

Joint ASU-Oxford (InSIS) Plausibility Project

How plausible is plausibility as a scenario effectiveness criterion?

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Our intention is to contribute the fruits of our research to date to the first event of the joint ASU-Oxford Plausibility Project to be held in Arizona in November 2009. As such, this paper should be considered as work-in-progress, aimed at contributing to opening and supporting a generative dialogue and ongoing inquiry, rather than a comprehensive or complete record of our scholarship and scholarly interests on plausibility.

This paper is organised in 5-sections. Section 1 provides background information on the origins of the joint ASU-Oxford Plausibility Project and how the topic of plausibility emerged from the second Oxford Futures Forum, which took place in April 2008. Section 2 introduces another OFF08-spawned collaborative initiative, The Oxford Scenarios: Beyond the Financial Crisis and suggests the value of a case study on the recent financial crisis is relevant to considerations of plausibility in scenario work. Section 3, highlights the methodological confusion about scenarios and the value of look at plausibility from within and across different traditions of scenario practices. Section 4, points to interest in plausibility in other fields outside futures and suggests wider engagement is useful in illuminating how plausibility operates in scenarios work. Section 5, contains an initial list of questions that reflect our ongoing intrigue with plausibility and suggest research topics relevant for scholarship into and practices of scenarios.

1. Plausibility as it emerged in the second Oxford Futures Forum (OFF08)

The aim of the OFF is to bring together the under-theorised field of scenario work with a theoretical lens in a generative dialogue to reveal the theoretical underpinnings of effective scenario work. In so doing, OFF contributes methodological insights to improve scenario work in practice.

The second OFF was held in April 2008 to explore 'sensemaking and scenarios'. It brought together scholars and practitioners in two different communities: 'scenarios' reflecting the legacy of Pierre Wack and the so-called Shell 'intuitive logics' method of scenarios (i.e. as ongoing and social process rather than an analytical product based on episodic projects) and 'sensemaking' in the tradition established by Karl Weick in his work related to high reliability organisations.

Plausibility was one of the themes proposed for the initial round of discussions by the Organising Committee following their mapping of the conjunction of the two. The differences and similarities between scenarios as episodic, cognitive processes seeking re-perception and making sense with and of the future, and the retrospective Weickian sensemaking, with its productive use and

attention to equivocality and ambivalence, were explored in several rounds of dialogue. (Notes of each round of dialogue are available on the OFF website, listed in the reference section at the end of this paper).

The theme of plausibility featured in other dialogues in the 2008 OFF as well, reflecting common interests amongst both communities about how plausibility relates to understanding the context, its possibilities, and decision making.

Challenges relating to the design and facilitation of scenarios include navigating between the 'too plausible' and the 'too implausible' extremes, where usefulness is located. Plausibility seems to relate to issues such as learning, complacency, developmental or constructive challenge, and denial.

Questions raised about plausibility in the second Forum included:

- What exactly, when, how, why and for whom is plausibility?
- Where is plausibility located temporally – in anticipatory knowledge, in retrospective sense-making, in imagination and creativity; in individuals or in conversations or teams? Is it most salient in the past, present or future?
- What roles does plausibility play in relating past, future, and present to each other?
- What is plausibility in relation to scenario thinking and to sensemaking? Is either possible without plausibility? If it is essential to each, how so?
- How do probability and plausibility relate to each other? How might they overlap and help each other? How do they contest each other?
- How does plausibility relate to actionable knowledge?
- What is plausibility in relation to accuracy?
- Which intellectual fields have most to say on it?

In short, we found that while plausibility is compelling, it is not unproblematic – particularly if we cede to the temptation of treating it as an independent variable upon which the dependent variable of successful or effective scenario work might be premised.

A key problematic question that concerns us is whether the *retrospective condition* that Weick and his colleagues have proposed for sensemaking can be lifted, and *whether prospective sense-making* is possible. Some of us believe that scenarios do exactly this – they produce prospective sense-making. How this operates, however, is not yet well understood, nor is the role –if any- that plausibility plays in these processes.

This raises the also problematic question regarding the required conditions for plausibility to be obtained. Some experienced scenarists contend that plausibility depends on well constructed *causal* logics in the scenario story. Others suggest that it is only in the end-state structural *integrity* that plausibility is called for. Yet others think that plausibility emerges from *correlative* patterns, not from tight causal argumentation or systemic integrity.

