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HANDLING THEORETICAL DIVERSITY ON AGENCY AUTONOMY

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Introduction

In recent years scholars have increasingly focused on agencies and agencification (cf. Christensen and Lægreid 2006, Pollitt and Talbot 2004, Pollitt et al. 2004, Wettenhall 2005). How an agency is defined and what it does varies considerably across national and organizational cultures, legal systems, and political systems (Smullen 2004). Nevertheless, *agencies* are normally said to denote public sector organizations that have the following features (Pollitt et al. 2004: 8-11, Talbot 2004: 4-6): 1) they are public law bodies; 2) they are structurally disaggregated from the core of their ministry; 3) they have some capacity for autonomous decision-making with regard to management or policy; 4) they are formally under at least some control from ministers and ministries; 5) they have some expectation of continuity over time; and 6) they have some resources (financial and personnel) of their own.

One of the defining characteristics of agencies is that they have some form and degree of autonomy from superior bodies. The concept of *autonomy* is used in different ways in the study of agencies. Mostly, the focus is on structural and formal autonomy and on agency design (e.g. Christensen 2001, Moe 1990, Yesilkagit 2004a). Other studies are more interested in de facto autonomy, taking autonomy as the level of decision-making competencies of agencies as the point of departure. Thus, autonomy is about discretion, or the extent to which an agency can decide itself about matters it considers important (Roness et al. 2008, Verhoest et al. 2004, Verschuere 2007).

Like in the study of public sector organizations in general, students of agencies and agencification have used many different types of theories to analyse how agencies are designed and how they work in practice. For example, in a comprehensive review of the agency literature Pollitt (2004: 320-27) identifies three

broad families of theories: 1) 'traditional', mainstream social science; 2) economic approaches, like rational choice theory; and 3) interpretive/constructivist theories (see also Pollitt et al. 2004: 12-18). Mostly, only one type of theory is used, but there are also some studies that draw upon several different types.

The main purpose of this paper is to identify and discuss strategies for handling the theoretical diversity on agency autonomy.¹ The strategies are linked to the answers to three questions, whereby an affirmative answer to one leads to the next. Firstly, is more than one theory used? Secondly, if more than one theory is used, are they kept apart? Thirdly, if several theories are used and kept apart, are they assessed in relation to each other? The four strategies are:

- 1) *prioritizing*: choosing one of the relevant theories (and perhaps further elaborating the theory)
- 2) *complementing*: using several theories at the same time, considering them as a whole
- 3) *contrasting*: using several theories at the same time, comparing them with each other
- 4) *synthesizing*: including elements from several theories to form a (new) synthesis

This classification is inspired by Pettigrew (1985: 41-42), but he only labels and elaborates the fourth one (called 'contextualism'), which is the one he favours. More importantly, he does not discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the various strategies. Primarily based on Pfeffer (1982) and Hartman (1988), seven criteria for assessing theories may be formulated (the last one is added to their lists):

<i>clarity</i>	the theory's line of argument should be easy to grasp
<i>parsimony</i>	the explanations and causal connections in the theory should be simple
<i>logical coherence</i>	the theory should contain no internal contradictions
<i>refutability</i>	the theory should be open to disconfirmation

¹ To some extent, the discussion draws on a previous review of theories and strategies in the study of organizational change (Reness 1997).

<i>truth</i>	the theory should account for empirical observations
<i>generalizability</i>	the theory should go beyond a particular case
<i>realism</i>	the assumptions on which the theory is based should be realistic

Some of these considerations may conflict. Thus, the requirement for theories to be clear and parsimonious may reduce the chances of truth and realism. This implies that in assessing theories we must discuss whether and to what extent they fulfil each criterion, and how the criteria should be weighted. Here, I also consider how important the criteria are when the *strategies* for handling theoretical diversity are used. For example, generalizability is more central to contrasting than to complementing. Moreover, the choice of strategy may make it easier or more difficult to fulfil the criteria.

Strategies for handling theoretical diversity have been reviewed in the study of organizations (e.g. Adler and Borys 1993, Reed 1985, Scherer 1998) and in political science (e.g. Campbell and Pedersen 2001, Jupille, Caporaso and Checkel 2003). In my discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of the various strategies I will also indicate how my classification is related to other classifications. However, most of the examples on the use of the strategies are drawn from the literature on agencies and agencification.

