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Strategizing public value

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ABSTRACT
To extend conceptual and empirical understanding of the strategizing required for public service organizations (PSOs) to create public value (PV), this paper applies a practice framework to analyse the practitioners, praxis, and practices of PV strategizing in two PSOs. Our findings present PV strategizing as a creative and innovative craft that is oblique in the sense that it rests on reflexive wayfinding, more than prescriptive waysetting. Our analysis explains how that craft can accommodate purposive and purposeful action, while providing an intendedly indirect way of prompting the learning that is required to deal with the complexity of PV strategizing.

Introduction

Reflecting the 'practice turn' in strategic management research (Whittington 2006), some recent public management strategy papers in *PMR* (Bryson et al. 2025; Huijbregts, George, and Bekkers 2022; Rizzo et al. 2025; Skalen and Trischler 2024) and elsewhere have begun to apply strategy as practice (SAP) perspectives to view strategy 'not something an entity has, but something that its members do' (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, and Seidl 2007, 6). As a consequence of this nascent practice turn in public management strategy research, attention has been directed towards 'strategizing' which is conceived, broadly, as the social process of 'doing' strategy (Jarzabkowski et al. 2007, 8). More specifically, strategizing refers to the activities undertaken to 'deliberately and emergently (re)align aspirations and capabilities, thus exploring how aspirations can actually be achieved within a given context' (Bryson and George, 2020, 1).

The emerging ontological shift in public management strategy scholarship presents a rich opportunity for studies to provide information of relevance to academics and practitioners about strategizing in public service organizations (PSOs). However, few studies of PSOs have been informed by a theoretical understanding of strategizing, and most have focussed on instrumental strategies that aspire to achieve organizational outcomes such as efficiency (Bryson 2021). As a result, little progress has been made in realizing the potential to enhance conceptual and empirical understanding of strategizing in PSOs that aspires to create public value (Greve and Ysa 2023; Rizzo et al. 2025).

As a direct 'challenge' to the organizational focus of instrumental strategies such as rational planning (Bennington and Moore, 2010:8), 'normative' public value (PV) strategy directs PSOs to be reshaped 'in ways that increase their value to the public in both the short and the long run' (Moore 1995, 10). Although early PV strategy scholarship was motivated by a desire to support 'practice' in PSOs (Bennington, 2015, 13), most studies have concentrated on the content of PV strategy (Höglund, Mårtensson, and Thomson 2021; Sørensen, Bryson, and Crosby 2021; N. van Gestel, Ferlie, and Grotenbreg 2024). Because the process of PV strategizing has been 'missed' from the research agenda (Bryson and George 2020, 6), analyses of what it involves and how it can be developed remain 'conspicuously lacking' (Collington and Mazzucato 2024, 1146). Predicting that strategizing in PSOs will come to pay greater attention to PV, Bryson (2021, 15) calls for theoretically informed studies to provide findings of relevance to researchers and practitioners. To address that call, we applied a practice framework (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, and Seidl 2007) to analyse data from case studies of PV strategizing in two PSOs. In doing so, we extend the practice turn in public management strategy research by addressing the research question: who does PV strategizing (practitioners), how do they do it (praxis), and what is done (practices)?

Our analysis of PV strategizing is developed through the four main sections of this paper. In section one, we specify our conceptions of strategy, public value, and strategizing, and locate them within a terrain of lively academic debate. The second section introduces the SAP perspective and framework that we used to guide our analysis of the who, how, and what of PV strategizing. Section three elucidates our comparative case study design, context, and methods. In section four, our findings explicate the practitioners, praxis, and practices of PV strategizing in the case organizations. In discussing those findings in section five, we argue that in contrast to depictions of rational planning strategizing as a 'science' (Whittington et al. 2006, 616), PV strategizing can be seen as a craft (creative and adaptive) that is 'oblique' (Kay 2010, 3–4) in the sense that it rests on reflexive 'wayfinding' more than prescriptive 'waysetting' (Chia and Holt 2009, 173). Rather than viewing obliquity as a weakness, or as an emergent characteristic of strategizing (Mintzberg 1978; Mirabeau and Maguire 2014), this study shows that it

can accommodate purposive and purposeful action, while providing an intendedly indirect way of promoting the learning and deliberation that is required to deal with the complexity and uncertainty of PV strategizing.

Strategy, public value, and public value strategy

Strategy, an organization's situated and socially accomplished approach to 'aligning aspirations and capabilities in order to achieve goals', is a central concern of public management research (Bryson and George 2020, 3). Among the PSO strategies that researchers have discussed (Drumaux and Joyce 2018; Ferlie and Ongaro 2022; Greve and Ysa 2023; Hansen et al. 2024), greatest attention has been given to instrumental approaches, such as rational planning, that focus on achieving organizational outcomes such as efficiency and effectiveness (Axelsson and Höglund 2024, Bennington and Moore 2010; B. George and Desmidt 2014; Vandersmissen and George 2023; Whittington et al. 2006).

In an alternative to the goals (forms of value) prioritized in instrumental PSO strategies, Moore (1995, 10) proposes that PSO strategy should focus on increasing 'value to the public in both the short and the long run'. This idea has attracted considerable interest among organizational scholars (G. George et al. 2016), public management researchers (Bryson et al. 2014; Crosby, 't Hart, and Torfing 2017; Hartley et al. 2017; Kitchener et al. 2023; O'Flynn 2021; Petrescu, 2019; Virtanen and Jalonen, 2023), and practitioners (Her Majesty's Treasury 2019; Kelly, Mulgan, and Muers 2002; Mulgan et al. 2019). Amongst researchers, PV strategy has prompted lively debates concerning the definition of public (Benington 2011), value(s) (Bozeman 2019; Huijbregts, George, and Bekkers 2022), and public value (Meynhardt 2021), along with a series of ethical issues involving the concept of PV. With regard to these debates, we see PV as 'a managerial way' to focus strategizing on wider goals and 'notions such as the common good' (Meynhardt 2015, 148–149). Some scholars have suggested this might be pursued by PSOs strategizing to address societal grand challenges, such as inequity and sustainable development (Geuijen et al. 2017; Kitchener 2021; Meynhardt et al. 2019; Sancino et al. 2024).

