

Dissertation title: An investigation into coping in NGOs in Third World countries.

Extended Abstract:

What actors do in practice has been the prime concern for strategy as practice scholars which has led them to focus on the micro-activities and the daily doings of actors involved in strategy work. Strategy and strategizing is understood to comprise of these micro-activities in practice. Strategizing is therefore conceptualized as a situated activity wherein the situation itself lends meaning to the micro-activities of actors and the artefacts they use. While SAP literature focuses on micro-activities, Chia & Holt (2006) argue that such kind of micro-activities do not occur as isolated episodes but on closer look, these activities are manifestations of regularized micro-practices which the actor draws upon to cope with particular situations. These regularized practices or pre-dispositions serve as the mediating link between the macro socio-historical context in which the actor is located and the micro doings in particular contexts of their daily enactments. These pre-dispositions are reproduced by actors, each time they draw upon it to act in a particular instance, ensuring the stability and persistence of structures (as patterns of dispositions) over time. Context, both in its particularity and its macro-social historicity, is therefore an indivisible part of the actor's existence which is internalized within the actor.

While the authors acknowledge the significance of the notion of context, implicit in the notion of context is a singularity (or continuity) of history, which continues into the present through the reproduction of pre-dispositions internalized within the actor that provides the tropes to cope with the day to day situations. Reproduction of pre-dispositions and the stability of structures requires the continuity of a consistent and unbroken progression of history to which the pre-dispositions can be traced. However, macro-social histories around the world have not been characterized by stability; rather fissures and fractures have been significant. In this thesis,

I problematize this notion of continuity of an unbroken history implicit thus far in the conceptualization of the macro-social embedding of the context and seek to develop the notion of situated action in societies/economies in transition. Transition economies have been identified in the strategy literature as those economies which have undergone a shift from central planning to market based competition as the basis of organization of major economic activities. Peng (2003) explains that even with the establishment of newer institutional structures, the “deep structures of the older institutions” continue in informal customs, traditions etc. While the notion of transition therefore implies the simultaneity of the old and the newer structures as an abiding characteristic of such contexts, Whittington (2016) places emphasis on the role of human activity in the persistence of institutional continuity through their adoption, non-adoption or partial adoption etc. The deep structures of these older institutions persist and continue into the present at the micro-activity level in habits, doings, routines etc. in pockets and spaces. Consequently, even with the onset of newer institutions, the pre-existing set does not disappear completely leading to the incomplete diffusion of the newer practices in the deep recesses of the socio-economic space.

While the above section problematizes the notion of singularity of history and therefore emphasizes on continuity of multiple histories, yet the relationship between multiple sets of institutions and the practices it spawns has not been explored in the strategy-as-practice literature. I dig further into the inter-relationship between multiple institutions and dwell on the question of how it may shape actors and their coping practices embedded within the fissured historical landscape of postcolonial India.

In this thesis, I trace the fissure to the history of colonization, a deeper exemplar of transition than explored in the strategy literature so far, within the post-colonial landscape of Indian economic and social development. Colonization, I argue drawing from postcolonial studies, saw several changes brought into the lifeworld of the natives due to colonial interests through

illegitimization and subordination of customary practices (Birla, 2009; Jammulamadaka, 2017), often through colonial legislation and administrative action. Even though power changed hands post-independence, the institutional structures of domination, in its various forms, continued to subordinate customary practices. Consequently the subordination of native practices brought in a power differential and manifested itself in the form of denigration between the central institutions and the local world of the natives. It led to the deprioritization of the natives' interests and in the discursive world led to formulation of hierarchical binaries such as modernity/tradition, formal/informal, developed/developing etc., which implicitly carried within it the relation of subordination and denigration of customary practices.

Yet notwithstanding domination, postcolonial theory has argued that the natives had access to culturally sedimented concepts and categories of thought with which to turn the powerful into a manageable entity while preserving their faiths and belief systems passed down through generations as a frame of reference for coping. Postcolonial scholar Nandy (1983), in particular, investigates the general social psychology of the ordinary Indian to understand how he coped while being under subjugation to resist the infiltrating reach of the dominant central institutions. I draw on Nandy (1983) to provide the grammar to articulate the nature of fractures and fissures in the postcolonial context.