To some extent the choice of strategy depends on whether we want to understand and explain a particular case or agency autonomy in general. While complementing may be most relevant for obtaining increased insight on a specific case, contrasting may be most relevant for developing and testing theories beyond specific cases. Prioritizing and synthesizing may be of relevance for obtaining insight on a specific case as well as for theory development.

Prioritizing

Pettigrew (1985: 41-42) has a telling metaphor on what I call prioritizing: “Clip on a single powerful lamp onto the miner’s helmet and take that down to the data mine.” In

examinations of agency autonomy, a single lamp has often been used, but the type of lamp has varied (cf. Pollitt 2004, Pollitt et al. 2004).

In the study of organizations in general, what Reed (1985) and Scherer (1998) call an ‘isolationist’ strategy, and Adler and Borys (1993) call ‘specialization’ is supported by those, following Burrell and Morgan (1979), who emphasize that paradigms are incommensurable and must not be reconciled. However, even if the use of more than one theory at the same time is regarded as possible and desirable, practical problems may imply that researchers stick to a particular theory. Limitations on working capacity and on knowledge of the theoretical diversity among scholars may make it difficult to use more than one theory in a specific study. However, cooperation among researchers may lessen these difficulties.

The use of the strategy of prioritizing may also be based on the deliberate choice of a certain theory from among several alternative theories. To some extent, assessments of the strengths and weaknesses of prioritizing will depend on the general features of the strategy. Of the seven criteria, truth may suffer most. By using only one theory, many empirical observations may fail to be detected or understood. Extending Pettigrew’s metaphor, a single lamp will not allow a lot of treasures to be discovered. Even if valuable findings are made, it is not possible to know whether even more could have been uncovered via other routes.

On the other hand, prioritizing will strengthen the chances of logical coherence. Thus, Reed (1985: 183-84) mentions that the standard argument for the ‘isolationist’ strategy is that theories “are allowed to develop and fructify without any contact with alien perspectives that may introduce conceptual impurities into their theoretical bloodstream.” However, prioritizing is no guarantee of logical coherence – for this also depends on features of the specific theory.

Assessments of the other criteria will also depend on features of the theory being selected. Theories will weight the criteria in different ways. For example, rational choice theories will emphasize clarity and parsimony at the expense of realism, and there are also some doubts on whether refutability is important or possible for these theories (Hindess 1989: 182-83, Peters 1999: 61).

To some extent, how central refutability and generalizability are depends on whether we want to explain a particular case or to develop and test theories on agency autonomy. To understand a specific case, knowledge about the possibility of disconfirmation is not crucial, and it does not matter whether the theory goes beyond

the case or not. For theory development, however, the existence of observations that may not be predicted from the theory is decisive. Here, the chances of generalization may be increased by using the same theory for several cases.

Even if the type of lamp being used varies, among scholars using economic approaches like rational choice theories, this strategy seems to be particularly popular for studying agency design. For example, Moe (1990) discusses the structural design of agencies (and the formal level of autonomy that stems from this design) as the result of processes of political and technical uncertainty, and of political compromise. Thus, autonomy is related to the formal, legal design of agencies. Elaborating on Moe, Yesilkagit (2004a) sees the structural design of agencies (and formal level of autonomy) as a result of the prevalence of certain logics (commitment and agency). The focus is often on delegation (of formal autonomy) from the principal(s) to the agent(s). Expanding on ideas in Strøm, Müller and Bergman (2003) on a parliamentary chain of delegation with four discrete steps, Braun and Gilardi (2006: 4) add a fifth step: delegation to independent agencies. Others more explicitly combine principal-agent theory with other variants of rational choice theory, like public choice theory and transaction cost theory, e.g. Greer (1994) in her study of Next Steps agencies in the United Kingdom and Van Thiel (2001) in her study of quangos in the Netherlands (cf. also Van Thiel 2004a, 2004b). Owing to their common core assumptions, this may still be regarded as prioritizing a certain type of theory. Moreover, as noted by Van Thiel (2004a: 175), elaboration of a rational actor model is needed for it to become a more complex and realistic model.

Instead of using a specific theory in a quite pure form, students of agency autonomy may also prioritize the theory even if they modify the theory by taking into account some elements from other types of theories. This may be done in different ways. Firstly, they may use what Jupille, Caporaso and Checkel (2003: 23) in their discussion of constructivist and rationalist conceptions in the study of the European Union call 'incorporation', i.e. showing how one theory is derived from, or is seen as a special case of, another theory. This is quite similar to what Campbell and Pedersen (2001: 267) call 'subsuming' in their discussion of types of institutionalist theories, based on different logics of action. However, this way of reconciling logics of action may be seen as unsatisfactory because it denies the distinctiveness of different logics (March and Olsen 2006: 703).

