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Interpreting planners' talk about change: an exploratory study

Francesca S Sartorio, Huw Thomas, Neil Harris

Cardiff University, School of Geography and Planning

Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff CF10-3WA

1.Introduction

This paper has two complementary objectives. First, it provides an illustration of a promising approach to understanding planning systems and their change. It seeks to link theories of institutional and organizational change with the model of actors' agency developed by Bevir and Rhodes (2003, 2008, 2010, 2012) to form an interpretive frame for understanding responses to possibilities of change in planning. This frame lends a specific lens to study change, embedding planning practice within a much wider social and 'political life' (Peters, 2005 in Lowndes, 2009:93) and providing a value-critical stance that planning theoretical framings – for their disciplinary positioning - have not fully developed. Secondly, it considers the willingness and ability of professional planners to think about radical change in planning and shows how planners envisage change and how they articulate their aspirations for the planning system, the kinds of structural change that Forester (1989) points out must sometimes be contemplated by all conscientious planners. We do this by looking qualitatively at narrative data obtained through interviews and focus groups. We then interpret findings referring to the political and organizational traditions relevant to the Welsh planners' community, following the interpretivist approach introduced by Mark Bevir and Rod Rhodes (2010) and institutionalist models of change (Lowndes, 1996, 2001, 2005; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010; Hall, 2010). As much research on planning reform seems to emphasize the political or technical dimensions of change, and planning systems as something tendentially static, this approach complements other planning theoretical framing by acknowledging planning's inherent institutional plasticity and change in planning as the 'object of strategic action' by actors (Hall, 2010:204) – in this case specifically planners -, as well as following a fertile tradition of institutionalist studies in planning (e.g. Verma, 2007; Sorensen, 2011 and 2015; as well as the Planning theory special issue 2005, vol 4, issue 3).

Within this approach distinctions are made between actors, organizations and institutions. In this paper we will identify as planning actors a number of professionals working within the field of planning who – due to education, affiliation or personal history – see themselves as planners and are widely recognised as such by others in the field. Most, but not all, are members of built environment professional institutions. The researchers, albeit active in a different organizational context (in academia) for a number of years, see themselves as planners too and participate in the culture of planning in the relatively small community of Welsh planners of which informants are part.

As organizations we define the public and the private organizations 'doing planning' and, in so doing, framing planning practice. And we will define planning as an institution; involving formal and informal 'rules of the game' (Lowndes, 2001:1958 and 2005:292) and including organisations such as those involved in discharging statutory responsibilities, and bodies involved in overseeing them. These are also actors, who we will show are formally and informally involved in definition and redefinition of planning as an institution. Both individuals and organizations are players in the 'planning game'. Organisations 'remain an important focus for new institutionalist analysis – in their role as collective actors subject to wider institutional constraints and also as arenas within which institutional rules are developed and expressed' (Lowndes, 2001:1958). Players reinforce rules - by abiding to them – but also 'influence how the rules themselves develop' over time by providing embedded interpretations and enforcing them in various ways (Lowndes, 2005:293).

As used in this paper, then, 'planning' refers to an institution found in modern nation states which regulates and otherwise tries to shape social relations in and through the use of land. The precise nature of individual planning institutions, in any given state, including its scope, will differ one from another (and will change over time), reflecting the social, economic, historical and political distinctiveness of the society shaping, and shaped by, it and – at any given time – the activities of the myriad individuals engaged in planning in that place. As Newman and Thornley (1996) point out, these differences can be related to differences in legal traditions and state forms, among other factors. And all these are outcomes of historical and contemporary political struggles within distinctive socio-economic formations (see also Dühr, 2007).

Simplifying, struggles in and around planning at any one time and place can be more or less firmly related to minor changes and tinkering within a particular planning family, or might otherwise consciously and intentionally be more substantial and likely to take an institution significantly closer to another family. This latter approach requires changes to the legal and other frameworks which define a planning system, and typically has significant socio-economic and cultural consequences. The change will only 'stick' if individual behaviours in complex arrays of networks change; but – elsewhere - it is the overt legal/bureaucratic changes that are often the focus of attention. It is the way that planners reflect upon the potential offered by this kind of change that this paper examines.

The paper draws on data gathered by the authors as part of a research project funded by Welsh Government (WG), the executive accountable to the elected Welsh Assembly. Full legislative and administrative responsibilities for planning have been devolved to the Welsh Assembly and through it to WG; the research was commissioned by WG as it contemplated the prospect of being able to re-think the nature of the Welsh planning system on assuming complete legislative responsibility for planning. The formal aims of the study were to

> …look at radical and innovative approaches to the way development is managed within the plan-led system, to inform the creation of a Welsh Planning Act. (WG, 2012 :13)

As client, WG expressed interest in the possibilities offered by fundamental re-consideration of assumptions about planning, an activity sometimes referred to within the project team as 'blue-skies thinking'. As part of this, the views of those who currently engaged with planning in Wales were sought in a series of interviews and focus groups, details of which are discussed later in the paper. It is these interviews and focus groups which provide the data used in the

paper. The case of Wales is interesting in many respect: as planning is a newly devolved area of activity for WG and Wales is seeking to distil a distinct planning system for its distinct territory and needs, and as the debate on devolution seems to have provided a fertile ground for the development of a distinct culture of planning (Sanyal, 2005), for the territory and society that Wales is today. The paper is articulated in six parts. The following section will present the theoretical framework adopted. A discussion of the research project and data collection makes up section three. It is followed by a presentation and interpretation of the findings in the fourth and fifth section respectively. The paper closes with an assessment of the potential and limitations of the interpretative model used and an agenda for further research.

2. Theoretical framework

Any change in the planning system produces change in the multitude of public and private organisations that deal – directly and indirectly – with planning and in the practice and identity of planners. But change in planning is ultimately mediated and enacted by planners as situated actors, localised in specific cultural contexts, who draw on their personal history and traditions, values and beliefs to deliberate on their own actions. In this section we develop a framework which links the three spheres of the institutional, organizational, and individual; we will use this to discuss attitudes towards change in the planning system as seen by actors, potentially affected by both macro-level institutional change, meso-level change in their respective organizations and micro-level changes of their own selves.

