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INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

Getting strategic about strategic planning research

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ABSTRACT

This introduction to the special issue on strategic planning has four main parts. First comes a discussion of what makes public-sector strategic planning *strategic*. This discussion is meant to reduce confusion about what strategic planning is and is not. Next, we introduce in detail the five articles in the special issue and note their unique contributions to strategic planning research. Third, we provide a broad assessment of the current state of strategic planning research organized in terms of prominent themes in the literature and our assessment of how the articles address voids related to the themes. The themes are: how should strategic planning be conceptualized and defined? How should it be studied? How does strategic planning work, or not? What are the outcomes of strategic planning? What contributes to strategic planning success? Finally, we offer conclusions and an agenda for future research.

KEYWORDS Strategic planning; strategic management; strategy; performance

Overview

For the purposes of this special issue, we define strategic planning as a 'deliberative, disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization (or other entity) is, what it does, and why' (Bryson 2011, 7–9). Strategic planning that fits this definition is an increasingly common practice in governments around the world (Ferlie and Ongaro 2015). It can be applied to organizations or parts of organizations; intra-organizational functions (e.g., finance or human resources); purpose-driven inter-organizational networks or collaborations designed to fulfil specific functions, such as transportation, health, education, or emergency services; and to places ranging from local to national to transnational (Bryson 2011; Albrechts, Balducci, and Hillier, 2016). Strategic planning can be and often is part of the broader practice of strategic management that links planning with implementation on an ongoing basis.

We believe this special issue deepens understanding of strategic planning and how and under what conditions it can foster more effective government actions. This

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special issue draws together five articles that address important questions related to public-sector strategic planning. The articles cover a variety of questions about factors that affect strategic planning efforts and the results of those efforts. Each article helps fill a gap in the literature:

- Bert George, Sebastian Desmidt, Eva Cools, and Anita Prinzie study how individuals' styles of information processing affect both the perceived ease of use and usefulness of the strategic planning process, and how each in turn affects commitment to the strategic plan.
- David Lee, Michael McGuire, and Jong Ho Kim explore empirically whether collaboratively developed strategic plans and specific plan designs make a difference in governmental efforts to reduce homelessness in US counties.
- Jordan Tama explores factors that affect the purposes, design and conduct of high-level strategic planning reviews by US federal government agencies.
- Åge Johnsen examines the impacts of strategic planning and management on perceived and objective performance measures in a large sample of Norwegian municipalities.
- Denita Cepiku, Filippo Giordano, and Andrea Bonomi Savignon look at the planning and budgetary responses – strategic and otherwise – of fifteen Italian cities as a result of the global financial crisis that began in the United States in 2007.

Following this brief overview, we proceed in four sections. First, we discuss what makes public-sector strategic planning *strategic*. Our goal in this section is to reduce confusion in the literature about what strategic planning is and is not. Next, we introduce in more detail the articles in the special issue. Third, we provide a broad assessment of the current state of strategic planning research in terms of prominent themes and offer guidance on the extent to which the articles in the special issue address voids related to the themes. Finally, we offer conclusions and an agenda for future research.

What is *strategic* about public-sector strategic planning?

The historic roots of public-sector strategic planning are mostly military and tied to statecraft, meaning the art of managing government affairs and involving the use of state power (Freedman 2013). Starting in the 1960s, however, the development of the concepts, procedures, tools and practices of strategic planning has occurred primarily in the for-profit sector. Public-sector strategic planning got a serious start in the United States in the 1980s (e.g., Eadie 1983) and later in other countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and elsewhere. This history has been documented by Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel (2009) and Ferlie and Ongaro (2015).

In the for-profit literature, it is reasonably clear that strategic planning is undertaken to maximize enterprise-wide or sub-unit effectiveness in terms of profit, market share, and other business-related outcomes. In the public sector, achieving goal alignment, continuity of effort, and performance-related effectiveness are important reasons for undertaking strategic planning. In other words, strategic planning may be

adopted in the public sector because users think it will help them decide what their organizations should be doing, why, and how (Bryson, Crosby, and Bryson 2009).

Of course, there are other often complementary reasons why strategic planning has become an increasingly standard practice. One reason is accountability and compliance – as, for example, the law requiring US federal agencies to engage in strategic planning under the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA) and the Government Performance and Results Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRMA) (Radin 2006; Tama 2015). GPRA and GPRMA were congressional mandates premised on the belief that strategic planning would lead to better agency performance. Other reasons include faddishness or simple mimicry (Pfeffer and Sutton 2006), the pressure of professional norms (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Tama 2015), prior relationships and experience with potential strategic planning participants (Percoco 2016), as well as more political reasons. These political motivations can include a desire to strengthen the control of political leaders over an organization's units and personnel or to enhance an organization's external legitimacy or support (Tama, this issue).

Beyond that, however, what exactly is it that makes public-sector strategic planning *strategic*? Clarity is important because many scholars have essentially wrongly equated strategic planning with rational-comprehensive planning (Lindblom 1959). We argue rational-comprehensive planning is not strategic planning, though some strategic planning approaches can resemble it. Lindblom characterizes rational-comprehensive planning, or what he calls the 'root method', in simplest terms as follows (81):

- Clarification of values or objectives distinct from and usually prerequisite to empirical analysis of alternative policies.
- Policy-formulation is therefore approached through means-end analysis: First the ends are isolated, then the means to achieve them are sought.
- The test of a 'good' policy is that it can be shown to be the most appropriate means to desired ends.
- Analysis is comprehensive; every important relevant factor is taken into account.
- Theory [meaning pre-existing theory] is often heavily relied upon.

