

Between Discourse and Practice: Conflicting Logics and Work Restructuring in Public Sector Organizations

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Introduction

This paper focuses on the relation between ethnography and discourse in general and with regard to empirical investigations into work restructuring in the public sector in particular. Although a focus on the mutual relevance of ethnography and discourse is not a new idea (Spencer, 1994), the linguistic turn (e.g. Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000) in organization studies sheds new light on this topic. Together with the rise of other qualitative approaches and an increased focus on cultural phenomena within organizations, the attention for language among organizational scholars is part of a broader stream of interpretive research. Although there is a wide variety among interpretive organizational studies, they generally share a common background in phenomenology (O'Reilly, 2005; Yanow, 2006). According to phenomenological philosophy (with Husserl and Schütz as some of its main representatives), human beings perceive the world around them and give meaning to (their position in) it with their previous knowledge and experiences as a point of reference. As researchers, it is therefore impossible to conceive of an objective reality. The only way to understand social reality is through the understanding (*verstehen*) of local patterns of meaning and the way these meanings are constructed (e.g. Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000; O'Reilly, 2005; Veenswijk, 2001; Yanow, 2006). Despite the large varieties within interpretive approaches, there are two aspects that feature prominently across them. The first is the central role that is ascribed to language. The second is the close study of people in order to capture their meanings. Some approaches focus more on language and text (discourse, narrative, storytelling, metaphors), whereas others focus on what people *do* and *say* (ethnography).

We argue that, in order to further understand the relation between social reality and the way social reality can be known or represented (an important question for most interpretive researchers), much can be gained by combining linguistic and practice oriented approaches. In a way, it may be argued that For linguistically oriented scholars (as well as literary scholars) one of the central questions underlying research endeavours involves how any piece of texts 'represents' a part of the social world, whereas practice oriented scholars ask themselves how they can know and understand the actions and interpretation of people, and – as Clifford and Marcus stress in their famous book (1986) – how (if) this

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can be documented or represented. As Scollon states, “social problems in our contemporary world are inextricably linked to texts” (2001: 139), and therefore we should not only look at discourse or at action but establish the links between them. In a similar vein, Van Leeuwen and Wodak argue that discourse is recontextualized social practice, because discursive practice “always takes place outside the context of the represented practice” (1999: 96).

In this paper, we will discuss the relation between text and action by focusing on the interaction between individual actors and changing societal and organizational logics against the background of public sector reforms. More specifically, through the presentation of empirical examples taken from our PhD projects, we will focus on the relation between changing public sector discourses and the way individual actors cope with and make sense of these changes in their daily practice. In both ethnographic studies we find that the actors involved enact, in their own way, the broader discourses of public sector reforms in their daily practices. We argue that the instances where actors verbally relate their practices to these broader discourses are particularly suitable to study the relations between text and action.

Organizational Ethnography and Discourse Analysis

In our studies we build upon the work of interpretive researchers in the field of organization studies. In particular, we are influenced by organizational ethnography and organizational discourse approaches. In general research methodologists these days tend to distinguish between ‘qualitative’ (naturalistic) and ‘interpretive’ (constructionist) research approaches to denominate non-quantitative research methodologies. As Schwartz–Shea and Yanow (2009: 57) indicate, in some disciplines or fields of inquiry the terms ‘qualitative’ and ‘interpretive’ are used interchangeably to denominate research with ontological and epistemological presuppositions based on phenomenology and hermeneutics. In other research areas ‘qualitative’ research refers to a variety of different approaches, ranging from approaches based on objectivist–realist presuppositions to constructionist–interpretive approaches. What is certain is that the twentieth century has brought about an ‘interpretive turn’ in the social sciences (Schwartz–Shea & Yanow, 2009: 57; Yanow & Schwartz–Shea, 2006). What the ‘interpretive turn’ entails is an increasing awareness to the role of language in the study of human phenomena.

As mentioned, within the field of organization studies there is increasing attention for both ethnographic approaches as well as discursive approaches, but there are not many studies that explicitly combine the two. The explanation for this can be found in the fact that ethnography and discourse analysis traditionally have a different focus. Whereas ethnographic research concerns the study of human behaviour and actions, discursive approaches mainly focus on texts (although for some the concept of a text may also include actions). Nevertheless, both discourse analysts and ethnographers attribute a central role to language when it comes to the construction of social reality. With the linguistic turn in social sciences (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000), it has become increasingly recognized that texts and acts are mutually constitutive and the one cannot be separated entirely from the other. The wide spread of discursive approaches in social sciences has come to be known as one of the main manifestations of the ‘linguistic turn’ in the social sciences and philosophy (e.g. Alvesson & Karreman, 2000; Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000; Hammersley, 1997; Heracleous & Barrett, 2001), which is closely related to the interpretive turn (Yanow & Schwartz–Shea, 2006), as well as the ‘crisis of representation’ (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Proponents of these approaches build their arguments

against positivism upon phenomenological and hermeneutic philosophies, and specifically the social constructionism of Berger and Luckmann (1966). A central premise of the linguistic turn is that the independent ontological status of social reality is problematic since social reality is always intersubjectively constructed in “an ongoing interplay between individual agency and social structure, in and through which individuals and structures mutually constitute each other” (Ybema et al., 2009: 8). Furthermore, all knowledge and understanding of this constructed reality is mediated by language, which makes it impossible to directly and objectively represent reality. In other words, a key theme since the linguistic turn is the problematization of the relation between ‘text’ and ‘reality’.