Institutions, actors and traditions

According to Lowndes (1996:193), institutions 'comprise a set of formal and informal rules which structure social action and are shared within a particular [...] community'. Institutions are therefore embedded entities (Lowndes, 2001:1960), 'aris[ing] and chang[ing] over time: as a result of accident, evolution or intentional intervention (Lowndes, 2001:1959) in a continuous 'institutional lifecycle' (Lowndes, 1996:194). Institutional change depends as much on strategic, deliberate behaviours displayed by actors or on rules-abiding behaviour as on 'variation and deviation' (Lowndes, 2001:1960). Institutions are interesting as these are both the outcome of human activity as well as 'social forces in their own right' (Grafstein, 1988:577-578 as in Lowndes, 2001:1958). Thelen (2004: xiii) sees institutions as sets of social rules able to survive over time 'precisely through their ongoing adaptation and renegotiation in responses to shifts in the political, market and social environments'. She suggests that institutions emerge from the interplay of actors' actions (Thelen, 2004:287). Whilst considering institutional change and how it happens or could happen - Mahoney and Thelen (2010), in their theory of gradual institutional change, suggest that three interrelated factors are of relevance: the characteristics of the political context, the characteristics of the Institution and the type of dominant change agents (defined as actors, individual and collective, whose networks, motives and behaviours can help in explaining change, how it is produced and why). What Thelen (2004), and Mahoney and Thelen's (2010) models of gradual institutional change are missing is an explanation, or interpretation, of the reasons behind actors' decisions to take the roles they do that goes beyond assumptions of rational choice. In planning, organizational and cultural change have been studied, albeit not systematically. Literature suggests they are influenced by both external and internal factors, as well as planners' identities (Healey and Underwood, 1978; Vigar et al, 2000). According to Bevir and Rhodes, external factors are all

relevant in as much – and how – they are received and elaborated in traditions and in how these provide a vocabulary that is then transposed into individuals' webs of beliefs and organisational motives. Traditions act as 'ideational backgrounds' (2010: chapter 2) and 'dynamic sets of beliefs people inherit and then adapt for reasons of their own' (Bevir & Rhodes, 2012:85); in relation to institutions and change, they are broadly coherent accounts of one's institutional setting, and its place in the world (Bevir, 2011).

Bevir and Rhodes, fundamentally rejecting reification of institutions, have over the years (2003, 2008, 2010, 2012) emphasized the primary – and active - role of actors in interpreting, assessing and directing their space for action on the basis of the way they draw from their own traditions to craft webs of beliefs that are ultimately responsible in shaping their own responses to the dilemmas they incur in in their daily activities. Bevir and Rhodes' criticism of new institutionalist approaches to the study of social and political phenomena revolves around its tendency to determinism and reification and its 'neglect [of] the micro-level of institutional agency' (Bevir & Rhodes, 2010: chapter 2).

This point could relate also to planning; seminal analyses of planning systems (e.g. Newman and Thornley, 1996) have in fact emphasized their role in shaping planners' and citizens' actions and little has as yet been produced looking specifically at the creative space planning participants populate and openly questioning how change in planning happens. Bevir and Rhodes suggest 'decentring' as a deliberate attempt 'to focus on the social construction of a practice through the ability of individuals to create and act on meanings. It is to unpack a practice as the disparate and contingent beliefs and actions of individuals' and thereby 'to examine the ways in which our social life, institutions, and policies are created, sustained, and modified by individuals' (ibidem). Whilst rejecting autonomous selves, Bevir and Rhodes argue that situated agency is possible and – in fact - to be expected from actors. Situatedness implies that the context is internalised through webs of beliefs that each actor develops by dipping in a variety of traditions and their relative vocabularies. Situatedness also refers to actors' reasoning, which is always local, as based on a limited context and bounded rationality. Actors innovate when – confronted with dilemmas that expose the insufficiency of held beliefs to solve new problems – they modify their beliefs and 'transform traditions' (Bevir & Rhodes, 2012:85), intended as 'ideational backgrounds' (2010: chapter 2). Actors deliberately exert their agency by engendering their beliefs in their actions. Practices are 'set of actions' exhibiting patterns which can remain stable over time. They can impact on, and shape, traditions. Hay (2011; also cf. Martin, 2015) shows how useful synergies could emerge from marrying Bevir and Rhodes' non-foundational interpretivism with recent new institutionalist approaches.
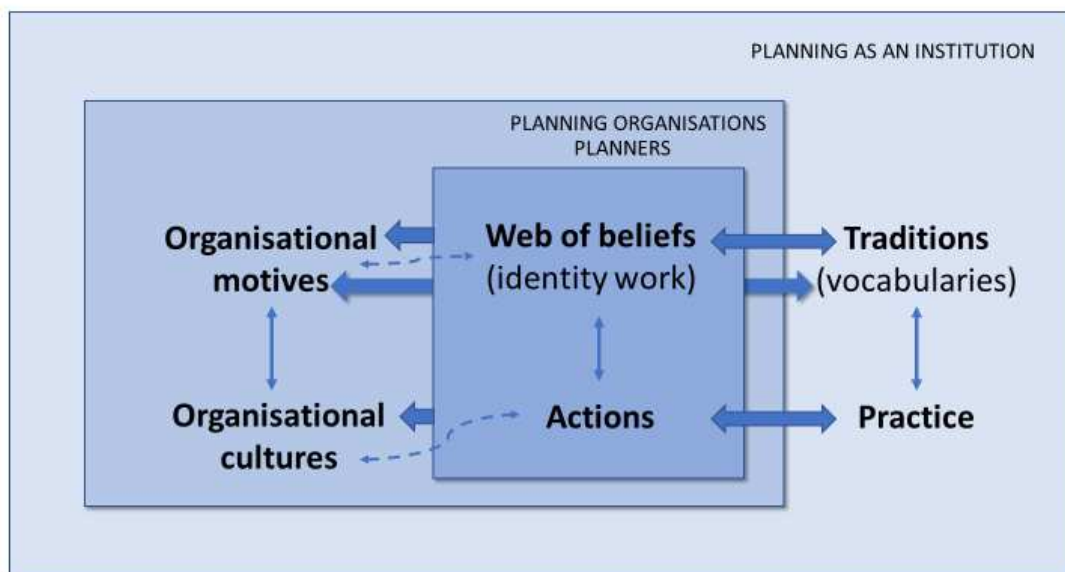
Figure 1. Planners, organisations and Institutions

(based on Bevir and Rhodes (2010; 2012) theoretical frame)

Organisations and organisational motives

Many authors have discussed the importance of organisations in shaping (individuals') behaviours. Meyers and others (2013) drawing on Mills (1940 as in Meyers et al, 2013) and Thornton and Ocasio (1999, as in Meyers et al, 2013) have emphasised the role played by organisational logics in informing organisational environments. They impact on organisational culture through motives specifically, 'vocabularies that are standardised and woven into the institutionalised fabrics of certain societal spheres' (Meyers et al, 2013:2). Organisational logics and motives are seen as delimiting and defining the horizon for change as well as influencing organisational cultures and actors' sense making. In this vein, planning as an institution – and any change in planning - influences all players: organisations, in the public, private and charitable sectors, and planners therein. So we can see traditions as having a role in shaping (and at times limiting or enhancing) understandings of reality; in passing on power structures, priorities, modes of action and social identities to organisations and actors; and in affecting behaviours and practice. But this is likely only in as much as traditions penetrate organisational motives and become part of the web of beliefs belonging to the actors involved. In relation to change, motives might have indirectly also the power to delimit the horizon of responses and – crucially – to provide actors with resources to imagine, create and figure out change as well as interpreting and enacting it. Organisational logics are passed on through discursive processes as well as practices; all organisations and individuals (both of the docile and the oppositional kind) are confronted with these motives. Agents interpret them drawing on their own traditions and use them to produce their own arguments on their role, attitudes and views (akin to Bevir and Rhodes' web of beliefs) within the variety of processes and relationships they are immersed in and which they contribute to shape. Organisations actively refer to a variety of traditions to construct their own organisational culture as setting for

practice. So, for example, public sector organisations with a role in planning in the UK might distil inputs from a number of institutions, such as planning itself, New Public Management (NPM), public service delivery paradigms, etc, whilst organisations in the private sector would deal with market imperatives, practice-based values and principles, consumers' rights, etc.

By drawing from organisational motives drawing on a variety of vocabularies stemming from different traditions, organisational cultures define relationships internal to the organisations as well as informing external links. At the same time organisational cultures act as an 'identity regulator' (Inch, 2010) able to affect – more or less deeply (Grey, 2005) – actors' social and self identity. These identities are constantly shaped and re-shaped in a process Inch – following Alvesson and Wilmot (2002) and Halford & Leonard (1999) - and Clifford (2012) call 'identity work'.

Planners as situated agents

Actors belonging to a social group look back at traditions and develop webs of beliefs – at times appropriating vocabularies through organisational motives that look or are considered appropriate for them - and use them as resources for their action as well as in their own arguments supporting their social role. These motives can be 'switched on' and enacted by individuals in specific social situations and might contribute in various ways and in positive or negative manners to their constant re-definition of a coherent and distinctive self (Lok, 2010 as in Meyer, 2013:3). Each individual relates to a number of social identities to which a number of different, at times contrasting, traditions – and the vocabularies they engender - are associated. This is typically the case for the planners working in the public sector discussed by Inch (2010; 2012) and by Clifford (2012) who are planning professionals but also state's agents and public sector workers, as well as possibly belonging to specific social, religious, cultural and ethnic groups (amongst others). Organisational motives, and vocabularies, will be crafted into different webs of beliefs and shared through actions and narratives. Individuals' webs of beliefs are likely to be influenced by organisational cultures; in turn, they are also – through practice – likely to influence organisations as well as, more widely, rules and traditions.

Actors, planners in our case, do have agency in the way they enact their social identities. But they are also situated - as they belong to a variety of social and cultural settings, each with a specific set of traditions, located in a specific time and space, and likely to interpret organisational logics in a specific way – because they are immersed and contribute to specific traditions both via means of their actions and narratives. Being situated affects agency as it inherently limits the awareness of agency itself (ie understanding that choices are being made) and potentially constraints deliberate strategic behaviours (Meyers et al, 2013:4). Situatedness also contributes to an enhanced focus put by actors, in positive and negative ways, on organisational motives. Organisational cultures drawing their motives from different traditions could, for example, be characterised by a mutually reinforcing use of vocabularies.

What kinds of traditions might be available for British planners to draw upon? There are characteristics widely viewed in literature on planning systems - and confirmed in scoping interviews with European planning scholars as part of this study - as distinctive of, and common to, all British planning traditions in recent decades: notably, planning's discretionary nature and great flexibility, its divorce from building regulations, the role ascribed to local councillors and similar others. But there are also differences in how UK planners may think about planning, even while subscribing to the aforementioned distinctive characteristics. It is

reasonable to suppose that debates and discussions held in political and professional, as well as academic, settings about institutional change in British planning in recent decades will be an influential source of vocabularies for planners' development of their own webs of beliefs and traditions about planning . A persistent strand in discussions has been the portrayal of the planning system as a largely negative, static and bureaucratic system, - a barrier to enterprise and good design, for example. This has had high visibility in professional, political and popular media. In discussing our findings in section 4 below we suggest that this tradition has reduced the inclination, and perhaps capacity, of many planners to think about any institutional changes in terms other than fine-tuning of the day to day machinery so as to reduce the scope for criticism. They are, as we put it, tied down by many small daily concerns, like Gulliver in Lilliput.

In the last decade or so, a rather different characterisation of planning has emerged to coexist and challenge this – the idea of spatial planning. The term, as used in UK planning, is notoriously ambiguous (Harris and Hooper, 2004), but Dühr's (2007) suggestion that in the British context it is a new conception of planning is persuasive. Certainly, the civil servants promoting it, after, made much of the need for 'culture change' in the planning profession not simply legislative and administrative changes, and especially, culture change within local government planning departments (Inch, 2010). The Royal Town Planning Institute (2001) was at the vanguard of promoting change, with its 'New Vision of Planning', which it carried through into changes in what it required of university planning schools (RTPI, 2003). Whatever differences there were in interpretations of the term, they all affirmed that planning had a positive role to play in societal governance and a concern for the quality of place was distinctive of that role. Alongside this, rather more long-standing and modest ideas of planning as the avoidance and amelioration of extreme negative externalities for relatively powerless people appear to have purchase in day to day professional practice. We suggest later that these more positive ways of thinking about planning also appear in the responses of Welsh planners to invitations to think broadly about changes to planning – namely those responses framed in a somewhat managerialist vocabulary that assumed the essential beneficence of planning if undertaken efficiently and effectively.

We might reasonably expect that broad traditions of planning, and their vocabularies, that have contemporary purchase stem from the debates and discussions which have swirled around the planning system in the last thirty years or so. It is important to note that these discussions, and changes, have usually been initiated from above, from national (and, since devolution, national-regional) governments. Only in the 1980s did local government emerge as a significant source of radical alternatives, and the Conservative government of the day was quick to abolish the more prominent of these, notably the Greater London Council.

Yet our findings suggest that some planners are aware of traditions of planning that date back further – for example, ones that consider effective planning to be part of a land policy that reduces the significance of private land ownership in development. These radicals (or romantics) must reframe the discussions of planning over recent decades within a perspective that allows them to connect current practices and opportunities to traditions that were more influential decades ago.