A further problematic aspect in prospective plausibility, a question is whether plausibility rests on *existing* causal or correlative links, instead of *possible but not yet existing* links. And what to do regarding possible, but as of yet non-existent causal links that are (today) implausible, but may only become plausible in the future? For example, consider Monica Lewinski and Bill Clinton one week prior to its happening, or the discovery that the main prosecutor in NY against AIG would be caught with a call-girl and lead to his resignation, again a week prior to its happening.

The dictionary definition of plausibility (see **Annex A**) includes connotations of it as devious and manipulative. So the *ethics* of plausibility become a problematic issue as well.

A final problematic issue is what are the available alternatives to plausibility? And, once identified, are these alternatives more cost-efficient, more effective, or less? Upon what criteria should preferences amongst available options be established - in terms of credibility?

2. What does our scenario work on the financial crisis say about plausibility?

The failures of effective, prospective sensemaking within the banking system provide interesting case studies with which to better understand plausibility. The probabilistic approach to decision making rests on the validity of statics and, in turn, the 'fit' of the probability distribution model with historical evidence. The plausibility of the scenarios developed within the banking sector –including by regulators- was judged in terms of the probability of outcomes.

We do not want to waste the opportunity in this crisis for learning about the role and meaning of plausibility in scenario work. It was after all the worst financial crisis in nearly a century, revealing the fallibility of increasingly sophisticated attempts to develop and use anticipatory knowledge.

We have been exploring the links between scenarios, sensemaking and plausibility through an ongoing collaboration among a group of participants from the OFF08. Insights from this work will soon be published in the form of *The Oxford Scenarios: Beyond the Financial Crisis*.

Some commentators suggest that one of the key contributing factors in the recent financial crisis is the so-called 'equation' that killed Wall Street: a Gaussian-Cupola calculation of risk. As others have noted, this equation reflects beliefs of knowable and the future. The (implicit) assumptions that growth can continue forever, that uncertainty can be packaged into calculable risks, that all risk can be priced in the market, that markets for different risks of risks (derivatives, hedges) can be developed again and again, that markets are rational and efficient, that regulators understood what they were supposed to regulate, that securitization reduced risk by spreading it, that leveraged positions could be hedged effectively, became locked into the phenomenal growth of the financial industry.

Up to the financial crisis, these (implicit) assumptions and the dominant logic they co-produced went unquestioned. This was in part due the perceived success of banking organisations to enable rapid economic growth over several decades, providing governments such as those of Iceland and the UK with substantial tax revenues. These assumptions in turn, conditioned the norms of practice in futures thinking, framing the future as a continuation of the observed/able past as modelled with

the help of advances in mathematics and computing, restricting plausibility to the probability of specific outcomes – but with reference to that which they had modelled, not what might need to be modelled going forward.

It would appear that the probabilistic approach to futures thinking, like the forecasting it sustains, fails most spectacularly when a 'break' with the past takes place. This is technically unsurprising, for the very basis of probability and forecasting depends on how relevant the data set is for the model. A break from the past means that yesterday's modelled data set becomes obsolete and irrelevant. But since the dominant logic of a financial services business is premised on proprietary data sets, models and derived probabilities, it is difficult to get the signal of an impending discontinuity to be heard as plausible – they are weak not only in the signal : ratio sense, but also in relation to the dominant logic.

In retrospect, it is possible to trace how different factors, including the actions of key stakeholders in the global financial and banking system triggered what in effect was a foreseeable catastrophe. We know it was foreseeable because it was foreseen by some pundits. While leading figures within the financial world raised early and dire warnings e.g. Warren Buffet's description of subprime mortgages as 'weapons of market destruction', the bulk of the players dismissed these as distracting scaremongering.

What we know of the scenarios developed and used within the banking industry is that they appear to have failed to reveal and test assumptions about dominant logics in the business models of individual banks and the underlying and systemic dynamics that underpinned banking success in the decades leading up to 2007.

What we can learn from this crisis about how meaning and role of plausibility in terms of the effectiveness of scenarios?

