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Creating Meaningful Practice

— A study on meaning making and communicational practice in a municipal organization

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Sarah Ek

Abstract

This thesis investigates and analyzes, with the help of the theoretical concept of Communities of Practice (CoP) the communication practice of an environmental organization in Sweden. The practice under investigation is a unit which is part of a municipal organization that works strategically with environmental issues, in order to achieve environmental goals set by the politicians of the municipality. Civil servants, that is, the members of the practice, have an ambition to increase and improve their communication. The problem is that the members of the practice perceive the communication that they carry out and their communication skills to be insufficient. With the concept of CoP and by focusing on two central components of the concept of “practice” and “meaning” this thesis investigates how the civil servants view their practice and what meanings they create on communication. This is in order to highlight what underlying assumptions the civil servants might have when it comes to their practice and their task to carry out communication. Furthermore, this thesis finds out what aspects of their meaning of communication that are reified and what aspects that are open for new meaning creation.

The study reveals that there exist diverse meanings within the environmental unit, on what communication means. Moreover, the study identifies a norm within the practice, indicating that to be a member of the practice it is important being ambitious and passionately engaged in environmental issues. The study also reveals a dominant aspect of an underlying assumption implying that an increased communication will turn the environmental unit’s practice into a more effective and successful one. A conclusion that is drawn is that the meaning of communication, created by the members of the practice is reified. Nevertheless, the norm and assumption that exist in the practice, implying that every member has to be engaged in environmental issues is open for new meaning creation, it is problematized by the members of the practice themselves. These findings might be helpful for the members of the practice in order to clarify and identify what obstacles they need to manage in order to develop and improve their communication practice. The study contributes to the research of focusing on communication practices within municipal organizations and presents a picture of what obstacles civil servants working within the environmental field have to tackle in their practice.

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Designation of Abbreviations

A & P Unit = the Analysis and Project Unit

CoP = Communities of Practice

E & C Board = the Environmental and Climate Board

EO = the Environmental Office

UE = the Department of Urban Environment

1 Introduction

There are countless of practices in society and many of them are dynamic systems that are formed by groups of people who interact with each other (Charon, 2010). This thesis investigates one of these practices, namely the practice of the unit Analysis and Project (A & P), which is part of the Environmental Office (EO) in Gothenburg. As well as there are many different practices there are many different theoretical concepts which offer tools to analyze practices. This study is using the theoretical concept of Communities of Practice (CoP) in order to investigate how the members of the practice of the A & P unit view their practice and communication.

The CoP concept has been developed by Jane Lave and Etienne Wenger in the early 1990s as a way to understand how learning and meaning making works in different practices (Wenger, 1999). It is a quite recent term although it refers to an old aged phenomenon and has turned out to deliver a useful perspective of knowing and learning when it comes to improving organizational performance (Wenger, 2011). Furthermore, CoP is a social constructivist concept that observes and describes practices, as groups of people who share a common interest a concern of an issue or simply a passion for a certain topic. The individuals of the group then deepen and develop their knowledge by taking part in the ongoing interaction that is taking place in their practice. (Wenger et.al, 2002) When being a part of a practice we are constantly shaped by its social norms, values and culture. Further, the dynamics of a social group is a dialectic relation between the individual and the group, implying that we also constantly contribute to shaping the norms and the culture.

Through practice the group develops and create meaning with what they do and why. In order for a group to work, produce, and achieve goals together several aspects need to be in place. There must be aspects of for example participation, communication, meaning making, engagement, coherence and diversity. Many of these actions are activities all of us practice on a daily basis, consciously or unconsciously. (Wenger, 1999) However, in this study the focus is on two central components of CoP: “practice” and “meaning”.

Practice is about meaning as an experience of everyday life and includes both acting and knowing. (Wenger, 1999) Furthermore, Wenger (1999) describes the concept of practice as a process in which we experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful (Wenger, 1999). The concept of “meaning” is about members of every practice creating meanings with what they do and why. The negotiation of meaning is central in every organization, and is a process which is carried out by the members of the practice. Since the negotiation of meaning is dynamic and changes depending on the participants, it constantly changes and shapes the participants and thereby also the practice. (Wenger, 1999) However, in every practice there are meanings that are not negotiable which means that the meanings are not open for new meaning creation. Wenger (1999) calls such meanings “reifications”. In addition, Wenger (1999) writes about the concept of reification which is a mental construction, an abstraction put into reality. Reification is the meaning we create on different objects through practice. These meaning creations become obvious for one, or for the individuals who share the same practice. Wenger

(1999) explains reification as we project our meanings to the world and then we perceive these meanings as existing in the world, as having a reality of their own.

1.1 Background

The study took its form due to an internship at the Environmental Office (EO) in Gothenburg. The internship took place at the unit Analysis and Project (A & P) which works strategically with environmental issues and aims for achieving the local environmental goals, which are set by the politicians. Their missions often include dialogue with many different actors in society and in general several aspects of communication. The EO consists of 150 employees, the Environment- and Climate Board (E & C Board) and representatives from both the left and right wing parties. The EO also consists of four different business departments. One of the departments is called Urban Environment (U & E) and consists of three units where one of them is the A & P unit (Goteborg.se).

The A & P practice's missions are decided upon by the E & C Board and the politicians and are handed out to the department executives. The department executives decide with the executives of the units about which missions that should be handed out to which specific unit, and members of the unit who also can be called civil servants. The civil servants then work with the missions and produce projects and documents in order to fulfill the missions and goals that are decided upon by the E & C Board and the politicians. The documents and projects that are being produced by the civil servants are communicated back to the E & C Board. This is due to the fact that the documents and projects have to be approved by the E & C Board before they are communicated.

The purpose with the internship was to gain insight in how it can be to work with environmental issues in a municipal organization, moreover how they work with communication. During the internship I got the opportunity to participate in many different activities. However, one activity which was quite dominant was to participate during meetings that concerned different projects. During these meetings aspects such as communication strategies, target groups, formulation of messages, and what channels to use were often discussed. My role in these situations was sometimes to highlight and ask new, sometimes critical questions in order to inspire new thoughts and reflections on communication aspects.

The reason for why I was given the opportunity to be a part of the organization was due to the interest of the A & P practice to get a communication perspective on how to develop and improve their communicational practice. The internship gave the opportunity to get a glimpse of their world. By being a part of their practice I also got to see what issues they struggle with, in their daily work and one of their core issues, how to improve and develop their communicational practice.

1.2 Problem Formulation

The problem is that the members of the practice perceive the communication that they carry out and their communication skills to be insufficient. By investigating how the civil servants view their practice and communication, it might open up for new meaning creation and reveal what reifications they have created regarding their practice and particularly regarding communication. Furthermore, it is relevant to investigate what underlying norms there might be at the unit that

shapes the civil servants, their practice and their meaning creation in order to find out what it is that keeps the civil servants together and makes their practice into a community of practice. This investigation can bring a platform of their perspective and thoughts, for them to use as an inspiration when taking the next step in the process of planning effective communication strategies in order to reach the environmental goals.

1.3 Purpose

The aim of this study is to investigate how the members of the A & P practice view their practice and what they mean with communication. This is in order to highlight what underlying assumptions they might have when it comes to their practice and communication.

1.3.1 Research Questions:

What is keeping the A & P unit together?

What are their idea of communication and what it can bring to their practice?

What aspects are reified and what aspects are open for new meaning creation?

2 Theoretical Perspectives

2.1 Communities of Practice (CoP)

CoP is a social theory with primary focus on learning as social participation. In this context participation refers to actively participate in the practices of different social communities. To participate in different kind of social contexts shapes not only what we practice but also who we are and how we interpret what we do. The theoretical framework of CoP is based on four components: *meaning, practice, community* and *identity* (Wenger, 1999). This study will only elaborate on two: *practice* and *meaning*.