Institutional change

Thelen (2004:xiii) suggests that institutions are able not only to withstand potentially disruptive change but also to maintain some substantial core elements through thick and thin over time and that often the biggest institutional changes emerge in 'settled' periods, when actors feel secure, rather than at times of crisis, when actors are more likely to play safe and resorting to tried and tested solutions (2004:292).
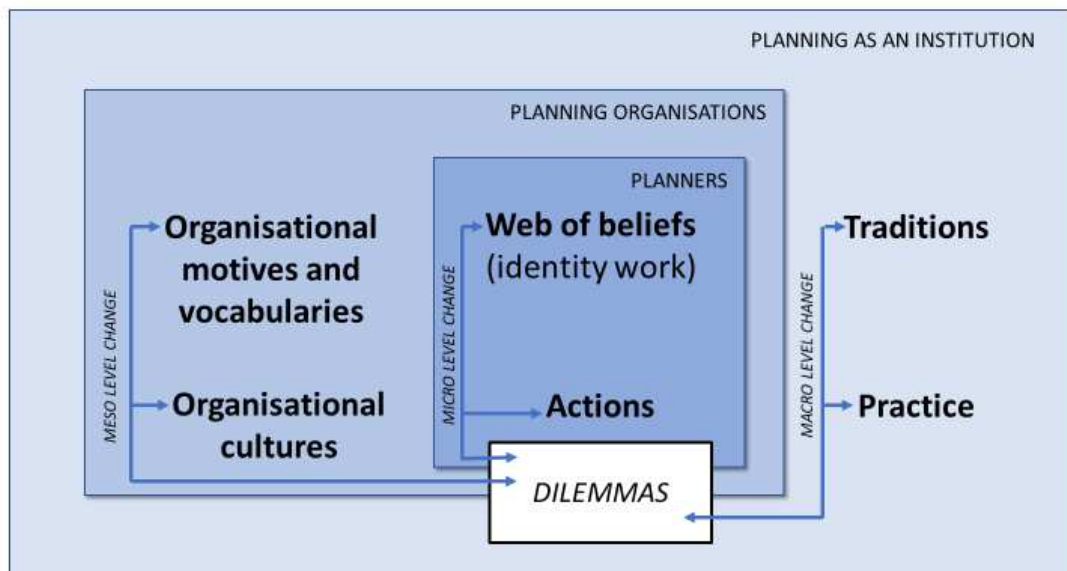

Figure 2. Change at micro-, meso- and macro-level

(based on Bevir and Rhodes (2010; 2012) theoretical frame)

Looking at the understanding, interpretation and use of traditions and vocabularies as well as organisational motives is particularly relevant in times of change as it might give some indication as to what type of change is pursued (if any is) within an organisation and within a wider institution and hint at the reasons behind such choice. At times of deep change on a variety of fronts, webs of beliefs, identities, organisational motives and particularly traditions and their vocabularies become crucially important in providing individuals with the tools to creatively look above and beyond the horizons provided by their situatedness in order to address the dilemmas they encounter. We deploy this framework as a way of understanding Welsh planners' responses to an invitation to undertake 'blue skies thinking' about the future of the Welsh planning system.

All the planners – and organisations - in our study could be considered potential change agents; in Section 4 we will present an interpretation of their beliefs and how the narratives they craft interact with organisational motives and traditions. Given the nature of the study, we will base our analyses mainly on narratives and a situated understanding of traditions at play.

3. The research study

Following an established tradition in planning (cfr Verma, 2007), this study follows a new-institutionalist approach by acknowledging 'informal conventions as well as formal rules and structures; [...] pay[ing] attention to the way in which institutions embody values and power relationships' (Lowndes, 2001:1953). As the aim is to help understand change (or lack thereof) in planning, we will look not just at how actors understand rules, but also at if and how new ideas are generated and passed on to others. Although practices are crucial in the field of planning, in this study we looked at the link between ideas and actions via (situated, contextualised) sentient agents' talk of change in planning. According to Schmidt, analysing discursive interactions becomes crucial when trying to understand change, or attitudes towards change as the sharing of views through narrative can be seen as a 'speech act' in itself (Schmidt, 2011:116-117).

In this context, our fieldwork constituting a substantial element of research commissioned by WG to enact planning reform is naturally problematic, as how much of what said by informants could be taken at face value became a matter of debate in itself - and equally stimulating - for the narratives' double role as talk (ie the answers of informants to questions in respect to changes to the planning system) and as action (ie a vehicle to shape, deliberately and possibly strategically, the very national policy they work within).

We have adopted an interpretive approach, focusing 'on figuring out what policy-relevant elements carry or convey meaning, what these meanings are, who is making them, and how they are being communicated' (Yanow, 2007, 111). As 'meanings are situation-specific', our study is 'highly contextualised' (ibidem) and researchers are themselves situationally involved. Although some (cf. Yanow, 2007) suggests that an interpretivist approach can best be applied on data generated via ethnographic methods, we adopt Bevir and Rhodes' (2010) view that an interpretative approach can be valid and possible using qualitative and quantitative data however generated as what makes a difference is how data is 'treated'. Yanow's position is justified by a concern on the researcher's roles as both interpreter of data and interpreter of the informants' own interpretative repertoires. Researchers in this study – planners, albeit active in a different organizational context (in academia) for a number of years - are 'as deeply socialised into the relevant political community as is practically possible' (Hay, 2011:173) for researchers to be: they see themselves as planners and participate in the culture of planning in the relatively small community of Welsh planners of which informants are part. Using a characteristic humanist, historicist, non-foundationalist, interpretive approach to studying social and political phenomena Bevir and Rhodes suggest that meanings can only be extracted from statements in their context: 'the use of the word *in practice* is its meaning' (Wittgenstein, 1972a:69 as in Bevir & Rhodes, 2010: chapter 2) and so 'the meaning of a proposition depends on the web of beliefs or language game in which it is located' (Bevir & Rhodes, 2010: chapter 2). The basis of interpretivism for them lays in 'treating data as evidence of the meanings or beliefs embedded in actions' (ibidem) and that 'we [can] explain beliefs – and so actions and practices – by unpacking the conceptual connections in a web of beliefs, rather than treating beliefs as variables' (ibidem). Uncovering underlying beliefs for actions means explaining those actions. The inherent interest to practice in Bevir and Rhodes' approach to interpretivism adds to Inch's (2012:518) approach to discourse analysis in planning, seen as a tool specifically apt to look at professional practice for its ability to validate knowledge, to (re)produce social identities and social relationship and to pass on and replicate power structures. Critics (cf. Wagenaar, 2012) of Bevir and Rhodes' approach illustrate a number of difficulties inherent to their epistemology, particularly in linking narratives with

actions. This exploratory case seeks to contribute to methodological debates on interpretivism too whilst showing how apt the model could prove to further our understanding of change (or lack thereof) in planning.

The paper draws on data from interviews with nearly thirty planners working in Wales or with first-hand knowledge of it and from six focus group discussions (two discussions with each of three groups of twelve participants) in the early–mid summer of 2012. Participants were predominantly male, with only twenty-four female informants between interviews and focus groups. Interviews were conducted mainly with senior staff and appointed representatives for specific interest areas whilst focus groups included younger and less experienced planners alongside middle- and high- management. Of all who participated, 40 informants worked in the public sector, between Welsh Government, Local Authorities, Community and Town Councils. More than a third of the informants worked in the private sector whilst the remaining came from charitable organisations, utilities providers and communities. In an attempt to listen to as many views as possible participants were chosen from all parts of Wales: urban and rural, rich and deprived, Welsh- and English-speaking. Fieldwork was conducted as part of a Welsh Government-funded research project which asked for 'radical and innovative' ideas in respect to the way that development management might be reconfigured as part of a reformed planning system (cfr Section 1 above). The project was part of the preparation for the acquisition of law-making powers in planning (and other areas) by the National Assembly for Wales. In principle, these powers allow the Assembly to fundamentally reform planning, and the project was exploring how this possibility might translate into (choices of) changes to the nuts and bolts of planning.

