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The Practice of Scenario Planning: An Analysis of Inter- and Intra-organizational Strategizing

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Strategic activity is often punctuated through the application of strategy tools. Despite widespread use, a lack of understanding exists regarding the impact such tools and their practices have on an organization's strategy process. Of the growing body of research tackling the phenomenon, none appears to extend beyond an intra-organizational setting. Acknowledging the importance of multi-organizational partnerships, particularly in the public sector, in this paper an attempt is made to help fill this void through examining the application and effect of a scenario planning process at an inter-organizational level. Conceptualizing scenario planning as a practice of simplexity, where complexity of thought combines with simplicity of action, an in-depth, longitudinal case study is used to demonstrate the importance and interaction of sensemaking, storytelling and organizing in creating meaning within strategizing activities at the inter-organizational level. However, also demonstrated is the relative weakness of the output of the scenario planning process – the *stories* – as a boundary object capable of transferring knowledge and meaning to the intra-organizational level. Through empirical and theoretical integration a model is developed presenting the flow of practices and artefacts used in sensemaking within inter- and intra-organizational strategizing.

Introduction

While much is known about strategy tools and their intended application and effect, knowledge of how they interact with and shape strategy processes remains underdeveloped albeit subject to a growing corpus of research. In recent studies (Eppler and Platts, 2009; Hodgkinson *et al.*, 2006; Moisander and Stenfors, 2009; Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2009, 2011), research on single organizational settings have dominated empirical work, complemented with further insight from multiple case analyses (Jarratt and Stiles, 2010; Johnson *et al.*, 2010; Regnér, 2008). With the exception of studies on networks and strategic alliances (e.g. Dyer and Singh, 1998; Gulati and Singh, 1998; Higgins and Gulati, 2003; Ritala, 2012), intra-organizational studies are surprisingly dominant in the private sector oriented strategy research domain. Within the public sector, however, inter-organizational partnerships are increasingly prevalent and important systems of engagement, particularly at the strategic and governance level (Brinkerhoff, 2002; Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998). Despite this, mainstream strategy research in a public setting (e.g. Jarzabkowski, 2005; Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2002) still gravitates to the intra-organizational, ignoring processes through which strategy is shaped in inter-organizational groups and the impact that process and its outcomes have on 'partner' organizations. Accordingly, the paper addresses specifically the use of scenario planning in an inter-organizational setting, and an attempt is made to understand its impact at both the inter- and intra-organizational level.

Although the singular (and particularly technical) act of scenario planning has been the subject of many studies (see, for example, Burt *et al.*, 2006; Godet, 2001; van der Heijden, 2005; Schoemaker, 1991, 1995; Schwartz, 1998; Wack, 1985a, 1985b), little attention has been paid to the practices involved and their engagement within a wider strategy process. Adopting more of a practice perspective helps deepen understanding beyond the insights generated from classic process-based studies (e.g. Godet, 2000; van der Heijden, 1997; Schoemaker, 1995) and extends the growing appreciation for the practices that constitute scenario planning (e.g. Bowman *et al.*, 2013; Hodgkinson and Healey, 2008; Hodgkinson and Wright, 2006; Wilkinson, 2009). Theoretical guidance is thus drawn from the concept of *simplexity* (Colville, 1994; Colville, Brown and Pye, 2012), the combination of complexity of thought with simplicity of action (understood here as the flow of scenario planning practices), which helps focus attention on two important aspects of scenario planning: the process and the scenarios. The former can be conceptualized as discursive and episodic practices combining sensemaking, organizing and storytelling, the latter as a product of the process – an artefact – specifically a designated boundary object that transfers knowledge across strategic boundaries (Bechky, 2003b; Carlile, 2002; Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2009). Understood as an episodic practice (e.g. a series of strategy workshops), external to regular administrative practices like budget planning (Jarzabkowski, 2005), and with a specific purpose, there is a moment when the scenario planning process concludes and the outputs become part of a wider, continuous flow of organizational sensemaking (Chia and MacKay, 2007; Gephart, Topal and Zhan, 2010; Johnson *et al.*, 2010; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Weick, 1993). This can be understood as a knowledge transfer problem, where a series of practices attempt to create an object (the scenarios) capable of transferring complex knowledge to an external body through a simple and engaging medium: a story (usually as prose but increasingly as infographical animated presentations and dramatic plays). Framed within the sensemaking literature, the scenarios become an object of widespread sensegiving (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991) that should become part of the on-going, external sensemaking process. Returning to the concept of simplexity, if scenario planning is an example of a process of simplexity, then the scenarios, the object of knowledge transference from internal to external, can be understood as a product of simplexity.

Empirical evidence is drawn from an in-depth, longitudinal case study in which a UK local government used scenario planning in inter-organizational planning cycles. Groups and organizations represented in the *Northshire Partnership* (a pseudonym to protect the identity of the case) comprise local council, health services, policing, education, voluntary sector etc. Together, they were collectively responsible for over 35,000 jobs with a combined annual budget of over £1.6 billion. Membership of the Northshire Partnership was restricted to CEOs and elected politicians and was supported by a local-government-led corporate policy unit. Case analysis reveals how the application of a scenario planning process shaped the strategy process at the inter-organizational level but failed to have a significant impact at the intra-organizational level.

The contribution of the paper is threefold. First, it enhances current understanding of strategy tools and their role in the strategy process through describing the effectiveness of scenario planning as a practice of simplexity at an inter-organizational level. In doing so, limitations of the tangible output of the scenario planning process are also revealed, as the formal objects – the scenario stories – struggled against the overcrowded and 'over-strategized' nature of the public sector. It is argued that the meaning contained within the scenarios was created through the inter-organizational process, and that the stories failed to transform meaning to those external to the process. This is synthesized into a model depicting the flow of practices and objects in inter- and intra-organizational strategizing. Second, knowledge of scenario planning is extended through both its conceptualization as an example of simplexity (see Colville, Brown and Pye, 2012) and through the empirical study, which affords unique insights into a scenario-to-strategy process. Third, much needed theoretical and empirical insight into the inter-organizational strategy process is provided, revealing the benefits and challenges of partnership working and identifying the public sector strategy space as particularly cluttered and naturally disparate.

Strategy tools: understanding scenario planning as a practice of simplexity

Strategy tools, or the practices that constitute strategizing (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Jarzabkowski, Balogun and Seidl, 2007; Whittington, 2003; Whittington *et al.*, 2006), have become an area of renewed interest (see Corradi, Gherardi and Verzelloni, 2010; Hendry and Seidl, 2003; Hodgkinson *et al.*, 2006; Hoon, 2007; Jarratt and Stiles, 2010; Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008; Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2009; Vaara and Whittington, 2012). The traditional strategy perspective concentrates on formal, structural analysis (Gunn and Williams, 2007), utilizing binary logics (Calori, 1998) to frame strategic decisions (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand and Lampel, 1998; Pickton and Wright, 1998). An emergent (Mintzberg, 2000) or processual perspective (Whittington, 2001) is more concerned with the social realities of strategy tools, e.g. as a means of sensemaking (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005; Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 2005), conversation (Barry and Elmes, 1997; Hardy, Palmer and Phillips, 2000; Jarzabkowski, 2004) and the consequential effect on strategy (Hendry and Seidl, 2003; Hodgkinson and Wright, 2002).

