

Adding Socialisation to the Recipe: the Final Ingredient for the OMC/EES.¹

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***Abstract :** This paper argues in favour of a more thorough analysis of a specific set of dynamics taking place in the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), the latter being conceived as an informal organizational framework aimed at mutual learning (de Burca and Zeitlin, 2003) and policy change (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000; Radaelli, 2000). The aim of this paper is to uncover the missing link between these two elements, which has hitherto been black-boxed by the literature. Theoretical tools from socialisation theories in International Relations (IR) are borrowed in order to circumvent such a fallacy. The premises are the same as the ones hitherto employed by scholars of the OMC (e.g. Jacobsson, 2004; Bulmer and Padgett, 2004): can norms and values assume a binding character even outside hierarchic forms of governance and thus leading to policy change? If so, how does this phenomenon occur? Nevertheless, the approach is different, in that it builds on two closely interrelated factors: the concept of socialisation with its micro-processes (Johnston, 2001; Johnston, 2008) and the institutional characteristics of social environments (Rogowski, 1999; Checkel, 1999). Accordingly, this paper will address the question: is the OMC in European employment policy a social environment conducive of socialisation?*

Keywords : Open Method of Coordination, policy learning, policy transfer, socialisation

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper's objective is twofold. First of all, it aims at clarifying the terminology hitherto utilised in this field of studies: policy mimicking, policy learning and transfer, socialisation, persuasion etc. As a result, it emphasises the conceptual difference between policy learning and policy transfer thus uncovering the link between these two *phenomena*. Secondly and accordingly, it tackles an issue familiar to the literature on the European modes of governance (e.g. Bulmer and Padgett, 2004; Jacobsson, 2004): are policy learning and policy transfer feasible even outside hierarchic forms of governance? And, more importantly, how do they occur? Indeed, this paper addresses the question: can socialisation dynamics be traced within the OMC in the European Employment Strategy (OMC/EES)? In the light of the theory employed in this paper such a question may be reformulated as follows: are the Employment committees (EMCO) a social environment conducive of socialisation? As specified below, the aim is not to prove whether and to what extent policy transfer occurs in the EES, but to verify whether the premises for socialisation are present in the institutional structure of the OMC/EES.

The theoretical relevance of this topic is multifaceted. On the one hand, the OMC is conceived as a real novelty in European modes of governance, being significantly different from the European precedent uses of soft law (i.e. the BEPG), from deliberative practices carried out by other international organisations, such as the OECD (Jacobsson and Vifell, 2003; Borrás and Jacobsson, 2004) and from benchmarking procedures employed in the private sector (Jacobsson, 2004). Accordingly, many practitioners emphasized its relevance by referring to the OMC as the 'third way between intergovernmentalism and supranationalism' (Ekengren and Jacobsson, 2000). On the other, the vast literature on the OMC and the modes of European governance has often fallen short in deepening the concept of 'mutual learning' and its implications. Whilst many detailed analysis have been carried out in other specific aspects of the OMC (e.g. the benchmarking)³, the majority of studies has failed in "[taking] account of the type of learning involved, where mimicking is merely one type of learning and probably not the most important one" (Jacobsson and Vifell, 2003 p.5). Furthermore, whilst several studies focus on the concept of policy learning in the OMC, none of them concentrates on how policy paradigms propel.

This paper is structured as follows. First of all, the research question is clarified and formulated in a empirically verifiable manner. Then, the ensuing part provides a concise historical overview of the EES, which is followed by an outlook of the functioning of the OMC/EES. Special attention is devoted to the institutions and the procedures associated by the literature (e.g. Ballester and Papadopoulos, 2009; Ballester and Papadopoulos, 2008)⁴ with policy learning and policy transfer, such as the Peer Review Meetings (PRMs), the national recommendations (NRs) and the meetings of the Employment committees. The following part is dedicated to the theoretical state of art: the main theories on the OMC as a new mode of

³ For a detailed analysis of the process of benchmarking in the OMC see Arrowsmith *et al* (2004).

⁴ I am particularly grateful to Prof. Ballester and Prof. Papadopoulos, who gently allowed me to quote their work.

governance and on the concept of policy learning and policy transfer are revised. The rationale being that the theory utilised in this paper, illustrated in the ensuing section, seeks to integrate the literature hitherto developed with a more systematic approach to the processes of policy learning and policy change: socialisation with its micro-processes is 'brought in'. This approach builds on two pillars. The first one is the analysis of the institutional features of a committee, an IO etc. (in this case the Employment committees as a whole) in order to test whether they may be conducive of socialisation dynamics (e.g. Johnston, 2001; Johnston, 2008; Checkel, 1999) and of which micro-process. Accordingly, the EMCO is analysed as a social environment and various criteria are employed to verify its 'conductivity'. A brief part devoted to policy change follows: this section shows case studies testifying that policy change in some MSs has occurred during the life of the OMC/EES. Nevertheless, as specified below, the aspiration to demonstrate causal relations in this field of studies has proved to be vain in the majority of cases⁵. Yet this paper aims at assessing whether socialisation is at work and which micro-process occurs within the OMC/EES: it leaves the 'burden of proof' of policy transfer to other works. Indeed, the last part entails the second pillar of the approach utilised: the empirical evidence of the socialisation dynamics. Through desk research official documents and statements by involved actors should be analysed with a qualitative discourse analysis method in order to find linguistic cues for the effects of socialisation micro-processes (Johnston, 2008). Nonetheless, for reasons specified below, this paper is in line with the tendency of the literature in this field and it tends to be imbalanced towards the first pillar of such an approach thus devoting more attention to the *in vitro* analysis rather than to the *in vivo* one (Zeitlin, 2005).

2. THE OMC/EES

2a. The Historical Background

Since an historical overview is provided by Figure 1, this section focuses only on the milestones of the evolution of the OMC. In the mid-1990s the debate on the economic externalities of the Single Market project⁶ and the necessity to review the European models of social regulation in the light of a more globalised world economy came predominantly to the fore (Borrás and Jacobsson, 2004). The then diffused perception was that this challenge had to be addressed in more flexible manners than the already existing policy tools could offer. In fact, the OMC found its rationale in the EMU convergence criteria (Caviedes, 2004; Noaksson, 2006): the BEPGs entailed a monitoring activity of the Council on the consistency of national policies based on the use of *de facto* soft law instruments. The employment strategy developed

⁵ The vast majority of the authors, who have tried to embark in this undertaking, in the end had to admit this. See, for instance: Jacobsson, 2005; Ferrera and Sacchi, 2005; Visser, 2005; Erhel, Mandin and Palier, 2005; Büchs and Friedrich, 2005; O' Donnell and Moss 2005. In order to have an idea of the difficulties a researcher encounters in assessing the causal relation between EES dynamics and policy transfer in a MS see also: The Danish National Institute of Social Research, 2002; Zijl *et al*, 2002; Sjørup *et al*, 2004.