We recognize that in any given PSO context, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to 'know' what actions will enhance PV (Prebble 2021, 1582). However, the vagueness of PV strategies, or 'propositions' (Moore 1995), should be seen not as a weakness, or an unavoidable characteristic, but rather, as a basis for innovation (Bozeman 2002). While we support Prebble's (2021, 1582) suggestion that this creates a 'powerful argument' for strategizing in ways that accommodate 'moderation, reasoned discourse, and comprise', we disagree that forms of unknowability – short of earnest belief and disproving –

render it impossible or unethical for PV strategizing to occur in a way that justifies the imposition of a PSO's authority (see Moore 2014 for discussion that authority). Instead, we align with Peters (2021), 1625) who highlights the dangers of any 'false scientism' that ignores Simon's (1947) arguments against the 'economic person', and his warning of the perils of inaction while seeking some form of analytical perfection. Specifically, we suggest that PV strategy's prioritization of collective value, over organizational value, requires strategists to draw on available experience and evidence to inform judgements concerning both the moral and technical tensions involved, and the grand challenges that, by definition, confront existing forms of knowledge and of knowing (Geuijen et al. 2017; Hartley and Benington 2021; Meynhardt 2021; Sancino et al. 2024).

Some critics have argued that PV strategy places practitioners in the seats of elected politicians (Rhodes and Wanna 2007). Others warn that public managers can act as an interest group subjugating the public good to their 'expansionist agenda' (Ferlie and Ongaro 2022, 70). While recognizing these concerns, we follow Moore (1995) to stress political primacy in PV policy setting (e.g. concerning grand challenges), and we view the agency of PV strategizing as the interpretation and implementation of those policy objectives (Alford and O'Flynn 2009; Alford et al. 2017).

With much of the PV literature concerned with the definitional and ethical discussions outlined above, less attention has been given to the original concern for the practice of PV strategizing in PSOs (Moore 1995). Among the relatively few empirical studies of PV strategy, most have focussed on strategic content (Hansen et al. 2024). Such analyses have tended to apply Moore's (1995) 'strategic triangle' framework which directs public managers to 'maximise the [public] value to be created, subject to the constraints of the two other aspects of the framework: the authorizing environment and the operational capabilities' (Alford et al. 2017, 591). In one example of this approach, Höglund, Mårtensson, and Thomson (2021) analysis of management control practices in a Swedish agency confirms the necessary alignment of the three dimensions of a PV strategy, and they illustrate the vulnerability of PV strategy to instrumental management control and performance measurement techniques. Similarly, Sørensen, Bryson, and Crosby (2021) and N. van Gestel, Ferlie, and Grotenbreg (2024) apply the strategic triangle to examine barriers and facilitators to PV strategy, including the countervailing influence of instrumental strategies.

Beyond these contributions to understanding the content of PV strategy in PSOs, little attention has been given to the strategizing that remains hidden at the centre of Moore's PV triangle (Hartley, Parker, and Beashel 2019; O'Flynn 2021). In contrast, the process of PV strategizing in PSOs is the focus of this study.

Practice framework for studying PV strategizing in PSOs

To guide this analysis of PV strategizing in PSOs, we employed a framework that reflects the key premise, main concerns, and language of the 'practice turn' in strategy research (Whittington 2006, 613). This represents a shift away from viewing strategy as formal plans, towards the SAP understanding of strategy work as a social process (Whittington et al. 2006). This re-focussing directs attention towards what actually takes place during strategizing; 'who does it, what they do, how they do it, what they use, and what implications this has' (Jarzabkowski and Spee 2009, 69).

Following Golsorkhi et al. (2015), we see this ontological shift as laying the foundation for studies that provide information of relevance to academics and practitioners about the practice of PV strategizing in PSOs (Moore 1995). This view is supported by early considerations of PSO strategizing which highlight the importance of thinking, acting, and learning (Bryson 2021; Bryson et al., 2022; B. George, Walker, and Monster 2019, Huijbregts et al. 2022; Skalen and Trischler 2024) in a politically astute way (Hartley et al. 2019a). However, studies of strategizing in PSOs have tended to focus on rational planning approaches and report tensions that arise among the planned and emergent activities of multiple actors working within pluralistic contexts (Axelsson and Höglund 2024; Brorström 2020; Jarzabkowski and Fenton 2006). To extend the scope of early public strategy practice research to include PV strategizing, we applied Jarzabkowski, Balogun, and Seidl's (2007) analytical framework which comprises three elements: practitioners, praxis, and practices (see Figure 1).