We can see social life as interconnected networks of social practices of diverse sorts (economic, political, cultural, and so on). And every practice has a semiotic element. The motivation for focusing on social practices is that it allows one to combine the perspective of structure and the perspective of action – a practice is on the one hand a relatively permanent way of acting socially which is defined by its position within a structured network of practices, and a domain of social action and interaction which both reproduces structures and has the potential to transform them. All practices are practices of production – they are the arenas within which social life is produced, be it economic, political, cultural, or everyday life (Fairclough, 2002: 122).

In other words, people continuously try to make sense of their environment to reduce uncertainty and to determine their actions (Weick, 1995). “Sensemaking involves turning circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action” (Weick et al., 2005: 409). Therefore we should not pay attention to either structuring and conversing or to structures and texts but a combination of these (Weick et al., 2005: 417). To study the processes of discursive construction, sensemaking and enactment it is important to combine the study of texts with the study of behaviour. Ethnography is a powerful approach when it comes to gaining an understanding of actors’ daily lifeworlds and offers insight into processes of sensemaking through the observation of people’s behaviour in the natural context. One of the main contributions of ethnography to organizational research is the varied ways in which it allows researchers to describe organizational life:

Organizational actors’ sensemaking practices across different situations, engaging with what people do and what they say they do; routine patterns as well as dynamic processes of organizing; frontstage appearances and backstage activities; the minutiae of actors’ lifeworlds as well as the wider social and historical contexts in which these lifeworlds unfold” (Ybema et al., 2009: 6)

An important quality of organizational ethnography constitutes what Bate (1997) terms “the being there quality”. Through thick descriptions of the organizational life-worlds, the author places himself/herself in the situation, while at the same time drawing the audience into the narrative as it unfolds. As such an ethnographic text does justice to the complexity of everyday situations (Ybema et al., 2009). The narrative richness of ethnographies makes them especially suitable for the contextualization that often lacks in other types of research (Bate, 1997; Pettigrew, 1985). Through an

iterative alternation between ‘zooming in’ and ‘zooming out’, “the ethnographic approach helps us appreciate that work practices do not take place in a vacuum and that people’s organizational lives are shaped both through individual agency and historical conditions” (Nicolini, 2009: 120). The relations between agency and structure constitute one of the central debates in social sciences and although it would be too much to argue that an ethnographic approach can ‘solve’ the issue once and for all, at least “the combination of contextual analysis with an actor-centred approach promises to remedy the apolitical reading of organizing” (Ybema et al., 2009: 7) and take into consideration the complexity of social reality.

In the following paragraphs we will focus upon the relation between discourses and practices through the discussion of empirical data taken from our PhD research projects. Our studies focus on processes of sensemaking and organizational change in the Dutch infrastructure sector. Like many other sectors, the infrastructure sector has been subject to institutional changes during the last few decades. In line with what has become known as the ‘New Public Management’ (NPM) doctrine, many tasks, services and organizations that were traditionally the responsibility of the government and public sector are increasingly moved towards the private sector.

We will discuss how the New Public Management (NPM) discourse has been adopted by many practitioners and scholars as the solution to existing problems in the public sector (e.g. Hood, 1995; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004). Although the aim was to improve the quality and performance of public services, several studies increasingly highlight the unintended consequences of these reforms and corresponding shifts in logics. Logics of action are frameworks that guide actors’ behaviour in specific situations. In particular when it comes to the restructuring of work in public service organizations, tensions become visible between different logics of action implicit in the broader NPM discourse, such as the logic of accountability vs. the logic of service, or the logic of control vs. the logic of collaboration (Emery & Giauque, 2003; Haque, 2001; Hernes, 2005; Noordegraaf & Abma, 2003; Paulsen, 2005). In other words, the focus on output measurement and the corporatization of public goods and services leads, in practice, to increased tensions for the organizational actors involved. By presenting empirical examples from two different organizations in the Dutch infrastructure sector we aim to shed a light on the dilemmas, tensions, and questions arising from the shifting positions and roles of organizations and the government. The data presented in this paper are taken from our PhD research projects conducted in two organizations connected to the Dutch Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management: the former state-owned railway company (NS) and Rijkswaterstaat, the department of Public Works and Water Management (RWS).

Introducing Rijkswaterstaat and NS

“Reliable with water, progressive in connections” – this is the mission statement of the Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management. Different directorate-generals within the Ministry are active with regard to policy development in the areas of Passenger Transport, Civil Aviation and Freight Transport, and Transport and Water Management. This essay focuses on two organizations within the area of transport, public works and water management.