Views were sought in semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. In both types of engagement, there were topics which structured the approach of the researchers. These were the elements of the planning traditions discussed above. As the planning community in Wales is relatively small, interpretation of data also stemmed from knowledge of the role, position and professional histories of informants. Whilst interviews provided some entry to the understanding of individuals' traditions and dilemmas, focus groups tested how individuals' views on radical changes interrelated by assessing how actors' narratives fared in group settings. However not having looked at actions – and pointedly refrained from reading narratives as deliberate attempts (ie actions) at shaping the context of planning practice in Wales - limited the understanding of actual webs of beliefs and how these related to practices.

Data was analysed following the theoretical frame presented above. Firstly, data was organised according to codes emerging from the field. These codes where then linked to themes rooted in the traditions of planning in Wales, some recent and peculiar to Wales, others older and stemming from the planning culture(s) for England and Wales. Each interviewee's responses were then considered at a deeper level in its context and linked as well as to traditions and vocabularies, to organisational motives, and – where possible - to webs of beliefs. Change described or implied was then linked back to micro-level (the individual), meso-level (organizational) and macro-level (institutional) change.

4. Welsh planners talk about reform

Welsh planners' talk about planning was diverse but the methods adopted brought soon to saturation. Positions are presented below under three headings, moving from the more conservative stances to those that hinted at more substantial types of change. As noted in Section 2 above, the three-fold typology of responses below drew upon characterisations of planning – its nature, purpose and institutions - that had some prominence in UK debates of recent decades and, in the case of more radical talk, earlier than that.

a) Talk that reminded us of Gulliver in Lilliput (Swift, 1726).
Often, planners gave the impression of being tied down by innumerable concerns with minutiae, and seemed unable to venture opinions about the broader objectives and concerns (current or possible) of a planning system, by providing a plethora of tweaking as solutions. Thus, when asked about problems within the planning system, and how they might be resolved, planners referred to the issues bothering them on a daily basis.

Most informants in the private sector as well as in Welsh Government (WG) mentioned the '*lack of up-to-date plans as [is] the main issue*' (CG3) and provided various suggestions to improve the rate of timely production, ranging from the provision of incentives to fines, stronger enforcement or the resort to more or less authoritative (e.g. *'frontloading detailed issues on selected sites'* (Interview P13)*, 'financial penalties'* (Focus Group 3)*, '[…] from WG call ins to retraction of planning powers'* (Interview P13), etc) measures. None of the informants felt that delving into the general reasons to, or providing references to principles and values for, their suggestions was relevant as – mirroring a preoccupation characterising most talk of planning reform over the past four decades - *'speeding up development'* (Focus groups 1, 2 and 3) seemed to be the only issue framing, and deserving, action. For some of them – notably in the private sector - a concern to increase development married with concerns within their organisations - variedly translated into organisational motives - which had been suffering in direct and indirect ways from the recent recession. Many of these were the same interviewees that suggested pre-application advice and other forms of guidance provided by LPAs should move from being phrased as requirements or '*an array of smoke and mirrors*' (Interview S1), to 'how to' guides to comply with policies (whatever the policy: from Language Impact Assessment to design quality) – hence implicitly moving from a scenario where permission can be granted only for certain developments meeting specific conditions to a scenario where development is seen as possible for any application. Whilst a minority of informants displaying such an attitude might have been openly referring to politics of deregulation, most were more naively depicting the scenario that would enable them to deal with the job whilst reducing the stress involved, as some of them hinted at (e.g. '*times are hard and the sector is suffering*' (Interview S1)) rather than clearly addressing. The vast majority of interviewees suggested that the 'real' problems with the Welsh planning system were '*not of technical nature but political*' (Interview GS&O), meaning that elected members at various levels lacked the necessary knowledge of the system to make it work. Somewhat worryingly, no interviewee seemed to acknowledge the principles and reasons beyond the current role granted to elected members in decision making in planning. This was a point also acknowledged and shared without further questioning in four of the focus groups. In some instances, the narrative provided referred to traditions of planning

as ideal '*enabler of development*' (Interview LG) somewhat falling short of its own goal, in other cases to narratives of planning as '*purveyor of red tape*' (Interview P2) so often portrayed by central government in the recent past.

On a cognate topic, many planners operating in the private sector – and organisations grouping business interests of various kinds - often said that there was too much information asked of applicants for planning permission and that the planning system was overly bureaucratic. Their solution would be: ask for less information. The concern, and the solution, may not be unreasonable, but they exhibited no desire to think more widely about why the information was needed, what roles the planning system could and should be playing in bringing about, such as, say, a more sustainable or socially just society. Nor were they interested in speculating what the potential outcomes of such suggestions might be in terms of general principles and values of planning as a societal practice. For many of the informants this point intertwined closely with organisational motives, and many experiences encountered by each of the informants' company were provided as examples to strengthen the case made.

The majority of public sector planners outside of WG were equally reluctant to muse about what might be, and suggested that the existing planning system was fine if it were allowed to settle down and was not continually tampered with. This kind of answer could well be a consequence of the project being funded by WG: the researchers were being used, whether they wished to be or not, as conduits for messages from one group to another (ie from public sector planners to Government, saying that the priority was stability and consolidation). If this interpretation were to be correct, then this act of passing on a clear message to government, via means of researchers seen as acting for government, could be read as action, a behaviour that could be observed and analysed accordingly.

Speculation about change, from this perspective, was a luxury. For most informants the reasons they provided for their views relied – at best - on organisational motives alone and – at worst – on what appeared to be simple self-protection (of their organisation, their role within the organisation and – often, it seemed – simply their job). Whatever their stance, their use of vocabularies did not seem to extend beyond organisational motives. Yet their proposed solutions would all involve macro-level change: however minute the tinkering, it had to be introduced and enforced centrally. Most informants in this group saw and shared a problem, but did not see themselves as having a role in finding a solution.

The majority of responses, and of respondents, fell into this first category. The problems highlighted and suggestions provided in interviews tallied almost identically and informants were able to reinforce each other's narratives in focus groups, suggesting that the tenor of exchanges and discussions held in a variety of formal and informal professional settings had been pitched at this level: simple solutions to simple problems within a broadly shared and accepted frame for planning aimed at '*getting things done*' (Focus group 2) and '*providing more opportunities for development in Wales*' (Interview GC&O and Focus group 2) – a goal accepted unquestioningly and almost by default. Narratives of self-defence and

survival from a sector that has had its practice tinkered and tampered with for too long seemed to provide the long lasting legacy of traditions reinforcing the idea that development is key and that planning – understood as a necessary process of land provision - gets, far too often, in the way. Traditions of planning as a slow, inert system not helping development seemed thoroughly internalised by informants and subsumed within their beliefs. On the whole, organisational motives seemed to shape – and clearly constrain - the remit of interviewees in proposing change. Informants seemed helpless and did not see themselves nor their organisation as part of the problem, let alone the solution for this sorry state of things.

b) The managerial talk.