Lindblom contrasts the 'root' method with the 'branch' method of successive limited comparisons. In simplest terms, this approach has these characteristics (loc. cit.):

- Selection of value goals and empirical analysis of the needed action are not distinct from one another but are closely intertwined.
- Since means and ends are not distinct, [formal] means-end analysis is often inappropriate or limited.
- The test of a 'good' policy is typically that various analysts find themselves directly agreeing on a policy (without their agreeing that it is the most appropriate means to an agreed objective).
- Analysis is drastically limited:
  - Important possible outcomes are neglected.
  - Important alternative potential policies are neglected.
  - Important affected values are neglected.

- A succession of comparisons greatly reduces or eliminates reliance on theory [and instead embodies learning by doing].

Public-sector strategic planning approaches in both theory and practice can and do range between the root and branch methods. In other words, strategic planning is not a single thing, but instead consists of a set of concepts, procedures, tools, and practices that combine in different ways to create a variety of *approaches* to being strategic. Formal strategic planning in some circumstances may resemble the 'root' method, but branch or incremental methods are very often required due to the presence of so many stakeholders with a multiplicity of goals and conflicting accountabilities, relative to commercial firms and nonprofit organizations. In this more complex environment, stakeholders disagree over how goals and strategies should be ordered. Accountabilities are also often diffuse and conflicting, in part because public managers cannot resort to the measurement elegance of 'maximizing shareholder value'. As a result, public managers employ strategic planning approaches besides what is often called formal strategic planning (Bryson and Roering 1987; Bryson and Edwards, forthcoming). These include, for example, logical incrementalism, which is incrementalism guided by an overall sense of strategic direction (Quinn 1980); and a hybrid approach that combines formal strategic planning with logical incrementalism (Poister, Pasha, and Edwards, 2013).

In terms of the dimensions that make up 'strategicness', all or most of the following features are typically used by public administration and planning scholars to characterize public-sector planning as strategic (e.g., Kaufman and Jacobs 1987; Poister and Streib 1999; Christensen 1999; Conroy and Berke 2004; Chakraborty et al. 2011; Albrechts and Balducci 2013; Bryson and Shively Slotterback 2016, pp. 121–122).

- Close attention to the particulars of context, including the decision-making context, when designing the strategic planning approach.
- Careful thinking about purposes, goals, and situational requirements (e.g., political, legal, administrative, ethical, and environmental requirements).
- An initial focus on a broad agenda and later moving to a more selective action orientation.
- An emphasis on systems thinking; that is, working to understand the dynamics of the overall system being planned for as it functions – or ideally should function – across space and time, including the interrelationships among constituent subsystems.
- Careful attention to stakeholders, including elected, appointed, and career officials – in effect making strategic planning an approach to the practical politics of gaining legitimacy, buy-in, and credible commitments; typically multiple levels of government and multiple sectors are explicitly or implicitly involved in the process of strategy formulation and implementation.
- A focus on strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, as well as competitive and collaborative capabilities and advantages.
- A focus on the future and how different strategies might be used to influence it.
- Careful attention to implementation challenges as strategies are formulated; strategy that cannot be operationalized effectively to fit the implementation context is hardly strategic.

- A clear realization that strategies are both deliberately set in advance and emergent in practice.

In short, public-sector planning is strategic when given the context participants have a clear recognition of, and desire to stabilize, what should be stabilized, while maintaining appropriate flexibility in terms of goals, policies, strategies, and processes to manage complexity, take advantage of important opportunities, and advance resilience and sustainability in the face of an uncertain future. In both theory and practice, different public-sector strategic planning approaches would have different profiles across the dimensions. (Note that the same dimensions of strategic-ness are also applicable to for-profit and not-for-profit strategic planning; what differs, as noted, is the governmental context, including the typically more complex stakeholder and accountability environments.)

The above list is informed by recent scholarship and therefore differs in important ways from Lindblom's essentially *a*political root method by including an emphasis on context, stakeholders, politics, alternative future scenarios, decision making, and implementation, among other items. It is important to recognize that the effectiveness of different approaches to strategic planning will vary depending on their incorporation of the features noted above and the context of application.

The underlying hypothesis guiding research and much practice in this area is that planning by public-sector organizations that is more rather than less strategic will generally lead to better outcomes and improved performance. Two issues, however, become immediately obvious: First, how does one operationally assess the 'strategic-ness' of the planning, and second, what effects do different levels of 'strategic-ness' have on results of various kinds? Unfortunately, there is a dearth of empirical research on public-sector strategic planning and its connection with implementation and performance – especially with regard to determining the impacts, if any, that different levels of strategic-ness have in different contexts on strategy implementation and organizational performance (e.g., Bryson, Berry, and Yang 2010; Poister, Pitts, and Edwards 2010; Poister 2010; George and Desmidt 2014).

While research results are rather mixed, across a variety of methodologies and cases they *generally* show positive and typically reliable relationships between planning (though again, how strategic is not always clear) and strategy implementation and performance (e.g., Andrews et al. 2012; Borins 2014; Walker and Andrews, 2015; Elbanna, Andrews, and Pollanen 2016). The size of the effect varies considerably from study to study. The result is a paucity of understanding about what works, how, and why under different conditions, and the extent to which there is variance by context and circumstances. This special issue strives to address those deficiencies and move the field of theory development and practice forward.

The articles in the special issue

As noted, the five articles in this special issue on strategic planning cover a wide variety of questions about factors that affect strategic planning efforts and the results of those efforts on outcomes. We discuss each in turn.