In the first place the Directorate-General for Public Works and Water Management (Rijkswaterstaat). The executive department (amongst others) is responsible for flood protection and for smooth and safe flows on the road and waterways. In line with overall plans for public reform, RWS’

current business plan (published in 2004) is focused on becoming a lean, cost efficient and service-oriented organization. It frequently mentions the importance of becoming a ‘customer-oriented network manager’ and a ‘professional commissioning authority’. In the years following the announcement of the business plan, these issues proved to be central elements in overall organizational developments.

The second organization is the former state railway company Nederlandse Spoorwegen (NS). Until the start of the denationalization process in 1995, NS was a state-owned company under the Ministry of Public Works and Water Management. Between 1995 and 2002 the company was split up in a task organization, ProRail (responsible for all activities related to the infrastructure, operating directly under Ministerial responsibility) and a market organization, NS Holding (entrusted with all exploitation activities and supposed to be economically accountable and independent from the state). Internally, NS Holding has undergone significant reforms, aimed at becoming a financially healthy and independent organization with a strong customer-orientation:

“It is our ambition to be the most reliable and customer-friendly provider of passenger transport by rail in Europe. That is why we unite our efforts around a single mission: to carry our passengers safely, punctually and comfortably via attractive stations” (NS, 2005).

What becomes clear from the description of these two organizations is that both organizations have experienced significant changes when it comes to their institutional position and task description. In line with the New Public Management movement, these organizations are moving from the public, ministerial responsibility towards a more autonomous, private position in the sector. This is translated into the mission statements of both organizations by means of a strong focus on professionalism, service and client-orientation. What is remarkable is that both organizations specifically refer to the issue of safety in their mission. Although safety and security issues have always been important, the central place in the mission statements of RWS and NS are indicative of the increased saliency of the issue in our society, and the central place it has in public debates.

Public Discourses and Local Enactment of Safety and Security

In the last decennia the issues of safety and security³ have gained a prominent place in society. A series of events and developments can be identified that have contributed to the development of the debates surrounding public security. These range from rather concrete events like the terrorist attacks in New York & Washington, Madrid or London, the war in Iraq, and natural disasters (like hurricane Katrina or the 2004 Tsunami) to more general shifts in the societal climate, like globalisation, technological developments and environmental problems (Adams, 1995; Beck, 1999; 2002; Giddens, 2002). In the Netherlands, the issue of immigration has become an important cause for social unrest,

³ In this paper, the terms ‘safety’ and ‘security’ will both be used since we focus on a wide range of issues referring to a broader theme (safety/security as a public value). In general, ‘safety’ concerns the protection against natural disasters, human failure or system/process failure, while ‘security’ concerns the protection against vandalism, organized crime, terrorist acts or other deliberate human threats (Ministerie van BZK, 2006). This paper discusses feelings of (in)security among citizens, and the responsibilities of the government and other organizations with regard to the safety/security (in Dutch ‘*veiligheid*’) of the people. For this reason, depending on the specific context we will talk about either safety or security.

which was invigorated by the murders of right-wing politician Pim Fortuyn (2002) and controversial filmmaker Theo Van Gogh (2004). This issue has been the subject of a number of political crises as well as a cause for fragmentation and polarization among citizens. Recently, the issue of climate change and the threats from the rising sea level have also obtained a central position when it comes to public debates with regard to the safety of citizens. A third cause for the growth in saliency of security issues can be found in an increase in aggression and violent outbursts (Van den Brink & Schuyt, 2003). A number of studies have indicated that there are not only more instances of aggression or violence, but also that this is one of the issues that worries citizens the most (e.g. Bruinsma, 2004; De Haan, 2003; Stol, 2004). This last issue is also very urgent in the realm of public service officials. Police officers, ambulance personnel, train conductors, etc. have to deal with aggressive customers on a daily basis (e.g. Adviesdienst Verkeer en Vervoer, 2004; Ferwerda, 1997; Middelhoven & Driessen, 2001; Van Ingen & De Waal, 2005).

Altogether we can say that there has been a shift in the public discourse surrounding safety and security. Information technologies and the wide attention in the media for the abovementioned issues play an important role in the breeding of a specific social climate that is characterized by distrust, insecurity and fear. Next to, but not completely separate from, this changing social climate is a shift in the position and role of the government. While traditionally the security and safety of citizens has been one of the central tasks of democratic governments (Raes, 1994; Van Zuijlen, 2004), recently the tasks and responsibilities of the government are increasingly being revised and even questioned (e.g. Boin et al., 2005; Huisman, 2004; Van Dijk, 2004). The notion of a passive citizen, receiving services and protection from public organizations under the direction of the central Government has slowly shifted towards a more reciprocal relation between citizens, organizations and the government. Citizens as well as organizations are stimulated to take their own responsibility in creating a safe and comfortable society.

