

Research that can help us understand civil service reform

The limits of public management research

Public management research has tended to focus on the what and when of reforms (Pollitt, 2017) – in doing so it overlaps with contemporary history examining civil service reform. Together they do the important job of characterizing reform episodes as well as the emergent nature of strategic change in the civil service over the last 40 years. They provide good quality data on the ‘what’ of reform which provides an essential foundation for those who would look deeper at why and how. And they have established the importance of context to the success or otherwise of reforms (Pollitt & Dan 2013; (Pollitt, 2017).

However as a body of work it has struggled to articulate what successful reform looks like; largely failed to offer actionable insights into how successful reform is achieved; neglected the role of politics and policy choices; and, for some of the biggest challenges facing government (for example financial crises) exaggerated the potential of management to resolve them (Pollitt 2017; Peters 2017). A review of 30 years of public administration research concluded: *‘neither of the two dominant strands of research is conducive to an understanding of real-world public administration in a conceptual and empirical perspective... Both fail in fostering public administration research that advances public administration as an academic discipline while at the same time it has failed to engage stakeholders, bureaucrats and managers (Peters 2017).*

An increasing number of researchers have sought to address the theoretical limitations of the public administration tradition by drawing on theories from other fields. They have used theories from strategy process, strategy practice, institutional work, sensemaking and dynamic capabilities - often in combination - to understand change in public sector institutions (see for example; Burgelman et al 2018; Cloutier 2016; Christiensen 2018; Kattel 2018; Loureiro 2021; Lozuea 2002; Pablo et al., 2007; Pablo et al 2017; Pettigrew 1992; Poister et al., 2010; Piening 2013). Within these research fields there are calls for greater efforts to bridge, connect and even combine theories – so as to benefit from their respective strengths and mitigate some of their limitations when applied in isolation (see for example: Vaara & Whittington 2012; Suddaby et al 2013; Burgelman 2018; Jarzabkowski et al., 2022; Kohtamaki et al., 2022).

The remainder of this article briefly examines these other fields in order to consider how they can help illuminate the practice of successful reform in the Civil Service. Later in 2024 I will produce a fuller article which draws on these fields to flesh out my conceptual framework for understanding civil service reform.

Strategy process research

Pettigrew’s novel longitudinal case study of 23 years in ICI’s history was a catalyst for the rapid growth of strategy process research (A. M. Pettigrew, 1987a). He critiqued most existing research on organisational change as ‘ahistorical, acontextual and aprocessual’.

Instead he proposed a view of strategy in which strategy content is the output of a ‘legitimation’ process which although expressed in rational terms is shaped by political and cultural considerations. ‘politics as the management of meaning’. (A. M. Pettigrew, 1987b). His

ambition was to 'catch reality in flight' within the context of 'the ongoing processes of continuity and change' in order to displace the then dominant rational theories of choice and planned change. (A. Pettigrew, 2013).

'Actions and actors drive processes but actions are embedded in multiple levels of context and both the actors and the context are shaped and are shaping - the interchange between agents and contexts over time is cumulative - the legacy of the past is always shaping the emergent future.' (Pettigrew, 2012)

He distinguishes between outer context (national economic, political and social context, social movements and long terms professionalization – from inner context, the ongoing strategy, structure, culture management and political process of the organisation. The process of change encompasses the actions, reactions and interactions of the various interested parties as they negotiate around proposals for change. He sees the role of actors in change in mobilising the contexts around them to provide legitimacy for changes as a critical connection that is made between context, content and process in pursuit of change. (A. M. Pettigrew et al., 1992)

He successfully applied his approach to a major longitudinal study of the implementation of nationally conceived reforms in regional health organisations. The study drew out 8 factors which were to be seen as 'a linked set of conditions that provide high energy around change'. He saw them as highly interrelated 'receptive and non-receptive' conditions, which will also be affected by the content of the change issue. (Pettigrew et al., 1992).

A substantial review of the evolution of strategy scholarship since the late 80's (Sminia & de Rond, 2012) concluded that Pettigrew's work had shown how:

'strategy is a social process in which imperfect but mostly well-intentioned human beings exercise their freedom to direct this process towards a (usually mutually agreed) outcome. They subsequently find that the process takes on a dynamic of its own, confronting them with their own fallibility and lack of control.'

In the 20 years that followed Pettigrew's landmark article, process research scholars attention had gone beyond decision making, change and the managerial elites to encompass amongst other things: the role of middle managers and value of involving other employees – the notion of open strategy; exploring the importance of framing and cognition and how the attention of the organisation can be affected through discourse – and consequently seeing the process of strategy as having some features of a social learning process; seeing the value of a parallel stream of resource thinking on capabilities, especially the growing work on micro foundations of dynamic capabilities as outcomes of the strategy process, whilst the process itself can also be seen as a dynamic managerial capability in its own right. (Burgelman et al., 2018)

In reflecting on the evolution of strategy process research 20 years after his landmark articles Pettigrew repeated his earlier call for further research into the how of change, focusing particularly on the intentions and actions of key agents (A. M. Pettigrew, 2012). The emergence of Strategy as practice (SAP) is seen by some as a response to that call (Sminia & de Rond, 2012).