Cognitive styles, user acceptance, and commitment to strategic plans in public organizations: an empirical analysis

Bert George, Sebastian Desmidt, Eva Cools, and Anita Prinzie study how individuals' different styles of information processing affect perceived ease of use and usefulness of strategic planning processes, and how each of these differences affects commitment to an organization's strategic plan. Their data come from questionnaires filled out by a large number of planning team members from municipalities in the Flemish region of Belgium.

The authors use the three-dimensional Cognitive Style Indicator (CoSI) model of Cools and Van den Broek (2007), which distinguishes between creating, knowing and planning cognitive styles. As the authors note, 'people scoring high on the creating style tend to make decisions primarily based on intuition or gut feeling. Creators search for renewal, see problems as opportunities, and feel comfortable in situations of uncertainty and freedom'. People scoring high on the knowing style 'have strong analytical skills, are proficient in logical reasoning and search for accuracy. Knowers like to make informed decisions on the basis of a thorough analysis of facts and logical and rational arguments'. Finally, people scoring high on the planning style are 'attracted by structure and prefer a well-organized environment. Planners like to make decisions in a structured, systematic way and are concerned with the efficiency of the process'.

The authors hypothesize that higher scores on each cognitive style will be associated with higher perceived ease of use and usefulness of the strategic planning process. In turn, they hypothesize that perceived ease of use and usefulness of the strategic planning process will be positively related to commitment to the strategic plan. They find through structural equation analysis that a creative planning style significantly increases perceived ease of use and usefulness of the strategic planning process. A knowing style has no significant similar direct effect on either perception about strategic planning. And a planning style increases perceived usefulness of the strategic planning process, but not perceived ease of use. In turn, perceived usefulness of the strategic planning process significantly increases commitment to the plan, while perceived ease of use does not.

This article makes two very important contributions. First, little research has been done on how information processing styles affect perceptions of the strategic planning process or commitment to plans. While advocates of strategic planning emphasize the importance of the process for enhancing strategic thinking, we know little about the actual process of participants' thinking that goes into strategic planning. This article helps fill some of that gap, and also indicates, which kinds of information processing – that is, cognitive styles – might be helpful and which are not. This also helps us better understand more about how individuals – and particularly those in leadership positions – can help or hinder strategic planning.

Second, the authors demonstrate that the creative cognitive style is highly related to more positive perceptions of strategic planning. This finding is particularly interesting given the widely held view that strategic planning is typically too formal, rigid, and analytic to be useful. If creative individuals are more likely to see strategic planning positively, this may indicate that they may be good candidates as participants in and leaders of strategic planning efforts. The authors also found that those who perceive that strategic planning is useful – those with creating and planning

styles – are also more likely to be committed to planning. Rather surprisingly, the perception that strategic planning is easy to use did not affect commitment. The implication is that if commitment to a strategic plan is important, then strategic planning should be undertaken only when it can serve some useful purpose; otherwise, and unsurprisingly, any resulting strategic plan will likely have little impact. Future research should consider building on the findings presented here and incorporate additional individual and team measures related to emotional intelligence (e.g., Petrides 2009) and political astuteness (Hartley, Alford, and Hughes 2015).

Collaboration, strategic plans, and government performance: the case of efforts to reduce homelessness

David Lee, Michael McGuire, and Jong Ho Kim explore empirically the linkages between collaboratively developed strategic plans, plan designs, and governmental effort to reduce homelessness in US counties. Using a mixed-method, 10-year-long panel design involving 145 county-level strategic plans from 124 county governments (out of 208 relevant countries), they find three things. First, having a strategic plan, rather than not having one, can mean many more beds for homeless people. Second, a 'more robust strategic plan' as measured by the number of components in the plan's design is significantly and positively associated with a greater number of beds. Third, collaboration among stakeholders increases the number of components in the design of the plan, which, as noted, leads to increases in the number of beds. In short, beds for the homeless increase with greater diversity of participation in the planning process and the resulting richer plan designs.

This article makes several major contributions, in addition to the specific findings noted above. First, in an era of increasing collaboration, collaborative strategic planning makes sense and is possible. The authors are not alone in making this point, but supporting empirical work is thin at present. The article's solid, longitudinal, mixed-method design is appropriate and strengthens the empirical findings. Second, the authors find that the actual design and details of strategic *plans* matter. Perhaps that should be obvious, but remarkably there is a scarcity of evidence that it does. And third, the article shows that strategic planning can help address what are often thought of as intractable social and economic problems, in this case homelessness. This is particularly important as public management scholars learn more about the impact of collaboration on management practices and how those practices can help improve the outcomes associated with collaborative efforts.

In future research of this kind, it is important for scholars to examine the actual mechanisms that link the strategic planning processes and plans to the actual outcomes. For example, exactly how do increased collaboration and plan components work to improve performance outcomes? Lee, McGuire, and Kim's fine contribution helps draw attention to the importance of that question.

How an agency's responsibilities and political context shape government strategic planning: evidence from US Federal agency quadrennial reviews

Jordan Tama explores factors that affect the purposes, design and conduct of high-level strategic reviews by government agencies. He explores via extensive interviews and document analyses the plausibility of four propositions regarding the design and

implementation of quadrennial strategic reviews in three US federal security-related agencies: the Department of Defense, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Department of State. The quadrennial reviews are mandated by Congress for the first two, while the Department of State has conducted its review in the absence of a legislative mandate. Tama proposes that a review is: (1) 'more likely to focus on the formulation of general principles if the agency relies heavily on collaboration; (2) more likely to involve intensive analytical processes if the agency is highly dependent on capital investments; (3) more likely to feature reforms designed to increase the agency's clout if the agency has weak political influence; and (4) more likely to be carried out in a manner that suits the needs of agency officials if it is not required by law'. In general, the empirical data involving archival analysis and interviews supports the propositions, although support for the last is not as strong as for the first three.