Secondly, students of agency autonomy may use what Adler and Borys (1998: 663), in their discussion of four forces that are at work in and on organizations, call 'reductionism', i.e. interrelating the four forces in a grand theory of integration premised on the universal causal primacy of one force. This is quite similar to what Scherer (1998: 154) calls 'back-to-basics', implying the reintegration of frameworks under the hegemony of a certain paradigm. While some students of organizations (e.g. Pfeffer 1993, 1997) regard this as a way to decrease the fragmentation in the study of organizations and provide a counterweight to rational choice theory, others (e.g. Cannella and Paetzold 1994) point to the dangers for theory development of conformity to a central paradigm.

Thirdly, it is possible to take into account elements from other theories by showing how they may strengthen or weaken the effects of the theory taken as the point of departure. For example, taking a structural-instrumental perspective as the point of departure, we may analyse how bargaining resources, institutional norms and routines, and institutional environments and myths may support or restrict hierarchical control (Christensen et al. 2007: chapter 9). Likewise, taking principal-agent theory as the point of departure, the delegation of formal bureaucratic autonomy to a newly created agency will be affected by the organizational culture that evolves within the agency (Yesilkagit 2004b: 548).

Fourthly, central features of one theory may provide the framework for how elements from other theories work. For example, taking a cultural-institutional perspective as the point of departure, we may analyse how goals and problem-solving, interests and bargaining, and external events are interpreted within and filtered through established norms and routines in organizations (Christensen et al. 2007: chapter 9). Like in the previous form of modification, this points in the direction of a synthesizing strategy, but it is still a certain theory that is being prioritized.

In addition to the problems of clarity, parsimony and logical coherence, prioritization by drawing on elements from other types of theories may affect refutability. Thus, the theory may be too vague and broad, allowing almost all observations to be explained in some way or other. This problem may be reduced by specifying how the elements from the other theories interact with the elements from the theory taken as the point of departure.

Complementing

Pettigrew (1985: 42) also has a good metaphor on what I call complementing: “Go into the mine lights ablaze, looking from many perspectives of process, and hope to see and explain without being blinded by all the distractions and reflections.” By using this strategy, we normally aim to understand and explain as much as possible on a specific case, and not to choose among theories. This means that success is measured in terms of the insights obtained from the theories in their totality. Thus, it may not matter whether the theories are incompatible. The reasoning behind this strategy is presented clearly by Pondy and Boye (1981: 84): “Under a multi-paradigm approach to inquiry, it will be argued, the function of theory shifts from that of ‘truth proving’ to that of ‘insight seeking’. Since theories will no longer be competing for the single prize of being most nearly true, the simultaneous acceptance of several incompatible theories will no longer be problematic. What will matter is how much insight and understanding can be extracted from the entire constellation of theories generated from the several paradigms in use.”

Over time, this strategy seems to have become more common in political science and in the study of organizations. Well-known examples are Allison (1971) and Morgan (1986). In addition, Allison and Morgan emphasize that the ‘conceptual lenses’ through which we look at a case will affect the selection of data, the observations and how they are interpreted. These aspects are not so central in the present discussion.

The most important criterion for the strategy of complementing is truth. This consideration is, however, related to the theories taken together and not to each of them separately. They may account for different observations and contribute to a better understanding than each theory can do on its own. If we aim to obtain insight on a specific case rather than to develop theories on agency autonomy, the criterion of generalizability is not important and the criterion of refutability is not relevant. For each theory there are no particular requirements for clarity, parsimony, logical coherence or realism. Since the linkages between the theories are not decisive, it is unnecessary to clarify the boundaries of the theories. Thus, it does not matter much whether the theories partly overlap or are mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, for this strategy too practical problems may imply that researchers stick to some theories

rather than others. Limitations on working capacity may mean that it will be wise to apply theories that make different, but not necessarily incompatible predictions.

In the study of organizations, what Adler and Borys (1993: 664-65) call 'eclecticism', i.e. weaving together the influence of all four forces, has strong elements of complementing. According to them, this strategy is well-suited to portraying the complexity of organizational phenomena, by allowing the researcher to range across several approaches and give richer accounts than by using more single-minded alternatives. However, the weakness of eclecticism is that this richness is purchased at the expense of generalizability.