As a foresight-based strategy tool, scenario planning is used widely in strategic planning (Grant, 2003; Wack, 1985a, 1985b) and public policy development (Docherty and McKiernan, 2008; Godet, 2001; McKiernan, Davies and Scott, 2000). The most cited literatures (e.g. Kahn, 1960; Schoemaker, 1993, 1995; Wack, 1985a, 1985b) present scenario planning as a structured, analytical activity to create multiple futures to help stakeholders re-perceive reality and thus improve strategic and/or policy decisions. Despite widespread use since the 1970s (Linneman and Klein, 1983; Malaska *et al.*, 1984), an absence of theoretical belonging has left scenario-based approaches drifting between a multitude of frameworks: 'planning, thinking, forecasting, analysis, and learning are commonly attached to the word scenario in the literature' (Bradfield *et al.*, 2005, p. 796). There is no set paradigm or location for scenario planning, no methodological agreement, and little consensus on what actually constitutes a scenario planning process (see, for example, Derbyshire and Wright, 2014). The aim here is not to create definitional clarity but rather to delve into the practices of a somewhat typical 'intuitive logics' (see Amer, Daim and Jetter, 2013; Ramirez and Wilkinson, 2013; Wright, Bradfield and Cairns, 2013) scenario planning process, to understand what people do, and the impact it has on the wider strategy process.

Conceptual guidance for understanding the practices involved in scenario planning is derived from Colville, Brown and Pye's (2012) notion of simplexity: 'a fusion of sufficient complexity of thought with necessary simplicity of action' (Colville, Brown and Pye, 2012, p. 6). Fundamental to simplexity is the interaction of sensemaking, organizing and storytelling. These three concepts are also critical to understanding the practices involved in a scenario planning process (see Figure 1) and thus provide an unusual and valuable opportunity to understand how a concept like simplexity is enacted as a means of organizing strategic work (Colville, 1994; Gioia, 2006; Weick, 2012).

Whether applied in a public or private sector setting, scenario planning helps people in organizations to structure and simplify the contextual complexities of long-term uncertainty. Achieved through analysis and the creation of narratives, there are many methodological options available to scenario planners (Martelli, 2001), but perhaps the most widely used is the 'intuitive logics' method (often referred to as the 'Shell' method after the company who popularized the technique). Figure 1 draws together and synthesizes heuristic guides, methodological stages and processes from noted scenario planning practitioners and scholars (see, for example, Godet, 2000; Schoemaker, 1991, 1997; Schwartz, 1998; Wack, 1985a), depicting the function of the stream of actions with respect to complexity reduction and illustrating the constant flow of sensemaking and storytelling.

Past studies and scenario planning exercises have illustrated similar techniques applied to macro-level scenarios (see Schwartz, Leyden and Hyatt, 2000; Wack, 1985a, 1985b), industry-level scenarios (see Schoemaker, 1995; Stokke *et al.*, 1990) and organizational-level scenarios (see Moyer, 1996). Beginning with a seemingly infinite number of variables and possibilities, the process of creating plausible futures relevant for strategic decisions is a challenge in complexity reduction. Although somewhat at odds with Weick's (1979, p. 261) call to 'complicate' one's self, wisdom can also be found in 'profound simplicities' (Gioia, 2004, 2006, p. 1717).

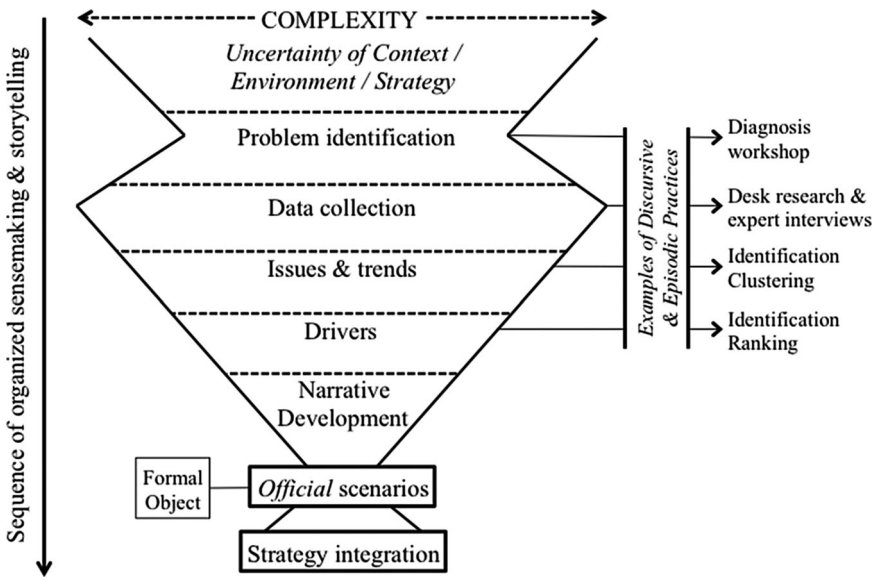

Figure 1. Sensemaking practices and complexity reduction in scenario planning

Scenario planning provides a structure to manage complex conceptual challenges through a process of simplification that involves a series of straightforward, mostly discursive practices (Hodgkinson *et al.*, 2006; Jarzabkowski, 2005; Kornberger and Clegg, 2011; Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2011). The first of such practices involves a small group of senior managers responsible for strategy identifying a single (or small number of) problem(s), helping to reduce the complexity of a large number of variables and futures to a more focused level where the subsequent period of research and knowledge generation can reduce epistemic uncertainty to a more manageable and comprehendible level. A strategy group (or specific scenario steering group), with the assistance of external practitioners and facilitators (see, for example, Hodgkinson and Wright, 2002) would conduct research and analysis. The analysis phase, a process of organized sensemaking and sensegiving, seeks out wide-ranging data intended to provide contextual understanding and cognitive challenge. The data are categorized as events or issues (of which there may be thousands of data points); they are clustered through group discussions, and then condensed prior to the selection of a few (usually eight to 12) 'key drivers', which are used as the foundation of the scenario development.

The interactive elements characterize scenario planning as an unmistakably social activity, facilitated by knowledgeable actors inside and outside the organization and involving practitioners from a variety of intra-, inter- and extra-organizational roles (e.g. senior managers, outside experts, facilitators/consultants). The analytical aspects (the transformation of data into stories) suggest it is also a situated activity, occurring in a particular time and place with implicit and explicit relevance to the world around it. Consequently, the nature and trends of the present are inextricable from the logic used to create the scenarios. Thus, the resultant product or artefact of the process becomes loaded with meaning that is intended to serve as a bridge to a new cognitive space (Bowman *et al.*, 2013) at the organizational or societal level.

Sensemaking, organizing and storytelling in a scenario planning process

A critical aspect of Colville's (1994) notion of simplexity is the interconnectedness between sensemaking, organizing and storytelling (Colville, Brown and Pye, 2012). As a synthesis of complexity of thought (the requirement of organizations to appreciate the increasingly entropic world) with simplicity of action (straightforward, focused, organized and replicable steps) simplexity is an interesting and novel concept to analyse scenario planning, particularly considering the initial uncertainty, or chaos, inherent in foresight activities:

> Strategizing 'at the edge of chaos, where complexity lives' (Gribbon, 2004, p. 103) represents a major challenge for both scholars and practitioners. Developing strategies at the end of chaos may be sustained with a simple infrastructure, designed to facilitate emergence and self-organization. (Cunha and Rego, 2010, p. 91)

Scenario planning attempts to manage such chaos and uncertainty through addressing both reality and perceived reality: 'they [scenarios] explore for facts but they aim at perceptions inside the heads of decision-makers' (Wack, 1985a, p. 140). It is a sensemaking process where strategic paradigms are challenged (Roubelat, 2006): '[people] gather and transform information of strategic significance into fresh perceptions' (Wack, 1985a, p. 140). Divided into social (Maitlis, 2005) and cognitive (Balogun and Johnson, 2004) elements, sensemaking aims to reduce equivocality through conversations and narratives exchanged between organizational actors. Shared sensemaking helps to establish coherence amongst multiple actors allowing meanings to materialize that can both facilitate and constrain their actions (Vlaar, van den Bosch and Volberda, 2006; Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 2005).