Tama's research is significant because it is among the few that examines in a rich, qualitative, comparative case study the effects of the context and the purposes of strategic reviews – a particular kind of strategic planning exercise – on the actual conduct of those reviews, for example, who was involved and how, kinds of analyses undertaken, etc. This study is also among the few efforts to examine the strategic planning processes of major US federal agencies and their explicitly political nature (e.g., Barzelay and Campbell 2003). Tama's article thus helps advance work on the practice and politics of strategic planning and demonstrates the advantages of in-depth comparative case analyses. His work also signals the need in future studies to dig deeper into uncovering the actual mechanisms that link planning processes to intermediate and longer term effects, both desired and unintended.

Impacts of strategic planning and management in municipal government; an analysis of subjective survey and objective production and efficiency measures in Norway

The article by Åge Johnsen is the first of two in this special issue to look in more detail at how strategic planning fits into an overall process of strategic management. Johnsen looks at the impacts of strategic planning and management on perceived and objective performance measures in a large sample of Norwegian municipalities. He is also concerned with the impacts of strategy content and stakeholder involvement on perceived and actual performance.

Johnsen creates a strategic planning and management index that consists of measures related to strategic planning, allocating resources and budgeting, performance assessments, and performance measurement and evaluation. He also creates an index of the impacts of strategic planning and management that factors into four components, including impacts on the management of goals, people, operations, and external relations. He makes use of strategy content measures for 'prospectors' and 'defenders' derived from Miles and Snow (1978) and adapted by Andrews, Boyne, and Walker (2006). Prospectors search for new opportunities and are innovators, while defenders focus on their core business and emphasize control and technical efficiency. Johnsen develops an index of stakeholder involvement that in total is weighted towards involvements of municipal elected and appointed officials. Finally, he develops indices of perceived and objective performance.

Johnsen examines five hypotheses: that higher scores on the strategic planning and management index will lead to increases in perceived and actual performance (H1

and H2), that defenders and prospectors will have good performance (H3 and H4), and that higher stakeholder involvement will lead to good performance. The results are mixed. Strategic planning and management increase perceived performance, but not objective performance as operationalized and measured. A defender strategy increases perceived performance, but not objective performance; while a prospector strategy increases neither one. Finally, increased stakeholder involvement has a positive impact on perceived management of external relations and an objective summary 'production' index across a wide range of municipal services. The summary index includes performance-related measures in education, health care, child care, social services, and culture services.

Johnsen offers an insightful discussion about why these results might have occurred, and especially the disjunction between impacts on perceived performance and objective performance indices. One important possibility is that very different kinds of performance are being measured. Specifically, responses about perceived performance may be measuring results affecting management processes and not actual production. Further, there clearly may be lag effects between improved management processes and actual production. Finally, and intriguingly, the causation may be reversed, in that performance may be a cause, not just a result, of improved strategic planning and management, a causal direction not tested in the study.

Johnsen makes another important contribution by expanding previous work to a context outside of the United States and United Kingdom. We cannot assume that findings about the impact of strategic planning and management are generalizable across the globe between different nations and kinds of organizations with different purposes. Johnsen's article, for example, demonstrates that some findings for transit agencies in the US (Pasha, Poister, and Edwards 2015) and municipalities in different areas of Great Britain (Andrews, Boyne, and Walker 2006) do not hold for municipalities in Norway. This article also contributes to the literature by further exploring the combined impact of strategic planning, strategy content, and stakeholder involvement on organizational performance in a different context.

Finally, Johnsen's work also draws attention to the need for future research to explore the actual mechanisms that lead to perceived and objective performance results, especially in feedback-rich environments. Research methodologies that allow for feedback effects will be needed to understand those mechanisms and the ways in which good strategic planning and management can both cause and result from performance, Simple linear models will capture only some of the reality in feedback-rich environments.

Does strategy rhyme with austerity?

The final article by Denita Cepiku, Filippo Giordano, and Andrea Bonomi Savignon looks at connections of strategic planning with financial management by the fifteen largest Italian cities in the context of the global financial crisis that began in the United States in 2007. The authors link two existing literatures: one on the predicted effects of austerity on the type of decision-making practices cities will follow – in this case, strategic planning practices – and the other on the predicted effects of the types of strategic planning practices pursued and their effectiveness as part of a crisis management strategy.

The authors distinguish among five types of decision-making approaches. The approaches are: formal strategic planning, logical incrementalism, a blending of formal strategic planning and logical incrementalism, incrementalism (especially in the form of decremental across-the-board cuts), and simple inertia, or a continuation on the same non-strategic path as before. As noted in our discussion of what makes strategic planning strategic, the first three can count as strategic responses to the crisis, while the latter two cannot.

The literature on austerity posits three responses to financial crises: the abandonment of formal strategic planning in favour of decrementalism, a move from decremental cuts to formal strategic planning as a crisis continues, or a mixture of responses, including the two previous responses, rhetoric alone, or inertia. The literature on strategic planning posits that formal strategic planning, logical incrementalism, or an approach combining the two would produce better results than decrementalism, rhetoric alone, or inertia.

The authors analysed each city's strategic plans and financial documents for the period 2011–2013 to determine how each city strategized following the crisis. Of the fifteen cities, one used formal strategic planning, three used logical incrementalism, none used a blended approach, seven followed an incremental approach, and four relied on inertia. Basically – and in contrast to predictions in the literature – it appears that cities did not change their planning behaviour during the crisis in that they continued to plan (or not) as they had before the crisis. As the authors note, in general 'strategic planning is not the place where the crisis is analysed and addressed'. It was more difficult to uncover the effects on financial outcomes of the different planning approaches. The authors suggest that this is for two reasons. First, it may simply be too early to determine the impact of planning. Second, what the authors call 'the great weight of politics' and established patterns may make responding to the crisis in a strategic way via targeted budget cuts, investments, and tax increases simply too difficult to accomplish; as a result, incremental and inertial approaches prevail.

