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## PLANNING IN ORGANISATIONS: RATIONAL CONTROL OR CONTINGENT ACTIVITY?

**Tim Dant & Dave Francis**

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Tim Dant  
Department of Sociology  
Bowland North  
Lancaster University  
Lancaster, LA1 4YT  
[t.dant@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:t.dant@lancaster.ac.uk)  
01524 593184

# PLANNING IN ORGANISATIONS: RATIONAL CONTROL OR CONTINGENT ACTIVITY?<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This paper develops an interactional approach to planning in organisations that draws out the relevance of both rationalist and contingent models of planning. The distinction between these two models is developed in the light of the modernist / postmodernist debate to provide a set of theoretical issues to with planning in organisations. These issues are explored in the context of planning carried out in two empirically studied settings, a health authority and a school. The two models are found to provide resources for organisations and participants in these settings, both to proceed with planning activity and to account for it. Neither model is however adequate to describe the process of planning which is always a practical and situated activity whose character emerges in the process of interaction.

## Keywords:

organisations ♦ planning ♦ rationality ♦ contingency  
♦ health planning ♦ educational planning ♦ situated  
activity ♦

## **Introduction**

This paper will propose an approach to the study of planning in organisational environments, illustrated with empirical materials drawn from our investigations. We take an 'interactional' view of planning, regarding it as an activity in which people attempt to organise their knowledge in relation to some collective practical task. Planning is involved wherever and whenever people come together (whether face-to-face or otherwise) for the purpose of previewing a task and co-ordinating their activities towards accomplishing it effectively. Our interest in planning is a 'sociology of knowledge-in-use' and centres on how, in a given organisational environment, people engage in the task of formulating and 'organising' their knowledge for some projected purpose. The plan produced by this sort of activity could be seen as an interface between knowledge and action, although from our analytical standpoint knowledge and practical action are not to be regarded as independent entities, either conceptually or empirically. The meaning and significance of any plan is constructed in use by the members of an organisation, in and through the ways in which they orient themselves to the plan as a constituent feature of their circumstances of action.

From this theoretical standpoint, we will consider the relevance for the study of planning of two conceptions of the relationship between knowledge and action in human conduct currently available in social science theory (Suchman, 1987). The first is a rationalist or cognitivist conception that involves separating knowledge from action. Human conduct is conceived as 'grounded' in the systematic knowledge generated through rules for cognitive procedures (identifying goals, proposing lines of action, estimating consequences) which the human actor should follow. The second is a pragmatist or situationist conception which emphasises the contingency and incompleteness of knowledge (Rorty 1982; 1987). Contingency refers to the set of circumstances - more or less intended, arbitrary, uncontrolled or unanticipated - that affect action such that it cannot be understood as guided by an underlying principle or a set of rules for reasoned conduct; action is ultimately 'groundless'. For Rorty the relation between knowledge and action is in this way contingent such that 'truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences' (1989: 7). Truth and knowledge do not stand outside of social and historical contexts but emerge in the flow of action that constitutes the context in which decisions - and plans - are made.

In discussing knowledge in organisations Tsoukas (1995) makes a similar distinction between 'propositional' and 'narrative' forms of knowledge. Propositional knowledge involves the attempt to represent in systematic, rational terms the rules that should be followed to bring about certain effects. In contrast, narrative knowledge is the accumulation of individual and collective experiences; a 'community shares a set of narratives through which it articulates its self-understanding, its historicity and identity, and preserves its collective memory' (Tsoukas 1995: 21). Such narrative knowledge provides the contingent context for action with any organisation. Rorty is careful not to set up a contest between systematic knowledge and knowledge that progresses towards 'the point ... where we treat everything ... as a product of time and chance' (1989: 22). Our aim is similar to Rorty's programme of understanding the role of systematic knowledge within a world characterised by time and chance.

We will discuss two models of planning derived from these general conceptions of the rational and the contingent not to find out which is right but to explore how they both contribute to our understanding of planning as knowledge-in-use in specific organisational settings that we have observed. The paper is in four sections. In the first, we will outline these two models more fully and their reformulation in the currently popular distinction between 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' as applied to organisations. In the second, we will present a coarse grained case study of planning in a local health authority and in the third section we will offer a more close grained study of planning in a school. Finally we will comment on the character of organisational planning that emerges from thinking of it in these two ways.

