# Theorizing Inside Activism: Understanding Policymaking and Policy Change from Below

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ABSTRACT    *To further our understanding on policymaking and policy change we need to recognize the significance of individual key actors in policy and planning processes. This article theorizes on the characteristics and policy influence of inside activism in which individual public officials act strategically from inside public administration to change government policy and action in line with a civic engagement and value commitment. Based on initial empirical findings from Swedish local government, we argue that inside activism is empirically relevant but not satisfactorily covered by other key actor concepts. We theorize that inside activism is 1) dualistic: open, deliberative, consensus-seeking and tacit, tactical, power-driven; 2) influential through informal networking inside and outside of government; and 3) dynamic as it varies over time and between critical situations. Due to current trends in society and public administration (e.g. governance), we expect inside activism to be increasingly relevant and we encourage further theoretical, empirical as well as normative research and discussion on this phenomenon.*

## The Neglect of Individual Key Actors

Social science literature on policymaking and policy change has in recent decades stressed the role of collective actors such as advocacy coalitions and different types of policy and governance networks (Kjær, 2004; Pierre & Peters, 2000; Rhodes, 1997, 2006; Sabatier & Weible, 2007; Sørensen & Torfing, 2007) and/or the importance of discourses and general story lines (Fischer, 2007; Fischer & Forester, 1993; Hajer, 1995). Unfortunately, these contributions have made us neglect the significance of individual key actors in the policy process, even though there are important trends that seem to increase their degree of freedom. First, the governance trend with new paradigms and ideas on how to govern the public sector gives individuals within and outside the public sector more ideational room for manoeuvre and flexibility (Pierre & Peters, 2000; Rhodes, 2007; Stoker, 1998). Second, the trend of increasing civic engagement–with the growing importance of civil society organizations as a vehicle for citizen mobilization and policy influence—opens up alternative venues for legitimacy and resources for individual key actors within the public sector (della Porta & Diani, 1999; Tarrow, 1998). Third, the trend of increasing use of knowledge and expertise in policymaking leads to a growing demand for professionals, experts, consultants, and

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researchers, not just as "technical experts" but also as "practical problem solvers" that bring values and facts together in meaningful ways (Fischer, 2009; Sandercock, 1998; Sehested, 2009). Fourth, the long trend of weakening party democracy and increasing bureaucratic power continues and has opened up for "policy politics" (Brodkin, 1990), implying a more "political" role of public officials with far more influence on policymaking than recognized in the formal parliamentary chain of governance (Svara, 2006).

These four interrelated trends increase opportunities for individuals to make a difference in policy and planning processes, not as atomistic actors operating on their own, but rather as key actors situated in various structures of power and discourse. In understanding policymaking and policy change we need to theorize more on the role and importance of these individual key actors in relation to structural approaches and concepts such as networks and discourses.[1]

In the literature on policy and planning there are several potentially relevant individual key actors with considerable discretion and influence: street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980), policy entrepreneurs (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Kingdon, 1995), policy brokers (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993, Sabatier & Weible, 2007), grey-zone administrators and network administrators (Sørensen, 2004), deliberative practitioners (Forester, 1999), boundary spanners (Pautz & Schnitzer, 2008; Williams, 2002), advocacy planners (Davidoff, 1965), and innovators inside government (Considine & Lewis, 2007). These conceptualizations focus on the importance of individuals in policy and planning processes, not as rational top-down decision-makers but as actors who, through the use of various strategies, promote alternative solutions and problem definitions in agenda-setting as well as in implementation. These actors interpret and translate general discourse and policy objectives to improve their fit to local contexts, and mediate between conflicting coalitions, facilitating co-operation. These conceptualizations provide important insights into how individuals can affect policymaking and policy change.

In this article, we contribute to this field of research by theorizing on a newly introduced concept with great potential to further our understanding of policymaking and policy change: the inside activist. As initially defined by Jan Olsson (2009a), the inside activist is an individual who is engaged in civil society networks and organizations, who holds a formal position within public administration, and who acts strategically from inside public administration to change government policy and action in line with a personal value commitment. In a recent survey of local environmental officials in Sweden, 23% of the municipalities had green inside activists, and these municipalities scored higher on three different measurements of environmental governing performance (Hysing & Olsson, 2011). This initial empirical fieldwork indicates that the concept has empirical relevance and a potential to further our understanding of policymaking and policy change. In this article we will theorize on inside activism by addressing the following questions:

• What characterizes the inside activist and what is the empirical relevance of the concept?
• How "new" is this actor concept? How does it compare with well-established concepts of individual key actors in the policy process?
• How can inside activism further our theoretical understanding of policymaking and policy change?
• What contexts give rise to inside activism? Where can we expect to find inside activists?

Furthermore, inside activism raises important issues of normative and practical relevance for planning and policymaking, such as implications for democratic legitimacy and efficient problem solving. It is highly relevant for the debate between advocates of

Habermasian communicative practice and its Foucaultian critics (Alexander, 2001; Flyvbjerg, 1998; Flyvbjerg & Richardson, 2002). We will address normative issues in the last section.