These authors also make significant contributions. First, they join two literatures that mostly have been disconnected. Second, they like Johnsen explore strategic planning in a different context than has been typical – in this case in the wake of the financial crisis and in Italy. Third, they like Tama bring politics much more to the fore; in doing so, they draw attention to the limits of strategic planning. And fourth, they demonstrate that 'cities characterized by a better quality of strategic planning [as measured by the content of their strategic planning documents] seem to display a more responsible – although not a properly strategic – behaviour' in terms of responding to the crisis, as measured by tax increases and allocations to reduce budget shortfalls, and investments likely to pay off in the future, than do cities that rely on incrementalism or inertia.

Like Lee, McGuire, and Kim, the authors show the importance of taking strategic plans seriously. Like Tama, the authors demonstrate the merits of comparative case study analyses. Like Johnsen, the authors emphasize the importance of using the right time lags to measure performance. Like the other authors' work in the special issue, theirs draws attention to the need for future research to explore the actual mechanisms that lead from different kinds of strategic (and non-strategic) planning to different kinds of performance.

Contemporary themes in the study of public-sector strategic planning and how the articles in the special issue contribute to the themes

Studies of public-sector strategic planning reveal a number of themes. This section notes the themes and notes how the articles in the special issue relate to them.

How should strategic planning be conceptualized and defined?

The first theme concerns how strategic planning is conceptualized and defined. Often strategic planning is defined and operationalized in *procedural* terms. Pasha, Poister, and Edwards (2015, 5) are representative of this convention when they say formal (note the adjective) strategic planning is 'a rational-comprehensive approach to strategy formulation that uses a systematic process with specific steps such as external and internal assessments, goal setting, analysis, evaluation and action planning to ensure long-term vitality and effectiveness of the organization'. Much of the negative critique of formal strategic planning has centred on the procedural approach to strategic planning. For example, Mintzberg (1994; Mintzberg, Ahlstrand and Lampel, 2009, 49–84) *by definition* limits strategic planning to a formalized, rigid, highly analytic, staff-driven exercise. He then concludes that strategic planning, so defined, does not work very well.

As we noted earlier, strategic planning approaches can take that form, but there are many other less formal, less rigid, less highly analytic and staff-driven approaches. The critique notwithstanding, rational planning in practice – which can vary in how formal and strategic it is – has been shown to have generally positive effects on performance in a variety of studies. Indeed, Lee, McGuire, and Kim find such a positive effect for collaborative strategic planning, meaning joint strategic planning by more than one organization. Similarly, Johnsen finds that strategic planning in combination with other management practices positively impacts perceived performance outcomes, but does not find a similar impact on objective measures. In a manner complementary to that of Lee et al., Johnsen also finds that greater involvement of stakeholders leads to higher objective performance on an index that summarizes results across an array of services. Cepiku, Giordano, and Savignon also find that cities characterized by a better quality of strategic planning seem to display behaviour in response to the financial crisis that more directly addresses budget shortfalls and need for investments.

Alternatively, strategic planning may be defined in *functional* terms. For example, as noted in the introduction, Bryson (2011, 6–7) defines strategic planning as a 'deliberative, disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that define what an organization (or other entity) does, and why it does it'. Defined in this manner, strategic planning consists of a *set* or *family* of concepts, procedures, tools, and practices meant to help decision makers and other stakeholders address what is truly important for their organizations and/or places. The set includes a variety of different *approaches* that vary in their purposes; formality; temporal horizon; comprehensiveness; organizational, inter-organizational, and/or geographic focus; emphasis on data and analysis; extent of participation; locus of decision-making; connection to implementation; and so on. Successful use of strategic planning is thus dependent on which approach is used, for what purposes, in what context (Bryson, Berry, and Yang 2010; Ferlie and Ongaro 2015).

All of the authors in this special issue either explicitly or implicitly define strategic planning in functional terms. This helpfully prompts attention to and appreciation for the differing approaches to being strategic. This advantage is particularly apparent in both George et al.'s and Cepiku et al.'s contributions. Had George et al. limited strategic planning *by definition* to its highly formal procedural form, they would not have hypothesized that a creative learning style would be positively associated with the ease of use and usefulness of strategic planning and subsequent increased commitment to the strategic plan. Indeed, they would have had trouble finding a good explanation for the finding. Had Cepiku et al. limited their definition of strategic planning to its highly formal procedural form, they would have missed important ways in which Italian cities acted strategically. As they noted, cities with better strategic planning – including approaches beyond formal strategic planning – appear to have experienced improved budgetary outcomes in response to the financial crisis.

How should strategic planning be studied?

An important methodological distinction is between *variance* studies and *process* studies (Poole et al. 2000). In variance studies, public-sector strategic planning is essentially treated as a routine or practice that is a fixed object, not a generative system comprised of many interacting and changeable parts. Variance studies typically assume that strategic planning is an *intermediary*, to use Latour's (2005, 58) term, meaning the planning itself is essentially invariant and merely the transporter of a cause from inputs to outputs. Inputs, in other words, are assumed to predict outputs fairly well as long as the 'transporter' is transporting (Bryson, Crosby, and Bryson 2009).