Examination of who 'does' strategizing involves ascertaining the general identity and roles of those 'practitioners' who shape the construction of strategy through who they are, how they act, and what resources they draw on e.g. managers, consultants, and policy makers (Jarzabkowski and Spee 2009, 11). Consideration of what strategists actually do ('praxis') focusses on the 'situated, socially accomplished flows of activity' (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, and Seidl 2007, 11) through which strategy 'is accomplished over time' (Jarzabkowski and Spee 2009, 73). Praxis is studied as the micro-level strategizing activity that takes place through practices such as workshops, meetings, presentations, and conversations (Vandersmissen and George 2023; Whittington 2006). Our framework directs attention to four forms of practice (cognitive, discursive, managerial, and technical) that are combined and adapted to enact strategizing (Hedborg, Vestola, and Kadefors 2024; Jarzabkowski, Balogun, and Seidl 2007). With respect to cognitive practices, the focus is on conceptualizing the focal form of PV (Huijbregts, George, and Bekkers 2022), whereas discursive practices reflect the form of discourse used in articulating and describing the strategizing taking place to multiple stakeholders (Spee and Jarzabkowski 2011; Vaara and
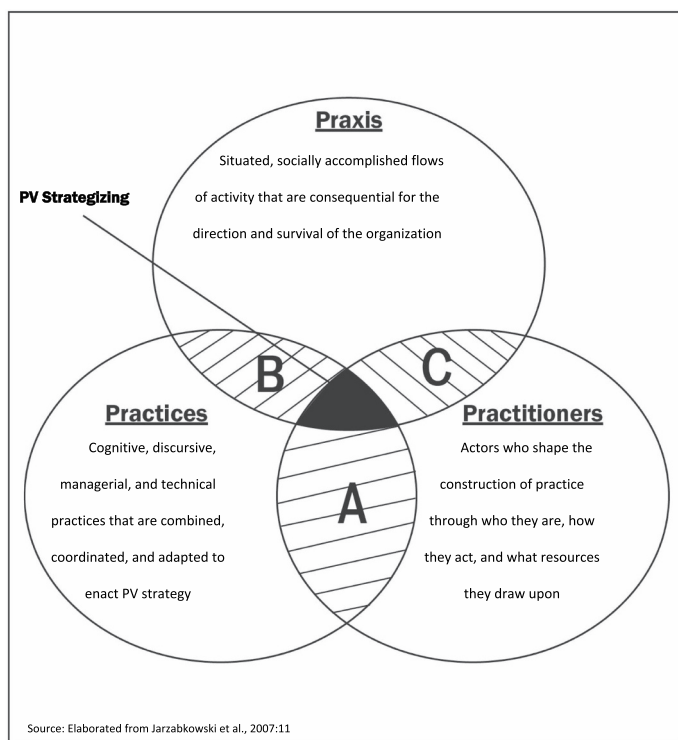
Figure 1. Analytical framework for studying PV strategizing.
Source: Elaborated from (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, and Seidl 2007, 11)

Whittington 2012). Managerial practices concern decision-making processes, and technical practices refer to the tools and approaches (e.g. workshops, SWOT analyses) enacted to develop, assess, and report PV strategizing (Huijbregts, George, and Bekkers 2022; Vandersmissen and George 2023). While it is understood that such practices in the pluralistic context of PSO strategizing require the management of complexity, ambiguity, and competing values (Parker et al. 2023), we know 'very little' about their form and use within PV strategizing (Hartley et al. 2017, 674).

In the practice framework used in this study (Figure 1), practitioners, praxis, and practices are viewed as discrete but interconnected, with PV strategizing occuring at their 'nexus' (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, and Seidl 2007, 11). In terms of language, we follow SAP to emphasize the dynamic nature of our unit of analysis by using the verb form strategizing, rather than the noun form, strategic work (Hartley and Benington 2021; Whittington et al. 2006). The next section explains the methods we used to apply this analytical framework in our study of PV strategizing in PSOs.

Methods

In producing this paper, we followed recommendations on the reporting of qualitative research in public management to provide a transparent account of our study design and methods (Ashworth, McDermott, and Currie 2019). Below, we describe each aspect of our study.

Study design

To advance understanding of PV strategizing in PSOs, this paper presents a theoretical elaboration (Vaughan 1992). Under this approach, the goal is not theory testing in a positivistic sense, but theory development through analyses of a focal phenomenon in theoretically sampled (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007; Ridder 2017) comparative case studies. Theory, in this sense, refers to a 'sensitizing' (preliminary) device (here, the practice framework) that forms a basis for guiding analysis in situations where knowledge is provisional and partial (here, PV strategizing in PSOs). Elaboration, in this use, means the process of refining and illustrating theoretical and empirical knowledge through the analysis of case study data from different temporal and organizational settings.

Illustrative case studies: context and sites

For this analysis of PV strategizing, we theoretically sampled two illustrative cases from different temporal and organizational contexts to strengthen the potential for theory elaboration (Bingham and Eisenhardt 2011; Eisenhardt 2021; Ridder 2017; Vaughan 1992). Our two cases are both set in the distinctive policy context of Wales; a devolved nation within the United Kingdom (UK) where notions of PV have a long political history (Rees and Thomas 1997) and were scripted into the 'yes' campaign for devolution (Dicks 2014). One of Welsh Government's earliest attempts to encourage 'PV-type' strategy occurred through a community regeneration programme called *Communities First* (CF). Although CF did not refer to public value directly, it was intended to create new partnerships in pursuit of value to the public in both the short and the long run (Horton 2012). However, an independent review of CF reported that its initial objective was inhibited by countervailing features of instrumental strategies including: 'top-down' political agendas; rigid systems of financial accountability; and target-driven monitoring procedures (Dicks 2014).

From within this distinctive environment, the first of our case studies explored PV strategizing during a major project at a non-profit PSO with an established PV strategy. That PSO is a community-development organization called Action for Caerau and Ely (ACE) and its activities are centred in one of the most economically challenged and stigmatized areas of Wales.[1] From its inception in 2011, practitioners at ACE enacted a strategy that

aspired to create PV by addressing the grand challenge of social justice through: 'improved confidence, lowered education barriers, and reduced stigma' (ACE 2021, 6). ACE's enactment of that strategy is exemplified in a 10-year collaboration with academic archaeologists and local history activities at an iron-age hillfort at the centre of its community. Our analysis of PV strategizing at ACE concentrates on a project to build a heritage centre at the Hillfort site between 2018 and 2022.