This shift in responsibility fits with a broader trend in which governmental bodies in the Netherlands and elsewhere have become subject to large reforms. The discourse around this broad public sector reform trend employs fashionable concepts, tools and principles (mainly borrowed from private sector management) like a shift from a strong focus on processes and inputs to an emphasis on outputs and outcomes, emphasis on service and customer-orientation, the introduction of measurement systems based on performance-indicators, quality control through performance or service contracts and targets, introduction of market-like mechanisms such as competition, privatization, outsourcing, etc. (e.g. Gruening, 2001; Hood, 1995; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992; Pollitt, 2001; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004). The reform programs generally involve wide-scale reorganizations whereby governments are receding, responsibilities for the provision of (former) 'public' services and values are shifting, and all kinds of new organizational forms emerge at the intersection of the public and private spheres. As a consequence, the role of the State in wider society has transformed and the boundaries between what is 'public' and 'private' have blurred. The responsibility of the government to provide a number of public services like energy, health care and transportation has increasingly become the subject of debate. Mainly due to economic reasons, the legitimacy of the often large, highly bureaucratic state-monopolies in which these public services are organized is being challenged. In what follows we will present a number of the tensions and questions with regard to the shifting responsibilities between the public and private sector when it comes to safety and security.

Urgent Matters and Shifting Responsibilities

“(In)security is a societal problem, which means that we, as a passenger transportation company can contribute to increasing security, but we cannot do it alone. What is more, it is clearly a matter of shared responsibility with other parties, in particular the public authorities” (NS: staff member security department).

This quote reflects an important issue for transportation companies as well as other organizations today. The changing position of many public organizations, from public state-monopolies to independent commercial companies has given rise to a number of dilemmas and tensions when it comes to the division of responsibilities among the public and private spheres.

With regard to safety and security this becomes all the more visible since the saliency of these issues has increased significantly over the last decades. For transportation companies like NS, aggression and vandalism are at the order of the day, and the recent terrorist attacks in New York/Washington (2001), Madrid (2004) and London (2005) among others have placed this issue at the top of (political) agendas. Furthermore, it has been argued that the social climate (with a general loss of respect for ‘uniforms’) in the Netherlands created a situation in which the public domain was unable to control the behaviour of its citizens, leading to an increase of aggressive and violent outbursts in public spaces including the public transport domain (Van den Brink & Schuyt, 2003).

Similarly, Rijkswaterstaat acknowledges the saliency of safety issues and associated responsibilities in the area. Living in the Netherlands not only has to be safe (technically), people also have to feel safe. Climate change and especially the dike breach at New Orleans are seeds for insecurity. Just like the collapsing Mississippi River Bridge near Minneapolis (summer 2007) immediately creates a public debate in the Dutch Media (directly addressed to the Minister of Transport, Public Works and Water Management) with regard to “forgotten bridges” in the Netherlands: “Compare and tremble” or “Do we await such disaster” are some of the messages in the Dutch media, referring to the controversies around the condition of several older bridges in the Netherlands (e.g. the “Hollandse Brug”). Safety means continuous and increased maintenance work on the road and waterways, however this should not result in additional bottlenecks with regard to the already present problem of traffic congestion. Top management of RWS recognizes the dilemmas: on the one hand public organizations have to reduce in size, focus more on their core tasks and increasingly leave executive tasks to the market, while on the other hand people increasingly turn to the same public organizations when it comes to issues of safety and security. The following excerpts, taken from 2006’ New Year’s speech of RWS’ Director General clearly remind the audience of that:

“The past years have certainly not been normal years. The economy started ailing and the welfare state became too expensive. Societal uncertainty increased, fed (amongst others) by the fear for terror. The society finds itself in a transitional phase. The old welfare state is financially unviable. Above all we no longer want a patronizing government. Society needs space, freedom for development, initiatives and individual responsibility. At the same time there is a need for security. Both at the individual and the collective level, there

is a need for the provision of safety and societal safety nets. The lack of it, or not being able to see it, leads to insecurity.” (RWS: New Years Speech Bert Keijts, 2006)

“We actively contribute to the actualization of the current security philosophy (...) one thing is clear: traditional, civil engineering solutions no longer guarantee ‘dry feet’ in the future. We can’t get away from searching new solutions”. (RWS: New Years Speech Bert Keijts, 2006)

Despite changing ideas on the role of the government and public organizations with regard to the management and exploitation of infrastructural works, the provision of safe, reliable and stable infrastructures continues to be considered a public value. And as such, security remains one of the core tasks of public infrastructure organizations such as Rijkswaterstaat and NS. This is not only reflected in the objective of for instance the Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management (i.e. to *protect* the Netherlands against water and to ensure *secure* connections), but also in the way employees talk about their job, whether this relates to responsibilities of Rijkswaterstaat as an ‘executive organization’ or ‘crisis manager’:

“We are responsible for the fact that everything is safe: that lighting poles don’t collapse and fall over the highway, that kind of things (...) some security and management of the area” (RWS: employee local district office).

“As manager of public works and infrastructures, including the main roadways, Rijkswaterstaat has an important role in formulating evacuation plans, as the majority of the evacuations will have to be completed via the network of roads. (RWS: employee National Institute for Coastal and Marine Management)”

In the case of NS employees acknowledge the company’s responsibilities in the area of security ranging from the protection of passengers and employees against terrorism, violence or aggression, taking care of surveillance and security wherever necessary, to protecting the organization from criminality:

“Our task is to determine which security measures should be taken to sufficiently protect a company from criminal influences. And with regard to criminal influences you should think about everything from terrorism to internal theft, breaking and entering, internal frauds, etc.” (NS: staff member of security department).