Studies of strategic planning in government do report mixed results. As noted earlier, the majority of variance studies of public strategic planning that have used linear regression methodologies, have generally found positive, though not necessarily large, effects (e.g., Borins, 2014; Boyne and Gould-Williams 2003; Andrews, Boyne, and Walker 2006; Meier et al. 2007; Andrews et al. 2012; and Elbanna, Andrews, and Pollanen 2016). In this special issue the articles by George et al.; Lee, McGuire, and Kim; and Johnsen are variance studies.

Process studies, in contrast, generally assume that the key to understanding the effectiveness (or not) of strategic planning may lie in seeing it as a complex longitudinal process approach to knowing and acting (Mintzberg 2007; Ferlie and Ongaro 2015). In the process organizational (or multi-organizational) stakeholders engage with one another in a series of associations and performances over time to explore and ultimately agree on and implement answers to a series of Socratic questions. These include: what might or should we be doing? How might or should we do it? What purposes or goals would be served by doing it? And how can we be sure we are doing what we agreed we ought to do, and that we are achieving the effects we want? Various practices (e.g., workshops) and artefacts (e.g., mission and vision statements, background studies, strategy exercises) typically play prominent roles. In this, special issue the studies by Tama and Cepiku, Giordano, and Savignon are part variance and part process studies, but the emphasis is more on variance aspects.

Few studies of public-sector strategic planning have taken a detailed process approach (Jarzabkowski and Fenton 2006; Jarzabkowski and Spee 2009; Ferlie and Ongaro 2015). Exceptions include Wheeland (2004) and Bryson, Crosby, and Bryson

(2009). The latter authors traced strategic planning as a complex cognitive, behavioural, social, and political practice in which thinking, acting, learning, and knowing matter, and in which some associations are reinforced, others are created, and still others are dropped in the process of formulating and implementing strategies and plans. They show that terms like process steps; planners; stakeholder analyses; strategic plans; and mission, vision, goals, strategies, actions, and performance indicators are all relevant to any study of strategic planning in practice, but not as rigidly defined terms. In short, these authors sought to understand how these terms are enacted in practice and what that meant for understanding strategic planning as a way of knowing that is consequential for organizational performance.

Our view is that the field will be advanced by pursuing a range of variance and process studies. Variance studies can show in the aggregate *what* works and what does not, as for example in the George et al., Lee et al., and Johnsen contributions. Detailed process studies, and especially comparative, longitudinal case studies, can help show *how* strategic planning works. Tama's contribution, and to a lesser extent Cepiku, et al.'s contribution help unpack the 'how' question by using methods that get closer to the actual practice of strategic planning on the ground, as opposed to approaches that abstract practice into variables scores against pre-defined scales. In particular, much more knowledge is needed about the actual process design features and social mechanisms that lead to strategic planning success (or not) (Mayntz 2004; Bryson 2010). Barzelay and Campbell (2003) and Barzelay and Jacobsen (2009) are among the few studies to actually focus on the importance of process design features and social mechanisms for strategic planning. Additionally, more work is needed on the roles that boundary objects (Carlile 2002, 2004), boundary spanning practices (Quick and Feldm 2014), strategic plans (Lee, McGuire, and Kim, this issue), and various tools and techniques (e.g., Bryson 2011) do or can play in fostering successful strategic planning.

How and why does strategic planning 'work' – or not?

How strategic planning is conceptualized and studied will have a dramatic effect on assessments of how well it does or does not work, and why (Poole et al. 2000). In variance studies, particular variables are seen as uniform and consistent causes over time that produce particular effects. This corresponds to Aristotle's notion of *efficient* causation, or what causation typically means in scientific research. But planning is a purposive activity, which implies what Aristotle calls *final* causation, in which the end purpose (telos) of an action or process is the cause for which it is done, as in 'rallying around a cause' (Falcon 2015; Pollitt 2013, 42–42). To the extent that strategic planning involves purpose-driven action (in which purposes may change over time), teleological explanations are apt. Both types of causation would appear to be very relevant to strategic planning research.[1]

George et al.; Lee, McGuire, and Kim; and Johnsen pursue causal explanations as they are normally understood, meaning efficient causation – although they also recognize that purpose-driven human beings are involved. Tama and Cepiku, Giordano, and Savignon mix efficient and final causal explanations. Tama's research in particular highlights that actors behave strategically in pursuit of their individual and organizational purposes.

Additionally, in keeping with a strong thread in the literature, all of the special issue authors see strategic planning as embedded in particular contexts. In the variance studies, context is controlled for as best it can be. After controlling for various demographic factors, George, et al. find different information processing styles affect perceptions of both ease of use and the usefulness of the strategic planning process. Perceived usefulness then has a positive impact on commitment to the strategic plan. After controlling for aspects of context, Lee, McGuire, and Kim find a significant positive link between aspects of the process of developing a strategic plan and the plan's design and performance. Johnsen also controls for features of context and finds that the process of strategic planning and management has direct links to perceived effectiveness, but no apparent direct effect on more objective indices of performance. Tama, in his more qualitative study, finds a number of contextual contingencies that affect the purpose, design, and conduct of US federal agency quadrennial strategic reviews and the indirect results of these reviews. Aspects of context significantly affect the interpretations Cepiku, Giordano, and Savignon offer for why they find the results they do on types of planning pursued by Italian cities in response to the financial crisis and links (or not) of the planning to resource allocations.

What are the outcomes of strategic planning?