### **Planning: two models**

Planning is often thought of as a quintessentially rational activity and so is frequently central in rationalist models of human conduct. On the other hand, pointing to the contingency of action in organisations constitutes the basis of the most influential contemporary critiques of the rationalist tradition. In this section we will briefly review the debate between these two viewpoints in the literature on town planning and organisational planning.

Edward Banfield (1973) sets out clearly the process of rational planning drawing from rational choice theory previously established in economics and the study of decision making. Three dimensions of rational choice are central

to the model of planning as a reflective and cognitive activity undertaken apart from operational activity:

**(a) the decision maker lists all the opportunities for action open to him;**

**(b) he identifies all the consequences which would follow from the adoption of each of the possible actions;  
and**

**(c) he selects the action which would be followed by the preferred set of consequences. (Banfield, 1973 [1959]: 149)**

An ideal model of planning is presented here in which reflective activity is undertaken apart from operational activity. Such a model is often the basis of textbook accounts of the 'planning process' (see for example Reade, 1985; Faludi, 1973 in the field of town planning and Argenti, 1968; Hussey, 1979 and Wyatt, 1989 in the field of environmental planning). This tradition sees planning as a branch of applied science, according to which the role of the planner is to bring technical knowledge and tools of rational inquiry to bear upon problems of policy implementation and decision making. Several empirical studies of professional planners have noted that their occupational self-image is associated with a belief in the 'rational' character of planning (see Reade, 1985: 81).

This normatively oriented tradition offers procedures and methods to maximise the effectiveness of the would-be planner in the form of a set of rules for rational planning. Typically, such procedures involve a first stage of summarising the existing state of operational activities and identifying goals and objectives which can be translated into measurable, operational targets. The second stage is to identify the means and resources by which these goals can be achieved by outlining possible courses of organisational action. These lines of action are characteristically beyond the organisational process and are actions in the world that would constitute the effects of the organisation. So, they might include building new buildings or launching a new product - activities that are not, like planning, reflective or cognitive.

The model of planning as a fundamentally 'contingent' activity can, ironically, be traced to the same source, the work of Banfield and his co-writer Edward

Meyerson. In their 1955 study of the Chicago Housing Authority they found that the organisation did not actually follow a rational planning model and that a 'political' dimension was inherent in planning at all levels. They describe the plans of the authority as always being dependent on decisions made by other organisations and how the rather unclear ends used to evaluate courses of action were tied up with the interests of members of the authority. Their study identifies a set of organisationally contingent processes that operated to stop the planning process from being rational. For example, they describe how when goals are expressed in vague and platitudinous ways they can serve better for propaganda purposes both to motivate those within the organisation and to attain approval from those outside it. Banfield and Meyerson came to see conflict as endemic within planning organisations, and that such conflict inevitably leads to compromise about proposed courses of action. Furthermore, the uncertainty of the future context of action means that even where agreement is reached and a plan formulated, what is to be done will almost certainly have to be modified. Most significantly, they argue that the primary orientation of an organisation's activities is towards sustaining its own existence and continuing to act in ways that have worked in the past.

Banfield and Meyerson's work was the inspiration for a more widespread critique of the rationalist approach to planning. A succession of writers (e.g. Dahl and Lindblom, 1963; Lindblom, 1973; Etzioni, 1968; 1973; Davidoff, 1974; Forester, 1985; Benveniste, 1989) challenged the assumption that planning could be conceived as a purely 'reflective' process, arguing instead that planning always occurs in a social context on which it is contingent. While Banfield's initial support for the idea of rational planning accepted it as a normative standard that should guide planners, later writers came to recognise not only the empirical inadequacies of this idea as a view of how planning is conducted, but also that separation between the 'rational' and the 'sociological/political' dimensions of planning could not be sustained. The sociological and political contexts of planning could not be regarded as 'extraneous' factors that served to 'contaminate' what would otherwise be a purely rational endeavour (Dunleavy, 1980. For a more detailed account of the critique of planning as applied rationality see Dant 1995).