This article is structured in six parts. In the next section we summarize the empirical relevance of the inside activist concept so far. In the third section—in trying to understand how "new" the inside activist concept is—we review various established theoretical concepts regarding individual key actors, identifying differences as well as similarities between those theorizations and the inside activist concept. We then go on to discuss and elaborate on the inside activism concept and how it may contribute to explaining policy influence and change. The fifth section discusses the types of context that give rise to inside activism, thus giving us some clues about where we can expect to find inside activists. In the last section we conclude our main findings, discuss normative and practical implications and outline some future research needs.

## The Empirical Relevance of the Inside Activist Concept

The inside activist concept was first introduced in order to explain policy change in a local land planning process. An inside activist was defined as "an actor that (i) is an activist in civic society (active member of a civic organization), (ii) holds a formal position in the public sector, and (iii) acts strategically from this position by using municipality resources as well as civic network resources in order to influence public decision making" (Olsson, 2009a, p. 176). This case showed how an environmental advocacy coalition effectively challenged a local government's road and housing plans with the result that the area was developed into a nature reserve. The outcome of this process was largely explained by the powerful influence of a few inside activists and their value network of ornithologists/ birdwatchers. They had a particular vision for the area, which they successfully supported in agenda-setting, planning, opinion-making, decision-making, and implementation (Olsson, 2009a). A similar key actor was in a later study identified as playing an important role in successfully developing a sustainable urban transport plan (SUTP) and thereby introducing objectives and measures in support of ecological sustainability in urban transport planning (Hysing, 2009a).

The results of these studies can be summarized in relation to the three dimensions of the inside activist concept. First, in both cases newly recruited public officials had positions within public administration that situated them close to the centre of policymaking. This insider status gained them: 1) knowledge of the political and administrative landscape and an ability to find suitable venues and individual decision-makers open to their specific ideas of change, and 2) social acceptance and formal legitimacy for their involvement in the policy process.

Second, the inside activists were both committed to green values and had important networks and contacts with similar-minded public officials and people engaged in the environmental movement. Through these networks the inside activists could mobilize such civil society resources as knowledge, lobbying, and opinion-making. One example from the land planning case (Olsson, 2009a) was when a journalist on the local newspaper, who was part of the network, was contacted to write inspiring articles about the area at critical times during the policy process.

Third, the inside activists had legitimacy based on their personal know-how and environmental commitment, which were important resources for strategic action from inside the local government. This was clearly expressed by the inside activist in the transport case: "We have been pretty good at positioning ourselves as experts, if that is

true or not can be discussed, but I think we know what we are doing and that has made it possible for us to more or less set the agenda" (Hysing, 2009a, p. 253).

The land planning case (Olsson, 2009a) showed how one inside activist used a phronetic agenda-setting power, which combined value-based argumentation, practical know-how, and an ability to contextualize the sustainable development discourse to the local planning situation (Flyvbjerg, 2004). This inside activist had a tremendous ability to get people involved and to avoid conflict, which also gave him and the value network of ornithologists/birdwatchers considerable influence.

Insights from these in-depth case studies were used in designing a nationwide survey of "green" inside activists, which was sent to local environmental officials in Sweden (Hysing & Olsson, 2011). Inside activists were identified using seven variables (Table 1). This study identified 81 public officials with inside activist characteristics, operating within 67 of the 290 municipalities in Sweden (23%). This was a surprisingly high figure as it required that the respondents agreed on all seven variables (which in total made it a rather demanding list of characteristics). In addition, using three different measurements on environmental governing performance, the study showed that municipalities with inside activists, on average, performed better on all three measurements (statistically significant differences) (Hysing & Olsson, 2011).[2]

Thus, the empirical results on inside activism, even though limited to local environmental governing, show a potential to further our understanding of policymaking and policy change. This article takes its point of departure from these empirical studies to theorize on the inside activism concept.

Table 1. Green inside activists among local environmental officials. *Source:* Hysing & Olsson (2011, p. 699)

| Questions | Green inside activists | Frequency/Total | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| I initiate and pursue action on environmental issues within the local administration (not at all, rarely, frequently, primary) | Frequently or as primary work task | 358/687 | 52.1 |
| I am at the heart of things (a facilitator) when it comes to environmental work within the municipality (1–10*) | 6–10 | 252/689 | 36.6 |
| As a public official I have a high degree of freedom to design my work tasks without the direct control of politicians (1–10*) | 6–10 | 497/696 | 71.4 |
| Politicians turn to me for advice on environmental issues (1–10*) | 6–10 | 310/696 | 44.5 |
| In me, citizens and interest organizations have a channel for effecting change (1–10*) | 6–10 | 306/695 | 44.0 |
| My contacts and personal networks are of great importance for the environmental work done within the municipality (1–10*) | 6–10 | 435/696 | 62.5 |
| Are you or have you ever been a member of or otherwise active in one or more environmental non-governmental organization (Yes/No) | Yes | 504/687 | 73.3 |

*1, I do not agree at all; 10, I agree fully; N = 701.

