

Constructing The Citizen (or What They Don't Tell You About Strategy Work)

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Preface: Researcher Positionality and Organisational Setting

This paper is drawn from my 2025 Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA), a professional doctorate oriented to workplace problems and contribution to professional practice. Although I had left the City Council where I had been employed before I began my research, I treated my subjectivity as an 'at home' ethnographer (Alvesson, 2009). This reflected my knowledge of the organisation and pre-existing relationships.

I used the organisational setting to explore the discourses in city strategy work and how they constructed citizen subjectivities. Although the research was not therefore a conventional 'case study', nor was it concerned with organisational or individual 'rights or wrongs', there was a higher than average level of sensitivity due to an ongoing organisational review. I therefore agreed to anonymise the city. As cities are themselves discourses, choosing not to reveal the city's identity helped achieve focus and avoid unnecessary distraction.

My empirical material comprised strategy-related documents from the city in question and texts from interviews with senior managers which I analysed using discourse analytical tools and techniques. The methods take as read that the researcher's assumptions and expectations are entangled with the analysis.

Definitions:**Citizen**

My use of the term ‘citizen’ is the socially desirable version, indicating active engagement and contribution to society. This is in contrast to a legalistic or administrative category denoting membership of a political community.

Discourse

There is no one definition of discourse but this is the one I most often use because of its explicit link to action:

‘Discourse’ is defined here as an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p. 175).

City Strategy

I treat city strategy as a discourse, a social practice and in Foucauldian terms, a ‘technology’ of governing, aimed at shaping and moulding human beings. It is a social scientific and philosophical perspective rather than one grounded in conventional industry or economics agendas.

Neoliberalism

My approach to neoliberalism is as a government ‘rationality’ rather than a political programme; it denotes a paradoxical mechanism that emphasises freedom of choice, while simultaneously regulating and surveilling that freedom (Dean, 2010).

New Public Management (NPM)

An academic label for a collection of doctrines that came to dominate the bureaucratic reform agenda from the 1980s. Characteristics usually include the importation of business practices and language into the public sector and encouragement of quasi-markets to create competition (Hood, 1991).

Subjectivity

Identity can be seen as something ‘inherent’ in the individual, while a subjectivity is socially constructed from the constitutive force of discourses which offer ‘choices’ of subject positions or ‘places’ for ‘speaking subjects’.

Introduction

After many years working as a local government manager, I switched track, becoming a mature student studying my own practice of city strategy-making. I began to view my seemingly rational and objective government work from different vantage points and to ponder its effects. One of the more unsettling findings was the realisation that my colleagues and I had been engaged in an unwitting process of producing different ‘versions’ of the citizen. By positioning citizens, it seemed that my work practice had also been shaping versions of myself and my practitioner peers. New questions arose; for example, when I produced a report that categorised citizens as ‘disadvantaged’ or ‘deprived’, or characterised them as ‘productive’, what did that do to them, and what did it do to me?

In this article, I draw from my doctoral research which uses Foucault’s governmentality and discourse theories to explore processes of citizen subjectification. The article is structured as follows. In Part 1, I provide a contextual outline, summarising the theories which did most to challenge my settled ways of understanding the world. Part 2 sets out a typology of citizen subject positions drawn from the discourses I identified, based on material collected and analysed from city strategy work. In Part 3, I discuss why this is important and the implications for government practitioners, particularly those with the responsibility - or perhaps the misfortune - of writing strategies.

Part 1: Setting the Context

Discourse and ‘Making Up People’

I was introduced to the work of the French philosopher-historian Michel Foucault in an evening class many years ago and was sufficiently intrigued to re-visit it many years later. His 1970s lectures on discourse, governmentality, and subjectivity provided a very different way of understanding my work as a city strategist.

While Foucault's (1972) exploration of discourse in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* is not for the faint-hearted, discourse, at least on one level, is surprisingly straightforward. This is because we are all 'doing discourse' at almost every given moment in how we make sense of events, people and 'things'. If we hold on to the idea that a discourse will always 'ring true' at a particular place and time, it can be conceptualised as *recognition*. Where people are concerned, we have to "talk the talk and walk the walk" to be recognised as a particular *kind of person* (Hacking, 2004; Gee, 2011, p. 177). In Foucault's theory, it is discourse that provides the invisible rules that tell us how to do the talking and walking, indeed how to *be* that person. The complexity arises when we acknowledge that subjectivities are multiple and in constant flux.

While the concept of identity is in common use, I prefer subject position or subjectivity (used interchangeably here) because identity seems to imply fixity as well as a very un-Foucauldian orientation towards psychology. Subject positioning is useful in creating a visualisation of how discourses offer a 'space' which individuals (or subjects), may 'choose', not necessarily consciously, to occupy. Once occupied, people are likely to view the world from that vantage point, adopting the relevant "conceptual repertoire" of "images, metaphors, story lines and concepts" (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 46). The implied choice in taking up a subject position illustrates the point that subjectification processes are not automatic and positionings are always provisional and may be resisted (Ball, 2016).

