Unspoken struggles during tedious meetings: witnessing the tacit puzzling process during strategic decision-making

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The practice of strategic decision-making concerning large scale infrastructure developments may best be regarded as a continuous struggle for meaning: all actors involved strive to make their own strategic vision as influential as possible, while at the same time there is need for a common ground which is a prerequisite for making a legitimate investment decision (S. Merkus, J. De Heer, & M. Veenswijk, 2014; S. Merkus, J. M. De Heer, & M. Veenswijk, 2014). To put it simple: some of them want a bridge, some of them want a tunnel but all of them want investments from the Government and therefore they need to tell a united story. Several kinds of decision-makers are involved in such complex and lengthy decision-making processes, of which political-executives (such as Alderpersons or Ministers) and their top civil servant advisors are key players. These two groups of actors are very much interdepend upon each other and their relationship is often tense: Alderpersons are more focused on short-term political success while top advisors are focused on the realization of long term objectives (Hart & Wille, 2006).

During decision-making processes, the top advisors have the task to negotiate a mutual plan for development in order to rationalize a decision which is often based on political bargaining among their political-executive leaders: a tension between rational planning and political reasoning is the often recurring result (Flyvbjerg, 1998; Stone, 1997). Political-executives follow a political reasoning which entails that they negotiate a decision acceptable to all, although based on the power differentials some actors will have more influence than others (Flyvbjerg, 2002; Merkus, 2014). As long as this common strategic plan is plausible and increases the chance for positive investment decisions from the central government, these political-executives are pleased. In other words, not the accuracy but the persuasiveness of such a plan is crucial (Bruner, 1986; Czarniawska, 2004). This forces their top advisors into a difficult situation: they have to puzzle to reach a compromise based on the diverse strategic agendas of different local governments while simultaneously, this compromise should enable their political-executives to ‘score’ investment money from the Ministry of Infrastructure.

These top advisors are puzzling and struggling for meaning during meeting which sometimes take one hour and sometimes take five hours (for instance when the moment of decision draws near and a plan really must be written down). The researcher has witnessed seven of such meetings as a participant observer over a period of 6 months and in addition he has held in-depth interviews with most of the decision-makers involved - as well as with the political-executives they serve. The researcher also witness stakeholder meetings which were meant to discuss and ‘sell’ the emerging plan with other stakeholders like civilians, ngo’s and political-executives who are not directly involved in the planning process. Although this research might not be regarded as a 'pure' organizational ethnography, the chosen methodological approach does lead to an in-depth insight on meaning making processes during
strategic decision-making. The combination of being present during meetings while at the same time having open interviews with the participants of these meetings is a specific way to look beyond a single organization to a field as a whole (Linda Rouleau, Professor Geneviève Musca, & B. Zilber, 2014).

Moreover, since most interviews involved a reflection on the process of puzzling for meaning which was witnessed during the meetings, it is possible for the research to notice a struggle for meaning during these meetings which would otherwise would have remained unnoticed. The purpose of the paper is to demonstrate how ethnographic methods can be used to understand meaning making within a complex inter-organizational decision making process involving a network of actors. In order to study the struggle for meaning, it is important to focus on the - often tacit - different strategic visions of the top advisors involved and the way in which they try to align their emerging compromise with the emerging common political ambition of their superior political-executives. The study shows the value of combining in-depth interviews which are focused on the meetings and actual presence during the meetings in order to really be able to witness a struggle for meaning which would otherwise remain implicit and unnoticed.

References: