



A structuration approach to scenario praxis[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Scenario planning has become a widely used approach for making sense of complexity and uncertainty in turbulent organizational environments. While its early development is rooted primarily in the practitioner world, more recently scholars have been directing attention to its theoretical and methodological presuppositions as they seek to establish rigorous epistemological and ontological axioms that can further advance these methods. In this article we seek to contribute to this lively area of scholarly activity by demonstrating how structuration theory can inform scenario planning by offering a set of concepts that can be used to consistently and systematically analyse future uncertainties within a flexible sociological framework. Structuration theory posits that social systems are reflexively structured through actor–structure interactions over time.

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1. Introduction

The application of scenario methods for making sense of complexity and critical uncertainties in organizational environments has become widespread in recent years [1]. While originally a strategic planning tool developed primarily by practitioners, more recently scholars have been directing attention to critical theoretical considerations underpinning the method by drawing on a rich array of conceptual frameworks [e.g. 2–16]. In this article, we contribute to this wider scholarly activity by demonstrating how structuration theory, as formulated by Giddens [17,18], can inform scenario planning theory and practice by providing a consistent set of ontological and epistemological axioms for analysing future uncertainties within a flexible sociological framework.

Structuration theory offers insights into how social relations are reflexively structured across time and space within pluralistic and overlapping social systems by drawing on virtual rules and resources. By focusing on actors and the rules and resources they deploy to effect change, we argue that scenario methods can better make sense of the unpredictable twists and turns that arise from the reflexive relationship between human activity and structural properties within continuously evolving social systems. Structuration theory provides a useful framework for analysing how highly disparate social variables (in the context of social systems, this includes economic, political and technological considerations) interact dynamically in common terms [19]. Scenario planning can benefit from such an analytical approach because, from a sociological perspective, it is through such structuration processes that future possibilities reflected in scenarios are shaped and emerge over time.

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1.1. Research purpose

In this article we report on our efforts to draw on structuration theory to construct three exploratory scenarios into the future of the public healthcare system in Ontario, Canada. We use this exploratory case not as an empirical study per se, but as an indicative exemplar of how a structuration framework can be usefully applied to scenario praxis. By praxis we take Giddens's [18] meaning, which is the interweaving of theory and practice. Ontario, with a population of 13.5 million inhabitants, is Canada's most populous province. As with the majority of state-funded healthcare systems around the world, there has been growing concern over the system's viability in the long-term. Such concerns precipitated the building of exploratory scenarios in the tradition of action-research, where our aims are both to explore the critical uncertainties inherent in the future of the healthcare system in Ontario, while simultaneously adapting structuration concepts for scenario planning perspicacity. We thus constructed the scenarios from the point of view of Ontario's Ministry of Health and Long-term Care. The purpose of this article, consequently, is to illustrate how a structuration framework for developing scenarios and analysing their theoretical and practical implications can be applied.

1.2. Research question and article structure

The central research question that we seek to address in this article is: How might structuration theory provide a useful, theoretically informed framework for constructing scenarios? We therefore assume that the main tenants of structuration theory apply in a scenario planning context. The article begins with a critical overview of scenario methods. It proceeds on to outline the main tenants of structuration theory and its relevance for scenario planning. We then demonstrate an application of structuration theory to an exploratory scenario intervention exemplar. Finally, after discussing the possibilities, limitations and further refinements needed in such an approach, we conclude by arguing that structuration theory is a useful concept for further advancing scenario praxis.

1.3. Research contributions

In this article, therefore, we intend to make three contributions. First, we contribute theoretically to the literature on scenario planning by demonstrating conceptually how structuration theory can enrich this vibrant area of management practice. Second, we advance scenario planning methodologically by illustrating how structuration concepts can be fruitfully applied to the building of scenarios. Finally, we contribute to praxis by operationalizing several theoretical concepts from structuration theory by applying the framework to an indicative exemplar involving the construction of exploratory scenarios for Ontario healthcare.

2. Conceptual overview

In the following section we present a critical conceptual overview of both the scenario planning and structuration theory literatures. Our aim is to elicit insights into how structuration concepts can be drawn on to advance scenario planning praxis.

2.1. Scenario planning

With its intellectual roots in systems thinking during World War II, Anglo-American scenario planning quickly moved beyond its military origins to become a widely used strategic planning process in public, private and non-for-profit organizations [20,21]. Originally developed at the RAND Corporation, a military oriented think-tank in the United States, it proliferated to businesses in the 1960s through researchers at the Stanford Research Institute and the Hudson Institute, the latter of which was founded by former RAND analyst Herman Kahn [22,23]. Through the Hudson Institute it was further refined in a number of different contexts, but most notably by planners at Royal Dutch/Shell, the Anglo-Dutch oil and gas giant, who has been one of the leading proponents of the approach since 1973 when strategic planners turned to scenario planning to help convince senior executives of the impending OPEC-oil crises, later crediting it with Royal Dutch/Shell's successful navigation of the oil shocks of the 1970s and 1980s [e.g. 3,24–29]. In this section we will focus on this approach, critically appraising its current standing.

2.1.1. What are scenarios?

Scenario planning can be described as alternative views about possible future worlds that highlight key strategic decision points in the present and direct attention towards how underlying causal structures might evolve. They do not try to predict the future, but to focus on critical uncertainties that can result in major discontinuities and strategic surprises. Unlike traditional probabilistic forecasting techniques that base their future projections on analysis of determinable past patterns derived from historical datasets using sophisticated statistical techniques, it is an approach that is designed to accommodate the complex and uncertain interactions of indeterminate forces that can result in discontinuous change. Indeed, Royal Dutch/Shell planners referred to their approach as intuitive logics for this reason. What is meant by this is the process of transforming observed facts into fresh perceptions [3,26–28]. This is achieved through an iterative process of alternating between intuitive exploration of knowledge and rational analysis [29]. Yet, with its proliferation as a strategic planning tool through the practitioner world, some have argued that scenario planning has become “debased by frequent use in many different contexts, rendering it slippery” [30 p 34]. The use and abuse of scenario planning has become a concern for several observers [14,30–32].

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