals of their position and their aspirations for a fulfilling life, that they attempt to close so as reconcile conflicting aspects of their living praxis. To do this, they continuously reproduce rationalisations and practices to help them settle the contradictions which arise from the position of being in the middle in a system of multi-layered governance. I use the word rationalisation to designate the specific understanding which is reached at any given moment and which allows a degree of coherence between goals and living praxis. Thus, practices of thinking and doing are needed to iron out the contradictions.

Compliance and partnership as rationalisations

Back to the case, whilst the *doing* of the technologies of self consisted of strategists partaking in practices of writing strategies and commissioning surveys as a way to embody what they saw as the qualities of good strategists according to some standards, the *thinking* of the care of the self consisted in discourses through which they attempted to reduce the discrepancies between conflicting aspects of their lived praxis. Such instances, I argue, were the interwoven discourses of compatibility and partnership. “Compatible” was the way in

which the strategists referred to the strategies they formulated when they were faced with the criticism that they all too easily and uncritically reproduced the European ones. The discourse on compatibility was a very prominent one, shared by most strategists drafting the successive strategic documents. The idea of compatibility indicates a more autonomous and more deliberate position than control or imitation. It comes to show a purposeful and intentional attempt to make two texts relate to each other for reasons which are clear and well thought out. Thus, not only is a sense of agency restored, but also a solid basis is maintained on which legitimacy can still be drawn from the European technological visions and programmes of action. As strategists face criticism about the originality of their work and its relevance to the local context, they strive to maintain a solid basis on which to give a convincing account of themselves sustaining a discourse on compatibility.

The discourse on partnership can be understood as a further rationalisation to allow strategists to render internally consistent the discrepancy between the oft conflictual relationship with the Europeans strategists with their appreciation of them as triggers of change. Under the partnership discourse, the European side was often portrayed as a partner with confluent interests and targets, and with equality of negotiating power, rather than as an observer or assessor of performance. The European strategists were discussed as benevolent dictators, knowing what is good for the country and providing the impetus to make it happen. The Greek strategists portrayed their position of both agents of government and governed subjects as a blessing, as drawing on the widespread legitimacy of European programmes as inherently positive and desirable afforded them increased authority by association, whilst the discourses on partnership made the Greek strategists co-constitutive of something much larger and recognisable.

Such rationalisations seem to emerge to allow the actors in the middle layer to come to terms with their limited capacity to act autonomously in a context of governing 'at a distance'. Such rationalisations appear to constitute active efforts to reconcile, in their hearts and minds, the position of authority which national policy makers occupy with the fact that their courses of action and desirable forms of conduct are conditioned and regulated.

The above points could appear to be mechanisms of legitimisation, perhaps operating at the representational level, as facades for an inconvenient situation. However, if the

rationalisations only operated for external legitimisation, they would not be powerful enough to sustain the uneasy balance between the demands of being governed and the possibilities of governing. I instead suggest that, beyond the management of appearances, actors engaged in governing and being governed 'at a distance' may be required to make conscious efforts to internalise, and make part of their ethical makeup, different aspirations, which are attuned to particular regimes of government. National strategists engaged in ICT policy are called to embrace, interpret, and carry forward an ethos of innovative living, strategic decision making, and technologically-driven social change. This is neither automatic, nor self-evident. Instead, it is accomplished through constant and conscious *askesis*, i.e. efforts to 'become' particular kinds of policy makers, and to create an ethical existence which accommodates their aspirations, the demands of their positions, and the intricacies of what is going on on the ground. My research shows that not only were rationalisations necessary in order to render the various elements of their environment internally consistent, but many of the practices in which national strategists were engaged as part of their job could also be understood as exercises in the process of self-formation. For example, the writing of policies was simultaneously a practice demonstrating their status as governed subjects, but also served to cultivate and make material their aspirations to be like, act like, and develop like the European counterparts.

To sum up, there is a palpable need to understand the processes through which actors in the middle layers of a multi-layered domain come to constitute themselves as being simultaneously the subjects of government and governing others. I argue that a continuous engagement in practices of thinking and doing, i.e. of *askeseis*, or exercises, is needed to bring closer the demands of the environment and the living praxis. Such a perspective can help to fruitfully investigate the active work required in the fashioning of subjects, particularly when the demands and aspirations which may need to be embraced are in discordance with established ways of living and working and the wider context.

Discussion

At the core of this paper are two concepts: agency and practice. What the analysis highlights is that these two concepts are not distinct, rather they are interwoven and co-constitutive. Agents forge their subjectivities by participating in a variety of practices and using them in a

formative manner as representing aspirations, hopes and a model to emulate. Practices on the other hand can become self-sustaining the more they embody identities which agents aspire to.