Our second case study focusses on the development of a PV strategy in a higher education PSOa university businesss school (CARBS) between 2012 and 2016. For this analysis, CARBS presented a rare opportunity to study strategizing during the development of an explicit PV strategy to encourage economic and social improvement through interdisciplinary scholarship that addresses grand challenges.

Data sources and analysis

Data for this analysis of PV strategizing in PSOs were collected during two research studies conducted by the first author. The study of PV strategizing at ACE during the heritage centre project followed a relatively standard case study methodology (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). It comprised three main data sources. First, 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted with ACE practitioners, community volunteers, partner organizations, and political representatives, each lasting around an hour in duration. Second, researchers observed community workshops, management meetings, and the launch of the heritage centre, each of which lasted several hours. Finally, ACE's strategic documents and reports were analysed.

The study of PV strategy development at CARBS involved an 'analytical autoethnography' (Anderson 2006, 378) with data derived from a wide range of sources including: the iterative reflections of a leading participant in the process; dialogue with internal and external colleagues that revealed 'reflexive accounts of practitioners'; meeting notes which contained 'micro stories of praxis'; and records of presentations that described practices (Fenton and Langley 2011, 1184). In contrast to 'evocative autoethnography' (Learmonth and Humphreys 2011, 105), this analytical autoethnography involved a commitment to theoretical analysis which, in this paper, was continued through the application of the practice framework to guide analysis.

For this paper, our analysis of data from the two studies sought to build narrative accounts of PV strategizing at ACE and CARBS (Fenton and Langley 2011). Using our analytical framework (Figure 1) as a 'sensitizing' device (Vaughan 1992), we conducted a targeted analysis of the two published case reports (Kitchener and Delbridge 2020; Kitchener et al. 2023) and their supporting datasets comprising: fieldnotes, interviews, and internal documents. Essentially, our re-analysis involved coding the two studies'

data thematically against the three elements in our practice framework. Our accounts of PV strategizing then evolved iteratively through discussions between the authors, and also from presentations of 'proto-versions' at research conferences[2] (Learmonth and Humphreys, 2011, 114). Discussions between authors focussed on data that illustrated elements of the framework, data that challenged it, and data suggesting novel aspects (Ferlie and McGivern, 2014).

All attempts to analyse qualitative data also involve a 'trade-off' between internal validity, arising from thick description, and external validity from conceptualization (Ferlie and McGivern, 2014, 67). In this early theoretical elaboration of PV strategizing in PSOs, we prioritized external validity through the use of our sensitizing framework to guide data analysis (Ashworth et al. 2021; Golden-Biddle and Locke 1997). Subsequent analyses of PV strategizing could prioritize internal validity in longitudinal, observational studies (Whittington et al. 2006).

Findings: public value strategizing

This section draws from the data analysis described above to present our elaboration of the practitioners, praxis, and practices of PV strategizing in our two case PSOs which is summarized in Table 1.

Practitioners

Our application of the practice framework led us to examine the who 'does' PV strategizing in our cases by ascertaining the general identity and roles of the practitioners who shaped the construction of practice (Jarzabkowski and Spee 2009; Jarzabkowski, Balogun, and Seidl 2007). Our findings show that the key strategists at ACE were the founders; three community development specialists previously employed by a local authority under the CF Programme described above. Having been 'scarred' (as one practitioner described) by the replacement of the CF programme's normative goals with a 'fixation' on instrumental outputs, their motivation for starting ACE in 2011 was to create PV by working with community members to address the grand challenge of social justice through 'improved confidence, lowered education barriers, and reduced stigma' (ACE 2021, 6). While ACE's strategizing has never mentioned the term PV explicitly, it clearly matches Moore's (1995, 10) prescription to increase 'value to the public in both the short and the long run'. At the time of this study, ACE's three founders had accumulated nearly 25 years' experience of PV strategizing. In addition to the founders, a small team of three people were pivotal to strategizing the heritage centre project we studied: a community development specialist from ACE who had previously worked for the local authority

Table 1. PV strategizing in the two case organizations.

	ACE	CARBS
Form of PV creation	Enhanced community well-being through improved confidence, lowered education barriers, & reduced stigma	Social & economic enhancement through interdisciplinary scholarship & organizational governance that addresses grand challenges
Practitioners	Leadership team – community development specialists	Leadership team – senior academics & professional services
Praxis *Statesmanship*	Towards external political actors	Towards parent university
Oblique Wayfinding	Co-creation of strategy with community	Waymarkers to guide innovation
Practices		
Cognitive – Inspiration	Asset-Based Community Development	Brewer's PV of social science
Discursive-Mode of discourse	Code-switching PV term not used	Reformatting Strategy titled PV
Managerial – Decision-making	Co-production, project management, working groups	Collaborative leadership, innovative structures, grand challenge orientation
Technical – Reporting	MSC, participatory, qualitative data	PV Report, narrative accounts, combination of data

Communities First team; a post-doctoral archaeologist from the Royal Commission who had just joined Cardiff University; and a historian and lifelong learning specialist from Cardiff University.

At CARBS, PV strategizing began in 2012 when a new head of school, a professor of public management, led their senior management team (of eight professors and the school manager) to design and implement a strategy that was titled 'Public Value', and which aspired to: 'Promote economic and social improvement through interdisciplinary scholarship that addresses the grand challenges of our time, while operating a strong and progressive approach to our own governance' (CARBS, 2023). During strategizing meetings and less formal discussions, the practitioners at CARBS voiced a shared desire to develop a normative alternative to the prevailing instrumental strategy of business schools that focuses on organizational outputs including rankings, accreditations, and graduate salary premia (Kitchener and Delbridge 2020).