⁶ In this regard see, for instance, the 1993 White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment issued by the Delors Commission.

under the shadow of the EMU (Pochet, 2005) until the introduction of the chapter on employment in the Amsterdam Treaty and the 1997 European Council of Luxembourg on Employment, which formally established the ‘Luxembourg process’ (the European Employment Strategy). Political factors should not be underestimated in this regard: the inclusion of a title on employment was a ‘red line’ of the Jospin government for the introduction of the Stability and Growth Pact in the new treaty (Pochet, 2005). Almost at the very beginning this rather innovative process faced an obstacle typical of the EU: “an agreement in principle that fails to blossom into obligation” (Caviedes, 2004 p.295). Indeed, the task of the Luxembourg process was even more demanding than the one carried out by the economic policy convergence where a successful and legitimate model (i.e. the German one) had been identified since the first phases (De la Porte, 2008). The need to create a more flexible institutional architecture than the BEPGs, especially with respect to the setting of the targets, was evident. Such a necessity of reforms was addressed by the Lisbon European Council in 2000 which posed social cohesion and employment within the so called Lisbon strategy, which should lead the EU to become “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of economic growth with more and better jobs, and greater social cohesion” (European Council, 2000 para.5). The OMC officially emerged there, when it was included in a more comprehensive strategy of soft governance. After the 1999-2002 establishment of the single currency two shortcomings started to become evident to the eyes of policy-makers: the inefficiency of the BEPGs to trigger policy coordination and the incapacity to find effective *fora* to address the macroeconomic dialogue⁷. Furthermore, the right-wing wind blowing in the end of the 1990s put the employment issue into the agenda again. Accordingly, the first years of the 2000s witnessed the proliferation of national evaluations analysing the impact of the EES on national policies. In accordance with the 2002 Informal Social Affairs Council, the attention moved towards the simplification of the processes, a closer coordination among the strategies in the social realm, the clarification of the guidelines and the strengthening of implementation (Sjørup *et al*, 2004; O’Connell *et al*, 2002; Pochet, 2005). Indeed, the simplification of the objectives of the EES was evident in the report published by European Employment Taskforce chaired by Wim Kok in 2004 (Kok *et al*, 2004). The final step, namely the completion of the mainstreaming of the EES into the macro-economic governance, was taken in 2005 with the re-launch of the Lisbon Strategy.

⁷ The ineffectiveness of the macroeconomic dialogue sponsored by the 1999 Cologne Summit is emphasised by many authors (e.g. Pochet, 2005)

Figure 1: History of OMC/EES

Year	Major milestones and initiatives
1997	Agreement at the Amsterdam European Council (June 1997) to establish a new Title on Employment in the then forthcoming (Amsterdam) Treaty.
1997	Luxembourg 'Jobs Summit' (November 1997) launches the implementation of the Open Method of Coordination-Employment (embedded in Article 128 TEC). The first Employment Guidelines of the European Employment Strategy (EES) are adopted.
1998	Amsterdam Treaty incorporates the framework for shared employment priorities in the new Treaty.
2000	January - Council Decision establishes the Employment Committee (EMCO). EMCO's main task include the formulation of Opinions on issues of Employment, Social Policy, Health or Consumer affairs that might be requested by the Commission, the Council or on the basis of own initiative. EMCO is obligated to consult with social partners as well as work in close collaboration with other relevant committees (e.g. Economic Policy Committee, Social Protection Committee, Education Committee). EMCO also participates in the so-called Cologne Process (Macroeconomic Dialogue) March - Lisbon European Council discusses progress in the delivery of the EES. A new strategy to 'modernise' European Union is formulated, since then known as the "Lisbon Strategy". December - Nice European Council highlights quality in work as an EES objective.
2001	March - Stockholm European Council agreement on intermediate targets (overall employment rate: 67%; female employment rate: 57%; older persons 55-64 employment rate: 50% by 2010').
2002	March - Barcelona European Council highlights active ageing and lifelong learning - "Active policies towards full employment: more and better jobs"
2003	5-year evaluation of EES - Concerns are expressed with moderate results of EES so far and emphasis is paid to give priority to improve governance. European Employment Taskforce is created. Led by Wim Kok it eventually produces the report "Jobs, Jobs, Jobs – Creating more employment in Europe".
2004	Findings of Kok report 'inspire' the 2004 Employment recommendations aim to cover all member states (i.e. including new ones). These Employment recommendations form the basis for the new 2005 Employment Guidelines". The Commission decides to integrated the activities of peer review and exchange of good practices into a new 'Mutual Learning Programme' that came to effect in 2005.
2005	Re-launch of the Lisbon Strategy - European Employment Strategy process is integrated in a much larger programme of macro-economic co-ordination and governance reform that involves the adoption of Integrated Guidelines for Growth and Jobs and the formulation, monitoring and implementation of national reform programmes on a three year cycle.

Source: Ballester and Papadopoulos, 2009

2b. The Functioning of the OMC/EES

After this short historical overview this part moves the attention to the result of the institutional and procedural evolution of the OMC/EES. Indeed, when the EES moved out of the shadow of the BEPGs the focus was on its operationalization and therefore, it has witnessed incremental changes almost yearly. The OMC is conceived as a policy tool balancing national differences among MSs and the unity of a common EU action (Borrás and Jacobsson, 2004) by institutionalising an informal organizational framework aimed at mutual learning (de Burca and Zeitlin, 2003) and policy change (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000; Radaelli, 2000). Several tools and mechanisms were employed to achieve policy learning and the transfer of best practices (de la Porte, 2008): joint reports, quantitative indicators, peer review meetings etc. Furthermore, benchmarking, subsidiarity and participation were identified as key principles characterising the OMC/EES in any phase. A brief outlook of the characteristic of the OMC (in general) may be appreciated in Figure 2.

Figure 2 : The Characteristics of the OMC

The open method of co-ordination

Intergovernmental approach: the Council and the Commission have a dominant role

Political monitoring at the highest level

Clear procedures and iterative process

Systematic linking across policy areas

Interlinking EU and national public action

Seeks the participation of social actors

Aims at enhancing learning processes

Source: Borrás and Jacobsson (2004)

For the sake of exposition, as many scholars suggest (e.g. Pochet, 2005; Ballester and Papadopoulos, 2009), it is helpful to analyse the substantive side and the operational side separately. For what concerns the first aspect, the mid-2000s reform identifies three overarching objectives (Kok *et al*, 2004): full employment, quality and productivity at work and social cohesion in the labour market. Such principles are operationalised in ten guidelines⁸, each of which in turn comprises five or six indicators (Watt, 2004).

⁸ These are: active and preventive measures for unemployment; job creation and entrepreneurship; promotion of adaptability and mobility in the labour market; promotion of human capital and lifelong learning; increasing labour supply; gender equality; integration of disadvantaged workers; enhancing work attractiveness; increasing regular employment; combating regional employment disparities (De la Porte, 2005).

This paper deserves more attention to the operational characters of the OMC/EES in that of more interest for the approach employed below. The mid-2000s reform entailed a key novelty: the juxtaposition of the ‘political time’ of the EES and the BEPGs (Zeitlin, 2005). Furthermore, as emphasised by Pochet (2005) and Ballester and Papadopoulos (2008), a clear distinction between the implementation phase (January-March) and the guidelines phase (April-July) emerged. During the first one the Commission assesses the implementation of the previous year’s guidelines issuing the draft Joint Employment Report and it presents its summary report to the spring European Council. The latter drafts provisional guidelines, which are scrutinised by the Commission, the EP and the relevant configuration of the Council, which in turn adopts the employment guidelines and the employment recommendations. On this basis the MSs prepare the National Action Plans (NAPs).