Within scenario planning, sensemaking occurs externally and internally as aspects of the process (e.g. problem identification, key driver analysis and strategic integration) stimulate reflexive appraisal of organizational capabilities against the strategic requirements of hypothetical futures (Sandri, 2009). The reflexivity between individual, organization and environment – essentially enactment (Smircich and Stubbart, 1985) – is the interplay between the internal and external (Weick, 1988). Accordingly, the reflexivity is dependent on a processual view of organizing, demanding temporal sensitivity (Mead, 2002; Weick, 1979). Cognitive barriers are overcome through enhanced understanding of the environment and 'scaffolding insights about the organizational *self*' (van der Heijden, 1997, p. 7) in an ongoing dialogue of strategic appraisal. Language with scenario-specific meaning can be used to create or negotiate an 'objective' reality (Chermack and van der Merwe, 2003), facilitating the strategic conversation (van der Heijden, 2005). The negotiated and evolving language helps process participants to contextualize the impact of the external environment on the organization (van der Heijden and Schutte, 2000).

Here, two important concepts are introduced. The first is flux, where scenario planning, through the categorization of events and issues and the sharing of sensemaking stories, offers an organization a way of engaging with complex environmental uncertainty one would associate with a continuous state of flux (Näslund and Pemer, 2012; Weick, 2012). The second is justification, driven again through storytelling, where discursive elements of sensemaking create stability of thought and legitimacy of strategic action (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012; Weick, 2012). Through consideration of these concepts, an underlying tension in sensemaking is raised through considering whether it is episodic or continuous (Maclean, Harvey and Chia, 2012). Gephart, Topal and Zhan's (2010, p. 284) definition, where sensemaking is 'an ongoing process that creates an intersubjective sense of shared meaning', echoes a Weickien perspective (see Weick, 1993, p. 635), suggesting a continuous interaction, whereas Maclean, Harvey and Chia (2012) and Starbuck and Milliken (1988) define stages within sensemaking that imply a more episodic phenomenon. The two notions, however, are not mutually exclusive – sensemaking may be continuous and general among people in organizations and it may be a separate stream, perhaps project-specific, or part of a detached or specialized formal process. Scenario planning is such an example, where a process is intended to separate and formalize – essentially organizing – the sensemaking process as a means of ensuring the presence of 'polyphony' (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012) or 'plurivocality' (see Czarniawska, 2008, p. 134) as a stimulant to challenge current or dominant thinking and help overcome cognitive barriers.

Scenarios as a sensegiving object

Communication of sensemaking, essential in the scenario planning process, is referred to as sensegiving (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991) and can be represented as a sequential flow of understanding and influence as 'sense' is processed and disseminated in an organization. Sensegiving is an interpretation of sensemaking and subsequent sensemaking is an interpretation of sensegiving (Johnson *et al.*, 2007).

Sensemaking and organizing are interrelated, temporally sensitive processes. These processes are the motion, change and flow of time that connect

episodes of social activity and are continuously reconstituted (Weick, 1979). It is the sociality of the process and the emergence of sociality 'into higher and more complex' expression that result in conditions necessary for sensemaking to take place (Mead, 2002, p. 25). A scenario planning process is dependent on the occurrence of sensemaking. Thus the heuristic process, the formal aspects of the practice, provides a structure, ostensibly the episodic location and discursive space, for sensemaking to occur. The creation of stories serves as a condensed, concentrated and tangible output of the sensemaking process – a transformative vehicle to overcome cognitive barriers or, simply, a sensegiving object.

Despite origins in educational theory, transitional objects have found relevance in the strategy, organization and change literatures (Carr and Downs, 2004; Eden, 1992; de Geus, 1988; Normann, 2001). Recent research (see Carlile, 2002, 2004) conceptualized the problem as a boundary issue, whereby the transition of knowledge across organizational boundaries is problematized through varying degrees of obstruction, the strongest of which is a pragmatic boundary, described as the 'most socially and politically complex, as common interests need to be developed to transform knowledge' (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2009, p. 226). The use of meaningful artefacts, i.e. those containing (and constraining) knowledge and used by recipients, can help transfer knowledge across boundaries. However, to transfer knowledge successfully, the boundary objects must possess certain characteristics. For example, their sensemaking capacity is determined by their flexibility to satisfy informational requirements of multiple fields (Star and Griesemer, 1989).

Boundary objects are also subject to unintended consequences. Artefacts can be intended for very specific and deliberate sensegiving purposes, particularly if deemed so by senior managers – referred to as designated boundary objects (Levina and Vaast, 2005). However, they may not become boundary objects-in-use, as the natural flow of organizational activity creates alternative (undesignated) objects that acquire widespread meaning (Bechky, 2003a; Romme *et al.*, 2012).

Spee and Jarzabkowski (2009), in particular, offer an interesting conceptualization of strategy tools as boundary objects. While one could derive many such objects from the scenario planning process (e.g. the key drivers, influence diagrams), the most obvious 'designated boundary object' are the stories themselves – the apogee of a stream of discursive practices. Particularly useful in an inter-organizational situation, where sensegiving is critical to reaching a wider group of stakeholders, the stories are designed to engage and stimulate thought, challenge mindsets and provoke action.

Public sector scenario planning

Although following similar methodological steps, scenario planning in a public setting has a more ideological than analytical function (Marchais-Roubelat and Roubelat, 2008, p. 27), often used as an organizing device to facilitate interaction and engagement of relevant stakeholder groups charged with implementing policy choices (Bowman *et al.*, 2013). A key function of publicly oriented scenario planning processes is to make sense of complex environments and communicate a vision of society, helping to enact positive change amongst key stakeholder groups, which should subsequently refine their strategic direction and improve society through aggregate means.

Public sector scenario projects attempt to convey the story of a positive but attainable future, an articulation of the achievement of ambition (Bezold, 2009), often tempered with a cautionary tale of social regression as a consequence of apathy and inaction (for good examples of this see Kahane, 1992; McKiernan, Davies and Scott, 2000, 2001a, 2001b). Although opposed by Wack (1985a) in for-profit situations, the use of polar scenarios is advocated strongly by Masini and Vasquez (2000, p. 51) as a form of 'social building of the future', where future studies are a fundamental tool and people become subjects of change. This is partly accomplished through the reduction of complex contextual or environmental information to a manageable state where scenarios help to 'pinpoint priority issues in terms of problems and opportunities' (Masini and Vasquez, 2000, p. 51).

Using facilitated discussion and sharing stories helps establish common dialogue capable of penetrating the entrenched rhetoric of opposing interest groups (Young, Becker and Pike, 1970) and facilitates communication between people and organizations who are intertwined but lack common understanding. Scenario planning can help coordinate strategic activity within the polycentric terrain (Rhodes, 1997, p. xii) and interdependences of multi-organizational partnerships (Kickert, Klijn

and Koppenjan, 1997), although there is a lack of research exploring the transfer of strategy from partnership level to individual organizations.