The first component *practice* is what we do, and in the context of the situation in this research, namely the practice created by the A & P Unit. The concept of practice in general includes everything we do, or as Wenger (1999) describes it, "*Practice is a process by which we can experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful*" (Wenger, 1999; 51). Practice is about meaning as an experience of everyday life and includes both acting and knowing, because engaging in practice of different kinds always involves the whole person, body and mind. Sometimes it is just something we do without thinking of it, which is called mechanical practice. Furthermore, even if this activity is something we do without giving it much thought, it is not therefore thoughtless. The same goes to that when we are mentally focused on what we practice we are not disembodied. Practice also includes what is said, the explicit and what is left unsaid, the tacit. The tacit, what we take for granted tend to fade into the background of our minds to the individual consciousness and comes naturally, what we know instinctively, if it is not forgotten. However, the tacit is no more individual or natural than what we make explicit to each other; "*common sense is only commonsensical because it is sense held in common*" (Wenger, 1999; 47). Tacit knowledge is a concept which is also elaborated on by Nicolini et. Al (2003), whom argue that when practicing within any organization one gets to learn what explicit norms and business culture there is at that specific organization, as well as being aware of the interconnected activities that engender socially productive activities that shapes human action.

The next component is *meaning*, which is about members of every practice creating meanings with what they do and why. The negotiation of meaning is central in every organization and the A & P unit which will be explored in this study. The unit has created a practice with the mission to develop the strategic work in order to improve the environmental status in Gothenburg. In order to fulfill this mission they are simultaneously negotiating the meaning of what they do and why. The negotiation of meaning is constantly present in every activity and is a process created by the participants. Since the negotiation of meaning is dynamic and changes depending on the participants, it constantly changes and shapes the participants and thereby also the practice. Wenger (1999) also writes about reification which is a mental construction, an abstraction put into reality, something that is obvious for oneself and the people who shares the same meaning that is created by practice. Furthermore, Wenger (1999) explain reification as we project our meanings to the world, and then we perceive these meanings to as existing in the world, as having a reality of their own. In addition, Wenger (1999) describes reification as follows;

“A certain understanding is given form. This form then becomes a focus for the negotiation of meaning, as people use the law to argue a point, use the procedure to know what to do, or use the tool to perform an action”. (Wenger, 1999; 59)

Being a part of the meaning creation process, reifications are central to every practice. Every practice includes decision making, tools and rules, as well as it includes creation of abstractions, perceptions and interpretations. We all reify things and we do this by acting upon our meanings which we project upon things. These things can be meanings which we create on abstractions such as the economy (Wenger, 1999), or as in this case on communication. In order to use communication and the economy as examples, they are both wide concepts which many of us know what they mean without having the need to explain it to each other. However, reifications does not have to be meaning creations on wide spread concepts, they can also be meanings we create on documents or a budget. Reification is not the economy or a document in itself, on the contrary, the meaning we give the economy or the document. This is where a reification can be useful within a practice, when members of a practice can talk about objects and know what it means without having the need to explain it to each other every time. Wenger (1999) argues that reifications shape our practice and experience, and the effects of reifications are not always that clear. The problematic aspect of reifications is that they are not open for new meaning creation. As long as one acts upon reification without discussing it is when reifications can make a practice to stagnate.

This is why the purpose of this study is to investigate what kind of reifications the civil servants are creating when it comes to their practice and communication. Since the members of the practice perceive communication as important to reach their goal, it is also useful to explore what is meant by communication in this practice. Revealing some of their reifications is interesting from a theoretical perspective and helpful as well for the civil servants to see their non-obvious reifications. In other words, to see what kind of assumptions they make when talking about communication. Furthermore, the result also describes what meaning the civil servants create regarding their practice and especially what they mean with a very central part of their practice, which is communication.

3. Previous Research

There is a vast amount of research literature on how practices perceive or deal with their communication tasks. However, in this chapter two studies are going to be used. First out is an article written by Israelsson (2013) where an investigation has been done on finding out whether organization managers and communication managers in all of Sweden's municipalities are working strategically with communication, and thus contribute to the organization's achievements and efficiency (Israelsson, 2013). The result in the study show that the organizational managers believe that communication contributes to their goals. In addition, the study shows that communicators in the public sector work strategically with communication and that they have good conditions to do so. Nevertheless, the study did highlight some difficulties when it comes to communication in municipal organizations. A few examples of what the study reveals is that almost all public organizations have realized the value of having communicators. However, the functions often have few resources and the study reveals that most communication functions include strategic tasks which seldom are prioritized. Additionally, more production oriented tasks have higher priority, as well as tasks related to the image of the organization. The study also discovered that planning communication and to be a support to others in the organization are strategic tasks that are prioritized and is also what the communication functions do well. (Israelsson, 2013) The study is relevant since it has the same context of focus, namely municipal organizations as this thesis and due to that it also problematizes the same issues.

Another study within the field of communication in organizations is conducted by Johansson (2003). This study investigates how organizational visions are interpreted by employees. The purpose is to advance the knowledge on the communication processes in organizations through a description and analysis of communication about strategy, encompassing vision, strategic objectives and common values in a corporation (Johansson, 2003). It is a qualitative study conducted during approximately two years where the author used methods of participant observation, discourse analysis and interviews in order to describe and analyze how the content of the strategy, vision, goals and common values are constructed and formulated. The writer also investigates how the strategy is communicated, interpreted and valued on different manager levels. The study reveals that visions, which as formulated by top managers met different realities constructed by managers at lower levels in the company (Johansson, 2003).

Another important factor in the study by Johansson (2003) was that the attitudes, knowledge and interpretations of the managers influenced the communication about the strategy. Furthermore, the employees did neither have the same detailed knowledge of the strategy as the managers, nor were they given the same opportunities to get the knowledge. The result of the study gave an understanding on what communication issues there can be within an organization. (Johansson, 2003)

4 Methodology

4.1 A Qualitative and Reflective Research

The thesis is of a phenomenological character since it aims to understand how the particular group of the A & P unit perceive their own world (Inglis and Thorpe, 2012), or in other words,

their practice at the EO. This is also due to that phenomenology is, according to Inglis and Thorpe's (2012) a description centrally concerned with individual's action and activities, which in this case is relevant due to that focus lies on the practice of the members of A & P unit. The foundational view of phenomenology and the theoretical concept of CoP provide frameworks and perspectives which are useful in order to highlight the A & P group's view on their practice and communication. Also, when it comes to revealing what underlying assumptions the members of the practice might have when it comes to their practice and communication.

In order to investigate the views of this specific group of civil servants, a qualitative research method is appropriate. This is due to the fact that qualitative research often is suited for investigating and understanding deeper perspectives, patterns and life worlds of individuals, groups or other social phenomenon. (Trost, 2010) Furthermore, the methodological approach is in this case relevant due to the aim of finding out what the members of the environmental unit think about their practice, and also what meaning they create when it comes to their practice and communication. Additionally, in order to understand and find patterns regarding the unit's practice a qualitative study goes hand in hand with the actual question and the chosen theoretical framework. (Trost, 2010) In order to find out the perspective of the whole group of civil servants interviews with all ten members of the A & P unit was carried out. As well as to call this research a qualitative study it is also a reflective study due to the aspects of interpretation and reflection. As well, as due to all references and the empirical data are results of interpretations (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). As the researcher in this study I take part and interpret the subjective worlds of the civil servants with the help of the theoretical concept of CoP, as well as to my own subjective world.