When the macro-history is characterized by fissures, several possibilities can arise. An actor can be embedded in either of the histories or be embedded in multiple histories through experiences over his lifetime. In this case that I investigate, the actor (focal actor of this study) experienced this multiplicity of histories and therefore conflicting sensibilities at different phases in his life. Such a focal actor, who encounters these conflicting historicized sensibilities in the context of action, sets up my research problem. Clearly, the fractured socio-historical settings makes a smooth drawing upon of pre-formed predispositions, shaped through a continuous history, as the mechanism of forging the link between the micro context of action

and the macro context of the broader social history, problematic. In the external context, i.e., in a place of work execution where the actor has to engage with both these conflicting sensibilities together, the actor is then likely to face breakdowns when these two polarizing sensibilities meet in action. In other words, breakdowns would feature much more prominently as a defining characteristic of these contexts. Under such conditions, *this thesis seeks to explore the modes of coping [to overcome breakdowns in practice] by the focal actor located in such a context carrying the burden of a historical fracture.*

The choice of the focal actor was based on theoretical sampling. I studied an actor who worked in the field of social development for over forty years and successfully conducted several programmes for the local community. He had spent a certain part of his childhood in the villages where his interactions with the locals and their wisdom left a deep impression in his mind. Even when he left for higher studies outside India, those memories remained strongly etched within and conflicted, often intensely, with the dominant discourse of development of a nation that was pulling itself together from the colonial rule. He therefore came back to his country after completion of his studies to his native village and started his journey of discovering the age-old wisdom of the people.

The focal actor (Dr. Prakash, name changed) founded the organization Nirvik Trust (name changed) in 1976 and has been working in and around 100 villages in one district of Andhra Pradesh in integrated rural development for the last fifty years in various aspects such as agriculture, education and vocational training of the locals to enable them to become self-sufficient. The organization had already been working in the area of development prior to any institutional or organizational presence of the government or multilateral aid organizations in the villages and thus its founding principles, unlike several development organizations and NGOs, was not closely tied to any specific program designed at the national or global level. This made the focal actor a good theoretical choice for us. Several innovations by the founder

have also received national level recognition such as the Self Help Groups and DWCRA (Development of women and children in rural areas), which points towards success that the focal actor attained in program delivery/design. Several of the foreign funding agencies like EZE, OXFAM which started making entry into India in the early 70s took keen interest in the activities of the organization and expressed their desire to fund the activities undertaken by the organization. Also, the organization has worked in several programmes funded by the government in the area of education, agriculture such as the Krishi Vigyan Kendra etc. The founder has been a member of National advisory boards and has been involved in several programmes funded by the government and the funding agencies. Since then NT has been associated with several of these agencies in various capacities. Thus, in NT, I could hope to observe theoretically through its experience over the years the play of local and global/national interests and institutions. I trace, in particular, two major programs – the wasteland development program - which established NT firmly within the local community, and the setting up of a technical training institute (ITI) where NT was seen as attempting to meet the continuing requirements of its local community support base. Both programs were designed and conceived within global discourses by actors located at institutional centres of power. The strategic voice of the dominant actors was manifested in design of the wasteland program, such as the choice of preferred species of trees/plantations, targeted users etc; while the choice of syllabus in various trades, the classification between trades, requirements of equipment etc, needed for institutional certification were manifestations of global designs in the case of the ITI project.

