3
Theoretical Concepts and Tools: Rhetoric and Culture

Introduction

This chapter presents the conceptual framework used to analyse and compare official agency talk. It describes in detail concepts from both the New Rhetoric and Grid Group Cultural Theory (GGCT). Both of these perspectives offer different heuristic tools for comparing similarities and differences in agency talk across The Netherlands, Sweden and Australia. They are particularly appealing to this study because they are sensitive to how similar reform practices and even labels, such as agencies, can be situated in entirely different discursive structures. In answering the research question of how agency reform has been constructed across different political cultures they provide a way to distinguish both the rhetorical styles and cultural flavour of agency talk. They can also be used to examine how these aspects of national agency talk have changed or remained stable over the period studied.

Some of the advantages of combining GGCT with rhetorical analyses were already recognized by Christopher Hood in his book *The Art of the State* (2000). More specifically he has argued that together these frameworks can capture much of the variety in public management ideas and yet also show how this variety is limited (Hood 2000:6, 178). Extending upon Hood’s ideas it is argued here that public management talk can be limited by the cultural flavour of an argument, since this may bring with it certain rhetorical styles, and it can be limited by cultural context more generally (Hood 2000:178, 180). While this chapter draws from Hood’s (and colleagues) earlier works (Hood...
2000; Hood & Jackson 1991) and particularly the classification of GGCT to public management ideas, it also introduces the New Rhetoric as useful for examining and comparing the spread of public management fashions. This is because the New Rhetoric can distinguish between the levels of analysis at which symbolic convergence in agency talk may occur.

**Agency talk and social construction**

Before presenting the conceptual frameworks of the New Rhetoric and GGCT it is important to situate them epistemologically. While this is a comparative study seeking to explain agency talk, it nevertheless applies theoretical frameworks of talk that are social constructivist. That is the frameworks are being used to show how the idea of agency reforms has been constructed, and made credible, through talk as an action, rather than merely the representation of the world (Wittgenstein 1972; Austin 1975; Potter 1996). These frameworks can do that because they are somewhat sensitive to the particular rather than the general, and they accept that their object of study, agency talk, may not only vary in value, e.g. more or less individualist cultural flavours, but also in meaning (Burr 1995:3; Jost & Hyde 1997:11; Nussbaum 1990:54–82). The same symbol ‘agency’ is being analysed according to the rhetorical elements and cultural worldview that gives agencies meaning and credibility in different political cultures. This means that while some convergence in talk about agencies may be found, they could be located in a broader web of statements that take different things for granted and lend agencies somewhat different cultural connotations.

There is also an explicit interest in the cultural limits to claims about agencies in this study, and social constructivism more generally. Allowing meaning about agencies to vary by focusing upon the range and combination of statements that constituted agencies across different political cultures is not a commitment to anything goes. Rather it is an empirical interest in the limits of what is possible to say about agencies across different political cultures (Rabinow 1984:73; Foucault 1972). Indeed, both the New Rhetoric and GGCT recognize and can elucidate in different ways how agency talk may be limited. On one hand, through their focus upon ethos, pathos and logos, rhetorical theories such as the New Rhetoric give insight into who has the credibility to