4.1.1 Preparing the Interviews

The study has been executed with inspiration from the methodological concept of the seven steps by Kvale (1996). One of the steps which have been used as a guideline when working with the thesis is thematization, which is the first of the seven steps. This step took place in the beginning of the process before the interviews were executed and includes many different questions to deliberate on. The main decision in this step was to decide upon what I wanted to find out and to formulate the problem and the aim of the study. The main questions in this stage of thematization was: what do I want to find out, what do I want to investigate, why do I want to find out this, and how should I act in order to find what I am searching for. The same step also included to think of and decide on what theoretical perspectives I was about to use in order to answer the questions in this study. After deciding what to investigate, a decision was made on what the design of the study would be like. This is where the decision on making a qualitative study occurred (Kvale, 1996), which included interviewing all ten of the civil servants at the A & P unit. The reason for interviewing all of the civil servants was in order to grasp the perspective of the whole unit. Nevertheless, before interviewing the civil servants an interview guide was produced. This step was a process that included writing down issues that were supposed to be investigated in order to answer the overall research questions, and to find out the views of the members of the group as well as to find out what underlying patterns and norms there could be at the A & P unit.

With an ambition of creating an open climate, and to give the interviewees the ability to answer the interview questions in an open, reflective and spontaneous way the interview questions were formulated in a semi structured way. This was due to the ambition of receiving open and reflective answers and at the same time be able to steer the interviewees a little bit (Trost, 2010). This was in order to get answers regarding the unit's practice and communication which could be fulfilled by asking structured questions. In order to find out these perspectives there is a point of not asking too structured questions, nevertheless to give space for individual perspectives and reflections.

About a week before the interviews were carried out a document with the purpose and the interview guide was sent to the civil servants. This was done in order to give them an insight in what the focus and aim of the interviews, also what the whole study was about. In order for the civil servants to be prepared for the interviews the document revealed six examples of questions from the interview guide out of the total amount of 18 questions. The decision on only revealing six out of 18 questions was due to the plan on giving the civil servants the opportunity to be, to some extent, prepared without being able to reflect on and prepare their answers too much. The argument for preparing the interviewees on the content of the interview by revealing some of the questions from the interview guide, was due to that the interviews could in that way be a little bit more effective and productive, than what the interviews could have been if the civil servants would not have received any information at all on the content of the interviews. Not revealing any questions at all before the interviews could have been interesting due to that it could open up for more spontaneous responses. Nevertheless, it could have been difficult for the interviewees to answer the questions and thereby maybe result in a content poor interview material. Anyhow, the negative aspect of revealing the whole interview guide before the interviews could result in unspontaneous answers from the civil servants. The interview persons would then also have the opportunity of discussing the interview questions with each other before the interviews and thereby affect each other, and so their responses. Hence, the interviewees were only handed out six out of 18 questions. The interviews could in this way be productive and at the same time leave space for spontaneous answers, reflections and discussions during the interviews.

4.1.2 The Interviews

The next step was to collect the empirical material through interviews. In this methodological stage it was important to execute the interviews as planned, from out the interview guide but also to pay attention to the whole interview situation which includes the relation and dynamics between the interviewer and interviewee. The interview is, as Kvale (1996) describes it "*an interpersonal situation, a conversation between two partners about a theme of mutual interest*" Kvale (1996; 125). The interviews were carried out in different meeting rooms at the environmental office except from one which were carried out at a café due to a request from the interviewee who had a meeting nearby after the interview. The reason for carrying out the interviews at the environmental office was due to practical and time related reasons. It was practical to stay at the same place since the civil servants had quite busy days, and for them to do the interviews at their working place saved time. The interviews were carried out quite intensely during approximately one and a half week. The interviews were carried out in Swedish since it is

the formal language of all members of the practice. The interviews took from approximately 30 to 75 minutes.

The interviews were recorded and carried out in a reflexive way. The reason for recording the interviews was due to the reason of giving the interviewer the ability to be observant and focused on the topic and the dynamics of the interviews, which would have been difficult if the interviews would not have been recorded. This is due to that the multiple tasks of posing questions, listen, write and observe at the same time would have been very challenging. Another positive aspect of recording the interviews, is due to that words, tones, pauses and other utterances can be recorded and listened to over and over again if necessary (Kvale, 1996).

The interviews can be named as informal and has a starting point from Symbolic Interactionism due to that informal or qualitative interviews are about understanding thoughts and views of the interview persons (Trost, 2010). In order to name the form of the interview questions, they would, according to Trost (2010), be named semi, to low standardized, - and semi structured questions. The arguments for semi, to low standardized questions are due to the reason that almost all questions are asked to all interviewees. However, the questions were not necessarily asked in the same order to everyone. Nevertheless, the questions were asked in a reflexive order, depending on the interview person. This is due to that the language can for example be adapted depending on the dynamics between the interview person and the interviewer. The questions were asked when suited, dependent on earlier answers and reflections. (Trost, 2010)

The flexibility, standardization, and structuration during the interviews differed. The reasons to the difference could be many; however some reasons could be that all of the civil servants have been working at the organization for various lengths of time which can affect their answers, since they have different amounts of experience of the practice. The answers could also depend, to some extent, on what background the interview person has, what kind of project she or he works with or have worked with before, and also what roles the civil servants have at the practice. In general the interviews followed the interview guide, however the interviews were at the same time flexible and the dialogue did sometimes move outside the boundaries of the interview guide when the civil servants could not answer one specific question. When these situations occurred there was a challenge to ask questions in a way that made the interview person reflect about the question, or around the questions.

Another aspect and ambition in this stage of the methodology was to create a relaxed and informal atmosphere by carrying out the interviews in forms of a dialogue by asking, as mentioned before, open and reflective questions. The ambition with this way of posing questions and carry out the interviews are grounded in the interest of having dynamic and spontaneous interviews within a slightly flexible frame, as well as to find out how the civil servants resonate and reflect around the questions. However, this form does have both negative and positive sides. The positive part of allowing the interview person to reflect freely, within and sometimes outside the subject is that it offers an insight of individual perspectives. The negative part is that a few of the civil servants found it to be difficult to answer open ended and reflective questions. This could of course also be a critique on how the questions were formulated, however it could also be an aspect on that we perceive things differently, also how spontaneously reflective some of us are. When insecurity occurred during the interviews around the interview questions further

explanations about the questions were added. This way of posing reflective questions was preferable instead of asking direct and unreflective questions. Another aspect which is relevant and important to be aware of when executing interviews is body language and how it can affect the relation and atmosphere between the participants.

4.1.3 Management of the Empirical Data

The step that follows the execution of the interviews is according to Kvale (1996) the step of transforming the data into an adaptable form. This means in this case, to listen to the recordings and transcribe the interviews. The transcribing was done almost word by word with the exception on when the discussions got too far outside the boundary of the interview guide. In this case an interpretation was made whether the interview had gone too far outside the boundaries and turned into a discussion less relevant in relation to the research questions. This is a crucial point, when it comes to making a decision on what was relevant and less relevant. In this case the boundary was made when the discussion became too focused on details concerning a specific project or mission. The boundary was made here since the study focus on how the group as a whole views their practice and not how they view their specific projects. Therefore detailed aspects where in some cases not transcribed, nor when reflections got far outside the boundary of the interview questions. Other utterances, as for example sighs were not transcribed. Another important aspect regarding limitations is that the study does not investigate the content of the practice of the A & P unit, on the contrary it investigates in what way the civil servants view their practice and how they create meaning with what they do.

After the transcribing was done, each of the interviews were sent to respective interview person in order for them to control if I had caught their perspective in the right way, and very few changes were made. One example of an editing was if one of the civil servants perceived oneself to have made a statement which was too strong. After transcribing the collected empirical data the next step was to process and analyze the material with help of the chosen theoretical perspective. (Kvale, 1996) In this case the analysis was analyzed with the help of the theoretical concept of CoP and the result of the analysis is structured in order to answer the research questions. The analysis is mainly written in a sense which is supposed to suite both the members of the A & P unit and the teachers and student colleagues at the university. The analysis is structured with headlines and every chapter starts with a presentation of the perspectives of the civil servant and ends with an interpretation and reflection on the views of the civil servants. This was done in order to combine a narrative on perspectives and interpretation, and a reflective discussion which ends with a conclusion. The quotes in the thesis have been presented anonymously since there is no point of focusing on revealing which one of the civil servants said what. This is due to that the A & P unit is analyzed and presented as a group.