Might it be that the banking system had made itself blind to early warnings of potentially catastrophic change through its very acts of organizing and futuring? The 'how' of calculable and probabilistic future practices in banking appears to have limited the effectiveness of scenarios. Scenarios as prospective, episodic and collective sensemaking processes designed to reveal and challenge the 'what' of current action and thinking, and their consequences, were considered to produce 'extreme' and implausible' futures that needn't be acted upon. This, for example, is what well-informed stakeholders have told us happened to the otherwise imaginative scenarios produced by the UK regulator, the Financial Services Authority. This experience, if confirmed, suggests that implausibility may be far more relevant than plausibility, and that attending to plausible implausibility may be more relevant in scenario work than attending to plausibility!

The juniority of liquidity risk managers compared with other risk managers and, in turn, of risk managers compared with traders, not only institutionalized that hierarchy of plausibilities, but in doing so shaped the form and quality of the relevant strategic conversation. This suggests that power, and institutionalised power structures appear to play a role in establishing (im)plausibility. It would appear that plausibility in scenario work in banking was not immune to the manipulation of power to retaining the status quo of trading, where traders dominate non-traders. This retained

attention on more comfortable forms of knowledge favoured the detection of those cues/signals that reinforced group think and maintained the institutional script (and 'rational fantasy') of calculable risks.

With this in mind we wonder to which extent the probabilistic approach to scenarios in stress testing (or 'future proofing') individual components of the system (individual banks) will deliver sustainable financial services. It is as if the traffic system of a country attended only to brakes and airbags in cars, and did not consider rules of the road (e.g. speed limits and road signs) or infrastructure (e.g. traffic lights), and could do without police forces or radars. Ongoing sustained attention in the run up to the financial crisis centred on comfortable cues, and sustaining institutionalised, accepted strategic ignorance. The apparent denial of, dismissal of, and/or perceived distraction by, 'uncomfortable' early warnings of disaster also indicate the banking sector's emphasis on scenarios as an analytical technique rather than an intervention aimed enhancing the quality of strategic conversation by challenging and testing the assumptions about wider context on which their proprietary models rested. As a result, socially constructed 'common sense' across the sector went untested and there was a collective failure in disciplined imagination to 'think the unthinkable'. No wonder Alan Greenspan expects another financial crisis is inevitable!

Despite the brutal re-perception of the reality that "things that cant go on forever, don't", noted by Herb Stein, that has been forced on those who have lost most from the financial crisis, the jury is out about whether or not an effective re-perception of the misguided, common sense (or indeed 'non-sense') that was manufactured and sustained by the architects, operators and users of the financial system in the lead-up to the crisis is happening and if so, what effect that might have. Starbuck's research shows that crisis are not, alas, good learning vehicles, and this one appears to be another missed learning opportunity. Perceptions and/orand evidence about a 'brief recession' and signs of economic recovery will surely prove a more comfortable distraction from ra need to rethinking the deeply held mental models and myths that have underpinned the extraordinary growth in global financial services.

The above reflections suggest we should make a researchable proposition to the effect that comparing how plausibility and implausibility were manufactured before the crisis with how they work in financial and banking practices during and after the crisis offers a timely and interesting case study with which to research plausibility as a scenario effectiveness criterion.

3. How do different scenario traditions view plausibility, and what do the differences indicate about the nature of plausibility?

Is plausibility unitary, or does it comprise a family of different versions? As scenario practices obey to the second alternative, it would follow (in principle) that they too should imply different forms of plausibility.

Alternative traditions in scenario work manifested as 'scenario schools' tend to discourage probability and favor 'possible' or 'preferable' futures. We know of no empirical evidence showing

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that plausibility within any scenarios school (probable, possible or preferable scenarios) ‘works’, nor are we aware of comparative studies. Furthermore, there is no well-defined agreement of what plausibility means, how it is manufactured and determined, or when, by whom and for whom. Yet, within quantitative-based scenario schools, including many used in military settings and those with lineage from the ‘modified cross trends/impacts’ school (Ref: Bradfield et al; Godet), Bayesian probability is a condition for plausibility (Ref: Peng & Reggia)

US scenarios schools, notably Forrester’s group at MIT, have been more influential in establishing the role of modelling in relation to environmental change scenario work. They focus on prospective sensemaking and consider plausibility in terms of fit with historical data, , e.g. the Club of Rome’s Limits to Growth. (Ref: Mermet)

There has been an explicit rejection of probability as the basis for scenario work within the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Does this stem, in part, from recognition that the ‘fat tail’ distributions of global climate models render judgements of plausibility based on probability ‘implausible’? Or is it also that the IPCC is grappling with the challenge of bridging different “cultures of plausibility” and how they come together across the science-policy interface? Here plausible/implausible outputs from science become plausible/implausible inputs for policy-making. From our perspective, it appears that the most effective basis for plausibility in scenario work at the science-policy interface must be co-produced.

The methodological foundations of scenarios work focussed on concerns (as opposed to actors) such as those relating to local and global environmental change derive from a mix of different schools and mask a deeper mix of philosophical traditions (Ref: Wilkinson and Eidinow). Each implies a different basis of plausibility as a scenarios effectiveness criterion, and we know of no research examining the differences or how they are meant to interact.

In short, the scenarios community has not, to our knowledge produced, or even attempted to produce a systematic review of plausibility. A cursory review of the scenario literature provides evidence that there are many articles that mention criteria of plausibility for scenarios (especially in the context of stating that they are not predictions). Very few actually unpack what that means - see **Annex B**.

Our thinking, thus, leads us to make a second researchable proposition to the effect that attention to plausibility as the basis for effectiveness in scenarios would benefit from comparing scenario traditions and lineages.

4. How might research on plausibility in other fields outside futures illuminate how plausibility operates in scenarios work?

In our tradition –manifested in OFF- of valuing how other fields beyond futures consider scenarios, a preliminary scan suggests that scholarly and practitioner interests in plausibility is widespread and, in principle, could hold insights of help in scenario work – see **Annex C**. We propose a researchable

proposition to the effect that attention to plausibility as the basis of effectiveness in scenario work might also benefit from illumination from fields outside futures.

5. Specific questions aimed to open rather than direct the conversation

- What is plausibility?
 - Where do the concept(s) of 'plausibility' come from?
 - Which languages and cultures have worked the concept most, and why? (see etymology in Annex c)
 - What other walks of life (beyond scholarship) might be helpful to incorporate in the Plausibility Project? The arts? Criminal activity such as forging? Spying? Camouflage and disguise? Politics?
 - Why are futures studies so quiet on the matter of plausibility?
 - What do other scholarly fields tell us about plausibility – such as religion, mathematics, philosophy, humanities, linguistics, cognitive science, or management studies?
 - Do futures interventions construct plausibility or are futures interventions a priori conditioned by meta-contexts in which the (psychological, cultural, social, cognitive) bases of plausibility are often implicit?
 - What are the aesthetics of plausibility? When is it ugly or attractive?
 - When has plausibility been manufactured in a way that is good/effective?
 - How do the dark sides of plausibility operate? What ethics does plausibility entail?
 - Is plausibility subject to the so-called Rumsfeldian logics of 'knowns and unknowns': implausibly plausible; plausibly implausible; plausibly plausible; implausibly implausible ?

- How is plausibility established, on which basis, and by whom in scenario practices?
 - Concepts:
 - Is plausibility about 'better foresight' (i.e. the ability to see the future more clearly/learn from the future) and/or 'better preparedness' (i.e. the availability of alternative options and the capacity to act)? Or something else e.g. parsimony/simplicity, goodness/aesthetics?
 - Is plausibility really necessary or helpful? As many of the futures that unfold were considered implausible beforehand, why is plausibility required in foresight?
 - On what basis(es) does plausibility get agreed in scenario practices, e.g. causality/the clarity of causal logics, correlation/fit with the frame/scripts of sense-making, systemic integrity and parsimonyetc?
 - Does/how does temporality influence plausibility?
 - Is implausibility an ideal to be approximated with scenario work, and if so, how?
 - How does plausibility relate to credibility, likelihood, probability and other such concepts?

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- Where in the body is plausibility determined: in the gut? eye contact? brain? In inter-body interactions?
- Methods:
 - Is plausibility established in the same way in different contexts of futures practices e.g. single client vs. multi-stakeholders/public interest scenarios?
 - What can we learn from the financial crisis about the challenges, meaning etc in shifting beyond probability to plausibility?
 - How do implausibilities become plausible and viceversa? How can this be done ex-ante?

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Annex A: An Etymology of Plausibility (according to the OED)

[< classical Latin *plausibilis* deserving applause, acceptable < *plaus-*, past participial stem of *plaudere* [PLAUD](#) v. + *-ibilis* [-IBLE](#) suffix. Compare Middle French, French *plausible* pleasing, winning popular approval (1552), convincing (1580 in Montaigne).]

A. *adj.*

†1. **a.** Acceptable, agreeable, pleasing, gratifying; winning public approval, popular. *Obs.* Common in the late 16th and 17th centuries.

1541 [T. PAYNELL](#) tr. Felicius *Conspiracie of Catiline* viii. f. 13^v, Nothyng was so plausyble to the people as perswasion agaynst the lawe Agraria. **1592** [T. KYD](#) *Spanish Trag.* IV. sig. I4, I meane each one of you to play a part, Assure you it will proue most passing strange, And wondrous plausible to that assembly. **1593** [R. HOOKER](#) *Of Lawes Eccl. Politie* I. xvi. 92 It might..have beene more..plausible to vulgar eares. **1605** [J. STOW](#) *Annales* 1426 This change was very plawsible or well pleasing to the Nobility and Gentrye. **1643** [SIR T. BROWNE](#) *Religio Medici* (new ed.) To Rdr. sig. A2, There might be many things therein plausible unto my passed apprehension, which are not agreeable unto my present selfe. **1671** [MILTON](#) *Paradise Regain'd* III. 75 Before mine eyes thou hast set; and in my ear Vented much policy, and projects deep Of enemies, of aids, battels and leagues, Plausible to the world, to me worth naught. **1730** in *Swift's Lett.* (1768) IV. 249 Which..you will allow to be a desperate crisis under any party of the most plausible denomination. **1828** [I. D'ISRAELI](#) *Comm. Life Charles I* I. iii. 30 An invective against royal pedantry would always be plausible.

b. Of a person, a person's manners, etc.: affable, pleasant, winning, ingratiating. *Obs.*

1577-8 in J. H. Burton *Reg. Privy Council Scotl.* (1878) 1st Ser. II. 667 The said souirteis requirit the saidis officiaris with plausabill wordis to desist. **1605** E. PHILIPS *Certaine Godly Sermons* 202 To shew himselfe plausible, and to make himselfe deafe when he heareth an oath. **1624** [T. HEYWOOD](#) *Ist World's ^{is}io^v* II. 102 His aspect more plaucible and his countenance more amiable than the former. **1633** [BP. J. HALL](#) *Plaine Explic. Hard Texts* II. 20 The Sonne of man came in a kinde, affable, and plausible manner. **1704** [T. BROWN](#) *Declam. Praise Wealth in Wks.* (1707) I. i. 126 A Plausible Poetaster. **1796** [R. BAGE](#) *Hermsprong* III. xxi. 180 Mouths in plenty were ready to open in his praise; not one to his discredit... No man would give himself the trouble to please every body, without great and uncommon motives. In proportion as he was plausible, he must be the more dangerous. **1841** [E. BULWER-LYTTON](#) *Night & Morning* I. ii, Robert, you are a careful, sober, plausible man. **1880** [W. T. DENNISON](#) *Orcadian Sketch-bk.* 26 A' his forebears..war muckle stoor an' yet geud natired plossible folk.

†2. Expressing applause or approbation; plausive, applausive. *Obs.*

1542 [T. BECON](#) *Newe Pathway vnto Praier* ix. sig. E.vj^v, Now I wyll haste to declare of what vertue & strength the true and Christen prayer is, y^t men..may w^t y^e more plausible [*printed* plansible] & ioyful mindes delygth in it. **1567** [T. DRANT](#) tr. Horace *Arte of Poetrie* sig. Av^v, That when the Epilogue is

done We may with franke intent, After the plaudite stryke vp Our plausible assente. **1600** [P. HOLLAND](#) tr. Livy *Rom. Hist.* XXXIX. l. 881 For a while there was a plausible noise heard among them as they approued his words. **1622** [C. FITZ-GEFFREY](#) *Elisha* 1 A plausible Acclamation, The Chariot of Israel, and the Horse-men thereof.

†3. Deserving of applause or approval; praiseworthy, laudable, commendable. *Obs.*

1561 [T. NORTON](#) tr. J. Calvin *Inst. Christian Relig.* III. 216 To me it should not be very laborsom, and yet very plausible to bewray to their great shame those things that thei haue heretofore bosted vpon as mysteries. **1592** [G. HARVEY](#) *Four Lett.* iii, in *Wks.* (1884) l. 185 The plausible examples of..diuers such vertuous Romanes, and sundry excellent Greekes. **1637** R. HUMFREY tr. St. Ambrose *Christian Offices* l. 106 Those exercises which they thinke more plausible. **1684** tr. Plutarch *Lives* II. 110 But Sisinius and Brutus, a couple of seditious Tribunes, did presently interpose here, crying out, That the Consuls went about to disguise the most cruel and barbarous action in the world, under that so mild and plausible name of a Colony, for no other end, but that they might precipitate so many poor Citizens..into the very gulf of Perdition. **1709** [LD. SHAFTESBURY](#) *Moralists* III. ii. 211 Is there a fair and plausible Enthusiasm, a reasonable Extasy and Transport allow'd to other Subjects?

4. a. Of an argument, an idea, a statement, etc.: seeming reasonable, probable, or truthful; convincing, believable; (formerly) *spec.* having a false appearance of reason or veracity; specious.

1565 in J. H. Burton *Reg. Privy Council Scotl.* (1877) 1st Ser. l. 369 Undir pretence of that plausabill argument to draw eftir thame a large tale of ignorant personis. **1588** in D. Masson *Reg. Privy Council Scotl.* (1881) 1st Ser. IV. 281 The narrative..hes ane plawsable face to cullour the..pretendit forme thairof. **1651** [T. HOBBS](#) *Leviathan* III. xlii. 303 All such, as had both the ambition to attempt the attaining of the Kingdome, and the art to deceive the People by counterfeit miracles, by hypocritical life, or by orations and doctrine plausible. **1682** [DRYDEN](#) *Medall* 7 A Tempting Doctrine, plausible and new. **1711** [J. ADDISON](#) *Spectator* No. 90. ¶7 They told such a plausible Story, that I laughed at their Contrivance. **1790** [E. BURKE](#) *Refl. Revol. in France* 338 The dream of the philosopher's stone induces dupes, under the more plausible delusion of the hermetic art, to neglect all rational means of improving their fortunes. **1838** [C. THIRLWALL](#) *Hist. Greece* IV. xxxii. 259 According even to the avowed doctrines of Protagoras and Gorgias, no truth could claim any higher value than that of a plausible opinion. **1891** [T. HARDY](#) *Tess* II. xxxii. 149 Despite Angel Clare's plausible representations to himself and to Tess of the practical need for their immediate marriage, there was in truth an element of precipitancy in the step. **1952** G. SARTON *Hist. Sci.* l. xi. 280 If Hippocrates actually wrote the first textbook of geometry, which is not only possible but plausible. **1993** *Guardian* 14 July l. 12/4 It is entirely plausible that Sir Colin Marshall did not know of the computer accessing or hacking which was going on. **2004** *Vogue* Mar. 286/2. I invented a plausible surname for her and her husband that consisted of all the letters of both their last names.

b. Of a person: convincing or persuasive, esp. with the intention to deceive.

1761 [F. SHERIDAN](#) *Mem. Miss Sidney Bidulph* I. 74 The plausible man came to me in the evening, and with looks, full of pretended sorrow, but real guilt, begged I would hear him on the subject of a letter which he said he found had unfortunately prejudiced me against him. **1860** [R. W. EMERSON](#) *Fate in Conduct of Life* 40 A swindler.., then a quack, then smooth, plausible gentlemen. **1875** '[A. R. HOPE](#)' *My Schoolboy Friends* 221 He was a plausible, cunning kind of fellow. **1927** [A. CONAN DOYLE](#) *Case-bk. Sherlock Holmes* 175 But he is plausible and cunning. That is all I have to say to you. Don't take him at his face value. There is more behind. **1970** *Sunday Times* 15 Nov. 3/5 Plausible, highly-paid 'winklers' who are hired by property companies and landlords to persuade families to leave their rent-controlled tenancies so the homes can be sold at high prices. **2001** *FourFourTwo* Aug. 116/3 He's very plausible, but when you actually meet the man and get to know him, he's a wrong 'un.