It is worth focusing on the institutional and procedural characteristics which are associated by the literature with the concepts of policy learning and policy transfer: the Employment committees (e.g. Radulova, 2007), the Peer Review Meetings (PRMs) (e.g. Ballester and Papadopoulos, 2008) and the national recommendations (NRs) (e.g. Kröger, 2009). The creation of the EMCO was foreseen by the Amsterdam Treaty and it was put into practice by the 2000 Council Decision. The latter provides the EMCO with an advisory status: its primary task is to promote coordination among the MSs on employment and labour market policies. It contributes to the Luxembourg process and since the mid-2000s also to the Cologne process (the macro-economic coordination). Practically the EMCO cooperates with the Council in the draft of the employment guidelines and in the review of the NAPs. Since the EMCO is thoroughly analysed in the ensuing parts, it will be worth coping with the PRMs. Ballester and Papadopoulos (2008; 2009) identify as a key character of the OMC/EES the mutual learning dynamics occurring via the reviews of the ‘best practices’ within the PRMs. Two phases may be identified: the Peer Review Programme (1999-2004), the Mutual Learning Programme (started in 2005). Sabato (2011) emphasises the main characteristics of the two phases. In the first one the PRMs were seminars (with no obligation of attendance) organised by a MS which presented to the others its ‘good practices’ contained in its NAP. The evaluation of the ‘best practices’ were carried out by reports produced by independent experts. Starting from 2004 the PRMs were incorporated into the Mutual Learning Programme, which consists of three sections. Firstly, twice a year the thematic review seminar sets the agenda by identifying key issues (usually decided by the EMCO). Secondly, six times a year the PRM takes place without any substantial difference from the previous phase. Thirdly, other dissemination activities occur in order to bolster the learning process. Figure 3 shows the PRMs taken place between 2000 and 2006.

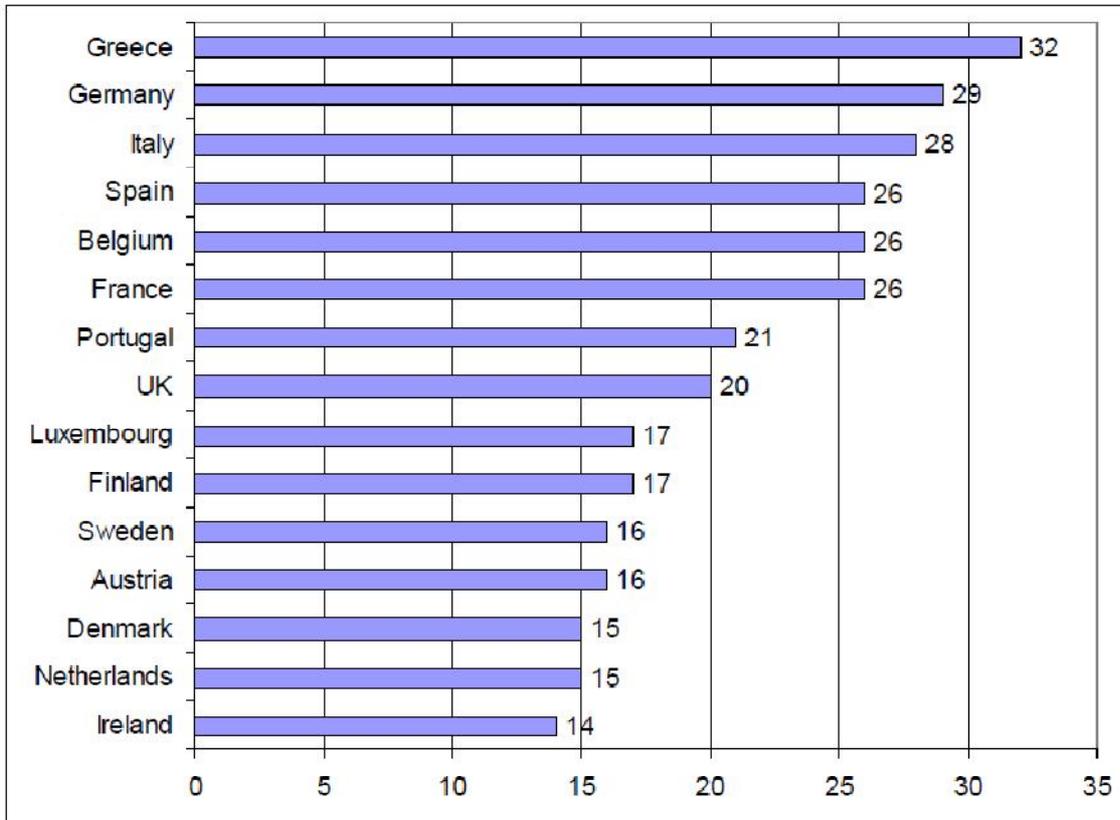
Figure 3 : PRMs 2000-2006

	<i>PRMs hosted</i>	<i>PRMs attended</i>	<i>Peer Review Attendance index</i> ¹⁶
Austria	4	23	0,61
Finland	5	22	0,59
Netherlands	3	20	0,51
UK	3	20	0,51
France	3	16	0,41
Luxembourg	0	16	0,41
Belgium	5	15	0,38
Portugal	3	15	0,38
Greece	0	14	(0,36)
Germany	3	14	(0,33)
Spain	2	13	(0,33)
Sweden	3	11	(0,28)
Denmark	3	9	(0,23)
Italy	1	7	(0,17)
Ireland	2	6	(0,15)
<i>Mean</i>	<i>2,67</i>	<i>14,73</i>	<i>0,38</i>
<i>S.D.</i>	<i>1,50</i>	<i>5,12</i>	<i>0,14</i>

Source: Ballester and Papadopoulos, 2009

Furthermore, the importance of the national recommendations (NRs) issued by the Council should not be underestimated, in that many scholars (e.g. Ballester and Papadopoulos, 2008; Casey and Gold, 2005) associate them with peer pressure dynamics. The adoption of NRs on the part of the Council started in 2000 and it was reformed in 2006: they identify the policy areas in which a MS has not complied with the guidelines. Figure 4 illustrates the number of NRs issued by recipient countries.

Figure 4 : NRs 2000-2006



Source: Ballester and Papadopoulos, 2009

3. THE THEORETICAL STATE OF ART: BRINGING SOCIALISATION IN

3a. The OMC as a New Mode of Governance

The necessity to build on the literature on the new modes of European governance derives from the fact that the learning approach must be integrated with the analysis of institutional dynamics (Jacobsson, 2005). Indeed, the analysis of learning dynamics alone does not isolate the role of the EES for several reasons, among which two factors are crucial. Firstly, the fact that the OMC/EES has not the ‘learning monopoly’ on national actors in this field, as suggested by De la Porte (2008), who underlines the role of the OECD. Secondly, the difficulties faced by scholars in analysing the causal relation between the promotion of the guidelines within the OMC/EES and the shift in the paradigms of national policies (Zeitlin, 2005)⁹ reveal the need to overcome this ‘isolationist’ approach¹⁰.

⁹ See also note 5.

¹⁰ Indeed, not only is the role of the OMC/EES difficultly isolatable, but sources of endogeneity are also present: the MSs themselves take an active role in the EES (Sjørup *et al*, 2004). The problem being that a MS is both policy-giver and policy-taker and with different degrees. See note 14.