The analysis once again stands for interpretation of the material in order to get a picture and to see the underlying patterns of the practicing world of the A & P unit. The study can in a general sense be viewed as an interpretation of the practicing lives of the civil servants which includes the whole research process, from the interviews to the analysis of the transcribed material (Bergström & Boréus, 2005). The research is as Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) express it; "*an interpretation of interpretation*" (Sköldberg (2009; 9).

4.1.4 Reliability and Validity

When it comes to validity and reliability in qualitative research, there is always a matter of interpretation. Since the interviews have been recorded and transcribed into written texts many methodological decisions and choices have been made during the transcription phase. The transcription is artificial constructions from oral to written ways of communication and is made by the researcher. (Kvale, 1996) Since the interviews have been transcribed almost word by word, however with some exceptions, there is a matter of reliability since the decision and interpretation lies with the researcher, which is an aspect to be aware of. Since the purpose of the study is to find out the views of the A & P unit the study in itself should have high validity since every member of the practice have participated during the interviews. However, since this study aims to reach an understanding of a real situation and the perspective of a group of ten civil servants and their subjective experience of their everyday life, or more precisely in this case their practice (Berger & Luckmann, 2011), it would be difficult to in a complete sense remake the interviews. However, if following the interview guide approximately the same answers could be collected again. Nevertheless, since aspects such as interview techniques and ability of creating relations and understanding are individual, it can be a critical aspect of this kind of methodology.

4.1.5 Critical Aspects

A general aspect of the thesis and how it has been carried out is the fact that I had the internship at the organization which gave me an insight and the opportunity to some extent get to know the civil servants and their practice. I had the opportunity to develop an opinion of my own about their practice, its culture and norms. This is something that might have affected the thesis in different ways. It gave me the opportunity to look for a possible research topic by interacting and practicing with the civil servants. By being a part of their practice and by asking questions I could after a while see that there were different issues that could be used as a focus for the study. My personal knowledge about the organization has probably also affected my way of asking questions and follow up questions during the interviews. My pre knowledge might have made me to ask for things which I already knew, or as I have interpreted the situation at the practice. This is positive due to the reason of making it easier to ask questions of a deeper character in order to find out underlying patterns. Nevertheless, it can also be a negative aspect since I sometimes, in an unconscious way might have searched for my own interpretations in the answers of the interviewees.

Since the interviews were executed during one and a half week there were limited time to listen to the interviews between they were carried out. This is a negative aspect since it did not allow me to reflect on, or evaluate my way of execute the interviews, which could have been helpful in order to improve my interview skills. By recording the interviews full attention could, as mentioned earlier, be directed to the interview and the interviewee. However, by recording the interviews with audiotape there are some visual aspects that are lost such as facial- and bodily expressions of the interview persons. (Kvale, 1996) These visual aspects are only observed by the researcher and later on for the researcher to interpret. A critique for the making of the interviews could be that the first two or three interviews always are test interviews, which could be a negative aspect since the dialogue might not be as good and easy going as the latter interviews. There is also a critical aspect when it comes to making limitations regarding interview questions. During the interviews I found which questions that worked and which questions most

of the interviewees found more interesting and relevant. This discover resulted in further focus on the “relevant” and “interesting” questions, and less on those questions, which I interpreted the civil servants to perceive, less interesting.

5 Result and Discussion - Perspectives of the A & P Unit

The analysis is divided into sections named after the focus area and issue. Every chapter starts with presenting the perspectives of the A & P unit and ends with an interpretation and reflection of their views.

5.1 Overall Description of the Unit

The people who have been interviewed in this study belong to the practice of the A & P unit which belongs to the department Urban Environment (U & E) which is part of the Environmental Office (EO) in Gothenburg. The EO consists of 150 employees and is organized in a hierarchic top-down system. On the top of the EO is the Environment- and Climate Board (E & C Board) which consists of a director, a chairman a secretary, and representatives of both left and right wing parties. The E & C Board is then followed by three different business departments. Every department consists of smaller sub groups which are called units. Two of the departments focus on food control and environmental inspection. The third department U & E, which is relevant in this study, consists of units working with analysis and projects, sustainable urban development and observation of the environment. There is also a fourth department called business support where units of communication, administration, law and staff belongs to and have the mission to support all departments with issues concerning communication, information, law, staff and administration. (Goteborg.se) The focus is in this study on the A & P unit which belongs to the U & E department.

The A & P unit is only a couple of years old which means that the unit's function and practice has not been active for that long. The civil servants are relatively new in their practicing roles; however experiences and time at the unit differ between the civil servants. Some have been practicing at the unit only for a few months while some have been practicing for a couple of years. Many of the civil servants have similar educations within the field of environmental science and have orientations within social sciences and human ecology. Two out of ten are civil engineers with focus on energy and environmental issues. Many of the civil servants have previously been working in different municipal organizations, while others have experience from consultant firms or other private companies.

The purpose and function of the unit is to work for a better environment for the people in Gothenburg and the mission is to lead and support the strategic environmental processes in the city. The environmental issues which the unit focuses on are decided by the politicians and the E & C Board. It is then up to the civil servants to make something out of the missions and to achieve the local goals by using different activities and methods. The missions that come from the E & C Board is first communicated to the department executive, who then communicates with the unit executives. Together the executives discuss and decide which missions that should be handed out to which specific unit and civil servants. The civil servants then work with the missions and produces projects and documents in order to fulfill the missions and goals that are decided upon and handed out by the E & C Board. The documents and projects which are

produced by the civil servants always have to be communicated back to the E & C Board. This is due to that they have to be approved by the board before they are communicated.

5.1.1 What are they doing?

Activity Groups

The practice of the A & P unit is about leading the strategic work regarding environmental issues in Gothenburg. In order to work with the environmental goals which are the foundation of their practice, the unit has different ways and forms of working with these goals. The character of the group and what seems to be the dominant working form is to work in pairs or smaller groups. The civil servants often work within different activity groups with focus on certain issues. There are for example one group working with issues relating to the environmental goals and another group working with climate related issues. However, the practice of the civil servants is not limited to only one activity group. On the contrary, some of the civil servants work in several activity groups with different issues and focus areas. One civil servant can be a part of the environmental group and at the same time take part in the climate group.

There are many issues where they meet in this particular unit since many of the issues are connected to each other. Some work with the same issue more or less all the time while some are involved in several issues at the same time. Since they often work within smaller working groups they often work close to each other in pairs with the same issue at the same time as they have their own issues on the side. The constellation when the civil servants work with project based processes in pairs one of them is usually responsible for the project and the other one is there to support the work. There are also situations where the civil servants take part in activities of other units. Subsequently, there is not only cooperation within the unit but also between the units within the department. Even when working in separate small groups with diverse problems there often are opportunities to get help from other groups and people at the unit who works with other issues and goals when needed.

Individuality

In order to continue to describe the different working forms of the A & P practice. Their plan is to try to avoid single assignments. This is due to aspects of vulnerability and also also due to the belief that working together is more rewarding since one can support each other. The views of the civil servants are on an overall term that they often work in pairs, or within the activity groups. However, there is a perspective which differs from the others. One of the members of the practice mentioned that the work is more or less distributed per person, so if they want to work together it is to a quite big extent reliable on them taking initiatives to do so. According to the same civil servant there are not always opportunities to work together as teams. Another civil servant described a situation of not working that much with others at the unit, however with two or three colleagues due to that they work with common issues. The civil servant explained further that s (he) cooperates with the head of the unit and two or three colleagues and that there are not really that much cooperation generally within the unit. Additionally, the civil servant said that it is clear that they somehow belong together to the A & P unit since they have

similar competences and orientations. Moreover, if one would take away the unit- and activity group meetings it would not be noticed if one of them was placed on another unit, it is mostly due to the fact that they sit closely together that makes them into the same associated unit.