There is widespread interest in public leadership across organizational boundaries (Ferlie, Hartley and Martin, 2003), and in particular the interaction of policy and practice (Tranfield and Starkey, 1998) and the benefits of collaborative activities in a multi-organizational setting (Vangen and Huxham, 2003). Despite familiar beginnings, some public sector scholars distinguish partnerships from networks, noting the demarcation as the establishment of the partnership as an organizational form rather than as a mode for social coordination (Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998). One justification for abandoning hierarchical organizational models is to find 'messy solutions' to 'messy problems' (Rhodes, 1997, p. xv), referring to the structural difficulties in dealing with multiple providers, interests and relationships.

Specific tools can help deal strategically with the clutter and complexity of the public sector. Scenario planning should offer multiple benefits in this environment. The combination of relative complexity of thought via analytical procedures and shared sensemaking with simple, discursive, storytelling-driven practices allows actors to engage with the clutter, gradually reducing the mess and constructing a negotiated, focused and meaningful set of plausible futures. These futures can be used to facilitate strategic development at the group level and/or be disseminated widely throughout the partner organizations as a stimulant and/or test bed for lower-level strategy work.

Summary

Understood as an example of a practice of simplexity, combining complexity of thought with simplicity of action, scenario planning is a foresight activity that draws together aspects of sensemaking, organizing and storytelling. As a process, episodic instances of shared sensemaking create cognitive benefits that help actors reduce the complexity and epistemic uncertainty inherent in long-term forward planning exercises. In this regard, scenario planning appears well suited to dealing with the 'mess' of inter-organizational strategizing processes that feature multiple actors, stakeholders, interest groups and relationships, when operating across multiple strategic levels in multiple strategic groups. However, in considering the nature and efficacy of an organized, episodic sensemaking practice, it is important to consider that sensemaking can be both episodic and continuous. Thus, while a specific group of actors can engage with the episodic sensemaking, the majority of strategy practitioners cannot. This problem of transference can be understood as a boundary issue. The formalized storytelling output of scenario planning – the stories – offers a mechanism, in the form of a meaningful artefact, that can help transfer knowledge through complex, pragmatic boundaries. Scenario planning stories are an example of sensegiving artefacts that should enter into the continuous sensemaking activities allowing users external to their creation to incorporate the knowledge fully into their strategic process.

Methodology

It is through a desire to understand complex social phenomena that a distinctive need for case studies arises (Yin, 1994). Seeking to explore and explain, the study follows an abductive design (Colville, Hennestad and Thoner, 2014; Suddaby, 2006), embracing the double hermeneutic (Giddens, 1984) and recognizing also that the meaning attribution inherent to intersubjectivity creates context specificity.

Following the sensemaking tradition, empirical observations are focused on the '"processes of becoming" rather than "states of being"' (Gioia, 2006, p. 1711). Hence, the role of the scenario planning processes and the boundary object (as a means of conveying and transferring knowledge to an uninvolved group) is central to the study.

Empirical evidence is drawn from a longitudinal case study capturing consecutive scenario-based interventions into a group-level strategy process in the public sector between 1999 and 2008 (reference withheld to protect authors' anonymity). The case study is an in-depth look at phenomena occurring with a bounded context (Miles and Huberman, 1994) in order to engage and advance understanding of the external interest (Stake, 2000) and develop a 'story against which researchers [and practitioners] can compare their experiences and gain rich theoretical insights' (Dyer and Wilkins, 1991, p. 613).

Data were collected from the most senior managers in Northshire's public sector, specifically

Table 1. Summary of interview participants

Interview group	Code	No.
Northshire Council Corporate Management Team	NCCorp	3
Service level (senior managers who sit beneath the executive level)	SLev	5
Northshire Council Executive (service heads and executives)	NCExec	5
Northshire Partnership Strategic Support (provides strategic and organizational support to the partnership)	NPStrat	3
Northshire Partnership Member (elected politicians and CEOs of partner organizations)	NPMem	8

Table 2. Types of documentation

Document type	Examples	Number	Date range
Communiqués	Emails, proposals, invoices	7	2002–2007
Meeting information	Minutes, agendas, presentations, supplementary reports	61	2002–2008
Internal documents	Internal reports, scenario drafts, analytical summaries, scenario planning interviews	127	2002–2008
Formal studies and reports	Community plans, service reviews, structure plans, improvement plans, government acts	30	2001–2008

those members of the Northshire Partnership (including elected politicians) and the heads of partner organizations and the larger services within the council. Interviews were also held with the policy group (located structurally within the council) who provide much of the partnership's strategic support (interview participants and numbers are shown in Table 1).

Supporting the 24 semi-structured, open-ended interviews were the analysis of 291 documents (see Table 2) and the observation of 16 scenario planning workshops, where extensive notes were taken, affording researchers contextual reality and insights into the interpersonal motives and behaviours of participants. Anomalous responses were checked and crosschecked with data sources to ensure accuracy. Crosschecks of this nature were often in themselves revealing. For example, one respondent said that s/he had made no contribution to a strategy document for which an electronic record existed to the contrary. When confirmation was sought, the respondent identified a never-ending stream of strategy documents that crossed the desk as the reason why s/he failed to recall it, noting that the flow of documents was so relentless that it all blurred into one and it became difficult to recall specifics.

The sequence and flow of scenario planning practices is of primary concern, making a detailed chronological narrative of the case a first priority. Table 3 presents a data display (Carter and Mueller, 2002; Eisenhardt, 1989) to clarify the type of data collected at each phase of the case study. During the nine-year period, two iterations of scenario planning were analysed. The second iteration was dismissed from further analysis as that process refreshed the existing scenario stories, rather than creating them fully, utilizing an intuitive logics method, as was done in the first process.

Case study context and background

Northshire Council, a unitary body established after the reorganization of Scottish local authorities in 1996, is the primary provider of public services in the region of Northshire, and plays a leading role in the Northshire Partnership – the group charged with community planning. The community planning movement was conceived as a 'strategic framework' (Lloyd and Illsley, 1999, p. 181) for institutions to help provide and promote the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the communities they serve. In the council, the Community Plan 'is at the heart' of everything they do, being regarded as the main policy document for Northshire and setting the agenda for all local government services. The other partner agencies are NHS Northshire, Northshire Constabulary, Scottish Enterprise, Council for Voluntary Services, Community Action Group and Northshire's Further and Higher Education sector. Together, the agencies have *circa* 35,000 employees and account for over £1.6 billion in annual public spending. The permanent members of the Partnership are the most senior decision-makers from the partner agencies.