In the literature review, I examined the literature on the making of strategic decisions and pointed out that a great deal of research takes place under a paradigm of rationality or bounded rationality, sustaining concepts such as the staged or incremental transition from the formulation of strategy, which is where the course of action is decided, to its implementation, which is a largely technical matter of putting in place the necessary arrangements to make the decided strategy work. Despite the paucity of academic evidence providing credible support to this model of planning for strategic change, there is evidence that its stronghold over practitioners of corporate strategy and policy is firm. For example, Colebatch insists that this view of strategic decision making, which he calls the cycle model, has gained primacy over the lived experience of the practitioners:

If their experience clashed with the assumptions of the cycle model, the model prevailed: it was the fact that experience did not reflect the model that was the problem. If practitioners found it difficult to state their objectives in unambiguous terms, and were relatively unconcerned with monitoring their achievements, this was seen as a problem with the practitioners rather than with the model. If the experience of the governmental process did not look like the execution of authorised directives, there was a 'problem of implementation' (Colebatch 2005)

Similarly, Nakamura (Nakamura 1987) argued that the 'textbook' view of policy has become ingrained in the language of academics *and* the living praxis of policy makers. The rational model then, which embodies specific assumptions about the nature of legitimate action and authority, has become more than a description or even a prescription; rather, it appears to have become a normalising device as well as a desirable end in itself tried up to what it means to be a good practitioner of strategic change.

This paper provides further evidence that this is true by pointing to the use of the rational model of strategic decision-making in its discursive and practice aspects (e.g. the writing of policies, the public consultations, the monitoring and evaluation etc.) as part of the strategists' continuous efforts to 'be' a particular kind of rational and strategic decision-maker. The model which has seeped through to the common-sense of practice provides not only an already available vocabulary, but also a narrative of post-hoc reconstructions of

strategic activity, even when the perception of semblance collapses under closer scrutiny. More importantly, it is the way that this operates as a pattern of ideal behaviour for practitioners judge themselves, and be judged by others as good that is brought into attention here. Although strategists both seek, and claim, to make decisions based on a rational and comprehensive understanding of the problems and some knowledge of the appropriate solutions, their options and modes of professional conduct are, as we have seen, heavily conditioned. The domain of planning and enacting strategic change is a vibrant domain of circulation of power, in the form of legitimate discourses, truth claims, material arrangements, devices and mechanisms which make certain constellations of power lasting and effective. Not only are specific alternatives rendered thinkable at given points in time, but so are forms of desirable professional conduct which enable strategists to legitimately operate within a broader network. Thus, a fruitful direction of studies of strategy-as-practice would be to explore how long-standing assumptions about the correct process of strategising are leaving their traces on the everyday practices which organisational actors undertake under uncertainty.

Conclusions

The study of processes of strategising and of questions of identity have been central within organisation studies. A growing focus on discourse and practice has meant that both of these domains of research have moved much closer to the subject and the way in which action is produced at the micro level. Addressing questions of both identity and strategy making, the paper explored how strategists come to construct their identities under conditions of uncertainty in contexts which can be understood as multi-layered, i.e. where a number of layers of authority interlock. A multi-layered system of supra-national governance has provided the context on which to study a group of strategists in the higher positions of national and European authorities. The purpose was to explore the ways in which they come to conduct themselves appropriately, and reflect on and try to sort out the contradictions that arise out of the demands of their contexts and their aspirations.

The theoretical perspective of the care of the self guided the analysis, by drawing attention to the technologies of government and of the self as assemblages of discourses, techniques, calculations and tools which govern others, and through which subject work on themselves,

their needs and aspirations, in order to achieve a satisfactory existence. I argue that the Foucauldian approach to discourse, which is taken to incorporate both discursive elements and the material arrangements which allow them to function as true, can help address the criticism of undue primacy on discourse as language at the expense of material aspects.

This research brings to the fore the power dynamics that operate on the body and the mind, both contributing to the ongoing shaping of the identity the subject seek to assume in order to be 'good' organisational members. I have argued that practices of thinking and doing are involved as strategists work on themselves to become better at what they do. Practices of strategising, such as producing strategic documents, forming an 'objective' understanding of what the problem is, monitoring and evaluating on the basis of data, are not just the 'done thing', but they can also be seen as elemental blocs in the path to develop as better, more rational and knowledgeable strategists. Such an interpretation should be seen as a way to unsettle and refocus the perspective through which processes of strategising are seen, and in this way allowing us to reflect on the effects on the subject of processes of planning for strategic change.

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