Based on the guidelines of phronetic enquiry (Flyvbjerg, 2001) that seeks to study the action of an actor imbued with values, the process of data analysis initially involved establishing a narrative based on the actions of the actor and the events that occurred prior to the commencement of the programme. This involved tracing the sequence of events and the

evolving understandings of the actor while moving from one event to the other. The second step of analysis involved tracing the actions of the key (focal) actor and his engagement with various 'other actors' in course of implementation of each programme. In this case, I draw upon Schon (1984) who develops a theoretical structure to explain the process by which a practitioner tries to solve a problem in practice which appears puzzling, surprising, interesting or may not turn out the way he had expected. Based on Schon's notion of framing, I traced the 'action and the response' generated in the event of a breakdown and how the actor overcomes breakdowns that required the focal actor to reflect and re-evaluate his initial understandings through a process of framing, experimenting, observing and reframing. The frames were arrived at by observing the pattern in the sequence of action taken by the focal actor towards each class of actors which implicitly revealed how the focal actor 'framed other actors' embedded within the context of the action. The second step of analysis thus allowed me to cull out a longitudinally evolving account of frames (and reframings) of the focal actor as he coped with breakdowns. The third step of analysis involved situating the actions (and the framings) of the actor as a consequence of responses of the other actors in the local space in the backdrop of the broader context to interpret and understand the theoretical significance of coping responses of the focal actor to the antagonistic and conflicting sensibilities that were manifested in action.

The data shows that the sequential set of breakdowns led to modified understandings in practice while reframing the requirements of the locals and in the process creating a stake structure which was imbued with the broad interest of 'reprioritization of the locals and their interests' through the creation of local activities and artefacts that had deeper and wider engagement with the lives of the locals. In the process of prioritizing of the locals' interests, the actor selectively appropriated from the global dominating discourse, and in the context of the action, displaced the global from its universal position and claims. The data also showed that in order to create

and continue to preserve local stakes and prioritize their interests, the focal actor pragmatically remained silent or overtly conformed to the demands of other actors in power.

Based on the analysis of the responses of the focal actor to breakdowns that he encountered, I show that the focal actor classified various other actors as he overcame the structure of denigration in practice. On one hand he was the unheroic actor with respect to the distant institutions and its representatives manifested in his actions reflecting a silent conformity. His engagement with the distant actors after each breakdown can be read as a way of converting the actors into manageable entities. These reframings and consequent actions were aimed at only overcoming the hurdles without seeking any deep transformation of the relationship with the dominating institutions. His engagement remained fleeting and non-enduring; opportunistic conformity helping in retaining access to resources that the focal actor needed from the national/global institutionally affiliated actors. On the other hand, with respect to the local community, he can be seen as a heroic strategic actor as he engaged in reframing the local community and their requirements/responses in coping with the sequence of breakdowns. Patterns of his coping response reflected attempts at overcoming the culturally sedimented sensibility of apathy of the natives towards outsiders. As the actor slowly understands this apathy, through engagement in the sequence of breakdowns, he creates multiple activity streams, work contexts, artifacts and tools for local engagement that is imbued with a 'reprioritized interest' of the local in design of programs and schemes.

Through the creation of local artifacts and tools, I find that the focal actor is able to convert the culturally sedimented sensibility of looking at development programs as acts of an apathetic outsider to that of an engaged insider. The continuous reframing (by the focal actors) of local community actors through a sequence of multiple interactions coevolved with the change in program design that enacted a pragmatic reprioritization (in locally enacted artifacts) of the interests of the local actors. This longitudinal series of reframings enables the actor to wean

away local community actors from a culturally sedimented categorical imperative [apathy towards acts of an outsider] shaping their engagement in action into a pragmatic calculus of interests and its articulation. I see this in the dairy programme where the focal actor's own framing of the locals' requirements undergoes a shift from "*educating and training the beneficiaries*" as he initially saw actors in the local community as uninformed to *creating a permanent source of income*, which further were reframed to "*involving the community*" as the focal actor slowly understood the apathy of local actors towards outside interventions. This required the actor to reflect on each breakdown, reframe his understandings and seek a renewed engagement with the local actors based on continuous redesign of the program. Data shows that this was realized only slowly through a sequence of multiple events and not through any single event or episode. This pragmatic reprioritization through series of reframings can be seen in the focal actor's engagement with the two kinds of activity stream where the activity stream which percolated down into the site of action from the institutional centre was restricted from its universalizing potential. The locally generated activity stream, in contrast, found a greater local circulation due to their adoption by the natives and thereby grew and expanded locally and yet remained outside the discursive gaze of the dominant institution and its beholden actors. Data shows that the local achievements, for instance, found mention only in local texts (some in the vernacular) which circulated locally and in very limited numbers and did not enter into the wider globally circulating (in global languages, such as English) discourse keeping it beyond its gaze and thus failing to create a macro impact in terms of changing policy stances, program designs and so on at a national or global level. The focal actor therefore reduced the ideological power of the global artefact (which I show, for instance, through the exemplar of the choice of 'eucalyptus' as the preferred choice of a global wasteland development program design) in action by limiting its expansive reach in his area of influence where alternate artefacts could circulate [e.g. the farm planted eucalyptus only in a small part