Table 3. Data display

Date	Event/description	Data used to study the event
2000	First Community Plan	Documentation (internal documents; formal studies and reports) Interviews (NPMem/NPStrat)
October 2002	Decision to use scenario planning	Documentation (communiqués; meeting information; internal documents) Interviews (NPMem/NPStrat)
November 2002 to March 2003	Scenario planning process	Documentation (communiqués; meeting information; internal documents; formal studies and reports) Workshop observation Interviews (NPMem/NPStrat/NCCorp)
March 2003	Scenario-to-strategy process	Documentation (communiqués; meeting information; internal documents; formal studies and reports) Workshop observation Interviews (NPMem/NPStrat/NCCorp/NCExec/SLev)
April 2003 to February 2005	Outcomes of scenario planning process	Documentation (communiqués; meeting information; internal documents; formal studies and reports) Interviews (NPMem/NPStrat/NCCorp/NCExec/SLev)
October 2005	Decision to re-use scenarios	Documentation (communiqués; meeting information; internal documents) Interviews (NPMem/NPStrat)
October 2005	Publication of progress reports	Documentation (meeting information; internal documents; formal studies and reports) Interviews (NPStrat/NCCorp)
April 2006	Revisiting the scenarios	Documentation (communiqués; meeting information; internal documents) Workshop observation Interviews (NPMem/NPStrat/NCCorp/NCExec/SLev)
April–September 2006	Scenario-to-strategy process	Documentation (meeting information; internal documents) Workshop observation Interviews (NPMem/NPStrat/NCCorp/NCExec/SLev)
September 2006 to April 2008	Outcomes of scenario planning process	Documentation (communiqués; meeting information; internal documents; formal studies and reports) Workshop observation Interviews (NPMem/NPStrat/NCCorp/NCExec/SLev)

The Northshire Partnership produced the first Community Plan in 2000, the second in 2004 and the third in 2008. The last two were developed following scenario planning processes facilitated by academic consultants with vast experience of scenario planning theory and practice. The goals of the community planning process were to improve public service; to provide a process for engagement and consultation for local authorities, public services, and the private and voluntary sectors; and to assist councils and partners in identifying and addressing the needs of individuals and communities. The first Community Plan articulated a ten-year vision that sought to deliver inclusivity for all citizens, a sustainable environment and best value. The plan was divided into six themes (people, economy, health, environment, education and inequality), each supported by a strategic partnership, which sat beneath the Northshire Partnership and worked to a three-year planning horizon.

The Community Plan was designed to sit above all public sector planning documents as it set the vision and ambition for the region. However, it was perceived as a council-led process and planners wanted to create a plan that 'was owned and shared by everyone' (NPMem). Scenario planning was identified as a tool that could improve long-term strategic planning.

Data analysis

To help address the use and impact of scenario planning, a detailed narrative was developed of the focused six-year case (i.e. from 1999 to 2005). The scenario planning process and the strategic

follow-through (2002–2005) were analysed using the stages described in Figure 1 – a synthesized diagram of an intuitive logics structure. In doing so, specific scenario planning practices were identified and examined within a simplexity framework where data were interrogated for evidence of sensemaking, organizing and storytelling (e.g. the 'problem identification' in the 'diagnosis/scoping' workshop demonstrated organized storytelling, where participants shared personal and departmental 'stories' before ranking key concerns and, in sensemaking terms, reducing equivocality through agreeing upon the 'problem' the scenario planning process should address). While facilitated, shared sensemaking occurred within the process in a deliberately focused, episodic manner (and at the inter-organizational level), participants would often draw on personal and professional experiences; thus the sources of sensemaking became a focus of the analysis. Conversely, analysis was also directed towards understanding how the episodic sensemaking interacted with the continuous stream of sensemaking that occurs – this was achieved through examining the impact of the process and the stories on the continuous sensemaking that occurred at the intra-organizational level. Specifically, transcripts of meetings and internal policy documents were examined for evidence of strategic tools and sensemaking procedures used prior to the scenario planning process. Through analysis of reflective thoughts at the inter-organizational level (via interviews and internal policy memos) for the organizing characteristics of the sensemaking practices, it appeared that scenario planning had become the accepted framework for doing community planning. Analysis at the intra-organizational level, however, revealed a diminished impact, devoid of almost any explicit engagement with the scenario planning work. In the vein of rich qualitative research, analysis often becomes a multi-phased process (Langley, 1999; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2011; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) and was thus extended to examine how people engaged with the scenario engagement retrospectively, i.e. without involvement with the practice. Most non-group member interaction came via the stories that were released publicly at a special event and disseminated online. Data were further interrogated for the presence of physical knowledge structures that contribute to continuous sensemaking, specifically strategic objects and artefacts that receive attention within intra-organizational strategizing. Artefact data were subsequently categorized as being 'local', 'regional', 'national', 'European' and 'global'. Often these artefacts would be specific outputs of established, formalized organization-level practices, akin to Jarzabkowski's (2005) administrative practices. On further analysis of the lack of integration (utilizing the retrospective reflection of service managers and executives of partner organizations), repeated examples of 'day-to-day' pressures emerged, with interview subjects referring explicitly to multi-level administrative practices requiring immediate attention – a similar categorization of local to global was applied, helping to uncover layer upon layer of strategic practices that affected all partnership organizations in varying manors.

Finally, a representation of the phenomenon was developed, showing graphically the filtering aspect of the episodic sensemaking (achieved through an organized set of simple practices like ranking the importance of key drivers) that was created through the scenario planning process, and the way the outcomes were (attempted to be) transferred from the inter-organizational level to the flux of continuous sensemaking found in the objects and practices that constitute intra-organizational strategizing (Figure 2).

Through this simple modelling process, the flow of knowledge that informs sensemaking and storytelling was captured and helped to identify seemingly small practices (e.g. the situated development of the stories and the subsequent editing process) that may have had a broader impact.

Findings

In considering the use and impact of scenario planning at the inter- and intra-organizational level, case analysis highlighted the effectiveness of scenario planning as a practice of simplexity, as both a storytelling-driven sensemaking filter for environmental complexity and as an organizing framework for simplifying the activities involved in long-term strategic thinking. There was a clear disconnect, however, between the effectiveness of the inter-organizational process and the perception of impact at the intra-organizational level.

A key aspect of the (mostly) positive scenario was joined-up public services, which allowed disparate forces to understand their contribution in