People who appeared extremely competent, were invariably enthusiastic about the potential and value of planning, and often thoughtful and practical in a way reminiscent of some of the planners Forester presents as examples of planners who learn and develop (also see Inch (2010) for examples of these kinds of planners), typically offered constructive criticism and well considered solutions of a slightly different kind. Mainly there was an overlap of the issues identified as problems, and to a certain extent of the solutions produced, with the group above but interesting nuances were put on the table and articulated slightly differently by different interviewees in this group. Some of the solutions were also aired in focus groups eliciting some – non-contentious – debate with which the majority of participants managed to engage meaningfully.

Following established traditions engendered by the many reform attempts of the past four decades, the effectiveness of the system was a concern for most informants in both interviews and focus groups. A solution invoked by many in both the private sector and within government (albeit not by informants in LPAs) related to a more prescriptive system, with reduced roles for decisions of a political nature and technical contents of LDPs made stronger in decision-making (e.g. a suggestion made by many referred to giving delegated decision for development sites on LDP). Common denominators in this category of suggestions were: an emphasis on parameters as guiding decisions and on planning literacy (e.g. *'compulsory training for elected members and anybody having a role in decision making'* (Focus group 3)). Interestingly this type of essentially technocratic suggestions was shared and generally unquestioningly accepted as worth exploring without interrogating the potential underlying issues of principle relating to the general role planning should have (and what it should accomplish) for Wales and its people. All these suggestions used a well-rehearsed vocabulary (e.g. *'meeting targets', 'joined-up approach', 'cultural change', 'cutting red tape'*, and similar) and actively referred to planning traditions and organisational motives in both the private and public sectors. For example, representatives of chartered surveyors with a professional expertise in planning and development that was usually deployed on behalf of private sectors clients framed concerns in terms of a public sector mistrust of markets and development, a familiar charge since the Conservative governments of the 1980s. Judgements and discretion of government and its professionals needed to be fettered accordingly.

By way of contrast (and apparently paradoxically), participants in one focus group, many in the public sector, particularly in parts of WG, also suggested an enhanced role for communities in decision making. Interestingly, however, communities were seen as important for disparate reasons, a phenomenon that has been part of the practice and debates relating to community participation in British planning for over forty years (Hague and McCourt, 1974; Tait and Inch, 2016). One informant in the private sector suggested that communities *'needed a stronger voice'* and that, for this, plans need to be drawn at *'a scale communities can make sense of and contribute'* (interview PrivA). Another informant, from the public sector, not overly concerned by the ability of communities to engage with plans, suggested that *'community benefits need to be better understood and effectively distributed to help deliver strategic projects'* (Interview GSP). Not surprisingly perhaps, given the array of perspectives related to community participation, talk of an enhanced space for communities did not fare well in joint settings with the exception perhaps of the recurrent theme of third party right of appeals, a discussion with which most participants were able to engage effectively, and dismiss promptly, albeit for different reasons (e.g. for it being time consuming and slow; for not contributing to increase development opportunities; for being costly and possibly difficult to afford for some sections of community; etc). As well as in traditions of participation specific to planning, this type of exchange seemed well rooted in the recent vocabularies of localism and of the 'big society', introduced by the conservative-lib dem coalition. Talk of communities, of their role, of their power in planning swung in a seemingly continuum from politically connotated fields on the right and left of the spectrum in a rather unsettling fashion.

To a certain extent following established narratives of country and identity in Wales, a stronger WG and stronger strategies were solutions equally shared by the private sector and WG divisions in name of clarity and certainty. These were similarly articulated by informants in interviews and advocated in focus groups. Informants for LPAs and Town and Community Councils however opposed them 'en bloc' referring to how taking powers up towards national government would deplete (local) democracy. Arguments pro and contra on this issue were articulated fluently, showing evidence of a well developed and trained vocabulary and matching traditions. Also talk of collaborative work between government levels, cross border work, pooling of services between LPAs, sharing resources between the public and the private sector and working closer with service providers used well rehearsed vocabularies referring to various traditions (drawing from both the Conservative's and New Labour's call for '*enabling development*' in '*partnership*' with the market and civil society) and – despite (or maybe because) being treated at a very general level, without much references to real situations or specific scenarios - found almost universal agreement among informants. On the other hand, some suggestions – whilst dipping in rehearsed narratives – divided informants. The suggestion to unify consent, as suggested in the Penfold review, provided by various individuals and groups in the public and private sector, was strongly opposed by those who felt that some issues, not least their own specific remit, would be '*falling out of sight'* (interview GHC). Although not delving deep into principles, the reasons provided referred to current newspaper headlines as well as to specific traditions in planning and aimed at making a case to keep a space in the system, and consequently a role for specific actors currently in the planning arena. Similarly, the suggestion for combining environmental permits and planning

permissions to reduce the fragmentation of the decision-making landscape in respect to specific developments seen as important for Wales (e.g. energy from wind) was used by different actors to make the case to open up space in the planning arena for 'new' actors and provide them with some (or more) power. A similar attitude was observed in arguments highlighting the need to align strategies with assessment of environmental capacity. Interesting ideas that provided scope for further unpacking but did not manage to go far not in interviews nor focus groups, related to the issue of '*planners as place makers*' (Focus group 2), raised by informants in an LPA and to the need '*to reset case law*' (Focus group 3) in order to make planning more effective in a changed context, suggested by LPAs again.

The views of planning provided by informants in this category certainly extended beyond '*getting the job done*' (Interview LG1) - as perhaps in (a) -, and were characteristically framed in the vocabulary of contemporary (and occasionally slightly older) traditions in UK planning, referring to place-making, spatial planning, partnership between government and civil society, and so on. But they were uninterested in speculating about structural changes in social relations (e.g. between state and market). Responses were again reliant on motives, albeit of a more general, abstract substance, and at times they explicitly referred to traditions too. These accounts were ones from people whose personal professional identity appeared to be at least congruent with, perhaps 'taken over' by an identity being promoted by the kinds of changes being encouraged in Welsh, and UK, planning traditions. The tradition of 'spatial planning' in particular was informing individuals' identities and motives. Overall the position of these interviewees was often higher or more visible within their organisation; also, on average these informants were older and had '*been around for long*' (Interview C2) occupying various positions in different organisations (or in different sections within the same organisation) over time. Change suggested was as for the previous group of interviewees at the macro-level and, although much mention of culture change was made, informants did not seem to take responsibility, despite feeling part of the solution. Differently from the respondents in the previous category strategic behaviour seemed to take shape here, as narratives presented seem also to trial alternative ways for actors to acquire visibility or expand their own or their organisation's influence in the planning arena. Vocabularies were however limited and relied on organisational motives or widely acknowledged traditions without delving deeper into underlying values and principles.

c) The talk of visionaries (or, perhaps, romantics?)

A very few participants were willing to consider changes which questioned social relations fundamental to planning and development – eg property rights. This was notable as the radical tradition of the immediate post-1945 planning regime in Britain, which nationalised development rights and attempted to re-capture for the state increases in land value caused by planning decisions (Ward, 2004) withered from the 1950s onwards and has rarely surfaced in professional or academic planning discussion in recent decades (Thomas, 1999; Rydin, 2013).