**The Inside Activist – A New Actor Concept?**

In theorizing on the inside activist concept, we need to consider other key-actor concepts in the literature. The purpose is not to make a full review of these concepts, but rather to identify differences from and similarities to our proposed contribution on the inside activist.

A first well-known key-actor concept is the "street-level bureaucrat". This concept captures the policy influence of public officials when dealing with pressures from politicians and high-ranking officials, on the one hand, and user or target groups on the other (Lipsky, 1980; Meyers & Vorsanger, 2007; Prottas, 1979), but does not capture that public officials are intimately connected to local contexts through networks and deliberation. However, in some contributions there is a more open approach in this respect, also indicated by a focus on street-level actors rather than bureaucrats (Hill, 2003; Weissert, 1994). As a contrast, for inside activists, horizontal networks are of vital importance for getting value-based legitimacy and for mobilizing resources. The inside activist is also more "political", acting to influence agenda-setting and policy formulation rather than reacting to the pressures of others during policy implementation. As such, the inside activist has more similarities with the "policy entrepreneur" concept (Kingdon, 1995) than the street-level bureaucrat.

According to Kingdon, many different actors may act as policy entrepreneurs: politicians, public officials, lobbyists, academics, etc. (Kingdon, 1995, pp.179–180). To a large extent it is the specific situation that gives the opportunity for policy entrepreneurship. Kingdon argues that much of the process is governed by large events and structures not under any individual's control, but entrepreneurs take advantage of those events and work within those structures. The entrepreneurs are depicted as "surfers waiting for the big wave" (Kingdon, 1995, p.225) as well as actors using a "window of opportunity" (Kingdon, 1995, ch.8). In those situations, a policy entrepreneur fulfils the function of linking different policy streams: coupling problems, solutions and political opportunities.

The policy entrepreneur concept is highly relevant in most policy contexts, but the concept is imprecise, as almost every actor is a potential policy entrepreneur, pushing for any kind of value or interest, not necessarily their own. Thus, we should consider the policy entrepreneur as a role or a function rather than as a specific category of actors. The concept of the inside activist draws several important insights from the research on policy entrepreneurship in terms of the strategies used to influence agenda-setting (e.g. Lovell, 2009; Mackenzie, 2004; Mintrom & Norman, 2009). However, contrary to the policy entrepreneur, the inside activist concept is more precise about who these actors are (public officials) as well as their motives for policy change (personal values based on civic commitment). Furthermore, inside activism is not only about influencing policymaking *per se*, but can just as well be about influencing the conditions of the policymaking game. Inside activists are not necessarily waiting for the big wave or restricted from acting when "policy windows" are closed. On the contrary, they are theorized as continuously searching for opportunities, and they try to open windows and keep windows open (Lovell, 2009).

A third well-known category of individual actors is the "policy broker", developed by Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993; 1999). This is a specific actor within the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) who mediates conflicts between different advocacy coalitions and supports learning processes. The policy broker needs to be respected by all parties involved in the process and viewed as relatively neutral (Sabatier, 1998). Favourable conditions for policy learning, according to the ACF, are low level of conflict and debate as well as a professional forum available for all parties. Successful learning, guided by the

policy broker, requires that all coalitions view a continuation of the status quo as unacceptable (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999). Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) recognize that high-level civil servants can perform the role of policy broker. However, it is problematic to clearly separate brokers from advocates, as brokers generally have some interest in policy, and advocates often have an interest in conflict resolution (Hajer, 1995; Hysing & Olsson, 2008). The policy broker concept is supposed to play a politically neutral role, helping a "better policy" to triumph over inferior ideas or to resolve the conflict through a learning process that ends in a synthesis. Thus, it suffers from an implicit normative bias towards the "good" pluralistic outcome of policymaking. In this respect, it is clearly different from inside activism which is about political interests, power, and policymaking influence. All actors in public administration have values and interests, but most of them want to portray themselves as neutral and balanced. There is an obvious risk of neglecting the political nature of policy processes and administrative behaviour if we actively search for policy brokers in empirical studies (Olsson, 2009a).