Key to the strategizing process at CARBS was the appointment of a Director of Public Value, a professor of Regional Economics with expertise in sustainable development, who held responsibility for leading strategy operationalization and implementation across the School. The Director of Public Value was highly instrumental in the practice of PV strategizing through engagement with faculty, professional staff, and external stakeholders, the development of the School's application for University funding, and the production of the School's annual Public Value reports (Jones 2018).

It is important to note that in both our cases, not all the strategy practitioners occupied senior leadership positions. For example, the ACE heritage

centre project team was vital in supporting and instigating the co-production processes that were central to public value delivery. In CARBS, colleagues from across the School engaged in strategizing in different ways, including: joining the School's PV Fellowship scheme to initiate PV engagement projects, and becoming members of the School's Shadow Management Board (SMB). SMB was established by CARBS to facilitate 'blue skies thinking', enhance participation in decision-making and to hold the School to account for the delivery of PV. For example, one of its earliest tasks was to co-produce a set of School values to underpin the PV strategy.

Praxis

In our practice framework, consideration of what strategists actually do ('praxis') directs attention to the flows of activity through which strategy is accomplished over time (Jarzabkowski and Spee 2009; Jarzabkowski, Balogun, and Seidl 2007). In both our case studies, the activity flow most often discussed by practitioners was the political work of trying to build a broad and stable agreement around the focal conception of PV. Having long secured the support of staff and community for their PV strategy, ACE's practitioners perceived the key targets for their praxis to be external political actors, such as local and national politicians. In one aspect of their political praxis, ACE practitioners publicly aligned their strategy with Welsh legislation and policies:

> With the CF programme ending in 2018 and with a new focus within the WelshGovernment on key strategies such as Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act2015, Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014, Prosperity for All (2017)Wales Economic Action Plan, Resilient Communities and Families First we feel thatACE is perfectly situated to influence this agenda positively by offering a workingmodel that places local action at its heart. (ACE 2021, 9)

In addition to linking ACE's PV strategy with legislation and policy, the political praxis at ACE was aimed at securing support from senior politicians. A key individual was the (then) First Minister of Wales (political head of government) who was also ACE's local Member of Senedd. During an interview, the senior politician, previously a youth worker and social policy academic, explained his 'strong personal link' to ACE's physical base (a community resource centre) where he was once based as a youth worker. As ACE's local political representative, the First Minister was a consistent and strong advocate of its PV strategy, publicly stating that it is 'one of a relatively rare number of organizations that sit at a pivot between development of social policy and the implementation of social policy' (ACE 2021, 10). ACE's political

praxis worked hard to maintain the First Minister's support by, for example, updating his office on developments at the community centre, where he also takes the opportunity to chat to local people. At the launch of the heritage centre in September 2021, the First Minister signalled his personal attachment to ACE's public value strategy when describing the opening of the heritage centre as 'emotional and overwhelming' (field notes).

In addition to maintaining the support of the most senior politician in Wales, the political praxis of ACE's strategy practitioners during the heritage centre project also worked to secure the aid of two local councillors who accepted ACE's invitation to sit on the project management team. From that position, the councillors acted as boundary spanners both horizontally (in terms of working across local authority responsibilities), but also vertically within higher levels of management and political leadership. Beyond the development of political relations during the heritage centre project, ACE practitioners extended existing relationships with the Local Health Board (by embedding social prescribing opportunities into the development) and local education providers through initiatives including: the provision of learning materials to local schools, participation in the local university's adult education and widening access programmes, and a dedicated Hillfort study room at the local secondary school.

At CARBS, having secured the broad support of school colleagues for their PV strategy (through extensive engagement over four years), practitioners directed their political praxis at leaders of their parent university. Operating as a 'wholly owned subsidiary of the university' (as termed by the chair of the Schools' external advisory board in a strategy meeting), CARBS' practitioners came to learn that 'business school strategizing required parental consent'. There was an initial reluctance to grant this because some university leaders (typically administrators rather than academics) raised anxieties about the potential for the School's PV strategy to have a negative impact on two of the main concerns of the University's instrumental strategy: corporate brand, and student revenue. In response, CARBS' political praxis involved four years of meetings and workshops with university leaders. These were described as 'painful' by one CARBS practitioner during an interview. It was not until the summer of 2016 that CARBS' practitioners had secured the requisite support for their PV strategy from university leaders.

Practices

Cognitive Practice

The main element of cognitive practice to emerge from this study of PV strategizing in PSOs was the imagination of a focal form of PV. At ACE, cognitive practice was inspired by the asset-based community development

(ABCD) perspective which holds that PSO strategizing should be co-produced with communities to benefit from, and reflect, the lived experience of citizens (Woodward et al. 2021). The practitioners at ACE reported that much of their cognitive practice of strategizing had been conducted during conversations conducted prior to their founding of ACE in 2011, while working as local authority community development specialists. During an interview, one practitioner reported that these early discussions were prompted by them becoming 'increasingly pissed off' with the effects of instrumental strategizing in their field. Although ACE's practitioners do not use the term PV, they recognized during interviews that it reflects their desire to create collective value in the longer term by addressing the grand challenge of social justice.

At CARBS, inspiration for the cognitive practice of PV strategizing came from outside its field of operation. In 2012, a public management professor from the school was appointed Dean (head of school) with a mandate to develop a new strategy for the school to support the University's instrumental strategy to improve its standing in world rankings and increase student revenue. In the spring of 2013, a senior professor who was aware that the Dean (his friend) was exploring alternatives to instrumental strategizing, shared with him, Brewer's (2013) sociological manifesto for social science to better create PV by addressing grand challenges through multi-disciplinary teaching and research. On completing the book some weeks later, the Dean asked the professor: 'what would a public value business school look like?' The professor replied, 'I don't know, shall we find out?'.