These developments have been mirrored in the field of management studies. There has been a continuing debate about the efficacy of central planning versus some form of distributed planning process. At the one extreme is a systematic approach that addresses the whole institutional structure - even a

whole economy (see Dembinski 1991) and at the other an argument for decentralisation and planning at the point of action (Hayek 1945). There are some strange parallels between Rorty's contingency of language and truth and Hayek's emphasis on the importance of 'knowledge of the particular circumstances of time and place' (Hayek 1945: 522) but at the end of the day Hayek's call for competition and planning via the market place does not sit well with Rorty's liberal principle of minimising cruelty.

The ideal model of the reflective and systematic manager/planner has been more substantially undermined by empirical studies that have led to pragmatic models of planning in management that accept it as a contingent process. This has led a number of commentators to stress the importance of tacitly held and used 'knowledge-in-action' (Schön 1987: 25) that needs to be grasped and represented by reflecting on what has worked and what has not, so that it can be applied in future practice. This has become a distinctive feature of contemporary textbooks on management; rather than prescribing a set of rules that will result in good management, they offer exemplary tales, based on direct experience or field research, of what works and what doesn't. The usefulness of this type of reflection ('reflection-in-action' - Schön: 1987: 26-40) for orienting action appropriate to organisations has become a major theoretical theme for the understanding of organisations as well as instructing practitioners (see for example the collection by Tsoukas 1994). A strong counter perspective to the rationalist, system-oriented approach which dominated modern management science has emerged over the past twenty years. Sometimes it is referred to as 'contingency theory' (see Reed, 1989: 74-75) and usually involves stressing that the decisions of managers are taken pragmatically in the flow of practical activities and shaped by circumstances of the moment.

Among the key contributors to this debate is Henry Mintzberg whose classic study of managerial work rejected the systematic and rule based model of management typically proffered in the early textbooks and instruction manuals of management science. Mintzberg emphasises the ad hoc character of the work of the manager, and, in particular, the pragmatic fluidity of management planning:

**The plans of the chief executives I studied seemed to exist only in their heads - as flexible, but often specific, intentions. The traditional literature notwithstanding, the**

**job of managing does not breed reflective planners; the manager is a real-time responder to stimuli, an individual who is conditioned by his job to prefer live to delayed action. (Mintzberg, 1981: 66)**

More recently Mintzberg has explored in considerable detail the literature on planning and cites a range of evidence to support his view that, under the influence of the rationalist perspective, planning in organisations has failed to pay in organisational or managerial terms (see Mintzberg, 1994, especially Chapter Three). He suggests that in practice formal structures of planning are concerned more with the proceduralisation and legitimation of existing strategic ways of working than the creation of 'strategies' as rational products:

**Organizations engage in formal planning, not to create strategies but to program the strategies they already have, that is, to elaborate and operationalize their consequences formally. (Mintzberg, 1994: 333)**

The application of the distinction between modernism and postmodernism to the study of organisations offers a contemporary version of the debate between the rationalist and contingent perspectives on planning (Cooper & Burrell, 1988; Parker, 1992). Indeed Tsoukas points out that the 'discovery' of the postmodern organisation amounts to nothing more than 'a new version of good, old contingency theory' (Tsoukas, 1992: 643).

In contrast to the systematic and rational features of the modern organisation, the features that characterise the 'postmodern organisation' are:

- a de-centred, non-hierarchical, organisational structure
- ill-defined lines of authority with activities organised emergently rather than through explicitly defined goals
- planning in situ as part of practical action
- rules being taken as general guides that are contextually interpreted
- participants in the organisation as heterogeneous and constantly changing
- a spirit of 'openness' and pragmatism and an orientation to the concrete and particular.

Two themes emerge in the academic debate about a postmodern alternative to modernist organisational structures and processes. First, is an awareness that the multiplicity and fluidity of organisations undermines the possibility of



differentiating between organisations in terms of fixed and identifiable structures, relationships, boundaries and 'centres'. Instead the 'society of organisations' (Perrow, 1981) is characterised by organisations which are 'functionally flexible, with no clear centre of power or spatial location' (Parker, 1992: 4). Second, is an awareness of the self-referentiality of organisational activities that recognises the contingency of norms, strategies and programmes on current activities and the tensions between them. 'Strategy operates at the level of practice rather than theory....[it] operates at the labyrinthine core of organisation - the eye of the vortex - where difference and self-reference reign' (Cooper and Burrell, 1988: 107).