A fourth key actor concept is the "femocrat", a notion used to denote public officials working to further gender equality (Yeatman, 1990). There are several similarities between the femocrat and the inside activist concept; the importance of external networks and organizations with respect to how the public task is handled as well as their commitment to social and political change within the government. Femocrats are often perceived as connected to the women's movement, not as formal representatives or agents, but rather as legitimate "experts" on women's policies and gender equality (Eisenstein, 1996; Sawer, 1996). Janneke van der Ros makes a distinction between the work tasks of femocrats and their attitudes, implying that they may or may not hold feminist views (Van der Ros, 1996). This last distinction is important and in accordance with how we conceive of inside activists within the local environmental policy area. Green inside activists are professionals who have their green commitment in common, but they may differ to a great extent in terms of how radical they actually are in relation to different environmental values and issues (Hysing & Olsson, 2011). A fifth really interesting contribution regarding public administrators as creative key actors is the "grey-zone administrator" or the "network administrator" (Sørensen, 2004). These public officials promote the establishment of strong networks within their policy areas that not only include a variety of private actors but also central political actors. Accordingly, Sørensen (2004) argues that it is "very easy for them to gain legitimacy with reference to the negotiated agreements and shared visions produced in these networks" (p. 125). Obviously, Sørensen's network administrator is relatively close to our inside activist concept. However, while the network administrators establish networks as arenas in which negotiations and compromises between various interests are used to gain legitimacy and support based on "professional needs", the inside activists use resources available in specific value-based networks for political purposes. A second aspect discussed by Sørensen (2004), which is also highly relevant for the inside activist concept, concerns the democratic implications and challenges. Is the widespread autonomy of grey-zone administrators compatible with democracy? Is a grey-zone administrator with his/her own agenda a threat to or a gain for democracy? These questions lead to a highly relevant question of a more principled kind: Is it or is it not functional for democracy to aim for a sharp institutional separation of politics and administration? This takes us further to explicitly normative conceptualizations of new forms and practices of democracy, namely Forester's deliberative practitioner.

From an implicit integrative point of departure, Forester argues forcefully for strengthening democracy from the bottom up by developing a deliberative practitioner role. This role should foster a proactive and creative interaction with citizens, and social

interests which can secure broad participation, learning and viable solutions (Forester, 1999). This contribution is part of the broad deliberative planning and democracy discourse in the literature (Fischer, 2009; Healey, 1997). It is also closely related to the idea of the advocacy planner that was originally advanced by Davidoff (1965). The basic idea of the advocacy planner, which Forester also supports, is that planners should abandon their value-neutrality, which is perceived as an impossible position, and instead take a free and active role in the policy process as an "inside" advocate of marginalized groups in society. The ethical rationale behind this argument is to make policy and planning processes "fairer" by counteracting social inequalities and power imbalances between different groups (Campbell & Marshall, 1999; Hoffman, 1989). The intentions behind both the deliberative practitioner and the advocacy planner as theoretical concepts are clearly normative–constructive with a specific vision about what a "good" planner should do. The inside activist has clear similarities with these concepts in terms of a personal value commitment and willingness to promote these values in his/her professional role. However, the inside activist concept was developed for a purely empirical–theoretical reason, leaving open to empirical research what interests are being represented by the inside activist, and what types of actions are undertaken to influence policy.

Summarizing this review, we conclude that the inside activist concept draws insights from various concepts (in particular the policy entrepreneur, the grey-zone administrator and the deliberative practitioner) but that the characteristics of inside activists are not satisfactorily covered by any of those contributions. The strength of the inside activist concept is its precise definition of who the key actors are, their motives for policy change, and their basis for power and influence. This makes the concept clear enough to be proven wrong, and thus well suited for empirical assessments and further theorization.

## Policy Influence Through Inside Activism

In this section we will discuss and elaborate on three dimensions of inside activism to further our theoretical understanding of policymaking and policy change. The first theme focuses on the nature of activism inside government, which we argue is a particular form of activism. The second theme, inside activism through networks, elaborates on the first theme with a deeper focus on how inside activists use networks. The third theme is about the dynamics of inside activism and deals with cycles of inside activism and value-changes over time.

### The Nature of Activism Inside Government

What is the nature of activism in inside activism? As a starting point, activism can be broadly defined as behaviours aimed at influencing corporate or government policy and actions on a specific issue (e.g. environmental protection), which can be compared to non-activist behaviour aimed at changing personal and household practices (McFarlane & Hunt, 2006). Traditionally, activism has been perceived as an activity that takes place outside the public sector. Non-governmental organizations and social movements try to influence public policy, using various means, ranging from direct action to lobbyism (Carter, 2007; Rootes, 2007). Inside activists, on the other hand, perform their activism from inside government, and the insider status is of vital importance in understanding this particular form of activism. Contrary to activists in civil society, inside activists can be expected to avoid open value conflicts. Acting from a position as public official, the inside activist is in most situations expected to provide "neutral" professional expertise and policy guidance. Although frequently debated and questioned (Sandercock, 1998), this

largely remains the basis for legitimacy and autonomy of the public official. Thus, actively taking part in opinion-making and arguing forcefully with an ideological conflict-style are in direct conflict with the role of public officials. No inside activists in the case studies used or promoted direct forms of activism such as openly obstructing political decisions.