Given the infinite literature on the modes of European governance, this section limits the analysis to those theories which emphasise two aspects: the institutional characteristics of committees and deliberative dynamics. Accordingly, the literature on European governance will be limited by the focus on policy, rather than polity or politics (Treib, Bahr and Falkner, 2007) and within this area, this paper will concentrate on the concept of deliberative democracy. The latter may be conceived as a mode of governance whereby norms and values are interiorised and thus policy change is fostered through reasoning, arguing and persuasion dynamics (De la Porte and Nanz, 2004; Radulova, 2007; Eberlein and Kerwer, 2004). De la Porte and Nanz (2004) identify three models of deliberative democracy: Habermas's procedural theory, Joerges's deliberative supranationalism and Sabel and Cohen's directly deliberative polyarchy (or democratic experimentalism). In the first one the focus is on arguing and how it triggers policy change, which is perceived as preference transformation from micro to macro level rather than mere aggregation. Such an approach builds on Habermas's theory of communicative action, which stresses the importance of persuasion, namely the interiorization of norms and values through the logic of appropriateness (March and Olsen, 2009). This approach is put aside in that too much focused on persuasion, which represents only one of the various processes which may lead policy change (Johnston, 2001). Sabel and Cohen's directly deliberative polyarchy emphasises the effectiveness of problem-solving deliberation through a bottom-up logic of participation (Eberlein and Kerwer, 2004), though the participatory character of the decision-making process eclipses the learning procedures. Indeed, learning processes are perceived only as the creation of a new common knowledge thus neglecting the mechanisms whereby such common knowledge is formed. Furthermore, the democratic experimentalism theory, despite stressing the importance of the institutional framework (Eberlein and Kerwer, 2004), is more concerned on the two-level policy network between the local deliberative units and the central authority rather than the analysis the internal characteristics of the social environments. Joerges's deliberative supranationalism focuses primarily on comitology, even though it may be applied also to other European committees (De la Porte and Nanz, 2004; Jacobsson and Vifell, 2003). Such an approach is the most suitable for the objectives of this paper given that it concentrates on arguing as a mode of communication through the lenses of institutional requirements and not through public discourse (Neyer, 2003): only certain institutional conditions trigger learning processes.

3b. Policy Learning and Policy Change.

The deliberative supranationalism approach is to be integrated by a more thorough analysis of the micro-processes of socialisation in order to better comprehend the dynamics taking place in the OMC which have hitherto been either labelled under the generic term 'learning' as a whole or characterised by conceptual confusion. Since the literature on policy learning is a conceptual minefield, as brilliantly suggested by Nedergaard (2005), this section aims at clarifying the terminology employed. A caveat is needed: this paper does not focus only on policy learning, but it tries to establish a connection between it and policy change

considering them as two interconnected but separate *phenomena*. Indeed, many authors have deeply analysed the concept of learning (e.g. Hemerijck and Visser, 2003; Zeitlin, 2005), but the majority have fallen short in going beyond and analyse the *nexus* between policy learning and policy change.

First of all, it will be worth starting from the operational definition of learning provided by Ferrera *et al.* (2002) and Ferrera and Sacchi (2005) for two reasons: it is very broad in scope thus comprising all the factors involved and it does not unduly expand to the realm of policy change. In this conception cross-national learning occurs through three effects. First of all, the heuristic effect entails the identification of the challenges the environment poses and the range of policy paradigms employable to address them. Secondly, actors embark in the process of capacity-building by creating a common language, common indicators and finally, a common knowledge bolstered by recognised paradigms. Thirdly, the maieutic effect leads the actor to put into question its established approach. It is of crucial importance that the fact that the actor questions itself about its beliefs does not necessarily involve policy change. This section argues that the definition of learning must be limited to this without going further. Indeed, a part of the literature poses under the generic label of ‘learning’ something more, though this paper argues that learning is only the first step towards policy change and a link has to be identified between these two. Such a ‘missing link’ should comprise the mechanisms whereby an actor changes its attitudes, behaviours and (only sometimes) beliefs. Indeed, identifying new policy options, constructing the capacities to understand and employ them and putting under inquiry the *status quo* do not say anything about how and why attitudes change.

A part of the literature tries to address this question with a myriad of different concepts partially overlapping in meaning. Furthermore, in the majority of cases scholars have fallen short in defining clear boundaries between these and policy learning. This section aims at clarifying the terminology utilised by looking at the meaning of the various concepts¹¹. First of all, the rational selection of past experiences through an inward looking approach may be found in many works: Hemerijck and Visser (2003) term it ‘social learning’ and Visser (2005) labels this ‘failure-induced learning’ etc. Secondly, the rational identification of successful exemplars and the borrowing of their behaviours is another mechanism identified by the literature: in Hemerijck and Visser (2003) is ‘policy mimicking’, in Visser (2005) is ‘selective downloading/mimicking’, in Hedström (1998) is ‘mimicking’ etc. It is noteworthy that several authors (e.g. Hall, 1990; Büchs and Friedrich, 2005) associate the term ‘learning’ with either one meaning or the other. The main characteristics of social learning and policy mimicking (in the terminology of Hemerijck and Visser, 2003) may be appreciated in Figure 5.

¹¹ The objective is twofold: the clarification of the terminology is indispensable for the theory utilised and conceptual parsimony is considered a value *per se*, to which social sciences should aspire.

Figure 5: Social Learning v. Policy Mimicking

Social learning	Policy mimicking
domestic	cross-national
inward-looking	outward-looking
trial and error	benchmarking

Source: Hemerijck and Visser (2003)

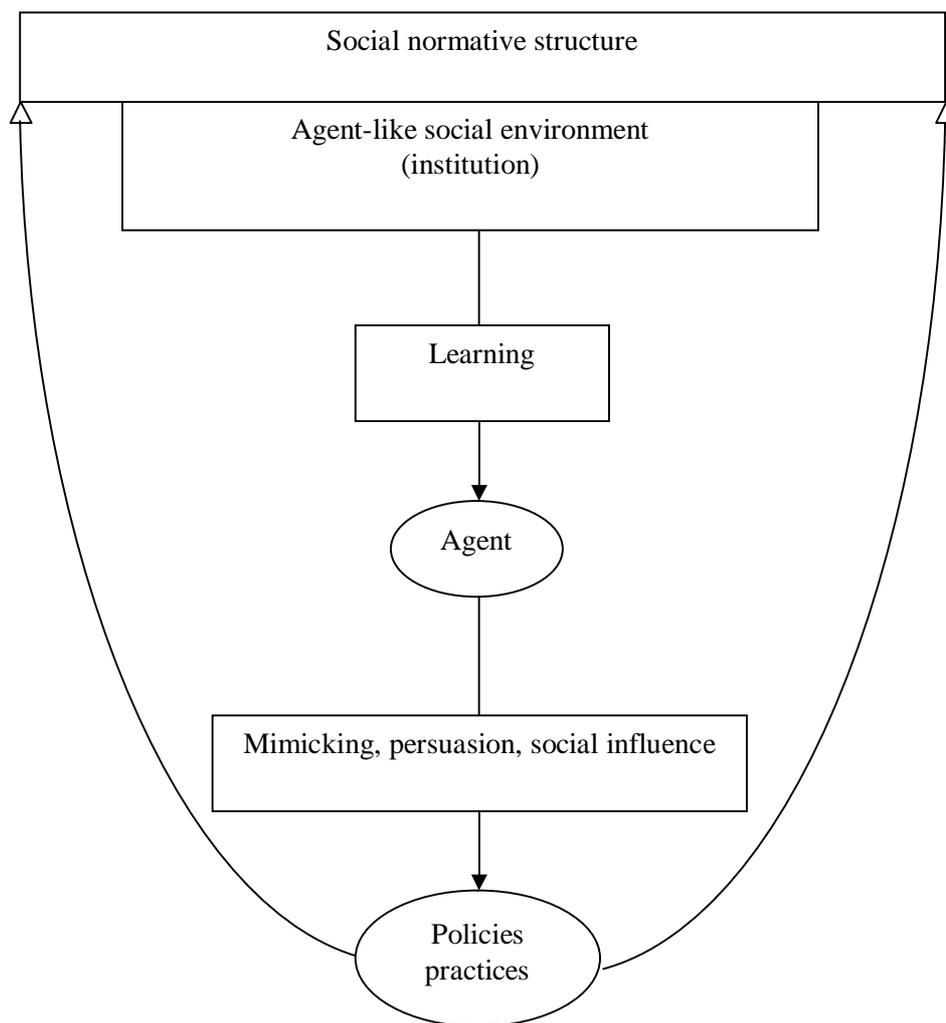
3c. Bringing Socialisation in: the Missing Link.