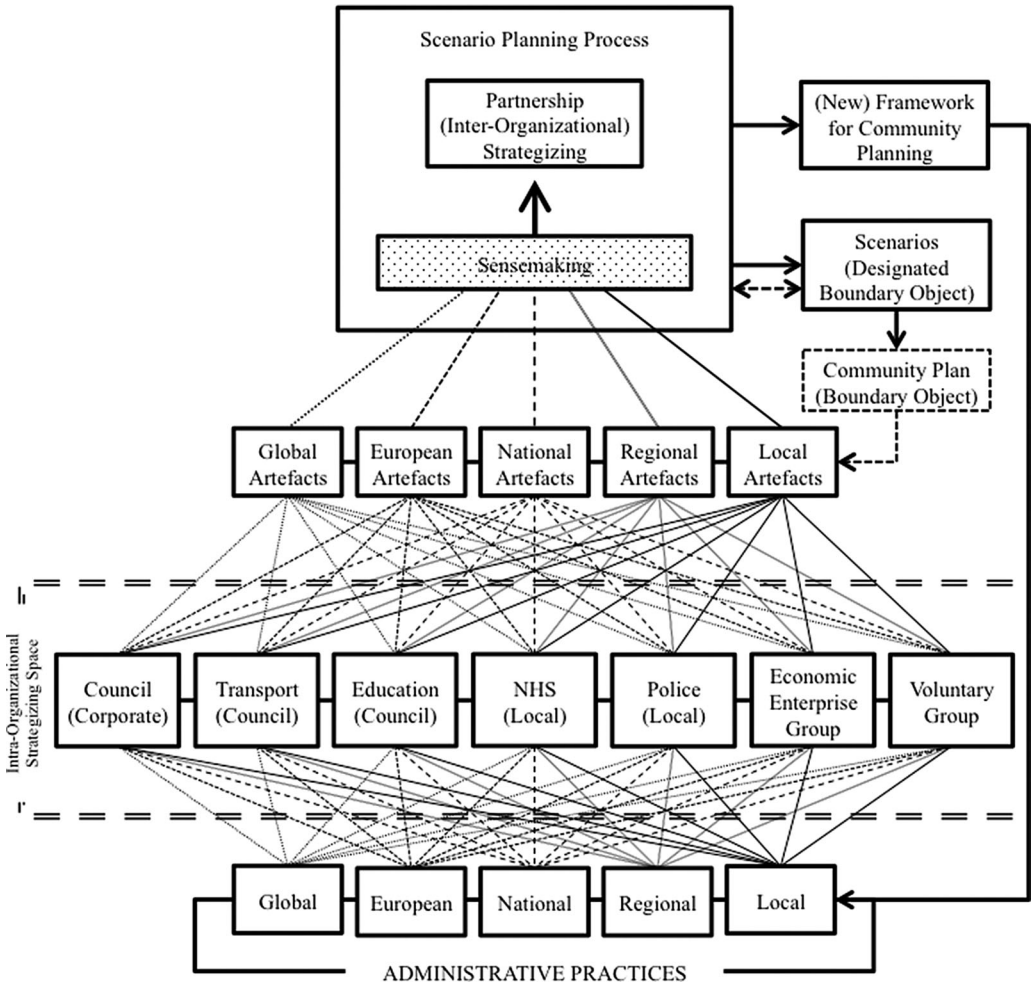

Figure 2. The flow of practices and artefacts in inter- and intra-organizational strategizing in Northshire's public sector

tackling societal problems. In sharing stories of success (and failure) in joint working and through identifying relevant actions and talking about Northshire as a single entity, a subtle transformation in policy development was perceived to be occurring. Within corporate management, who were continuously connected with the process, a dominant perspective was that services and institutions were mimicking the partners' enthusiasm and that they understood and viewed their role in achieving what had become a unifying vision: 'they could recognize it, they could actually feel it and see things in it, they could understand and appreciate what was actually going on' (NCCorp).

Speaking about the changing dynamic within the partnership, one member noted, 'people could see that they, on their own, couldn't do things and they needed to work in true partnership with people in other organizations and I'm sure that it's the scenario planning that woke them up' (NPMem). This was echoed by most actors engaged with the partnership's strategic processes, who suggested that the scenario planning process led to a new method of community planning, one that embodied principles of partnership and provided a way for them to consider complex subjects in a simple, manageable structure: 'I think that it's actually given us a policy development process' (NCCorp).

Subsequent analysis of the intra-organizational level, however, conveyed a contrasting image where the scenario planning work had little impact – the output of the scenario planning process and the day-to-day demands limited engagement at the intra-organizational level. Demonstrating richness

Table 4. Exemplar of impacts of scenario planning

Impact of scenario planning on the strategy process
Inter-organizational benefits
As well as it was painting a picture, in painting that picture it helped build relationships, it helped build that sense of common purpose and understanding. I think that's very powerful (NPMem)
[it provided] opportunity for those engaged with community planning to come together and share experience to reinforce the value of partnership working (NPMem)
The benefits were more subtle; they were the gelling of the partnership, the willingness of people to think longer term about possible futures and challenges. And the plan itself? Well, *plans are of little importance but planning is essential* (NCCorp)
The Fife Partnership provides a mechanism for making sense of a lot of the work so that it's not just taking place in isolation (NPMem)
It gives us a common language and it gives us a common focus and a kind of neutral one where we can talk about the different contribution our different services could make (NCExec)
They were there in the back of your consciousness and it was something you associated the partnership with (NPMem)
Intra-organizational shortcomings
I think we've always underestimated in community planning how much you're a prisoner of our own cultures, and our own way of doing things, and our own institutions (NPMem)
I'm not really sure why … why we didn't do them at the next level, the service level … there was a lot going on then with best value etc. (NCCorp)
I don't think we capitalized on them sufficiently in the plan-making, in the review of the Community Plan. I don't think you can look at the Community Plan that came out in 2004 and say, *right, that is the influence of the scenario process* (NCCorp)
I think the scenario planning process was acknowledged in the rewrite of the Community Plan but I'm not sure you can easily trace the outcomes in the revised Community Plan, in terms of what it was proposing, to change thinking arising from the scenario process – I was disappointed in that (NPStrat)
I don't think all the effort that went into the scenarios resulted in a significantly different Community Plan (NCExec)
the plan itself did not clearly show the influence of the scenario process, albeit it was acknowledged (NCCorp)
I guess, though, there's a tendency, in any large service, for activities that are focused right across the council to play second fiddle to the day-to-day realities that are running a service (NCExec)
There wasn't a change. There wasn't a 'light coming on moment' …. They didn't really affect our discussions in here …. We're aware of them, but they're not in areas where we have any primacy (NPMem)
The scenarios acted as a good mirror to set those things in context but I don't think they directly challenged and changed what were our objectives, what were our performance measures and so on (NPStrat)

of qualitative data is often limited in journal articles (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007); an attempt to manage this inevitable trade-off is through the use of exemplars indicative of the full body of data. Accordingly, Table 4 provides some examples supporting claims of success at the inter-organizational level and the lack of engagement at the intra-organizational level.

In understanding the difference in impact between the group and intra-organizational level, three significant themes emerged, all of which related to the breakdown of simplexity. An increase in the complexity and complicatedness of post-scenario planning activities (e.g. multiple progress indicator matrices) and a decrease in complexity of thought (e.g. simple binary responses for progress indicators) hindered the transference of the process from the inter- to intra-organizational level. These three themes are categorized as 'losing momentum', 'competing strategic processes' and 'assumption of strategic singularity'.

Losing momentum

The council service charged with the management of the strategic follow-through process attributed the lack of engagement with the scenarios to 'strategic fatigue'. Progress slowed down amidst 'so many tiers of local government' (NPMem) and an increased number of technical resource allocation tasks.

> That's where we lost momentum. I just remember [a member of the policy unit] producing endless charts and Excel spreadsheets and trying to turn a story into a cold, hard strategy. I don't know how it's supposed to be done, how if scenario planning is part of a core strategy like this, how that connection is made. But that was probably the weakest part of what we did. We lost steam. (NPStrat)

Although the work was well intentioned and started positively, the constant need for analysis of resources increased the complexity of the process,

both in terms of thought and activities, and enthusiasm declined:

> In doing some resource analysis of how fit our resources were to deal with the two scenarios … tiredness crept in and we didn't really go that step further. (NCCorp)

Part of this tiredness was also attributed to the number of competing strategic processes at play in the chaotic public sector.