In methodological terms, the idea of the postmodern organisation requires the social scientist to orient him/herself to the study of organisations in new and different ways.<sup>2</sup> Investigations no longer can be based upon the assumption of a fixed and stable object of inquiry. Method itself must become 'reflexive'; the act of investigation must be recognised to be constitutive of the phenomenon, at least in part. Organisational researchers, like organisational practitioners, 'create' the reality within which they operate. However, postmodern writers in organisation studies have not been fully clear or consistent on this methodological reorientation. At times they treat the issue as merely empirical in a conventional social scientific sense that simply requires documenting the degree of correspondence between the theoretical model of the 'postmodern organisation' and organisational reality. The difficulty is that conceived in such 'substantive' terms, the modern/postmodern dichotomy itself bears all the hallmarks of 'modernist' thought, being abstract, generalised and non-reflexive (and, thus, closer to a 'legislative' mentality than an 'interpretative' one - Bauman, 1987). We will return to these issues in the conclusion and consider their implications for our own investigations. We now turn to a consideration of some features of planning as we have observed them in two organisational settings.

### **Planning in a health authority**

At first sight planning in the local health authority that we studied (which we will refer to as 'the Authority') looked as if it followed a traditional rationalistic model. There was an annual planning cycle in which strategic plans were produced that set out the Authority's proposed programme of action.

Two types of planning document were produced. The first, which we shall call 'the Plan' set out local needs and the strategy to meet them. In general terms

the Plan was directed to a local readership of those interested in the work of the Authority - the providers and users of health services along with other local organisations whose work was affected by the what the health authority plans to do. In three subsequent years there were numerous differences in the ways in plans were organised as documents but they retained discursive features of a rationalistic approach such as headings for 'targets' and 'objectives', under which states of service provision that should be achieved within a specific timescale are described. The second planning document, which we shall call 'the Contract', was produced at a different stage in the year and specified the activities to be undertaken by the Authority in the following year within the requirements of the regional authority, the next tier up in the health service. The Contract was directed to the internal structure of the health service providing, for example, the basis for a review by the region of local activity. The Contract document was even more systematically arranged than the Plan and identified, for example, 'key tasks' and 'success criteria' with specified dates for completing the targets.

The traditional model of rational planning would suggest that these plans stood as directives to future action and that they were produced by a systematic review of possible means and ends by which the organisation might achieve its overall function. If this were the case, we could have expected that the production of the plan would involve a discussion of policy and resource issues and lead to the formulation of goals for the Authority. Different ways of achieving these goals would be discussed in terms of the likely success in achieving them and in terms of the allocation of scarce resources. This discussion would then lead on to the proposal of a series of lines of action that, once approved, would constitute the plan and shape the following year's action by the Authority. However, neither the production nor use of the Plan and the Contract followed this model. In meetings of the Authority observed over the course of a year, the contents of neither document received any discussion that could be classed as identifying goals or considering possible strategic courses of action. Such discussions might have occurred informally or within working groups of members of the Authority but there were no references back to such discussions during Authority meetings or during informal conversations the researcher conducted with officers and members.

At a meeting of a committee of the Authority in August of 1994 the Plan for 1995/6 was first discussed. The issues raised were: the guidance received

from the Region concerning local priorities; the shift from a five year strategic plan towards a one year plan; planning services at a 'locality' level (i.e. at an even more local level than the Authority); and the tight time-scale of producing the plan which was to be published by the middle of September. When the final document was received by the Authority at the end of September again the tight time-scale for production was mentioned and the inclusion of locality issues raised through consultation with health providers throughout the Authority's area. The same sort of process was largely repeated for the production of the Contract.