This paper calls into question two aspects of this approach. First of all, it is questionable that policy mimicking and social learning (as in the terminology of Hemerijck and Visser, 2003) represent the only avenues to policy change: there are other reasons why policy change is fostered other than an analysis of past experiences or the emulation of ‘the good guy’. Indeed, this approach is too agent-centered and too rational in its premises, being based on a markedly problem-solving perspective. A caveat is needed: attempts to go further this strictly rational approach are rare but present. For instance, Visser (2005), without utilising concepts such as ‘persuasion’, foresees the possibility of mimicking practices for trendy or prestige reasons. Furthermore, he acknowledges the role of peer pressure in creating a structure of incentives triggering policy change. The same is true also for Ballester and Papadopoulos (2008) and Sabato (2011) who identify peer pressure dynamics within the mechanisms of the PRMs; also Noaksson (2006) identifies ‘naming and shaming’ practices in the broader scope of the OMC/EES. Nevertheless, this paper argues in favour of a more systematic approach to uncover the missing link between policy learning and policy change. As a consequence, this paper integrates such an approach utilised to analyse policy change in the OMC with the concept of socialisation employed in IR theories.

The concept of socialisation in IR theories has been utilised since the very beginning though being under-theorised in the majority of cases (Johnston, 2001). Only with the constructivist turn both at the structure level (e.g. Kratochwil and Ruggie, 1986) and at the agent level (e.g. Wendt, 1992) such a concept commenced to be properly considered. Socialisation is not only conceived as a motivation for pro-norm behaviour, but also as something affecting the agent’s identity and interests: “a process of internalizing new identities and interests, not something occurring outside them [actors] and affecting only behaviour [...]; socialization is a cognitive process, not just a behavioural one” (Wendt, 1992 p. 399). Nevertheless, constructivist approaches to socialisation are characterised by a relevant fallacy. Indeed, they tend to focus exclusively on persuasion as the only form of socialisation (Johnston, 2001). Accordingly, socialisation is limited to a specific meaning attached to persuasion close in spirit to Habermas’s theory of communicative action: deliberation as the strategic attempt to convince other actors in an *inter pares* situation through reasoning and arguing (Hasenclever *et al*, 1997). Given the non-exhaustive approach to socialisation provided by earlier constructivist theories, this paper builds on socialisation as theorised by socialisation

theories in IR (Checkel, 1999; Johnston, 2001; 2008). Socialisation is seen as “a process by which social interaction leads [actors] to endorse expected ways of thinking, feeling, and acting” (Johnston, 2001) and it comprises three micro-processes: mimicking¹², social influence and persuasion. This novel approach neatly differentiates learning from policy change. In fact, learning is only the first step in order to trigger socialisation processes and then, policy change, as illustrated in Figure 1. Learning in its most comprehensive conception (as the one provided by Ferrera *et al.*, 2002 and Ferrera and Sacchi, 2005) is perfectly suitable for this approach.

Figure 6 : Learning and Socialisation



Source: Johnston (2008)

¹² What in the approach to policy learning is labelled as mimicking, namely borrowing or copying the others’ behaviours as a rational way to face the challenges from the external environment, in the IR theories revised is termed ‘emulation’. Likewise, mimicking in IR theories involves something more than a mere rational approach. As a consequence, the ‘mimicking’ mentioned here and the one utilised above in the meaning attached by Hemerijck and Visser (2003) refer to different mechanisms.

The theories on the OMC and the new modes of European governance, as stated above, implicitly entail something more than mere emulative processes, also with continuous references to terms such as ‘socialisation’ or ‘persuasion’, without going further though (e.g. Tömmel, 2009; De la Porte, 2008; Bulmer and Padgett, 2004). Accordingly, it will be worth analysing the concept of socialisation and its micro-processes. First of all, mimicking represents the borrowing of behaviours and attitudes due to the spirit of survival in a novel environment or in response to a novel *stimulus*. The action *per se* is the same as the one typical of emulation¹³, though the logic behind it differs. In fact, emulation is driven by a rational choice, whereas mimicking is triggered by the necessity of survival in uncertainty (Johnston, 2008): “I shall do X because everyone seems to do it and thus survives. So until I know better, X is what I shall do”(Betz, Skowronski and Ostrom,1996). Secondly, social influence conceives pro-norm behaviour as inherently interconnected with the social status of the agent in the social environment: social status markers, such as backpatting and *opprobrium*, are crucial in determining agent’s attitudes: “I believe the answer is X, but others said Y, and I do not want to rock the boat, so I shall say Y” (Betz, Skowronski and Ostrom,1996). Thirdly, whereas social influence and mimicking are characterized by a rational element, namely the maximization of a utility, persuasion is totally based on the ‘logic of appropriateness’ (Johnston, 2001; Checkel, 1999): “I do X because it is good and normal for me”(Betz, Skowronski and Ostrom,1996). Indeed persuasion represents public conformity due to private acceptance (Johnston, 2008).

4. METHODOLOGICAL REMARKS

Two caveats are needed: one refers to the methodology utilised and the other to the case selection. First of all, an approach which deserves more attention to the theoretical part rather than to the empirical one is preferable for several reasons: the short life of the OMC; the aforementioned difficulties in assessing policy change in such an indirect and non-binding process; the unreliability of Commission’s evaluations being more rhetorical and political documents than a proper empirical analysis (Eberlein and Kerwer, 2004; EIPA, 2000; Zeitlin, 2005). As a consequence, more attention will be devoted to the analysis of the institutional and procedural characteristics of the social environment in order to test its conductivity of socialisation dynamics. Once demonstrated whether the social environment is conducive of socialisation (and which micro-process), the next logical step should be twofold. First of all, a desk research analysis of documents and speeches of the actors concerned should follow in order to test whether policy change actually occurs (the ‘if question’). Furthermore, in the same sources linguistic cues associable with one micro-process or another should be identified in order to demonstrate its effects on the actors (the ‘how question’). Indeed, as stated above, policy change may take place due to different dynamics: mimicking, social influence of persuasion. Nevertheless, these two parts are not thoroughly investigated because both of them elicit methodological problems. For what concerns the ‘if question’, the aforementioned difficulties in demonstrating causal relations between the *phenomena* occurring within the OMC/EES and national policy

¹³ Emulation here refers to the meaning attached by IR theories, which is close in spirit to mimicking in Hemerijck and Visser (2003). See also note 12.

change represent a serious obstacle to the research. Furthermore, a constructivist approach should not be focused on causal relations: the concept of 'cause' is substituted by 'construction'. Indeed, a mutual constructive relation (not an unilateral causal one) is established between the agents and the structure.¹⁴ Moreover, many scholars (e.g. Noaksson, 2006; Jacobsson, 2005; Erhel, Mandin and Palier, 2005) emphasise that the limited policy transfer hitherto demonstrated does not automatically mean that no cognitive dynamics, such as learning and socialisation, are at work. For what regards the 'how question', this paper prefers a more theoretical approach creating thus a solid theory with the aim of paving the way for future research studies.