Five respondents from various parts of WG and LPAs advocated the need for government to acquire and manage land as a way to enable, and speed up, development. However only one interviewee went further by suggesting that planning might be based on the notion that land was a shared and finite resource which had to be publicly managed; another suggested that perhaps it was timely to consider resurrecting a public body which might bring large tracts of land into public ownership (and, hence, control). Both might be regarded as questioning existing notions of property rights. Both were outside the day to day cut and thrust of making and deciding upon planning applications. Their views were well presented and argued in interviews but discussions in one focus group halted soon as most participants did not show an interest. The narratives went beyond organisational motives and traditions and it was evident that both informants dipped into their own webs of beliefs for advocating such changes: *'in a sense this is about learning from the failure of the past, and present, system, but also going towards planning's main goals, and what is right, I think'* (Interviewee Com1).

Another participant – who worked with community councils (the lowest level of elected body in the British polity, and one with virtually no power) questioned the distribution of power in the planning system and argued for a more populist system, suggesting for example the co-optation of citizens to Planning Committees. But his was a marginal voice in discussions, with well rehearsed arguments but easily dismissed in focus groups with multi-sectoral membership, not least because the general perception was that the arguments fitted within a 'plot' for strategic positioning, and the acquisition of some power in the planning field for a (currently) minor player. There were also suggestions, from the private sector and government agencies both in interviews and focus groups, for innovations within planning – like mediation - which certainly have the potential for restructuring social (and power) relations within the planning system, though they might equally be regarded as tweaking of existing institutional forms to ensure more efficient use of time. Our research did not permit us to resolve what kind of implications the participants who suggested this had in mind. Their elaboration was interesting but schematic and take up in joint discussion was limited; most participants either felt their knowledge of mediation was not enough to enable them to participate meaningfully or were not interested.

In one focus group, the discussion turned to what might be regarded as outcomes of the planning system. For a short time, some ideas were put forward which were different in kind to the sorts of outcomes of planning which successive governments have sought to measure. Speed of decision-making gave way to talk about well-being and health, for example. But the discussion was difficult because lacking intellectual and value-related foundations; the possibilities – such as well-being – arose from nowhere and once aired were either agreed with or dismissed. Although the concept of wellbeing, for example, has been developed in subsequent legislative acts in Wales, and it might have been discussed in certain circles at the time, in focus groups there was no development of such idea, nor principled objection to it, because they appeared not to be rooted in a well considered and widely shared tradition, and the informants 'webs of beliefs' did not find adequate 'hooks' on dominant vocabularies or on discursive resources stemming from traditions old and

new. Outcomes of planning had been touched upon in three interviews too, with participants who had a keen interest in planning as observers and critical friends but did not have an active role in the system. One made the case that outcomes provide an entry to a debate that is much more focused on principles and values and – by default – on 'high' politics: '*The differences between outcomes of different national systems are not, at core, technical matters. It's really about how planners and people in general conceive planning, and also what they are – and feel worth - doing together'* (Interview PL N1). Another interviewee suggested that talking of outcomes shifts the attention towards *'a planning process which becomes a conversation about the future of a place [openly] addressing conflicts, generating commitments to visions and in turn creating a more certain context for Development Management'* (Interview PL N2). In both these cases the discussion was carefully crafted and – to a certain extent – intrinsically critical of recent traditions in planning but navigated at very general levels and the points made in interviews were not raised in focus groups. An interviewee from government, only loosely engaging with planning issues on a daily basis, finally, discussed at length the recognition of *'a presumption in favour of need: we should deliver what communities need, not what developers want'* (Interview GWR). In this case it was clear that the informant was keen about introducing a crucial paradigmatic change in how planning is framed and understood and the suggestion seemed dispassionate and rooted in personal beliefs more than traditions. The suggestion was not offered however in focus group settings so it is difficult to comment on how such suggestion would have fared in a multi-sectoral discussion, despite evidently chiming with NPM imperatives.

Responses in this category came typically from actors on the margin of planning, at times very knowledgeable of the system but not dealing with the planning process on a daily basis. Responses used resources well beyond organisational motives. Informants made reference to principles, values and world views dipping into their own webs of beliefs – at times colliding with mainstream assumptions and criticising – more or less openly – recent planning traditions. Many of the issues raised and discussed by this group hinted at substantial, macro-level solution of the societal kind. Paradoxically, given their marginal role in planning, respondents invested interest and energy in raising and presenting them and they felt they could contribute and be part of the process to find a solution. They also, more or less directly, admitted to be connivant in the current situation: '*this is how we do things and it would be difficult to do any different'* (Focus group 4).

In this category the (in)capacity of ideas and views to navigate discourses in joint settings was worthy of note. Interestingly, with one exception, narratives presented seemed to go beyond strategies of self-interest and could lend themselves to support wider substantial change. Possibly the limited resort to vocabularies relative to recent traditions meant that all the issues mentioned above did not manage to attract attention in focus groups for long.

5. The relevance of discursive resource availability in thinking about change

Planning as an institution; organisations and actors

Traditions in and of planning as developed within the past few decades in the UK and Wales particularly seem to have percolated and shaped organisations and actors via motives and vocabularies. Interestingly, informants could move seamlessly through – at times opposing – traditions without seeing or delving into contradictions as most of the talk was navigating on the surface, with little deeper engagement. Despite organisational motives clearly dominating talks, most of the suggestions produced, in all groups, hinted at macro-level, rather than meso-level, change. Also, most informants did not see themselves as having a role in 'making' this change, despite seeing how they could have a role in delivering it. Those that seemed to question and invest more, who most sincerely addressed the issue of cultural change, assumed responsibility for the status quo and saw themselves as able to contribute to the solution to the problems raised seemed to be those whose narratives provided (potentially) more links to beliefs than to organisational motives. Interestingly, these actors were also peripheral in the planning field and their arguments, relying less on recent traditions' vocabularies, did not fare well or long in joint settings.

The study confirms and reinforces Lowndes' view (2001, 2005) of organisations as collective actors with a specific role in how institutional rules are expressed and developed. Organisational motives appeared in the study as core to the structuring of informants' arguments in individual settings and as the main vehicle to enable or hinder ideas' sharing and development in joint settings. The specific organisational motives encountered contributed substantially to the nature of actors' narratives and the tenor of the exchanges amongst actors. Organisations appeared in the study as important agents in filtering and interpreting traditions but also, for their immediate role in actors' lives, in shaping (and limiting) actors' views of planning as an institution and their responses to a call for change.