Competing strategic processes

Strategy in the Northshire Partnership had become overly complicated; the scenario planning process simplified it at the inter-organizational level, but the pressure of competing strategic plans and policy and stakeholder interests at the intra-organizational level was relentless. Eventually, 37 different strategic plans were considered in the writing of the 2004 Community Plan (and below them dozens of service improvement plans etc.), which the head of the policy unit saw as a major shortcoming:

> We need to get this thing simplified again because it'd grown arms and legs and was creating lots of complexity and we'd lost the brevity of what we'd been trying to do .... Some of that is to do with the fact that there were lots of different planning processes going on underneath the Community Plan, all at different stages and all at different time periods. (NCCorp)

In transportation, a 'well-established strategic development process' (SLev) was identified as a reason why the scenarios had not 'really' improved the policy process. In the National Health Service (NHS), it was described as almost a continuous flow of strategy: 'there is an overarching compendium of strategies to which we are always adding and reviewing and refining' (NPMem), again reflecting the tensions between continuous and episodic sensemaking. Similarly, another partner from the local Enterprise organization echoed this notion of a constant state of flux in the form of a stream of strategy and strategic documents: 'the number of strategic documents that pass my desk are vast and many' (NPMem). The Enterprise group, like NHS Northshire, sits between a national framework and local objectives:

> Our strategic hierarchy starts with what was the framework for economic development for Scotland, which was then translated into a document called *A Smart, Successful Scotland: Ambitions for the Enterprise Network*s. The task of an organization like [us] is to sit between the national strategic environment and the local strategic environment and to build a bridge between the two. (NPMem)

The voluntary organizations are perhaps in an even more complicated position because of their reliance on (usually short-term) local, national and European funding and the concomitant requirement to adapt their strategy accordingly. With so many layers of planning, perhaps it is unsurprising that one of the greatest challenges of the scenario planning process is the multitude of local and national strategic requirements:

> The strategic direction comes from all sides: from the Scottish Government, especially if ministers want to see specific outcomes in specific areas and if there's funding associated with that, from the Council's structure plan, and from the Community Plan. (NCExec)

Although the scenario development process was intended to reduce complexity and align the overarching strategies, the Structure Plans, Service Improvement Plans, National Frameworks etc., are so deeply embedded in intra-organizational practices that the scenarios became another part of the complexity, competing against the continuous flow of sensemaking that occurs in their strategizing process.

Assumption of strategic singularity

While the previous two findings noted increased complexity (of thought and action), analysis also identified a reduction in the need for complexity of thought. While the mostly positive scenario 'instilled an understanding of what we're doing' (NPMem), what developed in the strategy phase was an underlying assumption that the positive scenario was virtually interchangeable with the ambitious vision defined in the 2000 Community Plan. It was believed that the council was working towards the positive scenario, implying that little strategic change was actually needed. This was described by a member of the scenario planning steering group as strategy 'by default':

> There was a tacit assumption that [the positive scenario] was close to the ambitions in the Community Plan, therefore we were going to carry on as we were. (NCCorp)

> The scenario planning process had given us comfort, perhaps, that [name of positive scenario] and the ambitions of the Community Plan were the same. (NCCorp)

This opinion filtered widely through the senior management of Northshire Council: 'I think we were probably going in that direction anyway, to be truthful, because the council itself was the leading instigator of the scenario planning sessions' (NCExec). This sentiment was echoed throughout the organization but was particularly prevalent in the education and transportation services, with transportation referring particularly to their limited ability to control their own future due to regulatory and budgetary practices.

This is perhaps expected when considering the enacted, organized and retrospective nature of sensemaking in a scenario planning process. Scenarios were developed within a situated time and space; they were based heavily on the past Community Plan and (then) current partnership agendas. For example, analysis of meeting minutes and internal policy documents indicates the importance of the partnership becoming a limited company and the development of telecommunications (particularly broadband connectivity); in the scenarios these two factors featured prominently, with their achievement being central to the positive scenario and their failure central to the negative scenario. Moreover, from analysing 'tracked changes' in edits of drafts of the scenarios, the rigorous editing process resulted in the incorporation of some public sector buzzwords (like 'wellbeing' and 'lifelong learning initiatives') and emphasis of particular sectors that it was argued would help foster 'wide engagement' (internal document).

Flows of objects and practices across knowledge boundaries

Although reluctant to claim causality in a study of this nature, there is evidence supporting that the scenarios' (the formalized stories') capacity to convey meaning and transfer knowledge across organizational boundaries and within intra-organizational groups was diminished as it competed against other, more entrenched, artefacts and the demands of embedded, administrative practices. These forces exist across the local–global continuum, providing structure and agency (Giddens, 1984) to govern everyday organizational routines. For symmetry, and to help establish connections, an example of issues within the local to global categorization is presented, uncovering layer upon layer of strategic practices that affected all partnership organizations in varying manors. Table 5 provides exemplars of both artefacts and practices affecting the intra-organizational level.

The findings uncovered a rich and complex political and social arena in which strategy tools are applied. Unintended strengths and inherent weaknesses of episodic strategy tools are exposed that will help develop understanding further.

Discussion

Scenario planning as a practice of simplexity

A form of dialectical negotiation is facilitated through simplexity in the form of scenario planning where sensemaking becomes shared and the goal of each simplifying action is a reduction in equivocality. Accordingly, while the scenario planning process creates a cognitive challenge through an organized, simple means of discussing complex problems, the challenge appears to be more directed to the *way* of thinking about the future (and indeed uncertainty) rather than at the actual content of the scenarios. Evidence is shown of the benefits of using scenario planning to integrate thinking (organizing and sensemaking) to foster discussion (sensemaking and storytelling). In strategy terms, the utilization of these strengths was a way to help the Northshire Partnership achieve interpretive (where frameworks of meaning are constructed between top managers and community to reaffirm goal relevance) and structural (where activity persists through administrative practices) legitimacy (Jarzabkowski, 2005). Scenario planning advanced community planning through procedural and interactive elements to become, essentially, the location of integrative strategizing. Jarzabkowski (2005) refers to this process as 'reframing':

> It first involves a shift from procedural strategizing, where the activity has high structural legitimacy but has also suffered the inertial effects associated with

Table 5. Exemplar of artefacts and practices constituting the flow of knowledge

Level	Artefacts	Practices
Local	Council's 20 year structure plan; service improvement plans; Community Plan; economic indicators	Election cycles, structure plans; service improvement plans; Community Plans
Regional	Transportation partnership agreements; joint economic development plans	Regional planning regulations; neighbouring local authority joint working processes
National	Political manifestos, the magenta and green book; national directives (for local services)	Election cycles; national frameworks; central government compliance
European	Regulatory frameworks; funding agreements	European regulation; funding cycles; auditing
Global	Macroeconomic data; commodity prices; interest rates	UN regulatory compliance regarding emissions standards

> it, to interactive strategizing. Interactive strategizing is important for reframing the meaning surrounding the activity in order to shift it from its inertial pattern and better align it with intended changes in the activity. This is followed by integrative strategizing in order to develop new formal practices that will structurally embed the changes, but with ongoing reenforcement of the new interpretative legitimacy of the change. (Jarzabkowski, 2005, p. 16)

The social and discursive aspects of *doing* scenario planning helps achieve this structural and interpretive legitimacy, and explains why those who were part of the process were so complimentary of its purpose and 'subtle' achievements, and perhaps why those not involved perceived little change. Thus, a reasonable inference is that in the interaction, the shared storytelling and sensemaking, the practices became steeped in meaning and knowledge. A small group working on simple activities while engaging in focused, complex thought created a collective knowledge and mindset, akin to a community of practice (see Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). The conduit for conveying that meaning, beyond the people involved directly, are the scenario narratives – simply a hypothetical story that readers (non-participants) have no physical or emotional attachment to. Consequently, as a designated boundary object, it does not possess the flexibility or contain the meaning required to transfer across domains, albeit local ones (Bechky, 2003b; Levina and Vaast, 2005; Star and Griesemer, 1989). Expanding the process to a wider audience will probably diminish the sensemaking and storytelling benefits of the inter-organizational group, while offering no more flexibility and transferrable capacity of the scenarios. Meaning is derived through organized, episodic sensemaking. The process created a quasi-external viewpoint for actors to participate in a different aspect of sensemaking, essentially changing the identity of the people involved from 'service heads' and 'councillors' to 'members of the Northshire Partnership' (Currie and Brown, 2003; Pratt, 2000; Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 2005). Scenario planning created both the location for them to participate in this different, episodic sensemaking and a way for them to engage with it – the practices created a new point of retrospection (Abolafia, 2010; Weick, 1995) and allowed them to enact their environment (Gephart, 1993) to reduce complexity, organize their personal experiences and organize collectively their understanding of how the future may unfold. Thus, meaning or, in scenario planning parlance, a mindset change can only come from participation, from being embedded in the process and experiencing both the episodic and continuous flow of sensemaking and storytelling. Accordingly, it seems unreasonable to think that such a mindset change is possible through the reception of a one-off artefact – the scenario stories – alone.