During a series of discussions over the following months, the Dean worked with a wide range of colleagues to conceive the PV of the business school as arising from efforts to address the grand challenge of economic and social improvement through the School's research, teaching, and self-governance. This broad conception of PV strategy was then brought to life in the following four 'directions of travel' for the School's main areas of activity: teaching, to develop moral sentiments and capacities to promote economic and social improvement; research, through interdisciplinary studies of grand challenges; extended engagement activity across a fuller range of external organizations and publics; and a progressive model of governance. With no further specification, these directions of travel prompted colleagues to develop many innovations aligned with the PV strategy including: an annual review of PV content in teaching programmes, targeted funding to support PV research projects; a PV Fellowship programme to nurture engagement projects, the introduction of a shadow management board to broaden participation in PV strategizing; and new partnerships with civic and community organizations (see Kitchener and Delbridge 2020 for further examples).

Discursive practice

There was less evidence of discursive practice in our cases relative to the other forms of practice studied. We observed a couple of occasions where the discursive practice of communicating PV strategy to key stakeholders took a similar, and reflexive, form. For example, during interviews about the Heritage Centre project, ACE practitioners used the term 'code-switching' to refer to the way they used different terminology (e.g. community involvement and citizen participation) to engage with plural stakeholders (e.g. community members and politicians). They also referred to sensitivities around the use of the term 'co-production' given it was challenging for local authority partners, and so used this language sparingly. At CARBS as strategic negotiations evolved, the school's practitioners learned that the University's concerns could be allayed by (what they termed) 'reformatting' the School's PV strategy to emphasize the term 'economic enhancement', and to align it with the University' instrumental goal of increasing student revenue.

There are a couple of potential explanations for the lack of evidence of discursive practice in the two cases. In the ACE case, relationships between ACE, key partners and the community had developed over a 15-year period which had resulted in a high degree of trust, a common understanding regarding strategic ambitions and, to some degree, a shared language. In the CARBS case, a series of discursive workshops held during the first 6–12 months enabled internal and external stakeholders to come together and mull over key terms. This included long discussions on different interpretations of 'value', for example, and potentially mitigated against the need for any subsequent substantial engagement in discursive practice.

Managerial practice

Our analysis revealed a major difference in the two PSOs' primary mode of strategic decision-making. At ACE it is co-production, at CARBS it is collaborative leadership. At ACE the primary approach to strategic decision-making draws from the ABCD principle to employ co-production:

> 'Co-production is an asset-based approach to public services that enables people providing and people receiving services to share power and responsibility, and to work together in equal, reciprocal, and caring relationships. It creates opportunities for people to access support when they need it, and to contribute to social change'. ACE (2021, 3)

Even before the heritage centre development started in 2016, ACE had produced formal and informal structures to support co-productive decision-making including a trustee board comprising nearly 50% residents, and deliberative approaches to project evaluation. During the initial phase of

the project, when a bid was co-produced for National Lottery Heritage Funding, ACE practitioners used several structures to engage partners and residents in the co-production of 'The Activity Plan'. These included: five working groups, interviews with residents to build knowledge of local issues (a technique used in community organizing), seven open days and events (1,172 visitors), a community survey, semi-structured interviews with residents, and a school survey. Early drafts of the Plan were then shared with partners and the wider community at open meetings and community events for comment and feedback. With funding secured, the heritage centre project started in April 2019. Immediately, ACE incorporated key stakeholders onto a project management team including representatives from the community, education and heritage bodies, and local authorities (elected and officials).

In addition to ACE's structural supports for co-productive PV strategizing, practitioners also developed innovative co-productive approaches to problem solving during the heritage centre project. In one example, there was a fear that anti-social behaviour around the new heritage centre could escalate and generate negative media attention that reinforced stigmatizing narratives of the area. ACE's response was immediate and co-productive. It brought local community members, ACE staff, councillors, academic partners, school staff, the park ranger and community police together to address the problem, speak to the young people involved, and resolve to work together to protect the centre. This co-productive problem-solving itself created a form of PV as it directed positive attention to the heritage project and the area.

During the development of CARBS' PV strategizing, collaborative leadership was used as the primary means of problem-solving. From the outset, academic and professional service colleagues were encouraged to contribute to cognitive practice (e.g. during strategy workshops), and CARBS' practitioners worked collaboratively with internal and external stakeholders to use the directions of travel to inspire aligned innovations in the School's teaching, research, and governance. This began with School's PV Director conducting an innovative 'crowd-sourcing' exercise among colleagues to identify five grand challenges on which to focus the School's activity: Decent Work, Good Governance, Fair and Sustainable Economies, Future Organizations, and Responsible Innovation (Cardiff Business School 2023). Following this, the School's Research Committee decided to re-direct its discretionary research budget to prioritize interdisciplinary studies that address the Schools' five grand challenges. While faculty are still encouraged to pursue their own research interests, school funding now supports a diverse and growing portfolio of PV research activity including interdisciplinary groups in Sustainable Procurement, Responsible Innovation, Circular Economy, and Modern Slavery.

Technical practice

In our two cases, the main technical practice of PV strategizing involved developing indicators that can reliably capture strategy enactment. During the heritage centre project, ACE employed a participatory form of strategy evaluation called the Most Significant Change (Davies and Dart 2005). That methodology is intended to capture the complexity of change, some of which is unintended, and to assess the value of those changes for different stakeholders. Story collectors (ACE practitioners) and story tellers (project participants, mostly citizens) work in a dialogical way to understand different experiences and then to identify the kinds of change that are most valued and why, as well as recognizing that there may also be differences. Responding to initial findings, one practitioner at ACE staff reported concerns that there is a gap between those who were engaging with ACE projects, and residents in the wider local population. Despite this, the success of ACE's approach to reporting PV was recently highlighted in a report by London Economics (2022, 63–64).