The activist behaviour of inside activists is likely to be dualistic, like Janus, the two-faced Roman god. On the one hand, inside activism is open, deliberative and consensus-seeking, especially in official documents, formal meetings and public presentations ("the Habermasian face"); on the other hand, it is about goal-attainment through tacit, tactical, and power-driven action ("the Foucaultian face"). Thus, we argue that inside activists are acting de-facto on both the light and dark side of planning practice (Flyvbjerg & Richardson, 2002; Alexander, 2001). Although the inside activists in the case studies had some discretion regarding policy politics, they rarely had hierarchical decision-making power. To become influential they therefore needed to engage in issue-specific discursive policymaking, which was knowledge-driven and consensus-seeking. This was not about persuading other actors, but rather convincing those who were concerned by presenting "good" arguments and avoiding points of conflict (compare communicative planning ideal, Healey, 1997). This strategy was influential in practice when it led to inspiring and positive solutions in the eyes of major interests and actors involved in the process.

However, this strategy has its limitations. In reaching their goals, inside activists also need to be tactical and power-driven, but in a tacit, informal way to avoid negative reactions. Instead of staying passive when important values are at stake, they are prepared to go beyond or to overstretch formal responsibilities and jurisdictions to promote their "higher goal" (e.g. environmental protection, gender equality, or social justice). In the case of local land planning, inside activists did not openly oppose policy solutions, but instead gave the opposite impression in order to keep the trust and support of political elites and to win time for countermeasures; they cultivated friendly relationships with specific politicians to sow dissension between the parties in the government coalition ("divide and rule"). Instead of waiting for a potentially negative decision concerning a project, one inside activist started implementing some parts of it in order to increase the opportunity and legitimacy of the whole project; that is, breaking the chronology of stages in the policy process and mixing them to get strategic influence. Most importantly, the inside activists used their personal networks in a tactical way thanks to their unique positions as insiders.

*Inside Activism Through Networks*

In theorizing on the inside activist concept we take an integrated approach regarding networks and individual key actors to understand policymaking and policy change. The relevance of networks for policymaking and policy change has been established in various studies (Marsh & Rhodes, 1992; Rhodes, 1997, 2006; Sørensen & Torfing, 2007). However, network analysis has also been criticized for using a descriptive, metaphorical concept without explanatory power, unable to show how networks are influencing policy processes. One of the basic reasons for this perceived shortcoming is the lack of understanding of how individual actors are important within networks (Dowding, 1995; Blom-Hansen, 1997). We do not conceive of the inside activist as a puppet with strings. Rather, we see inside activism as a two-way relationship where the inside activist is shaping networks, and is in turn shaped by them (Blom-Hansen, 1997).

We argue that networks are important for explaining why and how inside activists influence policies. Their influence follows from particular power mechanisms that become

operative through active networking, giving them advantages in relation to other policy actors. We will further elaborate on three types of such power mechanisms: asymmetrical relations; efficient resource mobilization; and activism in secrecy.

Asymmetrical relations follow from the inside–outside dimension to the advantage of inside activists. In their role as public officials they have a continuing presence and access to important actors, networks, institutions and resources in the "formal world" of government as well as in the "informal world" of civil society. If they successfully connect these relatively separate worlds through networking activities they gain strategic advantages in relation to politicians and public managers as well as non-governmental organizations and individual activists (Olsson, 2009a). It is similar to Putnam's idea (1988) of two-level games, where actors who have access to both levels are more likely to get and control information than those who are limited to one of them. This information is not only about factual matters, but is also strategically relevant: What issues are at stake? Who are the key actors? When is the deadline for decision-making? We further argue that the more networking activities inside activists engage in, the more opportunities they develop for asymmetrical power relations. Of course, the quality of the networking activities, such as discursive power and issue-specific expertise, is also of vital importance. In this complex networking, we further assume that hierarchical structures are partly used and partly undermined at the same time.

Efficient resource mobilization is essential to inside activists and their influence in issue-specific policy processes. The positions of inside activists present particularly good opportunities to draw on different kinds of resources (information, knowledge, financial, administrative, social, etc.) from different individuals and organizations within and outside government (Hysing & Olsson, 2011). This capacity to mobilize resources gives inside activists a capacity to make things happen. They may, for example, engage in complex networking to set up a project and get it started, or they may frame a problem in an unexpected way. This can also inspire other actors to get involved, which can further increase the influence and legitimacy of the inside activists. A specific type of informal network is the value network, which was quite important in the local land planning case (Olsson, 2009a). This network has a social and informal character that includes like-minded and value-committed people. In the land planning case, a value network of ornithologists worked quite efficiently thanks to a limited number of committed individuals spread over different public agencies and organizations (including inside activists). The network could therefore mobilize important individuals quickly and become a powerful force in the planning process by developing an advocacy coalition, which involved actors of political significance for the issue at stake (Olsson, 2009a).

Activism in secrecy follows from the relationship between inside activists and informal networks through which inside activists can, from backstage, initiate political activism with the help of trustworthy collaborators. In this way, the inside activists can mobilize their "troops" for political action (Needleman & Needleman, 1974, p. 327), letting others do the "dirty" work, such as opinion-making and open critique. This type of network coordination can be accomplished, for instance, by letting civic organizations deliver really hard critiques in a government circulation process and/or asking individual activists in social movements to write debate articles. Inside activists and their networks can arrange and coordinate a whole range of measures of political activism, which are difficult to trace back to individual inside activists. Thus, they cannot be blamed for acting in a way that contradicts bureaucratic norms. At the same time, the same inside activist can mobilize resources and support from within government and coordinate it with external activities.