In the recent discussions of strategies for handling theoretical diversity in political science, complementing is not explicitly put forward as a separate option. However, what Jupille, Caporaso and Checkel (2003: 21-22) call 'the domain approach', i.e. identifying the respective turfs and 'home domains' of each theory, has some elements of complementing. Thus, they emphasize that if one theory provides some value added to another, we can improve our efforts via this approach. What they call 'sequencing' relates closely to the domain approach, but goes one step further, suggesting that each depends on the other temporarily to explain a given outcome. However, for the domain approach as well as for sequencing, they are more interested in the boundaries of and the relationships between the theories than other proponents of the complementing strategy. This also applies to what Campbell and Pedersen (2001: 264) call 'linking'.

So far, the complementing strategy has seldom been used explicitly or solely to analyse agency autonomy. However, there are some traces of this in recent studies. For example, in their comparison of agencies for four tasks in four countries, Pollitt et al. (2004) put their task-specific path dependency (TSPD) model to work alongside the bureau-shaping theory (Dunleavy 1991, James 2003). They emphasize that "the object of the comparison is not for one model utterly to slay the others, but rather to see how far each will take us in explaining some of the features of agencies which seem to have emerged from research." (p. 251) Likewise, in their study of de facto autonomy (and control) of Norwegian agencies, Lægreid, Roness and Rubecksen (2006) outline three theoretical approaches: a structural-instrumental perspective, a cultural-institutional perspective and an environmental perspective. For each of the three perspectives, they derive hypotheses on how certain factors (characteristics of the agencies and their environments) are expected to make a difference for how they

perceive the extent of autonomy. In addition to presenting (in bivariate and multivariate analysis) the effect of each of the factors taken separately, they also discuss to what extent they (as independent variables) taken together can explain the variation in aspects of agency autonomy (as dependent variables).

More generally, in terms of multiple regression analysis, in using the complementing strategy we are primarily interested in the total explained variance (R^2) of the factors included in a full model. Whether we should add independent variables (derived from other theories) to the model depends on the extent to which they are able to explain the residual variance.

Contrasting

The core of this strategy is to choose among alternative theories based on assessments of their explanatory power. We formulate hypotheses and derive expectations from each theory, and investigate whether and to what extent the observations are in agreement with or depart from what we expected. The theories gain support to the extent that the findings correspond with the predictions.

Contrasting is often related to developing and testing theories. Here, it is as important to clarify the areas in which the theories hold (i.e. their scope or domain) and to specify the conditions for their explanatory power as to choose the *one* best theory. Pettigrew (1985: 42) describes the strategy in the following way: “Keep in mind the different process theories, and work towards making contingent statements of, for example, where and when the different theories of process may be more or less appropriate.” Adler and Borys (1993: 665) make a similar point in their discussion on ‘metatheory’: “A metatheory presumes that several theories (...) are adequate but apply under different conditions; it attempts to specify those conditions and the relationships among the theories. (...) The metatheoretical approach differs from the eclectic approach in its systematic specification of the conditions under which particular theoretical perspectives are appropriate.”

Theory development implies that findings from several studies are compared and related. Taking a specific study as the point of departure, discussions on the truth of theories are relevant both in advance and afterwards. When conducting a study on

agency autonomy, we have some advance expectations about what we will find if the theories hold true. Afterwards we examine, for each theory, whether the observations correspond with the predictions. Based on previous studies, we can also have advance expectations about the scope of the theories and the conditions under which they apply. Studies of agency autonomy are then primarily directed towards examining whether the expectations related to the scope and conditions of explanatory power are confirmed.

Thus, the expectations are at two different levels: 1) the relationships between the predictions and the observations for each theory; and 2) the relationships among the theories. Most studies seem to stay at the first level, discussing the extent to which the various theories gain support. For theory development it is also necessary to move to the second level. Based on previous studies and the study in question we may be able to modify the theories, or specify the scope of the original theories and the conditions under which they are appropriate.

In developing and testing theories, fulfilling the criteria on refutability and generalizability is crucial. The disconfirmation of a theory in a study, i.e. when the observations do not correspond with the predictions, indicates that we have gone beyond the boundary conditions of the theory. It will be easier to generalize if the same set of theories is applied in several studies. In this way, we can contribute to a clarification of their scope or domain.