Another aspect which might not have been the most dominant aspect, but which was mentioned by a couple of civil servants and hence important to mention is that there is a frequent exchange of people at the A & P unit. One of the outcomes of this exchange, according to one of the civil servants is that the situation affects which focus area the civil servants work with. Further, the civil servant explained that the problem is that when people quit, the focus areas change in order to cover up for those who have left the unit. Furthermore, even if the purpose is to limit the work into fewer focus areas per civil servant, this is not the case. However, the civil servant did recognize both positive and negative sides to this situation and the positive aspect is that it brings an opportunity to try out new things. However, the negative aspect is, according to the civil servant that it does not offer enough time to really get into their assignments. The other civil servant had another view on this situation and argued that the problem is that it is difficult to get to know each other due to the exchange of people. Since most of the civil servants are new, they do not know each other, and each other's strengths and expertise. This can according to the civil servant have a negative effect on their practice.

Meetings

Beside some level of cooperation within and between the activity groups, the A & P unit gathers through meetings in different forms where they reconcile activities, overall issues and projects. They have for example Monday meetings, unit meetings and activity group meetings. Overall, the unit has a lot of meetings in order to discuss and consider overall issues on all levels. This is due to that the A & P unit work with such big issues, which makes them dependent on other competences, and how others work with the same issues. When it comes to the unit, the dominant perspective is that there is quite a lot of cooperation and there are also opportunities and willingness to help each other when necessary. An additional aspect, related to meetings at the A & P unit was mentioned by a few of the civil servants, namely, that there is a lack of discussion between the civil servants within the unit when it comes to the working process on deciding what to do with the missions they are handed out by the politicians. Some of the civil servants expressed that there is need for more discussions in general since they work with such complex issues which need to be deliberated on. One of the civil servants mentioned that the lack of discussion could be due to that the civil servants are quite new in their roles and therefore a bit tentative when it comes to discussions, also when it comes to question each other. The same civil servants expressed that this can result in that no one really feel safe in their roles.

Interpretation and Reflection

My interpretation is that the dominant part of the members of the A & P practice, perceive themselves to be a group that work with different environmental issues that relates to each other. The common issues and the missions they get from the politicians along with the belief that working together is positive makes them, in most cases to work in pairs or in their activity

groups. However, there are difficulties such as exchange of people which according to some of the civil servants do affect their practice in a negative way. These different perspectives might be due to several reasons. One reason could be due to what kind of experiences the civil servants have from working within the activity groups, what kind of projects they have been assigned to do and what kind of cooperation opportunities that project have included. Another aspect could also be how much experience they have of working at the A & P unit and at the EO in general, which differs between the civil servants. Some of them might only have been working with one, or a few projects so far which is then the only reference they have, while some other civil servants have been working at the unit for a couple of years and have been involved in several projects where the working processes might have been different.

5.2 What do the members of the practice perceive as their mission?

When asking the civil servants about what the unit's mission is and how it is formulated the most dominant description was in terms with that the A & P unit's mission is to work with, develop and lead the strategic and environmental processes in the city. The civil servants had slightly different descriptions on what their mission is. What was dividing the descriptions mostly was depending on what words they used to describe the mission. From an overall perspective most of them seem to have approximately the same view and perception on what their mission is about. One of the members of the practice described the unit's mission to be, besides the dominant description the inspiring part or actor of the strategic work with environmental issues. Besides this overall description one of the civil servants had another view and stated following;

" I cannot see the whole unit's mission, I have trouble seeing the function of the whole unit since it feels like we work so much divided within the activity groups, it is easier to rather explain the missions of the activity groups" (Civil servant, 2).

The quote represents a picture of how a few of the civil servants perceive the unit's missions. However, there is some insecurity in general amongst the civil servants when it comes to what it is that they are supposed to do. There is an overall picture of that the civil servants should lead the strategic work with environmental and climate issues. However, one of the civil servants mentioned that it is not clear what they are meant to do, if it is only to produce projects and documents with different strategies on how to improve the environmental status in the city, or if it includes something else.

Interpretation and Reflection

In general terms there seem to be a quite dominant view on what the members of the practice perceive to be their mission. Nevertheless, behind this general picture on what their mission is supposed to be one can find insecurities on what the formulation of their missions is, or if there even is any formulated mission for the A & P unit at all. There is also some insecurity in what the next step is regarding their working process. The insecurities might have negative effects on their practice. The members of the A & P practice might have formulated their mission by talking about them, however maybe not in written text. One of the civil servants said that it is easier to

describe the mission of the activity groups than the mission of the unit. It might be a matter of perspective. Nevertheless, it could be helpful to formulate a mission for the whole unit since it could create a formulation and content for the civil servants to lean on and find inspiration from, whether one is working individually or in the activity groups.

5.3 What is it that keeps the A & P unit together?

5.3.1 Strong Engagement

In order to find out what it is that keeps the A & P unit together there is a point of investigating what kind of norms and culture there might be at the unit. When investigating norms one gets a glimpse of what patterns and hidden rules there can be that shapes the group. It can also indicate what it is that drives the civil servants into doing what they do and give a picture of what they find meaningful with their practice. Create meanings is something which we do constantly without, most of the time, not being aware of it. However, it is something that keeps us doing what we do day after day (Wenger, 1999). It is also something which was mentioned by all members of the practice. Furthermore, meaning is along with ambition attributes which seem to be the character of the unit.

One of the members of the practice argued that the personal engagement does in some cases indicate on personal environmental agendas, and that one can tell that things are at stake for some people. There also seem to be some people who are extra strong and characterize at the unit. Another aspect that was mentioned is that many of the people who work at the unit have from the beginning been almost self-driven and deliver from day one. Other aspects which describe the unit and how they create a certain atmosphere that is grounded in their engagement and meaning making, is that the civil servants have a lot of opinions and everyone wants to be part of everything that happens and decide how things should be. Along with the previous descriptions another civil servant expressed the atmosphere at the unit as follows;

“There is some kind of environmental activist culture of course, otherwise one would not have been working with these types of issues, a culture which might not be exactly what I come from. This is something that I felt in the beginning, that there was a quite different working culture, not in a bad way but in a different way. What can be a danger sometimes though is that people are so very engaged that one can have difficulties understanding those who are not that engaged”. (Civil servant, 10)

Another civil servant describes a similar picture of the group as being open. At the same time the civil servant adds that every one of the civil servants has chosen the occupation due to a reason. That there is an underlying culture of strong environmental engagement from the start, or else one would not seek for this kind of practice.

5.3.2 Change Makers

The norms and culture are something which the group of individuals shapes together. What meaning the group creates is also what drives them and is what they find important and meaningful with their practice. An aspect which says something about the A & P unit is that they all want to make a change. One important driving force in their practice is that they want to be a part of, and work for decreasing the environmental impacts and achieve the environmental goals

in order to get a better environment in Gothenburg. Another driving force is also to reach out with the knowledge they have at the unit to the people in Gothenburg and to highlight the environmental issues more in different social debates. There are also driving forces on communicating what it is that they do at the A & P unit, also what the EO is doing and what their role is. Something concrete which has encouraged the civil servant further in order for doing an even better job, is due to how successful the design of one of the programs which they have worked with during a long time. This is something which has spurred them forward in their practice. The recent recruitment of a communicator at the unit is something which also indicates on a driving force when it comes to communicating their missions and practice.