Strategy as practice

SAP emerged in the early 2000's with the promise of being able to provide insights into the tools and methods of strategy-making (practices), how strategy work takes place (praxis), and the role and identity of the actors involved (practitioners) (Vaara & Whittington, 2012).

With its roots in sociological theory strategy as practice examines how agents 'are enabled by organizational and wider social practices in their decisions and actions' whilst drawing on the strategy process approach. It has links with other theories found in strategic management including 'sensemaking' and the dynamic capabilities perspective (Vaara & Whittington, 2012).

SAP also aims to relate individual level micro-activities to both the organisational level, and wider multi-organisational field. It sought to remedy the lack of attention to the role of people and agency in the mainstream strategy research of the time. (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022).

The 'three p's framework – practitioners, practices and praxis have remained at the heart of the SAP framework but as the field has matured researchers have drawn on a wide range of theoretical and methodological approaches, some new to the strategy field, including: structuration theory, sensemaking and discourse. (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022)

More recently the concept of 'open strategy' was described and greater attention paid to people involved in the strategy process who were not normally considered as strategic actors. And researchers looked across streams of strategy and other research where closer collaboration could be fruitful, including institutional theory, strategy process, dynamic capabilities and routine dynamics. (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022)

SAP has been criticised for conceptualising strategy as little more than a kind of empirical objective ie: the doing of strategy (Rouleau and Cloutier 2022). Some argue this has led to an excessive focus on capturing the activities and micro level actions of managers at the expense of shedding light on why they are doing what they are doing, most importantly failing to seek a substantive impact on organisational outcomes (Suddaby et al., 2013). Rouleau and Cloutier suggest that researchers have neglected the nature of social practice, which should include the collective knowledge that agents have acquired over time and their contingent use of this in their social and organisational context (Rouleau & Cloutier, 2022).

Institutional work – bridging differing views of organisations

In his critique of public management research Peters (2017) laments that very little has been done to draw on the large body of institutional theory to help understand public service reform – despite the civil service being a major institution operating in a field amongst other institutions.

The idea of Institutional work emerged from efforts to bridge neo-institutional theory (NIT) and strategy as practice. NIT argued that organisations change their behaviour because of social and symbolic pressures created outside of the organisation – in the wider organisational field (Suddaby et al., 2013). But institutional work encourages a shift in focus to the '*purposive action of individuals and organisations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions.*' (T. Lawrence et al., 2011) Agents actively shape reform, some may act in the cause of reform and others may resist in order to maintain existing or restore previous arrangements. (Cloutier et al., 2016)

The study of institutional work has come to address three main areas: how institutional work occurs, who does institutional work, and what constitutes institutional work (T. B. Lawrence et al., 2013). Cloutier et al (2016) describe four types of institutional work that managers do and how they interact. They identify that what happens at the precursive stage of reform implementation (conceptual work and structural work) is critical because it determines what will be possible later. Echoing the turn to 'open strategy' they conclude that participative approaches may also be valuable in legitimizing new and contextualized visions of reform.

Because managers share agency with a wide range of agents with no one having complete control over the process. (T. Lawrence et al., 2011) an initial vision of a radical transformation will regardless of effort lead to 'a hybridised form where elements of the proposed reform are adapted and grafted onto previous arrangements' (Cloutier et al., 2016). It is striking that they conclude this 'dilution is a good thing because it is what enables reform (Cloutier et al., 2016).

Three particular areas of overlap between SAP and institutional work: a focus on what actors actually do, their shared cognitions and the role of language in creating shared meanings.(Suddaby et al., 2013)

Strategy discourse and sensemaking

Significant strands of research within both SAP and Institutional work have emphasised the importance of strategy discourse and how it is used both to promote change and to resist it (Balogun et al., 2014). Such work sees sensemaking as a social process within which advocates of reform try to influence others towards the 'cognitive re-orientation' required for strategic change to occur, but also a social process within which managers and other recipients will develop their own meanings for the changes being proposed, which could be conducive to change or mobilise resistance to change (Balogun et al., 2014). From this perspective the discursive practices of managers at different levels of strategy discourse are fundamental to understanding the success or failure of strategic change (Paroutis & Heracleous, 2013).

Dynamic capabilities

In the 1990's dynamic capabilities (DC) were introduced as a framework to explain the ability of an organisation facing a rapidly changing environment to know their context and reconfigure their assets to maintain their competitiveness. These DCs were described as being organisational learning skills: generating new knowledge that would 'reside in new patterns of activity or routines' (Teece et al., 1997). DCs have become the dominant theoretical framework for understanding how organisations change (Piening, 2013)

Teece later broke DC's down into three kinds of capacities: '(1) to sense and shape opportunities and threats, (2) to seize opportunities, and (3) to maintain competitiveness through enhancing, combining, protecting, and when necessary, reconfiguring the business enterprise's intangible and tangible assets' (Teece, 2009). DCs acted as strategic meta-routines through which organisations adapt, change or introduce new operational routines to improve their performance.