Most studies of public-sector strategic planning have focused on performance outcomes, and especially target achievement, efficiency, and effectiveness. As noted earlier, in terms of these outcomes, strategic planning generally seems to have a beneficial effect. Some students have found that perceptions of improved performance are linked to strategic planning (e.g., Poister and Streib 2005; Ugboro, Obeng, and Spann 2010; Elbanna, Andrews, and Pollanen 2016). Others have avoided common source bias and perceptions of performance by connecting secondary performance measures with survey data (e.g., Andrews et al. 2009; Walker et al. 2010; Poister, Edwards, and Pasha 2013). Lee et al., in this issue find positive causal links between collaborative strategic planning and more robust strategic planning designs and performance as measured by beds available for homeless persons. Johnsen in this issue includes perceptual and objective data in his research and finds positive connections between strategic planning and management and perceptions of success, but no significant links with the objective performance data. Cepiku et al. find that Italian cities with a better quality of strategic planning seem to display a more responsible approach to budgeting in the face of the financial crisis.

Poister, Pitts, and Edwards (2010) and Poister, Edwards, and Pasha (2013), however, have argued persuasively that the link between strategic planning and performance needs further investigation. The mixed findings found in the research are likely due to a number of factors. First, performance in the public sector is notoriously hard to operationalize. This task can be very difficult in municipal and state governments, where departments and agencies have different purposes and different measures of performance. Beyond that, one could argue that the measurement difficulty varies by the complexity of the products and services that government is involved with. For example, measurement is easier in a service like trash collection compared to mental health services (Brown, Potoski, and Van Slyke 2016). Second, many different types of performance outcomes should be taken into account (Poister, Aristigueta, and Hall 2015; Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2015). And third, there are likely to be a variety of direct and indirect links between strategic planning and performance.

Some studies have emphasized the importance of intermediate outcomes, such as participation (e.g., Lee, McGuire, and Kim in this issue), commitment to the plan (e.g., George et al., in this issue) visioning (e.g., Helling 1998), situated learning (e.g., Vigar 2006), and communication and conflict management strategies (e.g., Bryson and Bromiley 1993). Additional outcomes in this issue include the results of strategic reviews in the US government agencies (Tama) and budget allocations in Italian cities (Cepiku, Giordano, and Savignon). Unfortunately, very few studies, including those in this special issue, have focused on equity, social justice, transparency, legitimacy, accountability, or the broader array of public values (Cook et al. 2015; Beck Jorgensen and Bozeman 2007). Clearly, attending to a range of outcomes and how they are produced would be very helpful.

What contributes to strategic planning success?

Research indicates that organizations can face significant barriers before and during strategic planning that can potentially outweigh any benefits. First, public sector organizations need to build the necessary capacity to do strategic planning. The skills and resources to do strategic planning in the public sector should match the complexity of the processes and practices involved (Poister and Streib 2005). Necessary resources include, for example, financial capacity (Boyne et al. 2004; Wheeland 2004), knowledge about strategic planning (Hendrick 2003), and the capability to gather and analyse data and to judge between potential solutions (Streib and Poister 1990).

Additionally, leadership of different kinds is needed in order to engage in effective strategic planning. Process sponsors have the authority, power, and resources to initiate and sustain the process. Process champions are needed to help manage the day-to-day process (Bryson 2011). Transformational practices by sponsors and champions, as well as the groups they engage appear to help energize participants, enhance public service motivation, increase mission valence, and encourage performance information use (e.g., Moynihan, Pandey, and Wright 2013), all of which are important for strategic planning.

Research in this special issue builds on these findings. George et al. find that planning participants with certain cognitive styles are more committed to the strategic planning process in Flemish municipalities. Lee et al. find that collaboration and strategic plan design contribute to better performance. Tama finds that external political support makes a big difference in how strategic reviews are designed and conducted. Johnsen integrates strategic planning with strategic management and finds the components that strategic management adds increase perceived outcomes. Finally, Cepiku et al. argue that a tradition of good management, including the use of strategic planning, helps produce more desirable results.

Broad participation generally can also improve the process, as well as the resulting plan by giving various stakeholders a sense of ownership and commitment. We know that different perspectives can enrich any analyses and the eventual implementation of the plan (Burby 2003; Bryson 2011). Several studies demonstrate that citizens can help throughout the process by educating government staff about issues and contributing positively to more effective decision-making about solutions (Blair 2004). Including citizens has the additional benefit of reducing citizen cynicism about government (Kissler et al. 1998). Similarly, employees from all levels of the organization may need to be included in strategic planning for their input and knowledge about their respective areas of the organization (Wheeland 2004; Donald, Lyons, and

Tribbey 2001). In this issue, Johnsen's study of Norwegian municipal governments reveals that increased stakeholder involvement – including by elected, appointed, and career officials, and external stakeholders – has positive effects on objectively measured overall organizational performance.

That said, we also know that there is great variation in how stakeholders are included, and at least two studies show that participation of key stakeholders (internal and external) often remains shallow and elitist (Vigar et al. 2006; Vidyarthi, Hoch, and Basmajian 2013). Moreover, inclusion and broad stakeholder participation may not always make sense (Thomas 1995). We are not aware of any strategic planning studies indicating when it might be advisable *not* to include stakeholders in public-sector strategic planning. Future studies on this topic would greatly contribute to a current deficit in the broader literature.

Finally, integration with other strategic management practices can improve strategic planning's usefulness. Poister (2010) writes that integrating strategic planning and performance management more closely will likely improve performance. Johnsen's study in this issue finds positive links between strategic planning and management and perceived organizational performance, though no significant links to objective measures of performance. In other research, Kissler et al. (1998) found that this link improved the strategic planning for the US state of Ohio because planners had a better idea of where the state stood in terms of social and financial performance. Plan implementation also improved because plan progress was linked to measurable outcomes making it easier to monitor progress. However, performance is not the only area for integration. We also know that strategic planning should be integrated with budgeting, human resource management, and information technology management, although exactly how is unclear. One survey of local government practices in the United States found that many governments do some integration between strategic planning and other resource management practices but are not very sophisticated in how they do it (Poister and Streib 2005). That said, there is evidence that strategic planning can help inform budgetary and human capital allocation (Berry and Wechsler 1995; Cepiku et al., this issue).