Interpretation and Reflection

Describing the A & P unit could be done by two words: ambition and engagement. All members of the practice are aware of that there is a high level of ambition at the unit. However, only a few of them see it as a problem. When it comes to the other characteristic aspect of the unit, there are many who perceives the unit to have a culture and norm of strong engagement, some even say activist culture. However, the situation is the same here, there are few who problematize it. Even if most of the civil servants did identify specific norms and culture there are few who do not share the same view. The diverse views might in this case depend on how long the civil servants have been working at the unit, how long time they have had to see different social norms and patterns. An assumption might be made that the norms and culture are not really expressed at the unit; however there are aspects which the majority of the group recognize, and some even problematize. Some do recognize that the norm of being very engaged can sometimes be a difficulty and maybe even an obstacle in their practice, at the same time it is a driving force and therefore an opportunity when it comes to create a change within the environmental field. It is also what is keeping the group together.

The ambition of working for a good and sustainable environmental status in Gothenburg and to be a part of decision making processes in the city is what makes their practice, for them, into a meaningful practice. This is what Wenger (1999) argues of practice and meaning, namely that the foundation of what we chose to practice is due to what we believe in. Furthermore, Wenger (1999) mean that practice is that activity that culminates in what brings meaning to our lives (Wenger, 1999). What the members of the A & P unit perceive as meaningful is also what drives them to practice what they practice.

5.4 What expectations are there on their practice?

5.4.1 Expectations from themselves

Some of the civil servants described a perception on that there are expectations on their practice, both from themselves and other colleagues and actors. Regarding what expectations there are when it comes to the practice between the civil servants, as well as of the unit as a function, the civil servants have identified expectations coming from themselves to be high. One civil servant expressed that there are expectations from certain colleagues that one should be engaged, otherwise one is not attractive as a colleague when discussing different issues which is something that one wants to be. The reason for this is due to that there are such high ambitions on developing their practice forward. In order to do so one seeks to have conversations and

discussions with those colleagues who can offer an interesting exchange. Others have described that there is an expectation that one should practice as one preach and that there is a high level of ambition, maybe not saving the world but saving the city. An additional description was that there is a feeling of that people are passionate of their work and that there is a motto of “walk the talk” (Civil servant, 8) that permeates the A & P unit. Another civil servant commented following about what kind of expectations there are at the unit between the civil servants;

“Since several of us are very engaged in environmental issues in general, it might be that we sometimes expect the same engagement of others, there is anyway an expectation on that one should live as one preaches and there are quite many of us who do that. Coming to this working place without living as you preach can for sure be quite bothering and I think that one might end up a little outside the group if one does not think that it is that important as some of us do.” (Civil servant, 9)

Almost every one of the civil servant mentioned that the greatest expectations probably come from themselves. There are also expectations within the unit where some expect their colleagues to be engaged in environmental issues, not just at work but also on their spare time.

5.4.2 Perceptions of expectations of others

Since the mission of the A & P unit often involves many other actors within the city there are many who observe their work. Almost every one of the civil servants has mentioned that probably the highest expectations come from themselves. Many of the civil servants mentioned, besides high expectations from themselves, that there are expectations from others. When it comes to the members of the unit’s perception of what expectations there are from others the views sprawl and differ from each other. Some members of the unit perceive the expectations not to be that great, and some perceive them to be great.

One of the civil servants perceived the expectations not to be particularly high and that no one would be disappointed if they produced a less ambitious environmental program, it would work as well. At the same time the same civil servant explained that some of the expectations have to do with the fact that there are some members of the practice who are very ambitious and the A & P unit has become some kind of a core group at the U & E department and the EO. The civil servant continued to explain that the unit gets quite a lot of attention, and is noticed in the media due to their seminars and also due to the type of issues they work with. Since the mission of the civil servants at the A & P unit concerns the climate, the environment and traffic related issues which are getting a lot of attention in media, the focus also turns to the A & P unit. From this perspective the civil servant explained that they feel quite a big pressure in order for creating something new and big. Further, the same civil servant continued with the following comment;

“I think this stands a little bit in conflict to what the administration of environmental issues has been in the past, back then one operated a little bit more hidden, one did for example measure air pollutions, something that the administration of environmental issues are expected to do, and now comes the new way, the little bit more “shiny” way. I do not know but my feeling is that some think that we are a bit over ambitious at our unit, maybe a bit ridiculous and that we take our mission way too serious. One might give it way too much

meaning, maybe it is not that important, however one like to believe that what we do is extremely important and that we lead the development of the city". (Civil servant, 1)

Other members of the practice perceive there to be expectations from the political level, and not just expectations on the A & P unit, but on the EO as a whole. Even if the perception is that the biggest expectations are coming from themselves, there are a perception on that there are expectations on the practice of the A & P unit from politicians, the E & C Board, executives within the Environmental Office and other municipal offices in the city. When it comes to the E & C Board there are particularly expectations on the A & P unit's climate related practice. This is due to that the climate area is especially present on the political agenda. It is also a perception that there are expectations from the executive level on that the civil servants should produce and deliver projects fast.

A high level of ambition is something which is valued highly at the A & P unit. However, it has been problematized by some members of the practice. This is due to that the members of the practice sometimes create almost too high expectations on themselves and their practice due to their great ambitions. Time is often prioritized before quality which sometimes, according to one of the civil servants, creates clashes between the civil servants and those who place the order. The civil servant explained further that the clash results in frustration since it creates the feeling that they lack resources in order to do a good job.

Interpretation and Reflection

It seems quite clear that the members of the A & P practice perceive that the highest expectation comes from them. Their high expectations might have to do with how they perceive their roles and their expectations on themselves which are connected to the norms and culture of being ambitious and engaged in the practice, and environmental issues in general. However, there are perceptions on that there are expectations coming from other directions as well. The politicians and the E & C Board are also actors who seem to be perceived to have high expectations on the practice of the A & P unit. Other municipal administrations or offices within the city have also been mentioned as actors who are perceived by the civil servants to have expectations on the practice of the A & P unit. When it comes to the perception of expectations the members of the practice are aware of the high expectations they have on themselves, and also the expectations they perceive others to have on their practice. Since this situation is mentioned by many of them there is a chance that this is recognized within the unit, but the question is whether it is expressed or not.

5.5 What is the meaning of communication created within the A & P practice?

5.5.1 Meaning Creation

The content of communication is something which many of us know by just thinking about it. However, explaining the meaning of communication and put that meaning into words can on the contrary be harder. When posing the question on what communication means to the members of the A & P practice they described their meaning of communication in different ways. Some of the members of the A & P practice talked about communication as a wide concept, something which is about constant interaction between people in different forms, from information to dialogue. Another member said that it is first of all about two way communications. Other

members of the A & P unit related communication to their practice, since their whole practice is built on communication. Communication is a big part of their practice through for example meetings with other administrations, meetings with other people, through cooperation with other actors, through production of reports and documents, through networking, lectures, and other communicational methods.

Interpretation and Reflection

The different meanings the civil servants create regarding communication could, besides the fact that we have different perspectives, also be due to that the interviews mostly focused on their practice which may have naturally steered them into relating communication to their practice at the A & P unit. It could also be due to that some of the civil servants found it difficult to reflect on abstract concepts like communication. The point in finding out what meaning they create of communication might indicate how they will resonate in their communicational practice. Since the civil servants meaning creation of communication differs it might create obstacles and difficulties in their communicational practice.

5.5.2 Create Knowledge and Understanding

One of the most dominant reasons, which the civil servants explicitly mentioned were eagerness and ambition to as many of them said, reach out more, and bigger. One of the civil servants described an expectation on that an increased communication could bring the opportunity to reach outside the walls of the EO. Furthermore, the civil servant gave a picture of erasing the feeling of being confined at the EO and to be more open and interested in receiving and send out information. Besides reaching out more another view was that they should come out more, in order to be present and to participate in different events in Gothenburg. Moreover, the civil servants explained the importance of being present and participate in different events due to the importance of meeting people, as well as the importance of highlighting the climate issue in Gothenburg. Another member of the A & P practice described that there is a willingness amongst a few of the civil servants at the unit to communicate the opinion of the whole EO regarding environmental issues. In addition, that the EO should make a statement and show its position in the environmental debate.