B. n. That which is plausible; a plausible argument or statement; also occas. (with *the* and *pl.* concord) plausible or specious people as a class.

1654 [R. WHITLOCK](#) *Zootopia* 162 Having ensnared the silly vulgar, by the dazle of their fame, (in some plausible or other). **1670** *Moral State Eng.* 101 To discourse or argue plausibles. **1831** [J. S. MILL](#) in *Examiner* 6 Feb. 83/2, I mean the really profound and philosophic inquirers into history in France and Germany, not the Plausibles, who in our own land of shallowness and charlatanerie, babble about induction without having ever considered what it is. **1833** [T. CARLYLE](#) *Diderot in Crit. & Misc. Ess.* (1857) III. 226 The plausiblest Plausible on record. **1846** [C. G. F. GORE](#) *Sketches Eng. Char.* (1852) 29 So is it with the Plausible. By dint of strenuously pretending to be good, wise, or zealous, they contract almost the form and pressure of virtue and wisdom. **2002** *Sunday Tel.* (Nexis) 4 Aug. 19 In considering the Shieldfield scare, people could believe the implausible..or they could believe the plausible: that Shieldfield was a busy, inner-city nursery in which everyone was getting on with their lives as normal.

SPECIAL USES

S1. plausible-looking *adj.*

1833 [T. CARLYLE](#) in *Fraser's Mag.* 8 27/1 Supid, pudding-faced as he looks and is, there is a vulpine astucity in him;..an oiliness so *plausible-looking. **1841** [C. J. LEVER](#) *Charles O'Malley* xcv, With a very plausible-looking tray. **1966** *Philos. Rev.* 75 411 Certain plausible-looking solutions..will not suffice.

S2. plausible deniability *n. Polit.* (orig. and chiefly *U.S.*) (the possibility of) denying a fact (esp. a discreditable action) without arousing suspicion; the method of achieving this.

1974 *Washington Post* 14 Sept. A2/3 Author David Wise also objected that the secret activities also required a policy of '*plausible deniability' on the part of U.S. officials when publicly questioned about them. **1987** *N.Y. Times* (Nexis) 8 Jan. A1/5 Investigators want to know..whether Mr. Reagan's open support for the contras was translated into action that he and other senior officials now find it convenient to repudiate... According to several Administration officials, the White House in the last

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few years had used the technique of 'plausible deniability'. **2001** *New Republic* 8 Oct. 8/2 So the Agency [sc. the CIA] tried to avoid direct involvement in the war, and to maintain plausible deniability... The U.S. provided the mujahedin only Eastern-bloc weaponry, so the rebels could claim they had captured it from Soviet troops rather than received it from Washington.

Annex B: A Sample of references to plausibility extracted from a limited review of the scenarios literature

“Walton (2008:161) argues that epistemological and ontological challenges of dealing with knowledge related to the future means that ‘plausible belief’ rather than “true justified belief” should guide an evaluation of scenarios”.

Wilkinson & Eidinow (2008) encourage consideration of epistemologies in scenario practice and offer a three fold typology (problem focused; actor focused; and reflexive interventionist/multi agent based) based on these. *“Where the first two processes are intended to help those involved anticipate and respond to future changes in their environments, the aim of this third approach is not responsive but creative. The metaphor that we used above to describe problem-focused and actor-centric projects described how we used maps to move through an environment, in the former case creating reliable maps that help us get to a destination as efficiently as possible; in the latter case, the participation of a group is essential in drawing maps. It is not a question of more maps, or more accurate mapping, but of the requisite variety in the set of maps and their plausibility to a range of worldviews that matters most”.*

“Naude et al (2000) demonstrate the importance of psychological profiles in strategic conversations with some participants being able to get others to change their positions considerably”.

“Schwartz (1992, 1996) says the strength of scenarios is their ability to combine multiple variables and to enable readers to suspend disbelief more readily than viewing graphs and tables.

“Staley (2002) makes an interesting case for historians as appropriate scenario writers (writing ‘histories of the future’) and suggests history methods would enhance scenario writing.

“Ramirez (2008:189) makes the argument that clarity as a form of aesthetics is fundamental to scenario effectiveness *“I believe that scenarios need to be like good literature – they need to be read by users in ways that help their minds render futures ‘more real than real”.*

Boisot & McMillan (2004, long range planning) discuss probability and plausibility (as well as reality and possibility) in the context of knowledge management contrasting managers and entrepreneurs.