Secondly, the focus will be on the committees acting in the European employment policy, namely the EMCO and its sub-groups: the Ad hoc group and the Indicators group¹⁵. Indeed, the OMCs differ sensitively across issue areas (Caviedes, 2004; Borrás and Jacobsson, 2004; Peters, 2008; Noaksson, 2006) and thus a macro approach is not viable. Accordingly, OMC processes may be perceived not as a single 'recipe' but as 'cookbook' in which different dynamics exist (Vandenbroucke, 2003). Furthermore, a micro approach is preferable for another reason, namely the fact that "a constructivist ontology allows (even demands) that the unit of socialization is the individual or small group" (Johnston, 2001 p.34): this permits to focus on group preferences as preference transformation, typical of deliberative practices, rather than as preference aggregation (Johnston, 2001; Eberlein and Kerwer, 2004). The focus on European employment policy may be explained also by the fact that similar but not equal practices to the OMC had been already in place in the European Employment Strategy (de la Porte and Nanz, 2004) before the Lisbon Strategy. In fact, the employment policy is perceived by many authors as the most developed example of OMC (e.g. Jacobsson and Vifell, 2003; Noaksson, 2006).

Since two of the most comprehensive attempts to address the issue of learning and policy change in this field (i.e. Ballester and Papadopoulos, 2009; Sabato, 2011) focus on the dynamics within the PRMs and attach a strong role to the NRs, it will be worthy explaining why this paper does not pose itself in this line. Indeed, whilst focusing on these two aspects bears several advantages, such as clearly identifiable variables with quantitative indicators, this paper argues in favour of a broader scope for several reasons. First of all, learning dynamics cannot be reduced to PRMs nor 'naming and shaming' processes to NRs. Secondly, the empirical findings of Ballester and Papadopoulos (2009) clearly show that no correspondence between the intensity of peer pressure (measured through the number of NRs) and the eagerness to learn (measured through the attendance to PRMs) exist. Thirdly, these theories neglect why an actor should care about peer pressure: the latter rarely works alone without being inserted in broader cognitive dynamics. Furthermore, the role of the EMCO in defining the agenda of the PRMs is predominant and a theory in this field cannot

¹⁴ That is why some authors tend to confuse constructive relations with causal ones biased by endogeneity: the relation between the OMC/EES and MSs is revealing (see note 10).

¹⁵ Information about such committees is available at <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=115&langId=en>.

undertheorise its role. Last but not least, this paper starts from the assumption that cognitive dynamics occur in the daily interaction between actors and not in intermittent events.

5. THE EMPLOYMENT COMMITTEES AND SOCIALISATION

This section starts from the premise that institutions matter in that they shape actor preferences and they structure the policy learning processes (Bulmer and Padgett, 2004). It analyses the committees acting within the European employment policy as a social environment with their own internal logics, norms, values etc. (Kohler-Koch, 2002 in Jacobsson and Vifell, 2003). The importance to focus on social environments when analysing the process of socialisation relies on several factors: the effects of social status markers are more pronounced in a restricted context (that is why social influence may be isolated only within delimited environments) and the same is true also for the role of norm-entrepreneurs, for instance. The assumption is that certain institutional arrangements (of an international organisation or a committee), create a favourable environment for the conduction of one micro-process of socialisation or another. From various contributions of socialisation theories in IR (e.g. Checkel, 1999; Johnston, 2001;2008), a theory uniting the micro-processes of socialisation and the institutional constraints of a social environment may be drawn. This sections applies such approaches to the OMC practices taking place within the European employment committees building also on the deliberative supranationalism approach to the European governance. The aim is to address the question: are the employment committees a social environment conducive of socialisation? If so, what type? Accordingly, this section analyses the social environment represented by the Employment committees utilising the criteria identified by Johnston (2001;2008), which are integrated by other contributions.