Another reason to why the members of the A & P practice believe that it is important to communicate is in order to create knowledge and understanding for what it is that the civil servants do at the EO. Creating this knowledge and understanding is not only important due to creating knowledge and understanding within society on what they do, but also in order for society to understand the seriousness with environmental issues. In relation to that communication is important due to that it can increase knowledge and understanding. There is also an expectation on that an increased communication can bring decisiveness, inclusion, participation, and willingness to contribute to the work and activities there are, in order to improve and solve the environmental issues. An additional aspect which was mentioned by one of the civil servants was that an improved and increased communication could make the members of the practice to improve them and their practice. In addition it was also mentioned that it is important to be transparent when it comes to the practice and communication. Furthermore, the civil servant explained that one way of being more transparent could be by

inviting opinions and perspectives from other actors. By doing this the practice of the A & P unit could improve and develop further at the same as it would create a larger platform for dialogue and discussion regarding certain issues.

An additional reason to why the members of the A & P practice find communication to be important is due to implementation of activities which they suggest in order to achieve their missions and plans. Further, the reason was due that it could have a positive effect in order for creating, and enhance cooperation and relations with other administrations, offices and companies, which might be involved in the future projects of the A & P unit. Another reason to why communication is important and what they expect that an increased communication could bring is according to one of the members of the A & P unit following:

“In order to be able to affect decision makers in Gothenburg, it is crucial in order for things to be done. Things are happening out there but we want so much more to happen and I do not think that one can achieve more by just sending out a ‘paper’ on how everyone should act, it is about being available and palpable”. (Civil servant, 1)

Other civil servants had the same view as the previous statement and mentioned that communication is important since it can result in a situation where the civil servants of the A & P unit can put pressure on surrounding actors. By put pressure on other actors would be an important step in order for achieving the local environmental goals and the environmental problems.

5.5.3 Visionary Thoughts of Communicational Practice

The members of the A & P practice have great expectations on what an increased communication could bring to their practice. Along with these expectations and their ambitions come visions on how they could develop their communicational practice. One could categorize their visions into three main headlines which are increase dialogue with different actors in society, create change, and finally to reach consensus regarding the environmental issue.

Increase Dialogue and Communication

The most dominant vision of the A & P unit is to increase dialogue and communication with different actors in society. The civil servants of the A & P unit have a vision of becoming more interactive with citizens and other interests. In addition, to act out more, to have events, and in general to work more outgoing and have more space to communicate their issues. One of the civil servants mentioned a vision on having more dialogue with schools since it is an important actor and a key factor when it comes to future environmental practices. There are also visions on creating more accessible communication and dialogue with citizens. One of the civil servants had a vision on having a meeting point in the city center where the civil servants of the A & P unit could act as ambassadors of the EO. Moreover, the idea of this meeting point is that it could be a place where one could meet and talk about political and environmental issues and in general what is going on in Gothenburg regarding issues like these two. The civil servant also had an idea of using the meeting point as a possibility for both civil servants and citizens to meet local politicians and the environmental board. This type of activity, or event would be a step closer towards a more extreme communication which is the vision of this member of the A & P practice.

There is also a vision of improving the relation between the civil servants and the politicians. Improving their relation and communication are due to the reason of creating the opportunity to discuss the visions and expectations of both actors when it comes to political missions. Having a dialogue could make it easier to reach an understanding, as well as improve the practice and achieve the environmental goals.

Create Change

One vision amongst the civil servants of the A & P unit is to create change. When asking about their visions regarding their communicational practice one of them described a vision of achieving a big societal change, in which the A & P unit would be a strong force in creating that change. Another related vision was to create concepts that would make the people in Gothenburg more engaged, to be a part of and create a social awakening for environmental engagement. An additional vision is that the members of the A & P unit would communicate in such an effective way that every administration and company in the city would implement all actions which the unit and the EO proposes during the next few years. This would be in order to improve the environmental status in Gothenburg. There is also a vision on becoming a forerunner amongst other municipalities in the country when it comes to environmental strategies and activities.

Reach Consensus

A dominant vision within the A & P unit is to be able to create an increased understanding for the environmental issue and that everyone should know why it is important. The dream scenario is to reach a consensus and consistency regarding what issues and arguments the members of the A & P unit should operate. Furthermore, to communicate the A & P unit's and the EO's messages in the best possible way, and that the messages would be well received. An additional vision related to reaching consensus on the environmental issues is that the environmental and climate issues will be prioritized issues in Gothenburg.

5.5.4 Reification

When interpreting the visions of the A & P practice and the reasons to why they believe that communication is important, also their expectations on what an increased communication could bring, it is clear that they do have a lot of faith in communication and what affect it can have on their practice. This is an assumption which seems to be a general one at the A & P unit that communication will improve their practice. The meaning which the civil servants have created of communication is reification. The reification can in this case be an obstacle and aggravate their communicational practice. This is due to that the reification they have created on communication might hide the insufficient knowledge, which seems to be the case at the A & P unit when it comes to communication. And as long as the civil servants act upon this reification it is not open for new meaning creation (Wenger, 1999). The meaning, which the members of the A & P unit have created of communication might be due to that any of them have a specific education within the field of communication. Since they do not have a communication education the civil servants might find the insufficiency of communicational knowledge to be the weak part of their practice. It might also be perceived as an explanation to why their projects have not, in some situations been that successful or effective.

5.6 Obstacles

Amongst several obstacles which have been mentioned by the civil servants, four main obstacles have been identified regarding the practice of the A & P unit. The obstacles have been categorized into organizational frames, media and other social media, lack of resources and dialogue between the civil servants of the A & P unit and the politicians.

Organizational Frames

Several of the civil servants have mentioned difficulties related to the whole organization of the EO. One of the civil servants discussed what kind of role the EO is supposed to have, furthermore how the organization is perceived by others. The civil servant argued that the development in municipal organizations moves quite slow in general, and stated; *“one is not quick on taking up new concepts which really can be a barrier”* (Civil servant, 4). The same member of the A & P practice mentioned within the context of creating dialogue with citizens, that it also has to do with how it has been in the past since the EO has traditionally been working only towards actors within the municipal organization. Furthermore, this is about keeping old routines, what roles one has got in the past and also what roles others perceive the organization to have. Another civil servant also problematized and related communicational obstacles with the organization of the EO and mentioned that since the municipal organization is complex with many different corporations and administrations it can be very difficult to reach into different contexts of the organization. Therefore communication and cooperation is needed on every level. One of the members of the A & P practice described that there are many things which the civil servants would like to do when it comes to their communicational practice, nevertheless there are many things which they are not allowed to do. It has also been described that the civil servants are not getting the help they need from the communications department.

An additional issue that has been problematized by a few members of the A & P practice is that the civil servants always are dependent on that every activity or project has to be a political mission in order for the civil servants to communicate the project. They are not allowed to communicate anything that the politicians or the environmental board cannot support which is perceived to be a limiting aspect of their practice. One of the civil servants related this to democratic aspects of their practice and described a situation where they are not allowed to communicate anything before getting a political approval. The civil servant argued that the A & P unit's missions often are of such specific character that the citizens have a democratic right to know what is going on in their hometown. Moreover, they should be given the opportunity to be a part of the projects earlier in the process.