Features of the theories will also influence the size of the scope or domain, and how easy it will be to clarify this. The more parsimonious the theories are, the less the chances are of having a large domain. By making the assumptions more realistic, we can increase the domain. If the theories are clear and logically coherent, it will be easier to disclose their domain and the relationships among the theories.

In the recent discussions of strategies for handling theoretical diversity in political science, what Jupille, Caporaso and Checkel (2003: 20) call ‘competitive testing’ represents the contrasting strategy in a pure form: “Competitive testing means that we do not evaluate our claims only against ‘the evidence’ but against other theories as well (and, of course, other theories imply other evidence).” Moreover, their ‘domain approach’ also has strong elements of contrasting, since it involves properly specifying “the scope conditions of each theory, what its domain is, and how it relates to other theories.” (p. 22) They add that this works best when multiple theories explain similar phenomena, when explanatory variables have little overlap,

and when these variables do not interact in their influence on outcomes. Likewise, what Campbell and Pedersen (2001: 264) call 'linking' through specifying the scope conditions under which aspects of different paradigms obtain in empirical situations may also be regarded as a form of contrasting.

The contrasting strategy is used quite explicitly in some recent studies of agency autonomy. For example, in his analysis of why the French government delegates authority to quasi-autonomous agencies, Elgie (2006) discusses eight hypotheses based on different types of factors that may explain this delegation. The first four are mainly based on transaction cost theory, while the last four emphasize various contextual factors. His conclusion is as follows: "All in all, this article has helped to explain why governments have established so many AAIs in France. More than that, it has also helped to strengthen or weaken the validity of the various reasons that are put forward to explain the delegation of authority to quasi-autonomous agencies in general." (p. 226) Likewise, in his analysis of executive agencies in the United Kingdom, James (2003) distinguishes between two perspectives: the public interest perspective and the bureau-shaping perspective, which offer different hypotheses about executive agency reform and the outcomes of reform. He discusses the relative merits of the perspectives, summarized as follows: "Drawing together the findings suggests that, overall, bureau-shaping hypotheses are more consistent with the practice set out in Part II than public interest hypotheses." (p. 127) Towards the end he also tries to generalize beyond his case, by discussing the relevance of the perspectives and the findings for countries emulating the UK reform.

The study by Pollitt et al. (2004) also to some extent points in the direction of contrasting. Thus, in the concluding chapter (p. 264) they emphasize how the scope and precision of the task-specific path dependency model and the bureau-shaping model differ significantly. According to them, with regard to scope, the bureau-shaping model seems to have been developed mainly to explain why certain types of organizational change were originally chosen. On the other hand, the TSPD model is concerned both with why agencies were originally created and how they are managed and steered. With regard to precision, the bureau-shaping model provides some fairly specific predictions, while for the TSPD model ideas on which elements of path and task are crucial need to be added.

Likewise, Lægreid, Roness and Rubecksen (2006) discuss whether and to what extent the hypotheses based on the three theoretical perspectives are confirmed.

They also compare the effects of structural, cultural and environmental factors on agency autonomy, measured by Pearson's r in bivariate analysis and standardized beta coefficients in multiple regression analysis. More generally, in terms of multiple regression analysis, in using the contrasting strategy we are primarily interested in the size and significance of the standardized beta coefficients and the total explained variance (R^2) of the models based on each theory.

Synthesizing

Synthesizing implies the inclusion of elements from several theories. The emphasis is on how the various elements interact in what appears as a new and superior theory. Unlike complementing and contrasting, the (original) theories are not separated, but form parts of a totality. The resulting synthesis can be regarded as *one* theory, but the basis for the theory is a wider set of ideas on relationships than for prioritizing. As noted above, the distinction between prioritizing and synthesizing may be unclear. However, incorporating elements from other theories in the theory taken as a point of departure is in principle different from forming a synthesis consisting of elements from several theories of the same rank.

Nevertheless, it is not obvious how different the theoretical ideas must be to represent a strategy of synthesizing instead of prioritizing. For example, as noted above, when Van Thiel (2001) combines principal-agent theory, public choice theory and transaction cost theory, this may be regarded as prioritizing. By expanding her model using ideas of imitation based on innovation diffusion theory and institutional theory (Van Thiel 2004a), she moves more clearly in the direction of synthesizing. Thus, the synthesizing strategy implies that we include elements from different types of theories.