With its capacity to construct different versions of events and people, discourse is therefore very powerful as a mechanism for explaining everything from grand movements of social change to everyday, even mundane, activities such as the strategy work I am looking at here. The important point is to understand discourse as a force which *produces* something else. In other words, discourses have *effects*, facilitated or enabled through the way in which they convey meaning. It follows that strategy work is treated here not in terms of what it *is*, but what it *does*. And the doing part is the work of making up *kinds of people*.

Classifying Citizens

It is obvious, yet nowadays unremarked, that systems of categorisation and classification make government work possible: for example, statistics such as 'unemployed' or 'unskilled'; or economic categories such as 'consumers', the metaphorical *avalanche* of numbers (Hacking,

2016). It was the government practices through which such classifications were created and sustained that so fascinated the theorists who developed Foucault's outline of what he called 'governmentality' (Miller & Rose, 2008). For the purposes of this article, it is sufficient to keep in mind the implied distinction between 'government' and 'mentality'. When government practitioners categorise citizens, the question concerns the discourses that govern such work.

Strategy work provides one of many government regimes of practice through which citizens can be made more productive, resilient, active, and responsible. And most importantly, how citizens can be rendered *governable*. Though government practitioners may not think of their work in this way, what they do through economic strategy work anticipates and makes possible different ways for citizens to understand themselves. In doing so, practitioners unavoidably create subject positions for themselves (McKinlay & Pezet, 2017). Although I will not be dealing with the latter in this article, it will be useful to bear this in mind when looking at the citizen typology.

Part 2: A Typology of Citizens

There is a substantial body of literature on citizenship that tussles with concepts of duty and obligation, and their interface with rights and freedom. Of special interest here is the research on subjectification in public sector settings (Lister, 2015; Wright, 2016). Following Foucault, I have taken a more explicit governmentality framework than these literatures and approach the construction of the citizen from two perspectives: as a *process*, where the construction can be understood as an ongoing practice of government and as an *effect* where citizen subjectivities are treated as an *outcome* of governing. I will concentrate on the second, taking a look at one possible version of a simple typology.

The Discourses

I identified the following discourses (Figure 1) which were the basis for the typology (Figure 2): **Market** discourse denoting an orientation to competition, entrepreneurialism and transactional relations; **New Public Management (NPM)** discourse particularly associated with targets, monitoring and efficiency (see Definitions); **Bureaucratic** discourse, concerned with order, prudentialism and rule-bound ways of working; and **Humanistic** discourse, a broad category encompassing moralistic discourses such inclusion, and citizenship discourses which,

as noted earlier constitute a range of overlapping categories. These discourses are not the only ones in strategy work and they may be merged and sub-divided almost without limit. But for our purposes here, they are sufficient to illustrate the typology which I interpret below.