“We need to make sure that the Railway Police knows that we have some extra security guards working because we cannot, like in the past, respectably say that they should take care of it. After all we’re talking about a multinational company, NS” (NS: staff member security department)

The realization that the organization should take its responsibility in the area of security or safety is stimulated by the increasing (political and public) attention for these issues. As mentioned, recent

incidents relating to violence or terrorism, as well as events such as Hurricane Katrina and consequent flooding in New Orleans, contribute to the salience of the security issue and the urge to explicate the role of organizations like NS and Rijkswaterstaat in this. This role is, however, not restricted to instrumental measures and actions. A large part of the manifestation of this sense of urgency has to do with sending out a message that these issues are taken seriously. The saliency of safety and security in the media and public opinion creates the need to build an image around the security/safety related activities. Not without reasons, the 2007 open house organized by Rijkswaterstaat was dedicated to the overall theme of ‘security’ and ‘the public’ was invited ‘at the backstage’ of the organization, in order to experience how Rijkswaterstaat ‘works 24 hours a day on the safety and security of the road– and waterways’. Also a motto such as ‘more yellow on the road’ (referring to the yellow colour of the organization’s patrol cars and boats), which resembles the Dutch slogan ‘more blue on the street’ (the call for increased police presence) reflects the importance of conveying a message that government is taking providing safe and reliable infrastructure services serious, and above all that you can see and constantly experience it. Similarly, the presence of human surveillance (conductors, service employees, but also private security guards) and the use of visible technological systems (cameras, electronic ticketing, etc.) at the stations and in trains is used to create a ‘feeling of security’ among passengers.

Security: a Public or a Private Matter?

The responsibility for providing a safe or secure product or at least creating the perception that ‘everything possible is done’ through symbolic action (t Hart, 1993; Helsloot, 2007) as described above stems to a large extent from the specific task that organizations such as RWS and NS are delegated with, regardless of the public or private position of the organization. In that sense, the discussion whether or not safety/security is a public value (and as such an inherent responsibility for the government or the public sector) surpasses this task-related sense of responsibility. Nevertheless, the institutional changes in the sector makes this discussion very relevant for these organizations since they are confronted with shifting boundaries and the unbundling and division of different tasks between the public and private sphere. Who is ultimately responsible (and accountable) for the safety (and overall quality) of the products if many tasks that formerly belonged in the public sphere are delegated to private organizations? If safety is a public value that would suggest that the government is ultimately responsible. In practice, this is not an easily tenable statement, especially since the dominant ideology in our society is based on privatization, outsourcing, unbundling, separation and autonomic accountability. Regardless the discussion on a more conceptual or theoretical level, the following examples make clear that, by framing these issues in terms of a division between public and private, for the actors involved this discussion matters.

The business plan of RWS clearly indicates that the new role for the organization is that of a professional commissioning authority, and that all tasks that can reasonably be done by the private sector (contractors an engineering consultancies), should be contracted out as much as possible. The underlying expectation is that stimulating the market to become more involved in different phases of the infrastructure project, not only results in cost efficiencies, but also in important (technological) innovations, while safeguarding public values such as service reliability, universal access and safety. However, in particular the issue of providing safe and secure infrastructures in light of those shifting role divisions leads to discussions:

“You should not privatise on safety too much. I consider safety to be a public value. It is possible to outsource maintenance and related tasks to private parties, but in the end management of public works should remain a public task (...) and in principle we should continue to supervise that. (RWS: employee Centre for Public Works)”

“Thus far Rijkswaterstaat is responsible for the safety of the user. If structures collapse, we are primarily responsible. And even though you can hold somebody else accountable for the costs of repair (...) I don’t think that is feasible (...) nor do I think it is a good cause. (RWS: employee Centre for Public Works)”

In the case of NS, the question of boundaries between the public and private realm are also shifting since the denationalization in 1995 and the subsequent unbundling of the management of infrastructure (ProRail), transportation services (NS) and police (the former railway police was part of NS and has now become a specialized division of the national police force). Whereas in the past the railway police was, as part of the company, taking care of most surveillance and enforcement tasks, NS is now responsible for the security of their own operational processes. But the boundaries between the property (and thus responsibility) of NS as a private company and the public spaces surrounding these properties are not always clear. For instance, who has the final responsibility for the security of passengers at a train station when this is no longer a purely public space, since the owner is an autonomous, commercial company? It is therefore crucial to make clear arrangements between actors involved about the scope of responsibilities and qualifications, yet this is complicated because situations are often ambiguous and, as indicated, this discussion supersedes specific situations.

What becomes clear from these examples is that the institutional changes in the sector have consequences that reach beyond the structural (instrumental) division of tasks. It touches upon ideological principles in society. However, for the actors involved, the institutional and organizational changes have also very practical and personal consequences, as will become clear in the following section.