A seminal article (Zheng et al., 2011) argued that 'the fundamental function of the firm is to integrate and use knowledge' and drew out three Knowledge Building Capabilities that stand above others as special kinds of DCs: knowledge acquisition capabilities, knowledge generation

capabilities and knowledge combination activities. They found that this final knowledge combination capability contributed the most to innovation and performance, drawing on the raw material created by the other two processes. They noted the increasing role that alliances and networks play in organisations' environment.

Research has increasingly focused on exploring the range of processes and routines that provide the micro-foundations as the building blocks for DCs, explaining how they are created (Bhardwaj et al., 2022). More recent researchers typically identify micro-foundations of specific DCs as 'second order' themes which are underpinned by 'first order' routines (Ince & Hahn, 2020) (Bhardwaj et al., 2022). Different firms can reach similar DCs by quite different routes reflecting their own context and history. A number of antecedents, for example the degree of the organisation's embeddedness in networks and alliances, are proposed as important aspects of the path dependency of dynamic capabilities (Zheng et al., 2011).

DCs seem to provide a potential lens for viewing the success of civil service management reforms. Whilst the approach developed overwhelmingly through research in private sector organisations to those in the public sector, and specifically the civil service. An emerging body of work seems to make a plausible case (Pablo et al., 2007), (Piening, 2013), (Ince & Hahn, 2020), (Bhardwaj et al., 2022).

The two interrelated frameworks of (Teece, 2009) and (Zheng et al., 2011) have both been applied in non-private sector settings. (Feldman & Pentland, 2003), (Piening, 2013), (Ince & Hahn, 2020), (Vallaster et al., 2021), (Wenzel et al., 2021). These studies helpfully identify common DCs and micro-foundations with private sector studies but also exposed some distinctive DCs and micro-foundations that reflected the tensions facing non-profits and hybrid organisations (Bhardwaj et al., 2022) (Vallaster et al., 2021).

Multiple streams framework

(Kingdon, 2014) Kingdon's [1995] multiple streams approach (MSA) provides a compelling picture of the messy reality of how 'an idea's time comes' in government. It exposes the fluid and informal nature of a number of agents who play a key part at different points in the policy process. Whilst its origins lie in sociological theory, its application has overwhelmingly been in political science.

He describes three streams (problems, policy, politics) each with various sub-components. These streams co-exist independently until the point where a policy window opens to create an opportunity for a few "policy entrepreneurs" (I will subsequently use the term "agents") to push their conception of the problem and the solutions [cite].

He describes the function which these agents serve in the system as one of 'coupling' the three streams to the extent that they are sufficiently aligned to substantially increase the prospect of their ideas being adopted on an agenda for decision. They are playing the role of broker and bricoleur as well as advocate [cite].

The influence and appeal of his multiple streams framework is reflected in a large body of work which seeks to apply and extend it through all the stages of the policy process, and to combine it with other concepts [cite].

There have been some notable efforts to develop Kingdon's approach to address some of the main criticisms of his work.

(Ackrill & Kay, 2011) Ackrill and Kay [2016] make several necessary changes to Kingdon's conceptualisation of policy entrepreneurs (or agents):

- Policy makers in government are not just passive agents being sold solutions by policy entrepreneurs, but in fact acting as entrepreneurs themselves in making choices about which agents and solutions are suitable to the window and should become part of the coupling of streams.
- "Policy entrepreneur" is better used as a label for a set of behaviours at moments in a policy process, not as a permanent characteristic of an agent in the process. They found that agents can help create the windows of opportunity, rather than passively waiting for one to open.
- Agents are both inside and outside the system and hierarchy and may move between the two. They take on different roles through the process.

(Howlett et al., 2015) Howlett, McConnell and Perl [2015] developed a five-stream confluence model with the aim of extending the usability of the original stream framework beyond the agenda setting phase to policy development and decision making. They add a process stream and a programme stream to explain how at each subsequent confluence point different actors, powerful shifts in ideology and interest can change or reframe problem definitions in an existing policy flow. They claim that their model enables the factoring in of the role of various agents as active steerers of the policy 'ship', or alternatively explains how actors try to reconfigure or even block the flow of the policy.

(Boswell & Rodrigues, 2016) argue that MSA has demonstrated that it can be used to analyse how policies are applied and implemented across sectors or levels of government. They proposed that *'how this policy is implemented then depends on its confluence with local or sectoral problem and politics streams.'* They predict that where external requirements (for example from the centre of government) do not fit with departments' beliefs and conception of their local organisational problems, implementation will be weaker.

They tested their explanatory typology of implementation modes on a few UK reforms (including one, Asylum Targets, for which I was the lead official in the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit at the time). In this case they observed that modes of implementation shifted over time (from coercive implementation to bottom-up implementation) as the organisation came to see the solution as fitting with their local framing of organisational problems. It is this fit – even as the politics stream behind the original reform moved on – that explains why the organisation embedded the solution and applied it to other problems.

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