Social Media

Another dominant obstacle, or limitation is that the A & P unit is not active on social media, like Facebook and twitter and one of the members of the A & P practice stated following;

“we feel that we really would have wanted to use other medias like a blog or social medias, something which we feel quite limited to since we have not had the permission to use these

channels which I feel is a shame because I believe we could have been able to reach more people in that way” (Civil servant 10)

There is also a vision of becoming more proactive when it comes to sending in debate articles, inviting journalists and to have more press releases. Another one of the civil servants argued that it is a barrier in the city, on how the municipal organization as a whole and what the discussion looks like regarding how to use the web as a means to communicate. Furthermore, the civil servant that the unit are working with social organizational, on the line to political issues, and the problem is that they do not from city level want the unit to communicate these kind of social, political aspects on the official webpage of Gothenburg. Thus, the official web page of Gothenburg focuses on the citizens as they were almost clients whom enter the webpage in order to find different municipal services. The problematic issues is, according to the civil servant, that the decision makers or executives do not see the citizens who enters the web page as a democratic citizen who wants to understand how the municipality, or the EO make decisions, what they do, or how they do it. Furthermore, the same civil servant explained that the municipal organization has overlooked the possibility of using the webpage as a democratic platform and add that the website, as it is now, is not interactive at all.

Lack of Resources

Other obstacles when it comes to their communicational practice are resources such as time and knowledge. The perception is that communication takes a lot of time which the member of the A & P practice perceive themselves not to have. One of the civil servants described their working situation to be quite heavy from time to time; however they do have calmer periods. During the calmer periods they have to catch up with other things which they have not had the time to do during their peaks. Furthermore, the result of heavy and intense work results in that they do not have time for reflection or time to discuss how they want to move on with their communicational practice. An additional obstacle which has been brought up regarding their communicational practice is that most of the civil servants at the A & P unit are environmentalists and neither of them have a specific knowledge or education in communications.

Interpretation and Reflection

Several obstacles have in this chapter been identified; both on unit level and municipal level. The obstacles that have been identified by the civil servants on unit level are obstacles which they might be able to clear out through discussion and deliberation. However, referring to the bigger picture many of the civil servants revealed a skeptical view on how the municipal organization as such works with communication. Many of these aspects which concerns the limitations and frames of the whole organizations are something which might be difficult for the civil servants to affect directly. However, the issues could probably be managed and deliberated on in a long term perspective. An interpretation is that there are quite many obstacles which the civil servants of the A & P unit have identified which seem to be important and significant to them. The question is however if these obstacles are expressed, if it is something which they have recognized and talked about. If not, it is important to do so in order for the practice to improve and develop.

Discussing the obstacles with each other is a first step of trying to solve them, also to identify those obstacles which lie within their power to change.

6 Conclusion and Final Discussion

What is keeping the Unit Analysis and Project together?

The great engagement for environmental issues and the shared ambition to make a change are two strong and important driving forces. These two driving forces are keeping the members of the A & P practice together. Working for a good and sustainable environmental status in Gothenburg and to be part of the decision making processes in the city are the very purpose of their practice. This is something which the civil servants constantly negotiate on and is what Wenger (1999) argues, what creates a meaningful practice. The negotiation on what is meaningful is a dynamic process that constantly changes by their practice. Therefore the practice can be seen as shaping the individual members and the members shape the practice. (Wenger, 1999)

What are their idea of communication and what it can bring to their practice?

The civil servants have different meanings when it comes to communication and what it means. However, communication is seen by the members of the A & P practice, as something very important and as a fundamental means to reach their goals. It is clear that communication is something which they put great trust in. There is a dominant view of the A & P unit that an increased and improved communication will make their mission more effective and successful. They also have an expectation, or a vision on that an increased communication will create more understanding and knowledge on both their practice and on the environmental issue itself. There is a shared vision that communication can lead to change and that it is important to achieve the environmental goals and solve the environmental issues.

At the same time they do recognize difficulties and obstacles with communication, in forms of lacking resources such as time which is needed in order to include communication in their projects, also when it comes to plan communication strategies. When it comes to knowledge the perception of the civil servants is that they do not have enough knowledge about communicational practice in order to carry out effective communication. Other issues are regarding the municipal organization as a whole and concerns how the communicational practice has been in the past, contra how some of the civil servants imagine it could be in the present and the future.

What aspects are reified and what aspects are open for new meaning creation?

The norms and culture of being environmentally engaged and ambitious are aspects that are open for new meaning creation. This is due to that some of the members of the A & P practice problematize the fact that it is a very high level of ambition when it comes to their practice and that there are, amongst some of the members, expectations on that one should be engaged and live as you preach. Even if the norms and culture at the unit might not be discussed in an open way most of the civil servants are still aware of the norms and to some extent how it may affect their practice. Therefore it is open for new meaning creations.

My interpretation of the civil servants perceptions of communication is in this case that it is a reified aspect. It is the meaning of communication which the civil servants have created in their practice that is reified. The reification is in this case that communication is something which will improve their practice. The conviction amongst the civil servants of that environmental issues are important and that it should be a prioritized issue might be due to that there is an underlying assumption on that everyone should be engaged in this issue, and that it could change how society see issues concerning climate and the environment. From this view there is a picture of, as long as the civil servants communicate and inform the importance of the environmental issue, more people will gain more understanding for the issue, and change habits that have negative effects on the environment. It is this view of which the civil servants have created on having a great environmental engagement, which creates their reification on communication and what it can achieve with their practice. Their reification on communication hides the civil servants view on what communication can bring to their practice. This is where the reification becomes an obstacle in their practice, because as long as the civil servants of A & P unit act upon their reification, the reification will be maintained and as long as the civil servants do not discuss the reification and their assumptions on communication, communication will not be open for new meaning creation. Furthermore, an important step for the civil servants at the A & P unit is to discuss what they mean with communication and what an improved communication means in relation to their practice and how they could carry it out together in order to achieve their goals.

Final Discussion

In order to relate the findings in this study with the studies from the previous research chapter, there are similarities. When it comes to the study by Israelsson (2013) the researcher has found some of the aspects which also can be identified in this study. For example that there is a view within municipal organizations; on that communication is an aspect which demands resources such as time and knowledge. The other study by Johansson (2003) have similarities with this study since it is a qualitative study investigating perspectives, visions, and meaning making when it comes to communicational practice in organizations. Even this study revealed that aspects of knowledge and interpretation are important when it comes to communicational practice in organizations.

It might be easy to draw a conclusion based on three studies in order to argue that aspects of time, knowledge and interpretation are problematic aspects in every organization and therefore a common phenomenon. However, one could say that these aspects are important, nevertheless often seem to be the missing link when it comes to achieving a successful practice.

Consequently, the civil servants of the A & P practice have different pictures of what communication is and what it should be in their practice. This is where their reifications become visible and available for them to elaborate on. These are aspects which might not be that easy to change in a short period of time, however they are still important to discuss in order to develop their communication practice further.

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8 Appendix

8.1 Interview guide

Background:

Can you tell me about your background and how you ended up at the unit?

The device:

Can you describe how you work together at the unit?

What norms and culture do you perceive there to be at the unit?

What is the unit's mission and how is it formulated?

What expectations do you perceive there to be on the unit's practice?

What are your reflections on the unit's mission and business benefit?

What do you find important in order to develop the unit's mission?

The missions:

Tell me a little about what your mission is all about? What is it that you do?

How are your missions formulated? Please choose one mission to focus on.

In relation to how your mission is formulated, how did you interpret the mission?

What expectations do you perceive there to be on the mission?

What are your reflections on your mission and its business benefit?

What do you find important in order to develop the mission?

Communication:

Can you describe your picture of communication, what does it mean to you?

In what way is communication relevant in your practice?

What do you think that your target groups want to know about your practice and missions?

What are your expectations on an increased communication?

What driving forces and obstacles do you see when it comes to communication at the unit?

What does your dream scenario look like regarding your practice and communication?