“Selin (2006:6) writes *“The future is very much staked out within existing strategies, agendas and hierarchies. Scenarios are not innocent or distanced from those regimes, but rather often support or oppose them. Despite the aim to create objective or equally plausible scenarios, specific future worlds are sketched out and in the end scenarios are always selective and political”.* She also draws attention to the fact that some voices can be silenced in scenarios and that when we read them we need to think through whose interests are being promoted and whose are being discounted”.

“Roubelat (2006) draws an interesting analogy between strategic paradigms and Kuhn’s scientific paradigms arguing that re-perception comes about when an anomaly occurs in the strategic situation that can’t be understood or addressed within the existing paradigm of shared beliefs. Scenarios play the role of raising these anomalies thus potentially shifting the strategic paradigm of the organization” [\[Thus, does the dissonance in this situation make things seem more plausible\]](#)

“Cunha et al (2006:950) argue that a key tension in scenario work for participants is between needing to know how the future might unfold and fearing that this may not be in line with current modes of thinking. If participants are fearful this can result in them looking for *“expectancy confirming evidence rather than dissonant, disconfirming information”.*

“Schoemaker (1993, 1995) shows how scenarios play a valuable role in addressing probability heuristics (Tversky and Kahneman 1974). He argues for example that scenario work is effective in having one set of biases (overconfidence) offset by another (the conjunction fallacy).

“An example of the challenge of autopoiesis is provided by Claus’ (2007) who shows that the traditional music companies such as Universal did not successfully anticipate the impact of digital providers such as Napster and iTunes because the identity of these companies was defined as ‘selling CDs’ rather than ‘providing home entertainment’. Thus, the traditional companies kept taking actions that were congruent with their identity (such as programming CDs so that they couldn’t be played or copied on computers) even though ‘the environment’ indicated something different was needed. Eyakuze (2004) describes another example in the case of scenarios developed for Tanzania. He describes how that when the scenario builders focused on the future Tanzanians might face, they found themselves focusing on issues of identity and what that would mean for their future – captured in the phrase “Who are we (as Tanzanians)? The outcome was a definition that the author argues has not been challenged. Jacobs and Statler (2006) suggest that overcoming such tendencies could be possible by developing scenarios in a different way. They suggest the theoretical perspective of serious play which finds, like autopoiesis, notions of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ problematic (Winnicott as cited in Jacobs and Statler 2006). The value of play is that it makes explicit the inter-connection between assumptions about identity and context.”

“Bradfield (2004) reviews heuristics and other cognitive processes to show how these can potentially affect what data is accepted or rejected and how scenario storylines are constructed and received. Aligica (2005) shows that scenarios cognitively facilitate the blending of mental constructs to produce a new construct while epistemologically they operate as thought experiments. Jungermann (1985a, 1985b) shows the difficulties associated with scenario construction (due to the complexity of issues and the requirement to form new knowledge).”

Annex C: Plausibility as it features in other walks of life/literatures

Perhaps with roots in **mathematics**, there is Plausibility Theoryⁱ. According to this theory “something is plausible, if it is conceptually supported by prior knowledge”. Until Plausibility Theory came along, or so its proponents claim, Bayesian statistics – rules for weighting the likelihood of different events and their outcomes – was a commonly accepted basis of decision making. In this tradition, managers were encouraged to make decisions on a calculation of the probabilities of all outcomes of a given situation and choice of the solution with the maximum expected utility. See also: Collins and Mikalski (reasoning, 1989); Wolfgang Spohn (1985-); Lemaire and Fayol (arithmetic problem solving, 1995).

A model of plausibility is also offered from **cognitive science** (Connell & Keane 2006). What I found interesting in this article is the link between plausibility and the past as embedded into their concept-coherence view.

Not forgetting the **organisational science and sensemaking** literature: Weick's book Sensemaking in organizations (1995) There is a section on plausibility (Chapter 2: Seven properties of sensemaking). Also the Weick, Sutcliffe Obstfeld (2005 in Organization Science) article offers a short section on Plausibility and sensemaking starting at page 415 and that again links plausibility with stories, accuracy, action and "a potentially exciting" future.