of the land as a means to prevent soil erosion, quite unlike the large monocultures of eucalyptus across wastelands under the globally inspired social forestry scheme].

As discussed earlier, Whittington (2016) emphasizes on the role of human activity in institutional persistence and continuity through their acts of adoption, non-adoption, partial adoption. So even with the introduction of new institutions and its practices supported by resources and legitimized often by law and rules, the older set, even when denigrated by the dominating global institutions, does not disappear completely, surviving in traces at the micro-activity level. The data in the study shows that the older practice survives almost as a vestige, often in the form of mere memories. The continued enactments of older practices in local micro activities does not arise from mere inertia, as the literature almost implicitly assumes, but through strategy work of local actors [the focal actor here] who play a major role in stabilizing a world of micro-activities, tools and artifacts.

Thus, while literature has explored co-existence of multiple institutional practices and activities, interrelationships and power dynamics between such actors and their practices have remained rather unexplored. This thesis explored the inter-relationship further between the two sensibilities in the backdrop of the history of colonization in India and showed a continuing conflicting relationship manifested in forms of denigration that led to lack of local voice and power in program designing. Analysis of data showed how the focal actor resolved the antagonism between these two sensibilities at the micro-activity level by limiting the expansive reach of the activity stream driven from the institutional centre in action and creating new activity streams in the local space which found further circulation with enhanced acceptance by the natives.

The acceptance of the new activity streams by the natives led to a gradual transformation or restructuring of the sensibility of the locals with respect to the focal actor. Introduction of

locally enacted artifacts that had greater engagement in the lives of the locals created stakes for the local actors who gradually claimed a voice in program designing coming forward and showing interests in the focal actor's plantations [and plans around it] and adopting similar practices in their own farms. On the other hand, the locals remained indifferent to the artifacts that percolated down from the dominating central/global institutions and did not participate in other programmes. This rejection, through non-participation, reflected their own culturally sedimented sensibility of apathy towards the central dominating institutions, although such apathy stood in the way of the growth, development and improvement of conditions of living of the natives/local community.

The actor thus succeeds strategically in overcoming breakdowns by reworking on this culturally sedimented sensibility in the local space of action. The reconstruction of the relationship between the actor and the locals is therefore a strategic act and this reconstructed relationship sustains through enactments by the actor in the form of creation of new activity streams which grows through further acceptance of the natives. This is how the focal actor pragmatically coped with denigration with respect to the local actors. As long as the interests of both sets of actors remained fused through this creation of the activity streams for the locals and their acceptance, the renewed relationship between the two sets of actors sustained itself. If the activity creation stops, then the interests also no longer would remain fused and the reconstructed relationship may cease to be further renewed. The limited and local overturning of power of the global institution, and the consequent voice that locals gained in program design, was attained through the focal actor's persistent pragmatic framings/reframing through a long series of continued breakdowns. Lending power to practices that survived only in vestiges and as remnants, denuded of resources, required a careful manifestation and articulation of local interests around newly created artefacts. Lacking concreteness that can allow organization of local interests, acts of empowering of the local had to coevolve with

dissolution of culturally sedimented categorical framings [of apathy] through engagement in persistent pragmatics [by a reflective practitioner] around which new interest articulation could crystalize. Interest articulation, creation of new artifacts and activities and redesign of program thus co-evolved, displacing the dominance of global institutions within a locally delimited socio-economic space where the newly created artefacts, and the interests they articulated, could circulate. Yet, as data shows, the success of the focal actor did not translate into major change/reform at the national or even the provincial level. Attempts to scale up did not succeed. The macro-structural scaffoldings of the context thus remained unscathed, making success very local in its spatial scope.