If the Authority itself did not discuss goals and targets how did these become components of the Plan and how far was the process one of rational decision making? The job of drafting and revising the documents was conducted by the officers and their staff. The Plan for 1995/6 was not the production of a single authority but was a collaboration between three authorities, one of which itself had been created from merging two separate authorities. The Plan for 1994/5 had also been a joint document produced by the two the authorities that had been merged before the 1995/6 plan. The production of these joint plans, which are complex documents that have to follow layout criteria established by the Region, was undertaken by identified officers in the authorities involved. Typically, individual officers drafted sections and one officer took responsibility for pulling together a draft of the whole plan. Officers consulted colleagues in the other authorities by telephone, fax and occasional meetings. Within each authority meetings between officers would be on an informal basis as the need arose. It was not apparent that there were regular meetings in which the principles of the plan were generated. The bulk of drafting was not done in the Authority being studied and while officers collaborated in preparing the document it was not clear that their discussions addressed goals and how they might reasonably be achieved. Our observations suggest that producing the Plan and later the Contract was treated as an administrative task, one that involved filling in areas of action under headings largely controlled by goals and priorities set outside the Authority at regional or governmental level.

In the November of the year that this process was observed the members and senior managers took an 'awayday' in order to discuss the planning process; values, goals and priorities. These discussions confirmed the limitations of the rationalist model as a description of the Authority's planning process. The participants reviewed and revised the Authority's 'mission statement', which

involved thinking through its goals and how they related to those of other authorities. However, while it was possible to agree such goals in the abstract, when discussion turned to the means for translating these goals into measurable outcomes numerous difficulties emerged, especially concerning the availability of relevant information. Additionally, when the production of plans was considered it became clear that the guidance from the Regional health authority prescribed areas of activity and pre-specified goals and targets. By prescribing the *form* of the Plan and the Contract, the Region effectively controlled both what went into these documents and, just as importantly, what was left out.

As these constraints were rehearsed, members in a variety of ways expressed frustration with the formal planning process; for example, they suggested that they had little opportunity to put ideas into the plans or to make local issues a feature of what were apparently local plans. Even within the prescribed form they felt powerless to articulate meaningful goals, since this presupposed adequate performance information to test whether goals were being achieved and such information was not available. For these and other reasons it was recognised that the contents of the plan had little connection with anything that members regarded as 'strategic decision making'. A recurrent topic of discussion was the possibility of closing the gap between the plan and the practical reality of decision making; over the course of the day discussion moved beyond complaint to consideration of ways by which the Authority's members might 'recover ownership' of the plans that were uttered in their name. While accepting that the form of the document was prescribed by the Regional Authority (its headings, columns, topics, outcome criteria and, most importantly, timing), they were looking for ways in which their actual decision making could be recognised within the formal planning process.

We have noted that the work of producing the plan was largely dealt with by officers of the Authority rather than its members. Since the business of day-to-day decision making was also in the hands of those same officers, it might be supposed that they, at least, would be guided in such activity by its provisions, making reference to it in the conduct of their executive tasks. However, here also a gap was observable. Neither the Plan nor the Contract was treated by the officers as a 'working plan' in the sense of a document giving guidance for current or future action. Early in the field work the Chief Executive of the Authority said, in response to questions concerning the planning process and

the significance of the Plan and the Contract, 'If you ask me for a plan for [this area], it's probably in my head!'. He was able to point to other processes by which future action by the Authority was organised, that were independent of the Plan. For example, national health service managers and chairpersons of authorities are involved in a performance review procedure in which the manager agrees personal targets with their manager on the next tier up. For the chief officer of a local authority this meant targets being agreed with the senior manager at Region. For the local management team this meant agreeing targets with their chief officer. So plans could be set through a complex of documents that are, in principle, confidential to the two parties involved in each.

Other officer's views were similar to those of the Chief Executive, suggesting that the formal planning process was a procedure that had little bearing on the activity of the Authority. One officer who contributed to the production of the Plan and the Contract said 'The plan is a series of ad hoc agreements really... that's the plan, really, the Contract is something you do, that's something you do for Region, you pick out the key objectives ... and you try to meet those targets, the Contract targets. The real plan, the PLAN, if you like... is what goes on outside the Contract.' In elaborating this distinction between the 'working plan' and the formal ones, this officer was able to list the sort of activities that she regarded as the 'real' plan, activities that she was involved in on a day to day basis that were to do with developing health services locally. She agreed that these things might be mentioned in the Plan and the Contract but that they were not a true indication of what the Authority regarded as its current priorities or lines of action. What is more, the contribution of officers to the generation of the public planning documents was cautious of setting targets that might not be delivered. As this informant put it: 'I mean basically what we do, would be to include what we knew or thought was going to happen anyway'.