Conclusions and an agenda for future research

Strategic planning in the public sector increasingly has been institutionalized as a fairly common practice at all levels of government in the United States and several other countries. There is also reasonable agreement on what it means to be strategic when it comes to planning, and researchers have found reasonably good evidence that public-sector strategic planning generally helps produce desirable outcomes. Yet researchers have only begun to understand why and how strategic planning can be beneficial.

Based on the state of current research, what would a strategically informed agenda for strategic planning research look like? We start with some observations. First, it is important to emphasize that public-sector strategic planning is not one thing, but is instead a set of concepts, procedures, tools, and practices that must be applied sensitively and contingently in specific situations if the presumed benefits of strategic planning are to be realized. In other words, there are a variety of generic approaches to strategic planning, the boundaries between them are not necessarily clear, and strategic planning in practice typically is a hybrid. In addition, it is unclear how best to conceptualize context and match processes to context in order to produce

desirable outcomes. For example, should context be viewed as a backdrop for action or as actually constitutive of action (Ferlie and Ongaro 2015, 121–165)?

Second, because planning must attend to context in order to be strategic, approaches to strategic planning may be represented as *generic* in form, but in practice are likely to be highly *contingent* (Ferlie and Ongaro 2015, 123). Third, researchers should define strategic planning in functional rather than procedural ways, in order not to settle by definition what should be empirical questions, and so as not to be blinded to the array of approaches through which planning can be strategic. And fourth, we need a much better elaborated theory about the potential links from context to strategic planning to implementation and performance (Poister, Aristigueta, and Hall 2015; Andrews et al. 2012; Sandfort and Moulton 2015).

These observations lead to a fairly robust research agenda for the field – a strategic research agenda, if you will. A list of important questions includes at least the following (see also Bryson 2010; Bryson, Berry, and Yang 2010; Poister, Pitts, and Edwards 2010; and George and Desmidt 2014):

- How best can the dimensions of strategic-ness be operationalized and their effects explored?
- Strategic planning is meant to foster strategic thinking, acting, and learning, so what are these, and how can we study them, their antecedents and their effects?
- What are the important dimensions of internal and external context that make a difference for strategic planning, and which approaches are likely to work best, how and why, given the context? In what ways do internal and external stability or change in these dimensions make a difference?
- What difference does it make whether strategic planning is applied to organizations, subunits of organizations, cross-boundary functions, collaborations, or places?
- How should the approach to strategic planning vary depending on the policy field in which it is applied and kind of issue being addressed? For example, what difference does it make if the policy area is education, health, public safety, transportation, or something else (Sandfort and Moulton 2015)? What difference does it make if the issues are simple, complicated, complex, or wicked (Patton 2010)?
- What kinds of resources (e.g., leadership, facilitation, staffing, technical support, political support, and competencies and skills) are needed for strategic planning to be effective?
- What are the ways in which participation by internal and external stakeholders make a difference in the effectiveness of different approaches to strategic planning in different contexts? In other words, under what circumstances do different types of participation, by a range of stakeholders, and for a variety of purposes make a difference in the effectiveness of strategic planning?
- What difference do the various artefacts (e.g., mission, vision, and goal statements; strategic plans; background studies; performance measurements; evaluations) related to strategic planning make in terms of the results of strategic planning processes?
- What difference, if any, do various strategic planning tools (e.g., stakeholder analyses; analyses of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats;

competitive forces analyses; portfolio analyses; visual strategy mapping; etc.) make to the success or not of strategic planning processes?
- What are or should be the connections both theoretically and practically between the various approaches to strategic planning and the other elements of strategic management systems, such as budgeting, human resources management, information technology, performance measurement, and implementation?
- To what extent, how, when, and why should politics – whether bureaucratic, partisan, or otherwise – be incorporated into strategic planning research?

Finally, researchers should use methodologies that conceptualize and operationalize strategic planning in a variety of ways. As noted, public-sector strategic planning is not a single thing, but many things. Useful findings about strategic planning have come via multiple methodologies, including cross-sectional and longitudinal quantitative research; qualitative single and comparative case studies; and content analyses of plans. These studies have conceptualized strategic planning in a variety of ways, including as questions with Likert-scale answers, and as processes, practices, artefacts, and ways of knowing (Ferlie and Ongaro 2015). The variety of methodologies is useful, as each helps reveal different things about strategic planning. Given the increasing and widespread use of public-sector strategic planning, additional insight into exactly what works best, in which situations, and why, is likely to be helpful for advancing public purposes.

Note

1. Aristotle includes two other kinds of causation as well – material and formal – both of which may also be at work with strategic planning (Falcon 2015; Pollitt 2013, 42–42). *Material* causation has to do with change growing out of the material of which something is composed. The material composition of the 'thing' being studied affects both the potentiality and actuality of what is produced. To the extent that strategic planning is conceptualized as a 'thing' – as procedural definitions of formal strategic planning seem to imply – rather than as a malleable, adaptable process comprised of multiple and changing associations, there would seem to be 'material' limits to what can be potentially and actually produced. *Formal* causation refers to the material whose pattern or form makes some 'thing' into a particular type or kind of thing. For example, procedural definitions of strategic planning declare *by definition* the form that strategic planning takes and anything else does not really count as strategic planning. In Lee, McGuire, and Kim's work on the impacts of strategic plan design features, and also in Tama's work involving the form of strategic reviews, and especially those that are mandated, there are hints of material and formal causation.

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