	Gulliver in Lilliput	Managerial talk	Visionaries and romantics
Narratives shaped by	Organisational motives	Organisational motives Vocabularies and traditions	Beliefs: principles and values
Change described	Macro-level: minimal	Macro-level: limited	Macro-level: substantial + Micro-level
Approach	Defensive: self-defence and survival Disempowered	Tentatively strategic	Blue sky thinking Responsible
Narratives navigability in joint settings:	Narrative consisting of well rehearsed motives	Narratives relying on shared vocabularies, faring well	Strained bythe lack of widely available discursive resources

Table 1. Traditions, actors' resources and likely change

(Authors' own)

Planners as situated agents

Those who engaged in managerial talk were certainly change agents, or aspired to be such. They included some WG planners from sections other than that which had commissioned the research, but also a few local authority planners and people with local authority experience who had moved to the private sector. Most informants in this category displayed strategic behaviours and used vocabularies shared within the arena to either conserve, enlarge or craft a bigger space for themselves or the organisations/interests they represented in planning. The institutional change that could potentially emerge from their suggestion would however be limited in scope, and by leveraging on opportunistic behaviour would tend to be conservative. This is particularly interesting as respondents did not fail to see problems in planning but the limited discursive resources they adopted, intertwined with recent traditions, seemed to be crucial in shaping the dilemmas they saw in practice and were able to describe (and provide solutions for).

The few in the final group were invariably relative outsiders in relation to existing institutional networks – representing community councils, for example; service providers or rural communities. They were not members of professional institutes hence potentially not trained or interested in specifically defined professional world-views. Interestingly however respondents in this category were able to see and define dilemmas using resources beyond those provided by organisational motives and vocabularies and linking in crucial elements and considerations stemming from their own individual webs of beliefs.

Most talk fell into the first category, in which planners chose not to lift their eyes from the minutiae of planning as they presented themselves daily on their desk. Whatever stresses the institution of planning had endured in the last few decades had not appeared to prompt them to reconsider the nature of planning and their roles in it. This, perhaps, reflects the embattled nature of front-line planners over recent decades. Accused at various times of *'locking away jobs in filing cabinets'*, of facilitating a national housing shortage, of lacking requisite skills in everything from community engagement to economic development to urban design, they have had little opportunity to practise blue-skies thinking about their roles in public arenas. Moreover, what discussions there have been of more far-reaching changes to planning have been top-down affairs (from government or from the professional institute) that have been passed down to planners, often accompanied by hectoring about the need to change. Very few planners, we suggest, have had the opportunity to develop ideas about reforming planning within a space or arena that is relatively free from anxieties associated with restructuring, or loss of their own jobs, and the associated upheaval. Overall organisational vocabularies featured very strong in directing, shaping and communicating dilemmas and solutions. It appeared that situatedness, and the bounded rationality stemming from limited vocabularies, enhanced by the daily pressures on planners, constrained deliberate strategic behaviour somewhat, and potential cultural change as a consequence.

Institutional change

We would suggest that a possible consequence of how change has been discussed in planning in the recent past has produced an impoverishment of the discursive resources – concepts and practices – available to ordinary British planners when they are asked to talk

about change. Organisations seem to have had an active role in reaching this stag through the articulation of organisational motives. A continuous and divisive engagement with reform has seemingly inhibited the creative potential of those most involved as well as hindering their ability for strategic action. We could speculate that whereas authors such as Inch and Clifford are led (possibly by their methods) to think that planners are engaging and doing lots of identity work, our findings point to the possibility that they are inclined to make minor adjustments – for various different reason but possibly because, on the whole, they feel disempowered and disengaged, and don't have readily available discursive resources for broader conceptualisation.

As institutional change is a collective outcome, and the strength of ties within networks mirrored in individuals' and networks' narratives is crucial to enable ideas to 'stick', the case studied seems to suggest that there is little chance of cultural change taking place in planning in Wales in the near future as narratives appear to close in against any change going beyond minimal tweaking and, in so doing, are limiting institutional plasticity for planning in the current context. Lowndes (in Clifford, 2012) and Mahoney & Thelen (2010) highlight the importance of understanding strategic behaviours in studies of change. They suggest that individuals' reasons for resistance or change relate to opportunistic stances and vested interests as well as attachment to underlying values, arguably linked to the sphere of self identity. Whilst our study showed that recourse to beliefs was rare amongst informants, and that only a minority had the resources to engage in strategic behaviour, it seems to confirm that opportunistic behaviour, at times beyond rational choice, was behind the more conservative stances encountered.

6. Concluding remarks and an agenda for further research

The interpretive approach adopted in this paper provides a persuasive and fruitful framework for making sense of planners' talk about potential institutional change in planning. In general, planners' talk was conservative in response to the invitation to do some blue skies thinking about reforming planning in Wales. This is not surprising in times of change, as Thelen's findings suggest (2004). Moreover, it was by no means clear that most planners were engaged in such persistent identity work (e.g. thinking in ethico-political terms about the nature and acceptability of their own roles and responsibilities as actors in planning and development) that they could readily contribute to a project such as this. But, albeit different in their nature, contributions by managers and romantics did suggest that there were some planners who were capable of reflecting upon what their work asked of them and of others, as they reflected upon social relations – actual and desirable - within the planning system.

There are some elements that limit the findings however, particularly in relation to the focus of the case. Although the approach presented here has value as the interpretations of actors' talk and how these interact with underlying traditions opens a first window on both substantive insights and on methodological innovation in the discipline, longer and better resourced studies might delve deeper into individuals' conducts and behaviours to uncover how practice is shaped beyond narratives. Keeping narratives front and centre in the study might have here led to organisational motives and vocabularies to appear more significant than they actually are in institutional change; fieldwork enabling the extensive study of practice - as the pattern emerging form actors' actions (as in Bevir and Rhodes) - as well as narratives could have

provided a more balanced outcome and a deeper understanding of the role of actors' beliefs. This is of particular importance to studies such as ours - effectively initiated by WG - where individuals can act subtly in both acceptance and resistance by carefully choosing their vocabularies (see also Schmidt, 2011 on coordinative and communicative speech) and the use they make of them in the interplay between social and self-identity to pursue a variety of goals (e.g direct desired outcomes from a specific planning process; cultivate networks and coalitions; carve out further areas of influence...).

As the study showed how discursive resources availability seems particularly relevant for the emergence (or not) of narratives of change able to navigate in joint setting, and we accept Bevir and Rhodes' view that new concepts and approaches are incorporated, layered or used to subvert old practices through actors' mediation, it would be interesting to engage in further research explicitly designed to ascertain how discursive resources crafted within professional arenas feed into instances of actual cultural change and – particularly - how the language of change moves from singular rehearsed narratives to multifaceted, creative and stimulating vocabularies able to inform coalitions formation, crucial to achieve gradual institutional change (cfr. Mahoney and Thelen, 2010).

In conclusion, limitations notwithstanding, our exploratory study shows that there is potential and scope in looking at the three spheres (Institutional, organisational and individual) to better understand macro-, meso- and micro-level change in planning. It also shows how the field could gain from adopting interpretive tools developed in cognate disciplines to develop an understanding of change, strategic action and plasticity in planning reform that is more embedded in the wider 'political life' of the society that produced it (as in Peters, 2005 in Lowndes, 2009:93).

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