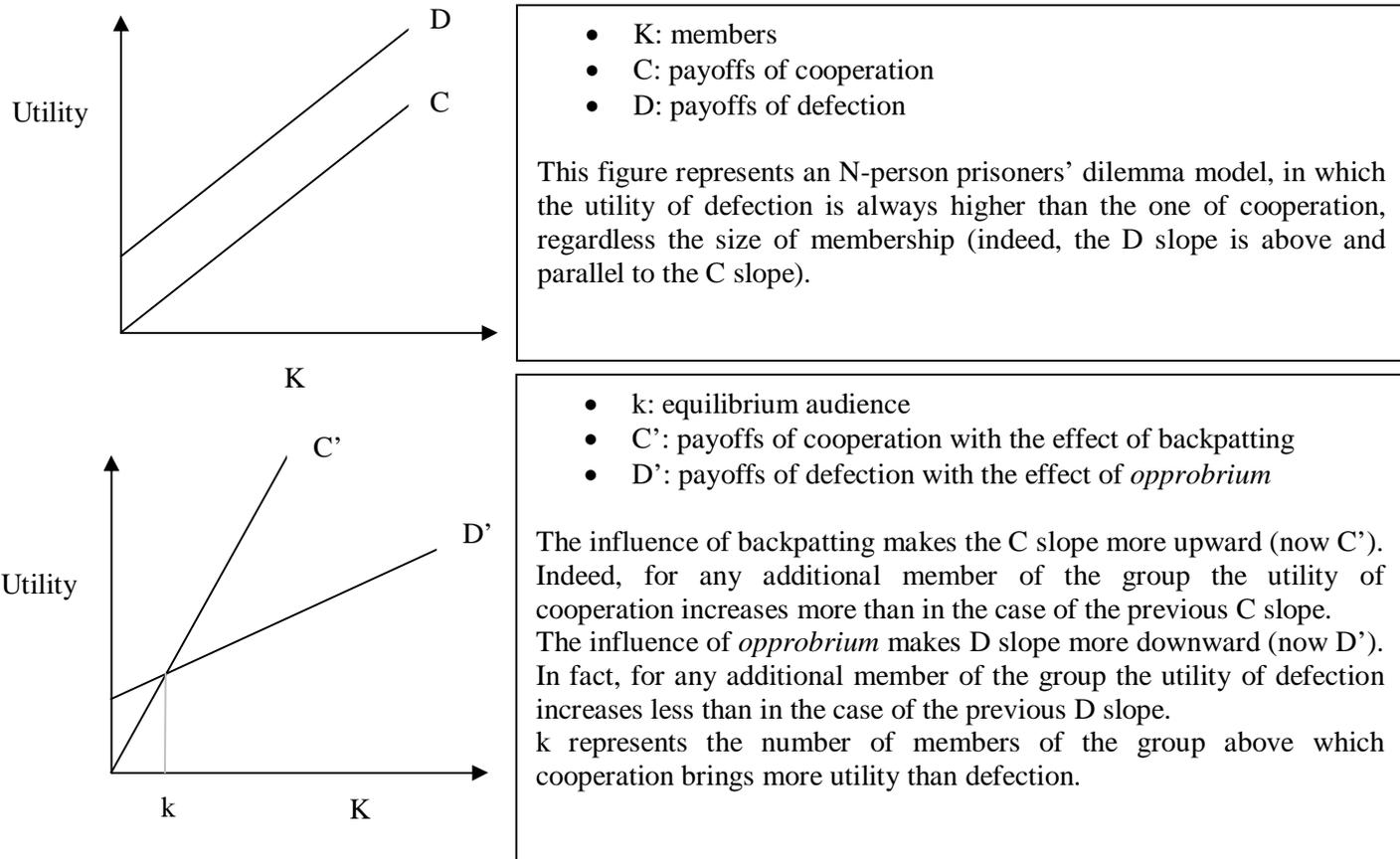
5a. Membership

A large membership influences the effects of social status markers within a group and the same is true also for an high level of publicity of internal dynamics, attitudes and behaviours (Johnston, 2001; Johnston, 2008). First of all, many authors stress the difficulties faced by bargaining dynamics in presence of a large membership (Neyer, 2003): arguing is a more feasible tactic in such a case. Nevertheless, the importance of the size of membership is relevant not only with respect to the mode of interaction (i.e. bargaining or arguing), but also it is a precondition for social influence (Johnston, 2001): large membership maximises the utility of backpatting and shaming¹⁶. The reason is illustrated in Figure 2, which represents the passage from

¹⁶ A relevant issue derives from this assumption: the accumulation of social status markers. The latter have a more marked effect when the possibility of accumulation is available. There are several factors which may bolster such an organizational memory (Hemerijck and Visser, 2003): a structured secretariat, the availability of information in a database, the iterative nature of interaction etc. The EMCO and its sub-group present all these characteristics: a structured secretariat within the Commission, a rather high degree of availability of information with an online database and an average of 16 meetings a year (Jacobsson and Vifell, 2003). For a detailed discussion on this see also Nedergaard, 2005.

a situation in which backpatting/*opprobrium* has no influence on the agent to a situation in which the agent is influenced by social status markers (i.e. a situation in which social influence is at work).

Figure 7: The Effects of Social Influence



Source: Johnston (2001)

As demonstrated, an increase in the number of participants augments the effects of backpatting/*opprobrium* and thus fostering cooperation. The EMCO consists of two representatives and two alternates for each member state and the sub-groups are composed of one representative and one alternate. Therefore, including the members of the EMCO Support Team and the ones of the EMCO Secretariat, an elevate number of officials operate in this sector meeting more than once a month in Brussels. Indeed, the iterative character of policy cooperation within the OMC has marked effects (Caviedes, 2004): it reinforces learning (Nedergaard, 2005) and peer pressure dynamics (Noaksson, 2006). Furthermore, several officials of the Commission and of the Council are involved in the daily work of EMCO and its sub-groups.¹⁷

¹⁷ Given the uniqueness of the status of the EMCO and few other committees, which have a 'double-hat' character being formally under both the Commission and the Council (Jacobsson, 2004)

Many scholars emphasise the importance of publicity as a factor supporting arguing rather than bargaining (Neyer, 2003; Noaksson, 2006), though publicity has a marked role also in sustaining social influence. Transparent procedures, the availability of information and the attention by mass media and the public opinion have a manifold effect. First of all, they are indispensable for the accumulation of social status markers, which in turn reinforces the social influence dynamics. Secondly, publicity creates two types of constraints on actors: the consistency constraints, which forces the agent to maintain his/her precedent positions, and the plausibility one, which prevents actors to take unfeasible positions (Neyer, 2003). As a consequence, publicity enhances the effects of backpatting and *opprobrium*, rendering thus cooperation a more viable strategy than defection. Despite the availability of reports and working documents on the Commission website (De la Porte and Nanz, 2004) and the vast academic literature developed during the last decade, publicity has hitherto shown weak effects on the internal dynamics of the employment committees due to two main reasons. First of all, the lack of an European-wide social and political platform has led to the segmentation of the public debate on employment policies (Neyer, 2003; Jacobsson and Vifell, 2003), remained linked to the national arenas. Secondly, studies show that the media coverage of the employment policy is almost negligible at the EU level, being the focus on the national level (De la Porte and Nanz, 2004). As a result, “governments do not face pressure from broader public debate to comply with the recommendations of the EES” (Meyer, 2003 p.6), especially in those MSs where EU intervention in this policy realm is perceived as illegitimate (Zeitlin, 2005).

5b. Franchise and Decision-making Rules¹⁸

Deliberative democracy theories underline the importance of authority allocation within a group: asymmetrical allocation bolsters bargaining dynamics (Meyer, 2003). Indeed, institutional constraints shape modes of interaction (Scharpf, 1997), but they also influence the way in which socialisation mechanisms function. In fact, with an even allocation of authoritativeness the weight assigned to social status markers from each member of the group is equal and there is not only one ‘persuader’¹⁹. In the EMCO and in the two sub-groups the power is unevenly allocated, as stated by the internal procedural rules, though many studies emphasize the tendency of consensus-building rather than voting (Jacobsson and Vifell, 2003; Haahr, 2004). As a consequence, although the QMV voting procedure allocates more power to certain members and less to others (Borrás and Jacobsson, 2004), the consensus culture developed in such committees rebalances the situation.

Another aspect is noteworthy: authority is not only related to institutional procedures or rules. In fact, within a group an actor may play the role of norm-entrepreneur even without formal powers (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). Many authors (some of them implicitly, e.g. Jacobsson, 2004, others explicitly, e.g. Schmidt,

¹⁸ Johnston’s model considers franchise and decision-making rules as two separate dimensions. This paper treats them as a single factor given the low importance of formal voting procedures within the employment committees.

¹⁹ As in the case of persuasion, in which socialisation is closely interconnected with the relation between the persuadee and the persuader and the latter’s specific characteristics (Johnston, 2001).

2000; De la Porte, 2008) emphasise the role of the Commission as norm-entrepreneur, which is a characteristic of persuasive dynamics rather than social influence. The Commission has played a pivotal role with respect to many aspects. First of all, it provides materials, logistic support and expertise to the committees through the secretariat (Jacobsson, 2004). Secondly, it bolsters the diffusion of common framework of analysis of labour markets (Jacobsson, 2004; Kaiser and Prange, 2004), such as the so called ‘flexicurity’ at the basis of the European Social Model. Thirdly, the Commission has always promoted the use of EU jargon within the employment committees, but also in the national realm, such as the concepts of ‘prevention’, ‘activation’ and ‘lifelong learning’. Furthermore, with the support of Eurobarometer and Eurostat agencies, it has spread the use of objective criteria, common standards and statistics, which facilitates deliberative dynamics (Jacobsson, 2004). Nevertheless, two points are important. First, “there have been no empirical tests on the extent of the Commission’s influence as a norm entrepreneur” (De la Porte and Pochet, 2004 p. 72). Second, the role of the Commission may be perceived more as a ‘knowledge editor’ than a proper norm-entrepreneur (Jacobsson, 2004). Indeed, despite acknowledging the fragility of this distinction, its role has been more oriented towards the diffusion of common theoretical and practical tools in order to create a fertile ground for learning dynamics, rather than proposing specific policy paradigms. The Commission has played a crucial role in the capacity-building phase of learning (in the terminology of Ferrera *et al.*, 2002; Ferrera and Sacchi, 2005). Furthermore, Nedergaard (2005) underlines the lacking of strong empirical evidence of the existence of a norm-entrepreneur among the representatives of the MSs within the EMCO.