In the CARBS case, the development of indicators to capture PV strategy enactment began in 2017 with the production of an innovative PV report (Jones 2018). This exercise is the first known attempt to measure and narrate a business school's PV against three indicators: (1) economic impact, (2) sustainability in terms of the School's annual carbon footprint, and (3) staff attitudes. A major challenge to emerge from this work was the finding that the largest contributor to CARBS' carbon footprint is the travel of international students who are its largest source of revenue. These findings were presented to the parent University, and they were received 'with interest'. More recently, CARBS has assessed, reported, and disseminated its PV contribution relative to its five grand challenges in addition to providing narrative accounts in different forms ranging from impact cases to podcasts. Although CARBS' reporting of progress towards its PV strategy has received external recognition, including commendations during external accreditation processes, the School's practitioners recognize that it has not reached the maturity of approaches either proposed by academics (Meynhardt 2022; Moore 2013), or used by organizations such as at ACE.

Discussion

In both our case studies, the key practitioners of PV strategizing were the organizations' senior leaders. At ACE, the main practitioners were community development practitioners who followed ABCD principles (Woodward et al. 2021) to co-produce strategy with community members. At CARBS, the practitioners were business school academics who consulted widely with internal stakeholders, and to a lesser extent, with external partners. This finding lends some support to the initial framing

of PV strategizing as a 'fundamentally managerial undertaking' (Collington and Mazzucato 2024, 1145). However, in countering Moore's (1995, 55) assumption of a senior PSO manager performing the role of solo PV strategist, both cases display a more collaborative and 'deliberative' (Benington 2009) approach to strategizing that involved a wide range of actors (Bryson et al. 2017; Mendez, Pegan, and Vasiliki 2024; Parker et al. 2023). With PV strategizing at ACE clearly involving members of the public, it may serve as a source of learning for the business school, and other organizations developing PV strategies.

Our findings empirically illustrate the potential for PV strategizing to accommodate two forms of action that Chia and Holt (2009, 92) view as discrete. 'Purposive action' is that taken to move away from a negative situation, while 'purposeful action' is that taken to move towards a desired state. Practitioners in both our cases viewed PV strategizing as a purposeful move towards the pursuit of collective forms of value, and a purposive move away from the instrumental strategies that had come to dominate their fields. This (re)combination of purposive and purposeful elements of strategizing illustrates the 'cognitive complexity' necessary for effective PV strategizing (Bryson 2021, 10). While both sets of case study practitioners addressed the cognitive complexity of PV strategizing, there was clearly more knowledge and experience at ACE. As a result, the practitioners at ACE may be viewed as 'savvy' strategists, while their counterparts at CARBS are probably best described as 'dreamers' Bryson and George (2020, 4).

Our findings about PV praxis highlight the importance of political activity directed towards key stakeholders, some of whom hold countervailing views of PSO strategy (Parker et al. 2023), and others who may not (initially or ever) share a belief in its desirability, or efficacy (Alford et al. 2017; Bryson et al. 2017). For ACE's practitioners, political institutions were the main target, and for their counterparts at CARBS it was the parent university. In both cases, a discursive practice (termed code-switching and reformatting in the respective cases) represented an important aspect of 'pragmatic' learning within PV strategizing (Bryson, 2021, 14). It also displays the 'political astuteness' required of strategists (Hartley et al. 2019,, 199). These findings also resonate with the emphasis that Moore (1989, 1) places on the political work of 'small-scale statesmen' in building support for PV strategy in pluralistic contexts (Axelsson and Höglund 2024; Trivellato et al. 2019)

In contrast to notions of rational planning and instrumental strategizing occuring in a planned, top-down, and linear way, our account of PV praxis can be seen as 'oblique' in that:

> 'Complex objectives tend to be imprecisely defined and contain many elements
> that are not necessarily or obviously compatible with each other, and that we

> learn about the nature of objectives and the means of achieving them during a process of experiment and discovery'. Kay (2010, 3–4)

Oblique strategizing is pursued in an indirect manner, rather than in a fully planned, top-down and linear way. As Kay (2010, 16) describes, an oblique approach recognizes 'that what we want ... has many elements. We will never succeed in specifying fully what they are, and to the extent we do, we discover that they are often inconsistent and incompatible'. Building on the report of this feature of strategic change at CARBS (Kitchener and Delbridge 2020), our case report of ACE provides another empirical example of Kay's (2010) obliquity concept, and a further illustration of the potential for strategic obliquity to accommodate both purposive and purposeful action (Chia and Holt 2009, 92). In contrast to the conventional conception of practitioners as all-seeing strategic 'way setters' who try to use maps (e.g. rational plans) to plot a precise course towards a specified destination, practitioners in both our cases they are better seen as 'wayfinders' who anticipate the need to progress tentatively, tolerate ambiguity, cope with the frustrations of not being in full control, and allow for some 'detours, lingerings, and directional changes' (Chia and Holt, 2009, 173).

In the CARBS case, this approach was adopted consciously to create the strategic space for colleagues to develop innovations aligned to the PV strategy (Axelsson and Höglund 2024), prompted by the 'directions of travel' offered for teaching, research, and governance. In the ACE case, obliquity was again adopted deliberately, but to create the space for community members to co-produce PV strategy in line with ABCD principles. These examples provide empirical illustrations of the potential for oblique praxis to inspire colleagues to innovate through their 'local coping actions' (Chia and Holt 2009, 24). They also reflect a deliberative (Axelsson and Höglund 2024; Jarzabkowski and Fenton 2006) and iterative approach to PV strategizing that requires practitioners who are both flexible, and willing to accept that cannot define all strategy content and processes in advance (Lê and Jarzabkowski, 2015).