*Dynamics of Inside Activism*

We should not expect public officials to act as inside activists all the time. In practice, public officials play different roles in different contexts and situations. They may, for instance, act most of the time in line with bureaucratic norms, but can switch to inside activist behaviour in critical situations when personal values are at stake.

The extent to which public officials can be committed to inside activism partly depends on their mandate and legitimacy in relation to commanding officials and top politicians. In the urban transport case (Hysing, 2009a), top politicians actively recruited a public official partly because of his green value commitment and previous involvement in environmental organizations. He was expected to be committed to green values more or less on every workday and could thus practise inside activism continuously. In contrast, in the land planning case (Olsson, 2009a), the process developed from below and top politicians had limited understanding of policy alternatives and the competition between two coalitions. In this planning process, inside activists were active in a few years. Notwithstanding this difference, both inside activists had discretion, used networks and influenced policy from below.

When it comes to radical inside activism which is challenging established norms, we can expect strong institutional obstacles. Public officials are under constant pressure to adapt to the norms and praxis of their organizations (i.e. the institutionalism claim, see Peters, 1999). There is an obvious risk of co-optation of inside activists. A public official starting as an inside activist may, in the years that follow, adapt to the elite interests of public agencies and later on even become a good representative of institutionalized norms and values. However, there are also other possible developments. First, even though inside activists come under pressure, they can remain faithful to their ideals by being quite good at disguising them in different ways and for different actors; that is, by being activists inside.[3] Following the reasoning of Needleman and Needleman (1974, p. 326), the inside activist can go underground within the public administration, covertly keeping his/her commitment while seeming to work and think in accordance with institutionalized norms and values (compare administrative guerrillas). Later on, the situation may change and become more favourable to inside activism.

A second development might be that an inside activist becomes more radical over the years or develops from a pragmatic public official to a more eager inside activist. Frustrated by slow policy progress, inside activists may over time search for alternative strategies for policy change. However, such an approach may be counterproductive; radicalization at the price of decreasing policy influence is a likely consequence, at least in the short run. A working strategy of radicalization would probably require a long-term perspective, including a series of minor policy initiatives to produce "good" examples, combined with opinion-making and discursive policy politics within government.

An important aspect of inside activism dynamics is how "good" outcomes are achieved. The empirical study of Hysing and Olsson (2011) shows that local governments with green inside activists score higher on three different measurements of environmental governing performance. This result can indicate that inside activism has contributed to better environmental performance, although the reverse causality assumption is also likely, namely that "green" officials with a strong commitment look for jobs and positions in high-performing local governments. This is supported by the fact that 60% of inside activists were prepared to "exit" if government policy were incompatible with their beliefs. Thus, causality may go in both directions, indicating that we may have a self-reinforcing greening process: green local governments attract green inside activists that contribute to

a further greening of the local government, etc. In other words, inside activism seems to make a difference, but it is probably quite a complex process. In order to elaborate on this, we need a better understanding of how green ideas are spreading between governments and organizations, also as an effect of increased job mobility among inside activists and other creative public officials (Considine & Lewis, 2007; Teodore, 2009).

## What Contexts Give Rise to Inside Activism?

A first notion to set out is of course that inside activism may be particularly relevant for local environmental governing in Sweden—a most likely case for inside activism. The Swedish model of public administration is sometimes characterized as a unique model with a tradition of strong state governing and a high degree of independence of both local governments and national agencies (Hysing, 2009b; Lindvall & Rothstein, 2006). It can be argued that this model gives public officials more leverage and autonomy and, thus, that it is more open for penetration by inside activists than is the case in countries with a more legalistic tradition of public administration, such as Germany (Painter & Peters, 2010). In addition, the extensive decision-making power of public agencies gives a strong incentive for activists in social movements to seek public employment, while lobbyist firms or private think-tanks are more likely channels of influence for social movements in countries with an Anglo-Saxon pluralist tradition (Rhodes, 2000; 2007). It is important, however, not to overstate the uniqueness of the Swedish model. Features of state traditions are partly blurred through dispersion of policy and ideas as well as through increased interaction and networking between countries. Thus, even though contexts always need to be carefully considered when applying theoretical reasoning beyond their original setting, we do not see national differences as a major hindrance for the phenomenon of inside activism.

We do believe, however, that some policy-area characteristics are favourable for inside activism. Environmental policy is a dynamic policy area that has evolved from pollution prevention to much more encompassing and complex strategies of sustainable development (Olsson, 2005, 2009b; Weale, 1992). Over the years, we have seen extensive policy development and experimentation that has required varied forms of knowledge and expertise, innovative policy solutions, and creative problem solving. It is also a policy area with a large number of organizations and strong civic engagement. Thus, one could convincingly argue that here, if anywhere, we should expect to find inside activism. Apart from environmental policy, several new policy areas such as climate change and information- and communication technology, and old policy areas such as regional development and town planning, are in a formative or dynamic stage. Once a policy area loses its dynamics one can argue that an individual's ability to have an impact on policy is more difficult; that is, when rules, regulations, organizations and responsibilities are more or less set and institutionalized, we can expect incremental policy change and decreased scope for inside activism (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993).