Figure 1: Discourses in City Strategy Work

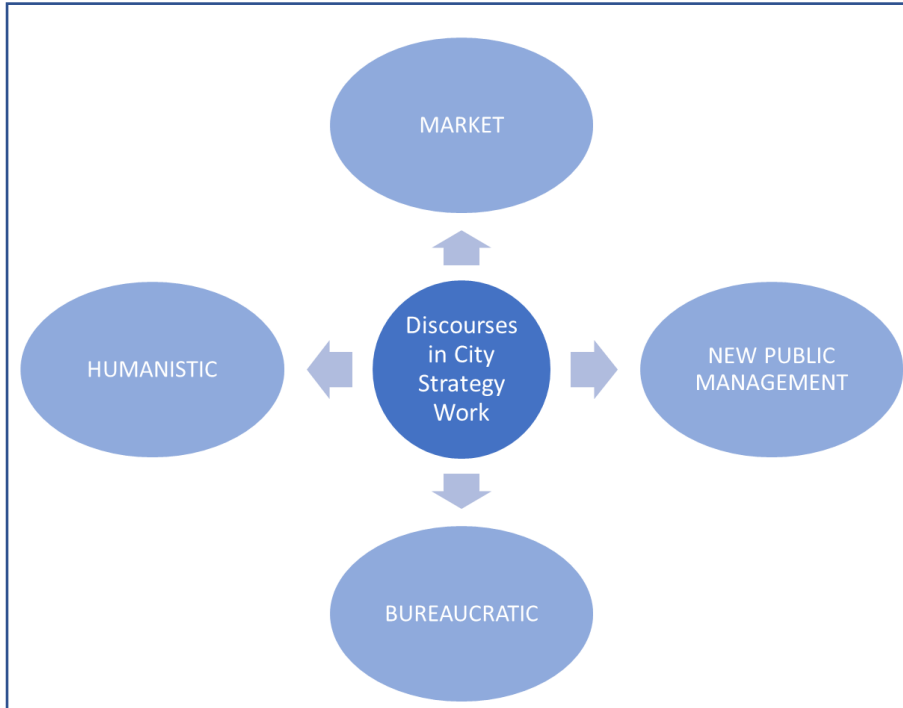
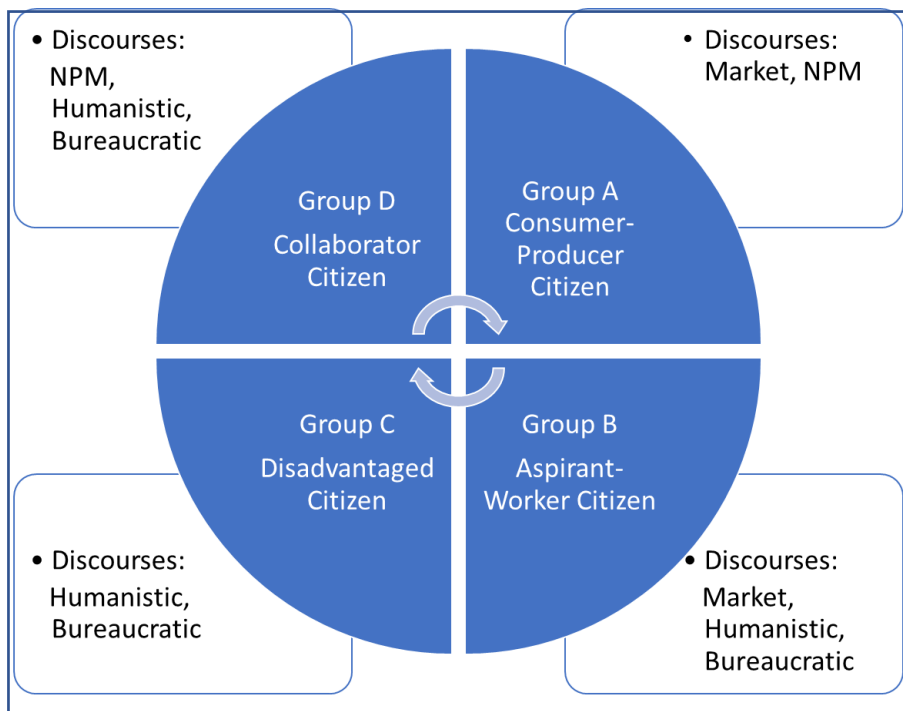


Figure 2: A Typology of Citizen Subjectivities



Interpretation of the Citizen Typology

I begin with **Group A**, the Consumer-Producer Citizen. It is a desirable and conventional subjectivity, not typically targeted in strategies, a passive beneficiary of ‘the economy’; stable; orderly and governable. The group comprises: workers in work ‘that pays’; workers ‘progressing’ in work, for example, through personal development or promotion; and citizens defined in government statistics as both the *economically active*, and *inactive*, the latter referring to the sub-population who, for various reasons, do not need paid work. The consumer-producer consumes and produces for their own satisfaction and contributes to calculations of the productive workforce. It is the rest of the population who are considered to need the attention of government.

The other three groupings B, C and D therefore comprise the main targets of strategy. For the purposes of this model, these are, respectively B, the Aspirant-Worker Citizen; C, the Disadvantaged Citizen; and D, the Collaborator Citizen.

Group B The Aspirant-Worker Citizen is a grouping in work or with aspirations to work. It is the most widespread subjectivity in strategy work for the economy and a key target for government programmes with the tacit objective to address the risk of such groups falling into Group C. This is the archetypal ‘active economic subject’, a prevalent subjectivity featuring in critical scholarship on neoliberalism and the worker (Fejes, 2010). The grouping encompasses employees, business owners, and aspiring workers wishing to become employ-able. They are skill-seekers and opportunity-seekers, judged to require specialised improvement programmes to help them enhance their skills and knowledge, develop or take up new ‘opportunities’, advance their careers and maximise their productivity and value to the economy. It is argued that the pursuit of such opportunities creates a sense of freedom, excitement and the potential for human fulfilment (Boltanski & Chiappello, 2005). With the prospect of such rewards, there is therefore an assumption of willingness to take up the subject position offered, particularly as the rewards of becoming employable and employed may extend beyond the economic, activating humanistic discourse. Nevertheless, the possibility of resistance to taking up the subject position is always open to citizens, who may ignore ‘opportunities’, opt not to engage in training programmes, or engage reluctantly or even defiantly in learning activities.