This study thus adds to the characterization of ‘transition’ in the strategy literature. While Peng (2003) has talked about the deep structures of the older institutions which continue in informal customs and traditions since they are more impervious to the deliberate policies, in this case, data shows that the continuity of the vestiges of the older institution can be attributed to the active efforts of a strategic actor in the context of action as seen above. While Peng’s characterization conceived of the older institutions as drawing support [and maybe resources and legitimation] from continuing traditions, this study brings out the specific features that continuing colonial scars bring into a postcolonial context. The older practices, thus survive, as the data showed, only as vestiges, often just as memories of another time bereft of the power of even articulating and defending interests around its preservation. The deep colonial scars are also manifested in the culturally sedimented social psychology that categorizes dominant actors of global/national institutions through the lens of apathy and disinterest.

The study also contributes to the SAP literature by seeking to delineate the mechanisms of coping where the context of situated action is fraught with historical discontinuities and deep fractures. Drawing conceptually from insights in postcolonial theory, the study characterized the local-global interface to contextualize situated action. Fractured historicity, where the scars

of colonial domination has left local actors bereft of voice and power as well as resources for ages, coping through drawing from pre-dispositions can only recreate and perpetuate the existing power structure. Predispositions in such contexts arise from culturally sedimented mutual framings of the local community and distant power holders and their respective practices that involves apathy, opportunistic overt acceptance and silent rather than active resistance by the local community. Predispositions arise from long-standing cultural tropes and not as much from materially mediated practices. Moreover, actors [such as the focal actor of this study], who have encounters with multiple histories, along with the institutions each historical trajectory creates, are torn with an internal conflict making the possibility of a smooth drawing upon from predispositions theoretically problematic.

The analysis in this study shows that coping by the focal actor did not merely involve drawing from predispositions; rather it involved a sequence of reframing of local community actors and consequent redesign of programs upon repeated breakdowns faced by the focal actor. Continued persistence of engagement inspite of breakdowns and failures instigated the pragmatic practitioner reflexivity that led to repriorization and continued experiments seeking to engage the locals through creation of activity streams. The limited overturning of the dominant institution and its discursive power, manifest in control over program design decisions, was enabled through local action around local artifacts, local activities and concrete interest articulation around it. The power crystalizing around artifacts and activity streams that were circulating locally countered the power of global ideas, text and policy discourses along with program designs and its desired resourcings, interest of distant actors that the dominant institutional discourse supported. Instead of long-standing predispositions, it was the reflective practitioners' deliberative reprioritization [a rationality in action] to seek engagements on materially mediated interests that overcame the hierarchy implicit in the cultural repertoire dispositionally available to actors in the study. It thus brings back the role of rationality, albeit

the reflexivity of a practitioner in action, even in the strategy work at the periphery of a power structure where the strategy actor may not have access to large resources and assets to engage in rational deliberative plans that dominates mainstream strategy literature focusing on top management of large organizations. The study thus contributes new insights into the nature of coping in contexts characterized by fragmented and fissured histories with the scars of long-standing domination that strategic actors may have to cope with. At a more abstract level, the study also articulates a genre of strategy acts that does not seek organizational performance or industry/institutional leadership or massive institutional change, but merely seek to preserve practices, interests of groups of actors living under intense long-lasting domination. It provides a heroic account of a strategy of survival and coping under adverse institutional power relations. Strategic success in this account does not comprise of financial success, organizational growth or major institutional change; instead it lies in successful overcoming of breakdowns that characterize the development intervention space; it lies in a successful weaning away of the local community from culturally tinted modes of apathy and indifference to active articulation of interests around materially mediated engagements. I argue that this broadening of the understanding of success and performance in the strategy literature is essential for the discipline to engage with the rising postcolonial aspirations of reconstruction of its scarred past.