However, as indicated in the introduction, there are also more general social and political trends that we argue promote inside activism. First, the governance trend opens up for new ideas and strategies on how to govern and administrate the public sector. The usefulness and legitimacy of hierarchical governing is questioned in favour of other more flexible and interactive forms of organization, such as market solutions, networks, and deliberative practices (i.e. from government to governance) (Bache & Olsson 2001; Hysing, 2009b; Kjær, 2004; Olsson, 2003; Osborne, 2010; Pierre & Peters, 2000; Rhodes, 1997, 2007; Sehested, 2009). In these new discursive and organizational

contexts, public officials gain more room for manoeuvre and flexibility as they are less hindered by bureaucratic ideals and practices. Public officials are expected to act as new public managers, network managers, and metagovernors rather than as rule-abiding, hierarchically controlled bureaucrats (Kickert *et al.*, 1997; Sehested, 2009; Sørensen & Torfing, 2007).

Second, increasing civic engagement (della Porta & Diani, 1999; McAdam, 1996; McAdam & Marks, 1996; Stoker, 1998; Tarrow, 1998) means a growing demand on governments to interact with civic organizations and movements, which enhance opportunities and legitimacy for inside activists to use their own networks in civil society in their professional roles. In general, governments and public administrations are now more open and interactive in relation to citizens and their organizations. Activists in a number of social movements—such as environmental protection, global justice and feminism—put pressure on public agencies, but also have strong incentives to get positions "inside" as governments are still regarded as key institutions for societal change.

Third, expertise is of ever-growing importance in policymaking. As the tasks of government become more complex and dynamic, the demand for specialized expertise and know-how is growing. However, the role of the expert is changing from a focus on "technical expertise" to a focus on practical problem-solving capabilities that bring professional knowledge together with political values and knowledge from alternative sources (Fischer, 2009; Sehested, 2009). Furthermore, in many policy areas there are contested claims about scientific knowledge and expertise, implying that gaining the position as "the expert" not (only) requires superior knowledge about factual matters, but also a need for recognition by powerful decision-makers. In this sense, the inside activist has a relative advantage over external experts thanks to his/her close and continuous contact with important decision-makers within the public administration. It is a matter of access in both a cognitive and physical sense.

Fourth, bureaucratic power has been well documented for a long time. Insights from this research highlight the futility of separating politics and administration (Lundquist, 1992; Svara, 2006). Public administrations are political in their efforts to support and realize policy objectives by (re)formulating policy and prioritizing between different goals, values and target groups. Inside activism is a clear example of this type of policy politics (Brodkin, 1990) and stresses the importance of policymaking from below. In combination with reduced trust in hierarchical governing, this means that there is a decreasing demand for traditional bureaucratic behaviour and growing acceptance for creative public officials who may fulfil important political functions in the new governance context (Egeberg & Trondal, 2009; Svara, 2006).

These important trends have general relevance for public administration today. Future empirical research may very well find inside activists being committed to quite different issues and values; not only green inside activists but also gender activists, social justice activists, democracy activists, health management activists or foreign aid activists.

## Conclusions, Implications for Practice and Future Research Needs

This article has theorized on inside activism and how this concept can contribute to our understanding of policymaking and policy change. Although based on limited empirical fieldwork, we argue that inside activism is empirically relevant within Swedish local environmental governing and that we can expect to find this type of actor within other dynamic policy areas. We have reviewed relevant concepts on individual key actors in the literature and conclude that the inside activist is not satisfactorily covered by any of those.

We theorize on three interrelated themes and argue that inside activism has a dualistic nature; open, deliberative and consensus-seeking; and tacit, tactical and power-driven; that inside activists get policy influence through networks, thanks to asymmetrical power relations, efficient resource mobilization and the power of secrecy in informal networking. We further argue that inside activism is dynamic; it seems to vary over time and occurs in critical situations. Considering major trends in society and in public administration, we argue that inside activism can make an important contribution to our understanding of policymaking and policy change.

*Implications for Practice*

What are the implications, then, for practice? What are the important conclusions for public officials, planners, politicians and citizens? What are the consequences of inside activism for democratic legitimacy and control as well as efficient problem solving? Inside activism surely raises important normative issues of great practical relevance.

First of all, in terms of policymaking influence, inside activism is not unique. Different kinds of public officials are influential in many ways and in different situations in the policy process, which is well illustrated in our review of key actors in the literature.