### **The plan as a contingent production**

What is emerging from our very coarse grained analysis of planning in a health authority is that the process does not fit with a rational planning model - it is not produced as a systematically considered guide to future action. Instead the production of the Plan and the Contract is work that has to be done by the Authority and it is largely delegated to its senior officers for reasons of expediency. The production of documents in the public sphere that are recognised as 'plans' is largely prescribed from outside the Authority and

there is no strong sense of ownership or commitment to these plans by either members or officers. This does not mean either that the Authority does not really do any planning or that the officers organise the operational work of the Authority along the lines of the formal plans.

Three points can be made in respect of these observations. First, if the formal plans produced by organisations are contingent then it is also important to notice that planning as a process is also intertwined with other activities. So as the Authority goes about its routine business of approving or not the activities of practitioners under its control it realises a 'working plan' plan for how local services develop that may make no reference to the Plan. Similarly, by initiating projects and identifying resources for them, the Authority realises such an 'ad hoc' plan, that may in the future come to be reported more formally in the Plan. Secondly, these 'working' or 'ad hoc' plans may have a largely retrospective character - describing them as 'plans' is something which is only possible after they have acquired a coherence during courses of action, not in advance of such action. Thirdly, therefore, it is not simply that in its routine business, especially the negotiation of contracts with practitioners, the Authority limits and directs action in ways which realise the 'plan in the head' rather than the Plan. The crucial point to note is that these two 'plans' are neither equivalent nor substitutable, one for the other. While the Plan and the Contract are formal entities, for the production of which the Authority is legally accountable, what we have called the 'working plan' is a member's formulation, produced in response to questions concerning the 'in situ logic' of day-by-day decision making.<sup>3</sup>

With these points in mind, we now turn to planning in a smaller and institutionally different organisation.

### **Planning At Hall Lane School**

Hall Lane is a County Primary School located in the middle of a residential area in a town. At the time of the fieldwork there were 377 children on the roll, in 13 classes taught by 13 full-time teachers plus the Headteacher and some Support Teachers, Classroom Assistants and clerical staff. The basic management structure consisted of the Headteacher, who did not take a class, the Deputy Head, who did and the three 'departmental managers' (as the Head preferred them to be called). Together, these five people made up the 'Senior Management Team' of the school. We will comment on some

features of the curriculum and development planning which involved management and teaching staff.

The organisation of these forms of planning were new and still being established at the time of the fieldwork. Since his appointment at the school three and a half years earlier, the Headteacher had initiated a process of large scale change. His enthusiasm for what he identified as 'a modern professional approach' to teaching and learning and the management of schools, had led to planning becoming a major feature of school organisation and classroom practice. His philosophy of planning could be characterised as 'rational formalism'; he strongly believed in the rationalisation of activities in terms of a formalised 'goals-means' procedures. In respect of both curriculum and development planning, this approach was essentially a top-down conception, in which plans follow a path from the general towards the particular, and from a statement of overall goals or aims towards the selection of appropriate means for attaining these. In curriculum planning goals were articulated as 'learning outcomes' while in development planning, both at whole school and at departmental level, a purpose statement and 'key objectives' structured the plans. In both aspects of planning, the Head took the view that planning would only be rational, efficient and successful if everyone planned in broadly the same way, following the same steps and representing their plans in broadly the same structured form. Teachers would then know what was expected of them and how to deliver on those expectations.

This top-down, rationalist approach was most marked in relation to curriculum planning. For example, under the Head's leadership a 'Whole School Curriculum Plan' was produced which, within the subject knowledge and educational skills requirements of the National Curriculum, was organised around an 'enquiry-based' view of teaching and learning. The planning process began with a 'Broad Focus' in which very general and open-ended 'questions' were posed to orient enquiry in broad thematic ways. Planning proceeded to the next, 'Limited Focus' level, in which the enquiry related more precisely to identifiable subject areas of the curriculum. Finally, at the 'Sharp Focus' level, specific learning activities and tasks associated with particular Attainment Targets laid down in the National Curriculum, were identified.