The Customer is King: From Univocal to Multiple Tasks

As mentioned, both RWS and NS set ambitious objectives with regard to becoming more service-oriented organizations. The Director-General of Rijkswaterstaat wants RWS to be the “most customer oriented public service organization in 2008”, just like NS aims to become “the best performing transport company in the EU”. Those aims are evidence of the corporatization of public goods and services: public performance and customer-orientation have become much more important than in the past and for both organizations this truly involves a cultural change. They not only have to be aware of the saliency of security and safety related activities, also the task of providing safe and secure services in itself becomes more complicated. In the past, the criteria used to evaluate what should be done and how, were less ambiguous and more straightforward.

Rijkswaterstaat, traditionally a technical oriented organization, used to be considered ‘a State within the State’, due to its huge technical competence. While processes of democratization and participative decision-making with regard to infrastructure projects started to undermine the

'autonomy of engineers' ever since the 1960's, the increased focus on the quality of infrastructure-bound services, has further complicated work from the engineers' perspective. Becoming a service-oriented *network* manager on the one hand involve investments in the construction and maintenance of road and waterways and in coming up with creative solutions in order to resolve problems such as traffic congestion. Such investments are of the utmost importance with regard to safe, reliable and smooth traffic in the future. On the other hand the work in itself often leads to extra congestion, inconvenience and annoyance amongst the public. Becoming a *service-oriented* network manager then also involves providing direction and information on the situation on the Dutch roads in order to manage expectations, to direct traffic flows and to avoid inconvenience as much as possible. Everybody is aware of the dilemma that in order to deal with maintenance, you "have to take away availability from moving traffic (employee local district office). Moreover, infrastructure projects are no longer evaluated solely on technical criteria, but on additional criteria like 'maximum allowance of extra traffic hindrance due to maintenance or construction work'. While calculating extra traffic hindrance was unusual in the past, it's now used as a norm to which the organization has to comply. In 2006 for instance, investments on maintenance of public infrastructure works (roads, tunnels, bridges, etcetera) should not exceed 6% extra traffic congestion. When this does happen, the Minister is called to account and Rijkswaterstaat experiences 'image damage'. Obviously in those cases a technical answer will not suffice. While the organization is still responsible for providing safe and secure infrastructures, this increasingly has to be done within the boundaries set by 'public service orientation'. Issues related to safety and security do not easily involve trade-offs and the organizational members involved (yet) lack experiences where they can rely upon. The result is increased complexity.

Likewise, within NS the focus in the past was primarily on the process of operating trains. Bluntly put, conductors focussed on controlling tickets, train drivers had to make sure that the trains could depart safely and on time, ticket-sales and information took place on a static location within the station, etc. All tasks were perceived to be of use for the smooth running of the primary process: operating trains. Around the time of the denationalization of the company, a new management philosophy was introduced, organized around the idea of customer-orientation. The plan, strikingly called 'Destination: customer' (*Bestemming: klant*) was aimed to place the customer at the centre of the business. All processes are now organized according to the steps a customer has to follow before, during and after the journey (Berendse et al., 2006; Duijnhoven, 2007; Wessels, 2003). This has significant consequences for the meaning of the tasks for all staff members. Conductors have to make the customer feel at home in the train ('service with a smile'), staff at the stations are no longer at a static location but move around and have to be easily approachable or even pro-active in providing information to customers, all activities are aimed at making the customer feel comfortable at all times. Security is an important aspect of this aim (as also becomes clear from the mission statement) and is related to human surveillance, design and hygiene of stations and trains, and trying to ban unwanted customers or other forms of hindrance. The central focus on the 'experience' of the customer represents a radical change for the staff, complicating the way they conduct their work. Especially the tension between service delivery and controlling/enforcement tasks produces difficulties for many employees as well as for management:

“Decision-making in the area of enforcement is often incompatible with decision-making in the area of service delivery. While the emphasis traditionally lies at the enforcement side, there is a shift taking place whereby decision-making in all pillars within the NS organization is increasingly based on a service vision” (NS: staff member security department).

Thus, the corporatization of business process for these organizations lead to an increasingly complexity for the daily practices of organizational actors involved. In the following sections, this becomes even clearer and subsequent dilemmas with regard to safety standards, professionalization, separation of tasks and accountability will be presented.

When is ‘Safe’, Safe Enough? Negotiating Standards

The corporatization of public goods and services encompasses more than additional tasks such as customer-orientation. New Public Management also involves a search for a more efficient and effective public sector. In addition to the increasing importance of ‘new’ criteria such as a focus on service, old guiding principles are reinterpreted, often based on a cost-benefit analysis. Then, the issue of safety and security neither turns out to be unambiguous and straightforward:

“The tricky side of security is that it costs a lot of time and investments and there is no direct outcome. It is hard to measure. This in contrast to safety, which can be more directly related to the products of the organization. As a consequence, there are hardly any concessions in the area of safety; the requirements are very strict and firmly rooted in rules and legislation. There is no discussion about it, while in the area of security measures are constantly subject of discussion” (NS: staff member security department).