Second, we want to stress that it may be difficult to draw general conclusions on practical relevance, because inside activism may have quite different implications in different situations. On the one hand, inside activism may seem problematic in relation to the parliamentary chain of governance, especially if inside activists are challenging policies with strong support from citizens. On the other hand, inside activism legitimized from above by popularly elected politicians seems to fit well with traditional governing. However, in practice, it is seldom black and white. For instance, in situations where political leaders and top officials have not yet decided on a strategy, an inside activist has a real chance to make a difference. In those situations, the government elite may even demand and welcome initiatives from below, especially if those are perceived as good solutions by major interests and actors in civil society. This was pretty much what happened in the land planning case. Even though all leading politicians in the governing majority were not that happy with the outcome, or at least parts of it, the result of this process is in retrospect described by most actors in the local community as a really good example of sustainable planning. Thus, one can say that this planning process gained democratic legitimacy retrospectively. However, we can easily imagine the opposite situation if things go wrong or if a decision is questioned later on by actors who were not properly heard during the process.

Democratic legitimacy and inside activism have a difficult relationship, especially when considering the increasing use of framework laws with a number of different goals, often vaguely formulated. It may thus be hard to judge when and how a public official is eventually leaving the "legal space" and walks on the dark side of planning practice (Flyvbjerg & Richardson, 2002). It is not obvious in all situations what actions and projects are appropriate in relation to existing laws, rules and policies. In understanding the magnitude and gravity of democratic problems following from inside activism, we need more empirical research as well as normative analysis and discussion.

According to the debate between Habermasian and Foucaultian planning theorists, two contending approaches are at hand (Alexander, 2001). The Habermasian, communicative approach has dominated for some time among planning scholars, but has been challenged chiefly by Bent Flyvbjerg and colleagues. The debate can be seen as one concerning different strategies to build a strong democracy. Bent Flyvbjerg and Tim Richardson argue

that a strong understanding of democracy must be "based on thought that places conflict and power at its centre, as Foucault does and Habermas does not. We suggest that an understanding of planning that is practical, committed and ready for conflict provides a superior paradigm to planning theory than an understanding that is discursive, detached and consensus-dependent" (Flyvbjerg & Richardson, 2002, p. 62). In this debate, we sympathize with the argument of Alexander (2001) that the practical implication of planners is to "integrate communicative and strategic rationality in ways that fit particular situations" (p. 311). This argument is in line with our empirical data on inside activism. Thus, in practice, the normative challenge is quite complex for individual public officials.

Another way of approaching this normative challenge is to take the public ethos of the individual inside activist as a point of departure (Horton, 2008; Rayner *et al.*, 2010). There are a number of values to balance: democratic legitimacy, efficiency in terms of productivity and goal-attainment, problem-solving capacity, and procedural values such as transparency. There is no simple answer to this complex challenge, such as a checklist on how to balance values in different situations. We must also remember that this balancing act is always suffering from limited information and knowledge. It is very much up to individual public officials to make reasonable priorities between different values and to deal with conflicting values within themselves.

*Future Research Needs*

Inside activism needs to be addressed much more in order to understand its importance and relevance in different contexts. Further comparative studies of policy areas and countries are particularly important. A suitable approach, which has worked quite well in our study on environmental policy, is to combine a survey study of public officials with qualitative case studies.

The discursive praxis of inside activists is of great interest and is worthy of further research. We need to better understand how inside activists are framing policy problems and solutions as well as arguing in different contexts. What types of arguments are they using, based on what types of values? What discursive strategies and arguments are influential in different contexts?

A deeper understanding of the dynamics of inside activism is important. How inside activism evolves over time is relevant both for increasing our knowledge of how inside activists keep their capacity for change over time and how they may be co-opted subsequently by norms and rules of their government. When and how are inside activists particularly active; in what stages and situations of the policy process?

Normative-constructive contributions are also important to this area of research. What is the normative basis and source of legitimacy of inside activism? How are individual inside activists legitimizing their activities and forming a public ethos from below? How can we as researchers, from an academic perspective, defend as well as criticize inside activism in relation to different schools of thought in democratic and planning theory?

Thus, there is a lot of work to be done. This article hopefully will provide the starting point for such research endeavour.

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## Notes

1. On the long-running theoretical debate on the relative importance of agency and structure, we take a middle-ground position. In our view, individuals are key vehicles of change, with their own personal resources such as classical leadership qualities. However, they are not atomistic entities but integrated within larger discursive as well as material structures, such as networks and organizations. To separate agency and structure is, in our view, unproductive for understanding policymaking. From a theoretical-methodological standpoint, however, we do argue for the utility of focusing on individual key actors as an entry point in studies of policymaking and policy change.
2. The research design of these empirical studies is based on a combination of qualitative case studies and a quantitative survey. Following the ideas presented in King *et al.* (1994), in-depth and contextual case studies were used to develop the theoretical category of the inside activist (i.e. an inductive approach). Based on these characteristics, a survey was designed to further elaborate on the category as well as to test its general relevance (i.e. a deductive approach). For more in-depth discussions on the research design as well as specific methodological issues, see references.
3. For this distinction we owe a great deal to Annika Agger (Roskilde University) and Jenny Lewis (University of Melbourne).

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