Group C The Disadvantaged Citizen represents the second main dimension for government programmatic activity. This group of citizens tends to be subjected to formal statistical classifications such as unemployed, homeless, low-income, living in poverty and similar. It is a target ‘at risk’ group, judged to be excluded in some sense from the economy and a focus of activity to reduce the potential for disorder. Even more so than in Group B, making this group employable is of critical importance; this includes activities ranging from basic life skills to gaining, remaining, and progressing in work. Such programmes are moralistic and even utopian in their aims and practice. Outside economic development strategies, the group are targeted for a wide range of other therapeutic, educational and support programmes. While there is a general assumption that citizens will willingly take up the subject position offered, there is also evidence of resistance. Citizens may resist being labelled ‘deprived’ and may take up other subject positions associated with individual acts of resistance, activating discourses of risk and disorder, for example, illegal behaviours, or collectively organised campaigning or protest (Lister, 2015).

Group D The Collaborator Citizen, is targeted directly or indirectly for participation in government. Collaboration as a policy goal has become extraordinarily common as a desirable way of working, so unremarkable that its meaning is rarely elaborated. Yet, a discourse perspective must always involve subjecting taken-for-granted concepts to scrutiny.

Depending on the discourses mobilised, collaboration may be recognised as instrumentalist or emancipatory (Haddara & Lingard, 2013). I found it to be most often represented as an instrumentalist approach to ‘delivery’, a solution to inefficiency and duplication of effort that mobilises NPM discourse. The alternative would be to value collaboration for itself, mobilising humanistic or emancipatory discourse types such as inclusion or democracy. These contrasting discourses can be mapped to different Collaborator Citizen subject positions.

While space does not permit a full exploration of the possibilities here, I suggest that the collaborator citizen may be seen as an idealised subjectivity associated with the maintenance of social order. Collaborative processes in government tend to operate through consensus-building techniques, activating bureaucratic and NPM discourses. Such consensualising practices, in depoliticising difference, may have the effect of subjectifying the citizen passively rather than actively.

Part 3: Implications and Learning

Why Does Subjectivity Matter?

It has been argued that subjectivity is “a key site of political struggle” (Ball, 2016, p. 1129). The struggle in this case takes place through the discourses in strategy work that enable or constrain the subject positions made available to citizens. Once a subject position is taken up, citizens ‘subject’ themselves to the rules and conventions of that subject position and the positions may appear normal or ‘natural’. Yet these naturalisation processes may work to constrain the freedom of citizens by limiting the subject positions offered. City strategy work, as a manifestation of discourses, has the power to shape subjectivities deemed ‘governable’ through the promotion, however unconscious, of desirable citizen behaviours.¹

The subject positions offered in the typology are characterised by a sense of what feels natural to practitioners working on government economic development strategy: consuming; getting into work or training; gaining skills; participating in collaborative exercises curated by government. It feels natural to me. But such natural-ness is a signal that discourses are at work, providing those invisible rules that guide practitioners to categorise or ‘cluster’ citizens in certain ways and not others. When discourses become fully naturalised, they can become so dominant or hegemonic that it becomes difficult to think in any other way.

Learning and Lessons for Practitioners

Foucauldian discourse analysis rarely lends itself to ‘bullet point’ actions, but can have impact in challenging practitioners to think more critically about their own practice (Sharp & Richardson, 2001). The task is therefore one of developing a more critical, self-reflective way of working. As I suggested in the introduction, practitioners could consider how they employ language in classifying citizens, pondering the assumptions bound up in making classifications, and what this does to the classified people and to themselves. There is also scope to consider the conventional language of strategy, examining possibilities for adaptation of common

¹ Footnote: A parallel theory is found in the “looping effect” of classifications which may have the effect of changing the behaviour of the people so classified; people then no longer fit the classification, resulting in a further round of classifications and subjectification effects (Hacking, 2004, p. 279). There are also affinities with stereotypes which I will not discuss here.

terminology, images and cultural stereotypes. Practitioners could also question taken-for-granted concepts, such as *collaboration* as discussed earlier.

Problem representation toolkits such as that developed by Bacchi (2012) provide a method of examining the solutions to problems as a way of revealing the underpinning assumptions and implications for subjectivity. For example, if 'employability' is the solution, then what kind of problem representations can be identified and what *kinds of people* are being imagined?

Classifications could potentially be diversified to produce a more nuanced range of 'communities', activating a greater variety of discourse types. Later in my research, I found that there was the potential for new subjectivities within citizenship, manifesting in discourses of community, belonging and solidarity. But that is a topic for another paper.

For the moment, we must remember that subjectification processes are not deterministic, and resistance is always available to the subject. It has been remarked that 'while governmental practices might seek to create specific kinds of subjects, it does not mean that they necessarily or completely succeed in doing so' (Inda, 2005, p.10). Subjectivity does indeed appear to be a site of ongoing struggle, even if the site of battle and terms of engagement remain undeclared and opaque.

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