“The importance of safety is recognized, but in particular the traffic safety. Safety issues are anchored in a legal framework with little room for doubt. From way back, this has been an issue and the costs and benefits are clear. In that area, the company is obliged to stay within the legal framework and there is no room for negotiation. For security issues, the situation is different; there is no clear legal framework, no standard. For that reason, people tend to stay near the bottom of what is deemed necessary, because that is cheaper. At the management level, security is but one of the many decisions that have to be made within the same budget, and therefore it is always subject to negotiating” (NS: staff member security department).

Dealing with ‘security’ or establishing a feeling of security is rendered problematic by the lack of legally defined norms or performance indicators. Security then is related to protection against criminal activity, such as acts of violence, aggression or terrorism, but also to the state of being or feeling secure. Exactly those issues have gained attention within current society. Safety (in a technical sense) then suddenly appears to be well defined and less complicated, as the organization has been dealing with this issue for a long time. Safety involves complying to a legal framework or technical standards, whereas security is less clear cut and cost-benefit analysis is rather difficult to make:

“It is very hard to determine when the department is successful. Can one say that it is successful when in 10 years there has been no terrorist attack? But when there has been an attack, does that mean that you’re not successful?” (NS: staff member security department).

However, within Rijkswaterstaat, where there is an increased focus on (cost–benefit) efficiency, it becomes clear that even established safety criteria can become subject of discussion. Public works built by Rijkswaterstaat were generally regarded as complying to the highest standards: “we really aim for 90% or 100%”. Within the ‘new’ organization, this is out of the question, as these projects simply cost too much money. Defining what is good (or safe) enough suddenly becomes problematic and is turned into a policy choice rather than a technical standard:

“I sometimes have the idea that afterwards the result of the project is contrary to [the principles] in the past. You were just aiming for 90%. We now have a director–general who, perhaps quite right, has said: “Guys, good is good enough”. But what then is the definition of good? (...) What does one regard good enough? Something that falls apart within a few years, or something that stays for the upcoming 15 years? That’s a choice of policy”. (RWS: employee regional department)

“Rijkswaterstaat always thinks of itself very high. That’s a fact. Such as ‘we only aim for 90 or 100%’. There is nothing wrong with that. But in the mean time, for contractors different interests play a role and aiming for 60% is enough. So why would they aim for 70%, when they can actually go for 60%? That’s where the problem lies with the traditional people from Rijkswaterstaat, who want to do a perfect and profound job, versus the contractor who wants to do his job, but no more than is required” (RWS: employee Centre for Public Works)

This complicates matters, since different parties involved have their own interests and also their own problem definitions. Whereas within Rijkswaterstaat discussions with regard to the required minimum standards sometimes run high, also within NS different problem definitions cause conflicts. Defining a ‘serious incident’ for instance, is done differently between the police, NS, the ministry, other transport operators, or even within different business units inside NS:

“...there is a difference when it comes to declarations with the police. For example when it comes to an injury there is a difference between what is seen as minor or major injury by us or by the police. This makes the interpretation of reports or statistics very complicated. And this makes it almost impossible to give clear instructions to the operational staff” (NS: staff member security department).

In other words, the institutional and organizational changes have increased the number of stakeholders involved, making it more complicated and also more important to come to mutual agreements with

regard to the interpretations of criteria, norms and roles. With regard to the latter, not only the definition and interpretation of tasks and roles among different stakeholders have to be (re)negotiated, also within specific jobs, the interpretation of work procedures and the possible leeway for action becomes ambiguous. Actors have to come to grips and make sense of the changes in their daily practices. In the next section we will focus on problems related to the process of redefining meanings of job descriptions, competences, and the separation of tasks.

New Roles and Responsibilities: Negotiating Leeway for Action

The separation of tasks obviously influences the possible range of actions for those involved. While this may lead to clarification on the one hand, restricting those boundaries may also lead to difficult situations, in particular with regard to safety and security. Tasks that were in the past integrated are now increasingly separated and specialized, to meet the requirements of a professional and reliable organization.

In the case of NS for instance, there is an increasing tendency to separate tasks and competences related with enforcement from service related tasks. As already became clear earlier, service and customer-orientation has become the central pillar in the management strategy of the company. Thus service becomes the main objective and competence for all operational staff, they are urged to constantly think about whether or not the client is comfortable and satisfied (in fact, customer satisfaction is the basis for performance measurement within NS). Consequently, the idea is that enforcement, control, and other tasks specifically oriented at security interfere with the service-minded performance of staff. Therefore the company has the intention to take away the majority of enforcement qualifications from the main body of operational staff and predominantly train them in service delivery. The enforcement tasks will be delegated to a smaller group of employees who receive professional training and they will operate in special security teams. The exact construction and division of tasks has not been determined yet, but what is interesting here is that this tendency to specialize can lead to complicated situations. Think about a train conductor who encounters a situation in a train where a passenger is aggressive and looks like he/she might become violent towards the conductor or another passenger. In theory, the conductor will call for back up and the special security staff (or in some cases the police) comes as soon as possible (usually at the next station). This situation seems similar to the current situation, but when this conductor is predominantly trained 'to be nice' this can be very threatening. Or, if the conductor is not afraid and feels like he/she would be able to control the situation by standing up to the violent passenger the situation might occur that he/she is not allowed to because of a lack of qualification. The new plan is part of an attempt from the central management to develop a clear strategy for the issue of security and to redefine the task-division and responsibilities of the company and railway police.

