

The social construction of plausible futures

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What I find intriguing about plausibility is how multifaceted, labile and subjective it is – and, more importantly, inter-subjective. It strikes at the heart of sensemaking; indeed, Weick (1995) identifies plausibility as one of 7 core attributes of sensemaking. That is, a group of people sharing an interest in an issue or problem will negotiate, either implicitly or explicitly, a shared ‘sense’ of the situation in the present that will in turn guide them in constructing a shared interpretation/meaning of their shared future together. The shared future-construction provides a platform for joint action. This is a process of *prospective sensemaking*, the social construction of plausible futures.

This has several implications. The social construction of plausible futures:

- occurs or can occur through design, culture, power/politics, knowledge management or discourse. These are alternative, non-mutually exclusive mechanisms used by people in organized settings to negotiate over meaning. These mechanisms serve to structure decision arenas, i.e., specific spaces where a choice needs to be taken.
- can be applied to issues or processes of governance, design, strategy, creativity and innovation (new ideas, action, initiatives), rule making, decision making (decision rationality vs action rationality; Weick, Brunsson), knowledge management (Boisot & MacMillan 2004), etc.
- entails criteria for judging choices and thereby motivating action. Plausibility is part of a class of *alternative* criteria, i.e., alternative to accuracy or efficiency. Other alternative criteria include reliability (it always happens, it can be expected to happen) and pragmatism (it works, it is useful).
- can be built into (retrofitted into) many empirical projects as a lens to visualize the future, in order to yield new insights. An example follows.

I am currently involved in a project to examine ‘platforms’ for cross-sector social partnerships¹. My co-author and I have identified 3 types of platforms: Resource Dependence (time-limited constrained transactions between partners); Social Issue (focused on the resource complementarities needed to address a specific issue); and Societal Sector (focused on long-term collaborative learning and exploration of sectoral role identity through the project). I am beginning to see these platforms as “prospective sensemaking devices used by actors to envision a partnership project, frame it, and make it meaningful and sensible. These cognitive activities motivate actors to initiate and implement the project in a certain way. That is, they help practitioners form mental models that they use to negotiate, implicitly or explicitly, the terms upon which they hope to build their project. The ‘terms’ include such things as design, governance, control, capabilities, scope of services and length of project. Sensemaking platforms develop in the microprocesses of strategizing... about a CSSP project” and thus involve the exercise of power.

Platforms for CSSPs offer prospective sensemaking in that they *give* sense and motivate actors to *build* rather than simply find meaning. How does this happen? Wright (2005: 91) believes that making sense of the future is possible and requires an ability to envision the future as if it had already occurred. Strategic leaders do this by “creat[ing] an idealized future state where leaders then engage in a retrospective interpretation of how that state occurred.” I believe that plausibility is involved as/when people involved in the partnership project negotiate a coherence in the shared image of the issue they are engaging with.

Questions:

1. Who judges the plausibility of plausible ideas/facts/images? How to avoid the infinite regress of judgment?
2. How are plausible ideas/facts crafted, formed? How are they diffused, or how do they *become* diffused in a group/population? How do they become shared images of the future?

¹ From Selsky & Parker, “Platforms for Cross-Sector Social Partnerships: Prospective Sensemaking Devices for Social Benefit,” forthcoming in *Journal of Business Ethics*.