Sensemaking in inter- and intra-organizational strategizing

In order to distil empirical findings to a more conceptual level, a model of the flow of practices and artefacts of sensemaking in inter- and intra-organizational strategizing is developed (Figure 3). Rather than thinking of the external organizations as objective systems (Katz and Kahn, 1978), they are understood as a collective product of organizing processes (Weick, 1979) that are composed of artefacts and administrative practices. In the traditions of established practice theorists (Bourdieu, 1990, 2002; Giddens, 1984), we see mutually constitutive relationships affecting, informing and making sense from practices and artefacts at both organizational levels. At the inter-organizational

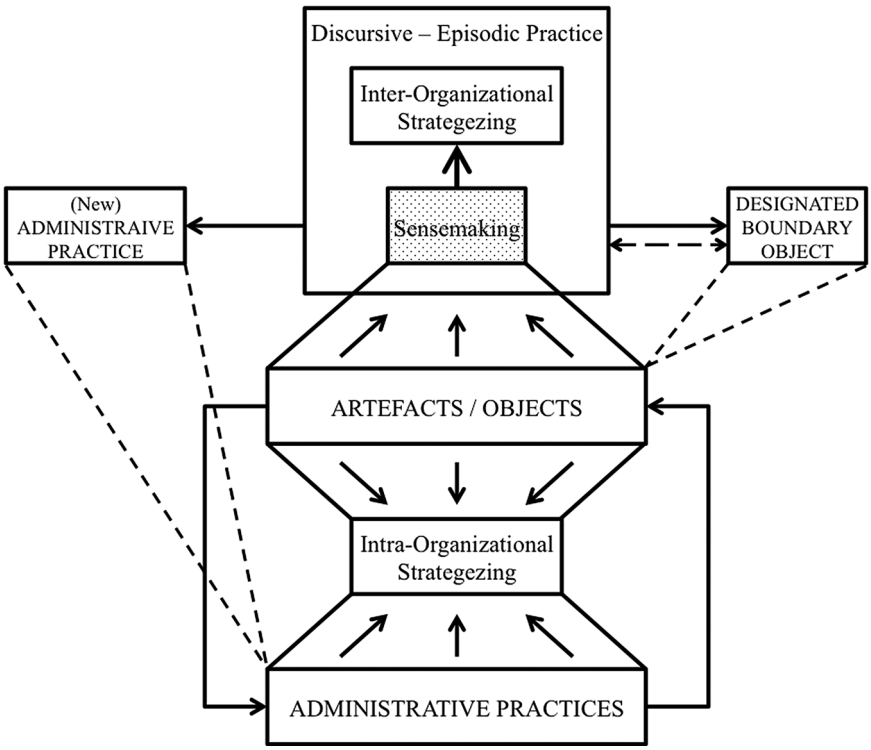

Figure 3. The flow of practices and artefacts in sensemaking within inter- and intra-organizational strategizing

level, scenario planning is an example of simplexity, where sensemaking, organizing and storytelling combine to facilitate a process loaded with meaning and allowing participants to simplify the complexity of long-term strategic planning. The flow of information that contributes to continuous sensemaking encompasses a vast number of objects from broad institutional logics down to local regulatory requirements.

Scenario planning creates the place and process to allow episodic sensemaking to help actors transform the clutter and mess of the public sector into something meaningful at the inter-organizational level. The tangible output is an object to facilitate this process, to act as a boundary object to transfer the inter-organizational thinking to an individual organizational level. However, in this model the new object, separated from the meaning contained in the participation of the scenario planning practices, does not dominate or transform meaning; rather it becomes another part of the sum body of objects influencing the intra-organizational strategizing and the administrative practices that structure much of their formal strategic activities. It is also important to note that while in the case presented the 'new object' (or the designated boundary object) may have failed as a boundary object, it still became part of the body of objects. In another situation, the designated object may also become the boundary object-in-use and exact more detectable changes in the intra-organizational strategizing.

A significant finding of the case, represented in the model, is the development of an administrative practice through continued engagement with the discursive, episodic practice. Scenario planning became how the inter-organizational partnership did community planning (it has since been used in two further planning cycles). Similarly to the new object, the new practice becomes part of the strategic milieu. However, in the case this was more apparent where organizations associated scenario planning with community planning, with individual organizations applying the principles of a successful and legitimate practice to help guide them on their long-term thinking. The model is not designed to be overly complex; rather its goal is to illustrate the nature of simplexity at an inter-organizational level and to draw attention to both the material sources and flow of sensemaking

that shapes strategizing at the intra-organizational level.

Conclusion

The paper makes three main contributions. First, it provides a detailed understanding of how scenario planning was used in a specific inter-organizational setting, conceptualizing the strategizing activities through the lens of simplexity and illustrating the deeply socialized form of sensemaking, where (analytical and interactive) aspects of scenario planning simplify complex, long-term strategic issues through the simplistic enactment of discursive and episodic practices. Although the direct output of the scenario planning process can be understood as a boundary object, a distinction is identified in the meaning contained within the process from that which is contained in the artefact (i.e. the scenarios). Lacking the depth of meaning, and thus capacity to transfer meaning, the scenario stories become simply one of myriad strategic objects that inform strategizing processes at the intra-organizational level. Figure 3 represents this complex flow of practices and artefacts and captures aspects of the tensions between inter- and intra-organizational strategizing. Accordingly, an inevitable challenge emerges for scenario planning to find a balance between engagement and meaning, and inclusion and impact.

Second, theoretical knowledge of the scenario planning process has been extended through its conceptualization as a practice of simplexity. Helping to illustrate how scenario planning is used, simplexity highlights the connections between sensemaking, organizing and storytelling components that are critical to understanding the impact of the practices involved. As an inter-organizational practice, scenario planning created a new sensemaking identity for actors as well as the space (both cognitive and physical) for enactment and retrospection. These aspects of sensemaking, inextricably linked to storytelling, and indeed organizing, helped redefine inter-organizational strategizing.

Finally, in showing the impact at both an inter- and intra-organizational level, the complexities involved in transforming meaning across boundaries, particularly in the public sector, are demonstrated. It is important to recognize even the subtlest of process-based benefits while acknowledging the shortcomings and/or limitations of strategy tools. Scenario planning, in this case, has been shown to be an effective practice of simplexity at the inter-organizational level but lacking the capacity to transform meaning beyond the immediate group of participants to the intra-organizational level.

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