When taking a look at Rijkswaterstaat, there is constant negotiation as to how much one should interfere with the contractors' job. Contracting out different parts of construction or maintenance projects towards the private sector, involves a fundamentally different method of working. Herein contractors are responsible for carrying out large parts of the work, and Rijkswaterstaat is watching 'from a distance', thereby restraining public officials' leeway for action. Within the new rules of the game, Rijkswaterstaat is checking the contractors' procedures and quality system, using a complex bonus/malus system for work carried out by contractors: compliance to previously set criteria (such as

technical standards, but also the amount of traffic hindrance, and security measures undertaken) determines whether the contractor is entitled to a bonus or a fine. But how much leeway for action does that leave the public officer with? And who is accountable when something serious happens? A manager of local district office, for instance describes what happens when some of his traffic inspectors accidentally find an “extremely dangerous scour in the road”. The contract manager would claim that the contractor is responsible for the road, that he should have identified the scour himself, and that it should be repaired. All such incidents should be reported to the contract manager so that he can hold the contractor accountable. For the local district however, this is not an option.

“I told my guys, we’re not going to do that (...) it’s useless to tell the contractor: ‘we now of a scour somewhere in the road, it’s life endangering, a hole in the road’s surface, but we don’t tell you where as you have to search for it your self and when you identify it you have to repair it. Well, four people got killed, the road collapsed, we knew it for a long time, but the contractor could not find it. We knew exactly where it was, but we were not allowed to say so. How should you tell that on television? Who? Well, I won’t”. (RWS: employee local district office)”

This is just one example of a situation in which the formal boundaries between tasks and responsibilities in the new situation are conflicting with the experiences of an actor (practically, as well as in relation to their old task descriptions and expertise). This friction is often invigorated because actors have their own sense of responsibility towards their job, especially if it is related to safety issues (after all people’s lives are at stake).

Who’s to Blame? The New Rules of the Game...

In situations like the above, actors often feel that they can held accountable afterwards, in particular when something goes wrong. They are afraid that after a serious incident, they cannot simply deny responsibility arguing that the rules have changed and that it is out of their hands. Just because formally another party is responsible, does not imply that people involved don’t feel responsible. For instance, in case of an accident as the result of infrastructure maintenance work, which has been outsourced to private contractors, using new types of contracts:

“What happens with the Minister in the Second Chamber? Who can’t say ‘sorry, but I devised DBFM-projects and the contractor is responsible” (RWS: manager regional department).

In addition to the questions with regard to accountability, safety related issues are extremely salient: they are subject to public scrutiny and receive wide attention from all kinds of media. Consequently, actors involved, are continuously aware of it:

“They are afraid that the public opinion will say well hold on, what are you doing? We don’t want to enter these trains, look at how unsafe it is with all these policemen on the train” (NS: operational staff member).

Such references to public arenas like the media, the public opinion or politics are often mentioned as a way of defining new criteria when it comes to deciding whether or not a specific action is legitimate.

Concluding Remarks

What has become clear from this paper is that organizations and organizational actors in the Dutch infrastructure sector are confronted with questions regarding shifting responsibilities, multiple tasks, and subsequent negotiations with regard to standards, leeway for action and accountability. In the last decennia the issues of safety and security have gained a prominent place in society. Traditionally security and safety of citizens is considered a public value and as such perceived as the responsibility of the public sector, however, governmental bodies in the Netherlands and elsewhere have become subject to large reforms. Governments are receding, responsibilities for the provision of (former) public services and values are shifting, and all kinds of new organizational forms and collaborations emerge at the intersection of the public and private spheres. Emphasis within the public sector currently lies on service and customer-orientation and market-like competition such as competition, privatization and outsourcing. On the one hand the organizations in the Dutch infrastructure sector (and arguably in other sectors as well) increasingly focus on service (e.g. improved traffic circulation, information provision, punctuality of public transportation), while at the same time one of their main responsibilities is to safeguard the security of their products (e.g. safe, reliable and accessible infrastructures for traffic and transport & ensuring an enjoyable and safe journey for passengers).

The dominant discourses with regard to public values such as safety and security as well as with regard to the public sector influence the ways in which organizational actors make sense of their personal tasks, responsibilities and identities. The actions and practices of individual actors, in turn, influences the construction and strengthening of public discourses. We argue that in order to further our understanding of organizational change processes such as the restructuring of public sector organizations it is important to focus on changing practices and micro-level processes (through ethnographic research) *in light of* broader public discourses. The intertextual relations between public discourses and local enactments cannot be understood separate from one another.

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