The use of the synthesizing strategy often stems from a concern to have theories that are realistic and true. Society is regarded as quite complex. Thus, to grasp relevant phenomena we need complex theories. By combining elements from several theories the explanatory power may be greater than by using only one quite pure theory. However, having realistic assumptions comes at the expense of clarity and parsimony. It will also be harder to have logical coherence – to link together the

various elements in a consistent way. In addition, a theory that is too vague and wide-ranging is difficult to refute: we can see everything, but thus also nothing (cf. Pettigrew 1987: 659).

Here, too, refutability and generalizability are central if we want to develop and test theories. In using synthesizing it will also be important to apply the same theory several times, for example in comparative case studies. However, comparisons across cases are not unproblematic, since it presupposes that there are no deep conceptual problems involved in comparison or integration (McPhee 1990: 397).

As noted above, Pettigrew (1985) favours the synthesizing strategy, or what he calls 'contextualism'. For the study of organizations, Reed (1985: 185) provides a more comprehensive argument for what he calls 'the integrationist strategy', emphasizing some of the same ideas as Pettigrew. According to him, the major intellectual challenge facing organizational analysis is to provide a more systematic and coherent account of organizational structures as the outcomes of a continuous process in which members attempt to come to terms with the contextual constraints that limit their design options. The theoretical response thought most appropriate to handle this challenge is a greater degree of conceptual reconciliation between theoretical approaches which are often regarded as incompatible in terms of their underlying philosophical presuppositions and ideological commitments. This implies a synthesis of selected conceptual elements from different approaches to form a theoretical framework which systematically incorporates actors' strategies and structural constraints. The latter is to be achieved by focusing on the process whereby institutionalized social relations are produced and reproduced in the everyday interactions of organizational members (cf. also Reed 1997).

Campbell and Pedersen (2001: 265) propose what they call 'blending' as an alternative to 'linking': "Whereas linking strategies preserve the integrity of each paradigm and carefully identify the contextual boundaries separating them, scholars can also *blend* insights from different paradigms in ways that suggest transcending or at least blurring those boundaries." According to them, a particularly fruitful approach may be to nest concepts and causal arguments from one paradigm within those of another. A similar point is made by Van de Ven and Poole (1995: 534) in their discussion on how the relationships between four different types of mechanisms ('motors') can be ordered (cf. Poole et al. 2000). Campbell and Pedersen (2001: 266) also mention that blending can involve recognizing the importance for change of

interactions among factors highlighted by different paradigms. While linking as well as blending imply the possibility of better integrating paradigms, the strategies represent paradigmatic complementarity rather than paradigmatic competition (p. 268). Since the paradigms are not ranked, the blending strategy points in the direction of synthesizing. However, they do not aim to develop a new theory, as a more complete form of synthesizing would imply. Later on, they also argue against “another, much different approach to adjudicating paradigms: the creation of some sort of grand theory consisting of vast and abstract conceptual schemes.” (p. 268)

Some recent reviews and studies of agencies also discuss the relevance of synthesizing. Pollitt et al. (2004: 18) present their task-specific path dependency model as being somewhere on the borderline between a traditional social science approach and social constructivism. Nevertheless, as noted above, it is regarded primarily as an alternative to rational choice theory, and not as a synthesis. Pollitt (2004: 338) also warns against theoretical integration: “Since the different theories are commonly acknowledged to have different strong and weak points, can we not simply amalgamate them in order to come up with a composite explanation? The short answer is ‘no’.” However, this answer comes with some qualifications: “Specific combinations of theories taken from the same or similar epistemological groups may well be viable and useful.” The TSPD model may be regarded as an example of this kind of more limited integration.

In their review of theories on agencification and regulatory reform, Christensen and Lægreid (2006: 14-21) distinguish between the rational-economic perspective, the organizational-structural perspective and institutional perspectives. They argue that single-perspective studies have limitations and they therefore try to take a broader, more mixed approach that combines elements from different perspectives. This is done in what they call a transformative perspective, which is presented as a (new) synthesis (e.g. Christensen and Lægreid 2001, 2005, 2007a, 2007b).