5c. Mandate and Autonomy Principal-agent²⁰

Social influence is at work when agents enjoy little room for manoeuvre. Otherwise, independent agents are more likely to be persuaded if they enjoy a high level of discretionary power within the social environment (Johnston, 2001; Johnston, 2008). Nedergaard (2005) identifies two indicators for the room for manoeuvre: the degree of ‘up-stream’ fragmentation and the degree of ‘down-stream’ fragmentation. The former refers to the type of mandate the committee enjoys and the latter to the autonomy of agents from their principals. Empirical findings illustrate the tendency of the EMCO meetings towards becoming ‘drafting sessions’ rather than deliberative fora (Radulova, 2007; Nedergaard, 2005). Indeed, due to a more proactive role of the Presidency and more stringent agendas (De la Porte and Nanz, 2004), the EMCO meetings have gradually become fora in which locked national positions are engaged in a bargaining on the wording of the final documents (Jacobsson and Vifell, 2003). As a result, more deliberative and thus persuasive dynamics have moved from the EMCO to the more technical sub-committees (Jacobsson and Vifell, 2003; De la Porte and Nanz, 2004). Accordingly, the situation radically differs according to the mandate which the committee official enjoys. In the Indicators group, for instance, where the mandate is markedly technical, officials enjoy

²⁰ Also these two factors originally were distinct and then this paper has merged them given that the autonomy of the agent is strictly interconnected with the specific mandate with which the committees are invested from time to time (De la Porte and Nanz, 2004).

large room for manoeuvre and thus deliberative dynamics may bolster persuasion²¹. Conversely, in those occasions in which there is a controversial issue on the agenda the EMCO is characterised by bargaining dynamics between fixed national positions and officials are constrained by precise political mandates. Yet in normal situations (i.e. no salient issue at stake) the EMCO officials are not restrained by so stringent mandates (although total discretion is rare) and thus social influence is at work.

6. AN APPRAISAL OF POLICY TRANSFER

Despite the difficulties in assessing causal relations in the field of policy change and the premise that these difficulties should not prevent scholars from looking for learning and socialisation dynamics, this section provides a brief outlook of the empirical findings the literature has hitherto collected. In general, the impact of the OMC/EES is analysed in two counts (Noaksson, 2006): the substantive impact and the procedural one. Regarding the former, Noaksson (2006) identifies two effects: an increase in the political salience of the European employment policy (Sjørup *et al*, 2004) and some major shifts in national policy orientation. Not only has the OMC/EES led to more attention of national actors towards the EU employment policy, but it has also triggered some important changes in national policy paradigms. In fact, several scholars (Zijl *et al*, 2002; Sjørup *et al*, 2004; Jacobsson, 2005) highlight three major changes: from a focus on measures to combat unemployment to a focus on proactive measures to increase the quantity and the quality of employment; from a high role of unemployment benefits to a high role of active labour market policies; from corrective actions to preventive actions. For what regards procedural changes, the literature (Jacobsson, 2005; Ferrera and Sacchi, 2005; Visser, 2005) underlines three main novelties in the national decision-making process: more cross-sectoral coordination, increased statistical and monitoring capacities and improved vertical coordination. Needless to say, so marked are differences among MSs that it is hardly possible to trace such a general overview. In fact, singular national case studies are considered by many authors both in academic publications (e.g. the chapters in Zeitlin and Pochet eds., 2005) and in national evaluation reports financed by governments (e.g. The Danish National Institute of Social Research, 2002; Zijl *et al*, 2002; Sjørup *et al*, 2004). Of all the national case studies, only the Dutch case, along with the Irish one is associated with policy changes attributable to the OMC/EES with a certain degree of certainty.

7. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS: LOOKING FOR SOCIAL INFLUENCE

Future research projects should concentrate on the empirical analysis of social influence dynamics within these committees in order to verify the theory. Through a qualitative discourse analysis (e.g. cognitive mapping) it will be possible to trace the consequences of social influence on actors' behaviours and attitudes (Johnston, 1995). As pointed out by Johnston (2001; 1995), if social influence is at work, cognitive mapping

²¹ Arguing on technical issues is suitable for the type of persuasion based on the content of the message (Johnston, 2008). In fact, scientific data, statistics etc. are perfect tools to support a persuasive strategy. Conversely, persuasive dynamics in political issues are more based on the prestige/authority of the persuader. For a detailed analysis of the types of persuasion see Johnston, 2001.

will reveal a marked attention towards social status markers. Several scholars identify peer pressure effects at work in the OMC/EES. For instance, Arrowsmith *et al* (2004) identify peer pressure dynamics as a main character of the benchmarking processes in the OMC/EES. Furthermore, Noaksson (2006) associates the shifts of the Danish approach to long-term unemployment and gender policies with the *phenomenon* of ‘naming and blaming’. Jacobsson (2005) underlines the concerns of the Swedish and the Danish government with respect to European meetings: they are willing to make good impressions on their colleagues. Such conclusions may be deduced from statements such as: “the whole process is driven by proving to be capable in the eyes of the Commission or other member states” (interview, Swedish government official in Jacobsson, 2004 p.363), “as a group pressure is created, you can’t see it as your mission to divert all the unpleasant things said about your country” (Jacobsson and Vifell, 2003 p. 14-15), “one does not want to be the worst one in the class” and “Peer pressure feels” (Jacobsson and Vifell, 2003 p. 20).

8. CONCLUSION

As demonstrated, the employment committees acting according to the OMC represent a social environment close to the idealtyp of social influence, as drawn by socialisation theories in IR. Needless to say, reality and theory are not perfectly overlapping. For instance, a large membership is a factor supporting social influence dynamics, though publicity has revealed to fall short in creating constraints on the internal mechanisms of the committees. Furthermore, although an even allocation of authoritativeness creates the precondition for social influence, the role of the Commission as ‘knowledge editor’ may be perceived as a subtle way to act as a norm-entrepreneur thus exerting influence (Schmidt, 2000). Finally, only in certain occasions that combination between mandate and autonomy typical of social influence arises. In fact, only when the political mandate of the committee concerns issues of not salient nature the autonomy of the agents is such that social status markers exert influence on them. As a consequence, when certain conditions are met, the OMC in the employment policy may be considered as a social environment conducive of social influence.

The objective of this paper is to focus on a topic often under-theorised and to illustrate the potentialities it bears. In fact, the *nexus* between policy learning and policy change within the OMC has hitherto been black-boxed by the literature: as stated above, there are other reasons why policy change is fostered other than an analysis of previous experiences or the emulation of ‘the good guy’. An agent may adopt a policy paradigm because it is seen as the only sensitive and appropriate solution or due to the necessity of recognition within a group. This is not a merely theoretical exercise for many practical implications derive. For instance, in the next rounds of reform of the OMC/EES more attention should be devoted to those factors identified above that hamper social influence dynamics. First of all, politicians should fill the gap between European decision-makers and civil society in order to amplify ‘naming and shaming’ dynamics. Secondly, measures should be taken in order to foster an *inter pares* situation among the

actors in the OMC/EES; otherwise an actor could impose itself as the only policy-giver. Thirdly, the mandate of the EMCO members should be designed in such a manner that some room for manoeuvre is left without granting absolute discretion.

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