Our findings also portray PV practitioners' co-ordination of 'bundles' of practices as a 'craft' (creative and adaptive) that is as essential to PV strategizing, as analytical 'science' is to rational planning (Whittington et al. 2006, 616). With the cognitive practice of PV strategizing once described as 'tough and substantive analytical work' (Moore and Khagram 2004, 9), practitioners at both PSOs developed approaches that were built on a strong appreciation of the organization's characteristics, and a desire to eschew the short-term priorities of instrumental strategies. Beyond this similarity, our analysis identified two differences in the cognitive practice of PV strategizing at the two cases. At ACE, the activity was conducted by the founding leadership

team before the inception of the organization. At CARBS, the same task was conducted by an incoming management team, over a period of four years, after the PSO had operated for nearly three decades. This suggests that the cognitive practice of PV strategizing may require more time in established PSOs than in start-ups, because it does not require challenge to, and subsequent movement away from, previously embedded ways of thinking and acting. Second, while the inspiration for ACE's strategizing came from within its field of operation (ABCD), the inspiration for CARBS' PV strategy was taken from the proximate academic discipline of sociology (Brewer's thesis on the PV of social science). While our study shows that PV practitioners can use either source of cognitive inspiration, it suggests that external sources may take longer to explain and build support for.

In terms of the managerial practice of PV strategizing, this study identified variation between the primary approach to strategic decision-making employed by the case PSOs. In contrast to ACE's involvement of citizens within its co-productive strategizing, CARBS relied on collaborative leadership. While both approaches counter Moore's (1995) assumption of an individual strategist, only ACE's approach involves deliberation with the 'public' directly. In this respect, strategists in the academic PSO could be seen to have something to learn from practice, outside the ivory tower.

We found the technical practice of PV strategizing to be least developed of the four studied in our case PSOs. Although CARBS conducted the first known attempt to measure and narrate a business schools' PV, it does not yet conduct public assessment of its PV strategy. In contrast at ACE, community members and partners are actively involved in evaluations of PV using the Most Significant Change approach (Davies and Dart 2005). Both approaches do make some attempt to answer calls for enhanced PV accounting and reporting (Meynhardt, 2015; Moore 2013), and to specify the forms of PV created (Osbourne et al. 2021). However, ACE's practice is clearly more mature, and it signals another area for learning for the academic PSO.

As Page et al. (2015) study of the collaborative pursuit of PV strategy in Minnesota demonstrates, it is imperative that PV strategists design reporting practices that accommodate the views of diverse stakeholders. Such approaches recognize that it is important to achieve consistency between 'espoused' PV strategy and its 'enacted' operation (Meynhardt, Frohlich, et al. 2019). Failure to achieve this would likely strengthen both: (a) criticisms of ethics in public governance, and (b) the scepticism of those who question the motives and capacity of PV strategy (Dahl and Soss 2014; Rhodes and Wanna 2007).

Conclusion

This study extended the nascent practice turn in public management strategy scholarship (Bryson et al. 2025; Huijbregts, George, and Bekkers 2022; Rizzo et al. 2025; Skalen and Trischler 2024) to provide information of relevance to practitioners and academics about the social process of PV strategizing in PSOs. Our application of a practice framework (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, and Seidl 2007) to analyse case study data from two PSOs with PV strategies provides a detailed explanation of the who (practitioners), how (praxis), and what (practices) of PV strategizing. With PV strategizing predicted to become increasingly prominent in PSOs (Bryson 2021), our findings may prove useful to PV strategists, and those who provide them with training and support (Collington and Mazzucato 2024). Following decades during which instrumental strategizing has dominated public service contexts, there is a pressing need to develop "savvy' PV strategists (Bryson and George 2020, 4). Our findings suggest that may require development programmes that focus on the 'craft' of co-ordinating bundles of practices in creative and adaptive ways (Whittington et al. 2006, 616).

Our extension of the practice turn in public management strategy scholarship to examine PV strategizing in PSOs provides three conceptual contributions. First, we portray PV strategizing as a craft that is 'oblique' (Kay 2010, 3–4) in the sense that it rests on reflexive wayfinding towards collective goals, more than prescriptive waysetting towards organizational goals. Second, we frame oblique PV strategizing as capable of accommodating purposive and purposeful forms of action that have been viewed as being discrete (Chia and Holt 2009, 92). Third, rather than viewing obliquity as an emergent characteristic of strategizing (Mintzberg 1978; Mirabeau and Maguire 2014), we present it as an intendedly indirect way of prompting learning and deliberation during PV strategizing.

To further elaborate the craft of PV strategizing in PSOs, research could usefully target any combination of the practitioners, praxis, and practices in our analytical framework. Given our identification of the relative lack of development in the technical practice of reporting PV strategy, this might be a priority, especially given the scepticism of those who question the motives and capacity of PV strategizing (Dahl and Soss 2014; Prebble 2021; Rhodes and Wanna 2007), and the need for more imaginative reporting mechanisms that capture the impact of PV strategy. Approaches proposed by academics (Meynhardt 2022; Moore 2013) and the most significant change method used by ACE could provide the basis for these analyses, and the development of practice.

Our analysis of PV strategizing was developed from studies of two types of non-governmental PSOs; a community development

organization and a higher education institution. While they shared some elements of political praxis, there were evident variations in their practitioners and practice. Further elaborations (Vaughan 1992) of PV strategizing should conduct longitudinal, observational studies (Whittington et al. 2006) of other types of PSOs drawn from alternative policy contexts. Given that our analysis reports that ACE was established to allow PV strategizing by individuals who felt that it was no longer possible within government employment in the UK, it would be particularly interesting to further extend the practice turn in public management strategy research by analysing PV strategizing in local and central government agencies.

Notes

1. This stigma was illustrated recently in the national media reporting of a 'riot' and frequent references made to an incident from 1991.
2. Listed in the acknowledgements at the end of this paper. (

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