According to Christensen and Lægreid (2005: 142-43) the transformative perspective proceeds from the notion that change and reform processes and their effects are based on multiple and intertwined driving forces. Instrumental attempts to decide on and implement reforms depend not only on polity features, but also on cultural trajectories and myths. The complex mixture of factors can sometime work in the same direction, connecting goals, means and results in an effortless way, or do

quite the opposite, leading to the obstruction of intended reforms. Most of the time, however, reforms or their effects seem to be characterized by complex interactions between polity, culture and environment, resulting in transformed and hybrid structures and cultures. They emphasize that the transformative perspective adds complexity to the understanding of administrative reforms and may therefore make it less elegant but hopefully more realistic (cf. also Christensen and Lægreid, 2001: 24-25)

A transformative perspective may be formulated in three different ways in the study of agencies (cf. Christensen and Lægreid 2007a: 8). Firstly, we can start with international doctrines, ideas and reform movements and focus on how they are translated and interpreted by national actors with their own goals and cultural features. An example of this is the study by Roness (2007) on how NPM and post-NPM doctrines on agencies and other types of state organizations have been transformed in Australia, New Zealand, Norway and Sweden since the mid-1980s. Secondly, we can focus on agency reforms as a complex interaction between different features. Starting with conscious reform efforts by political and managerial executives, one can examine how they are transformed when they encounter cultural constraints and external pressure. Thirdly, one can take cultural features as a starting point and examine how instrumental design and external pressure are translated and interpreted by actors within established norms and rules (cf. also Christensen et al. 2007: chapter 9).

The main challenge of a transformative perspective and other forms of synthesizing is to uncover how the interaction of elements drawn from different theories work, and particularly how structure and other factors affect the ways individual and collective actors act. One alternative is to specify necessary and/or sufficient conditions for actions and the course and outcome of agencification processes. Alternatively, features like structural forms and culture may constrain as well as enable specific types of action. In addition, the existing organizational structure and structure may strengthen or weaken the influence of external factors. The linkages between, for example, structure, action and outcome may also be probabilistic rather than deterministic. More comprehensive forms of synthesizing may also include reciprocity between elements from different theories. For example, a two-way causality between structure and action is possible and common. Thus, it is important to investigate how behaviour in, and outcome of, agencification processes

at a specific time influence what kind of changes are possible or probable at later times. The results of the processes, and the actors' interpretations of what happened, have an impact on the structures that frame future actions. This two-way relationship and co-evolution is discussed in some varieties of institutional theory in political science (cf. Peters 1999, Thelen 2003) as well as in the study of organizations (Scott 2001).

These more comprehensive forms of synthesizing presuppose that it is possible to uncover the mechanisms through which the interaction and reciprocity work. We must specify how the various elements fit together, or alternatively under what conditions we can get different combinations. As noted by Pettigrew (1990: 269), "for the analyst interested in the theory and practice of changing, the task is to identify the variety and mixture of causes of change and to explore through time some of the conditions and contexts under which these mixtures occur." However, it is quite demanding to conduct studies on interaction and two-way causality of structure and action.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper has been to form a basis for assessing strategies for handling the theoretical diversity on agency autonomy. This has been done by discussing the importance of various criteria related to theories, and the extent to which the use of the four strategies can satisfy the criteria. The importance of the criteria, and the choice of strategy, also depends on whether we aim to gain insight on a specific case or to develop theories on agency autonomy beyond specific cases. Thus, this discussion cannot lead to a general and definite conclusion as to which strategy is best.

The distinctions between the strategies are based on possible combinations of answers to three interrelated questions. As noted above, modifications to one strategy may lead in the direction of another strategy. These modifications also mean that some criteria will become easier or more difficult to satisfy. For example, prioritizing by incorporating elements from other theories in the theory taken as a point of departure to some extent resembles synthesizing. Compared with prioritizing by

having a pure theory it will be easier to have realistic assumptions, but more difficult to have a theory that is clear, parsimonious and logically coherent. Thus, the chances of satisfying these four criteria need not be very different for modified versions of prioritizing and synthesizing.

Since the theories themselves change over time, the answer to the question of what constitutes a particular theory may also change. A theory which at a given point in time is regarded as a synthesis of several theories can later on be regarded as a theory on its own, incorporate elements from other theories, or even be included in a new and superior theory. Thus, over time, the boundaries between types of theories can be displaced or transcended. This also means that the strategies for handling theoretical diversity change: what at a specific time appears to be synthesizing elements from several theories of the same rank to form a new theory may later on be considered as prioritizing based on the new theory.

The use of specific theories and strategies in the study of agency autonomy may also affect the extent to which the criteria are regarded as important. Thus, not only the theories on agency autonomy and the strategies for handling the theoretical diversity evolve over time, but also the criteria for assessing the theories and strategies.

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