The whole school curriculum plan was implemented through two more specific forms of planning, termly and fortnightly planning. Termly curriculum planning involved a team of teachers who worked together to plan the content and

organisation of teaching for their group of classes for a given term. Once a term these teams had a 'planning day' to jointly plan their work for the following term. Supply cover was bought in to free the teachers concerned who usually travelled to the County Teaching Resources Centre, some fifteen miles away, where the planning work could be done with textual and other educational materials to hand.

The most specific level of curriculum planning was the fortnightly plan which each teacher prepared individually to structure the work that was to go on in his or her class, on the basis of the termly plan agreed with colleagues. Both termly team plans and fortnightly individual class plans were written onto pro forma 'planning sheets' and submitted to the Headteacher. The Headteacher wrote comments and suggestions on the sheets and returned them. The planning sheets textually instantiate the methodology of curriculum planning which the teachers were to follow. This took the form of an objectives-led method (Eisner, 1967) which essentially consisted in specifying definite 'learning objectives' and gearing teaching and learning strategies and curriculum content towards attaining them.

By the time of the fieldwork, this system of planning had been operating in the school for some two years. By the Head's own account, the task of introducing it and persuading colleagues of its merits had not been straightforward or easy. Many staff had been at the school for a considerable length of time and were used to working in other ways. The Head and his Deputy, who joined the staff after his own appointment, had had, in their own words, to do a 're-education job' on some staff to convince them of the advantages of the new approach. Every indication in the early part of the fieldwork period was that this job had been successful; the new planning system appeared to be working well and to have the active support of the overwhelming majority of the staff, particularly the members of the Senior Management Team.

However, when individual interviews were conducted a rather different story emerged. In the interviews, every member of the Senior Management Team other than the Head expressed, in varying degrees, anxieties about and dissent from the Head's managerialist and rationalist 'line'. The Deputy Headteacher, despite being appointed soon after the Head and therefore regarded by many of the established staff as 'the Head's man', was the most strident critic. He expressed in interviews quite profound disagreement with some aspects of what the Head was trying to do as well as the manner in



which he was going about attempting to introduce change. The Deputy broadly supported the idea of planning and its role in improving the quality of the school and also recognised the need for the Head to be single-minded and determined in bringing about changes in a school that was both educationally and organisationally 'out of date'.

However, over the course of several interviews, his criticisms of the Head's 'style' and of the assumptions which informed the planning processes being introduced became more open and sharply stated. In particular, he expressed strong criticism of the 'workload' associated with the structure of curriculum planning - what was initially formulated as a report of other teachers' concerns about workload became a view with which he affiliated. Remarking that 'it's simply too complicated' and that 'many teachers are feeling badly overloaded', he characterised the direction in which the school was heading as 'becoming a bit of a sweatshop'. He was also quite cynical about the role of the Senior Management Team, suggesting that its main purpose was to 'rubber stamp' proposals originating from the Head, thereby giving a veneer of democratic and collective decision making, and that the Head was adept at manipulating the appearance of consultation.

Other members of the Team were much less personally critical of the Head, but they too showed varying degrees of scepticism about the planning structures that had been introduced and the assumptions informing them. For example, in the following interview extract the researcher is asking the head of the Special Needs Dept. about curriculum planning since the introduction of the Head's planning system:

TT: Erm, maybe we're a little bit more specific about the group activity planning that we do now, but that is something that has evolved from us, not from (Head).

DF: Right.

TT: And to do with the National Curriculum. The structure of the Broad Focus and the Limited Focus an' the rest of that is something that we just do because - I mean before we had these erm flow charts you see, so I suppose they've replaced the flow charts, if you like. They're a bit more specific than the flow charts, but really its just a bit of an added extra. I mean its very difficult really (to explain) because its - there's such a lot of

things you have to think about when you're actually planning a topic, that you want to do, you know you have to think about all of it, erm an' - I mean -

DF: Are you saying to me that really what you do is you plan the way - more or less the way you always have done but then present the - what you've done in such a way that it fits those [ structures

TT: [ More or less, yeah, I think so. I think so.

On the basis of these and other similar comments, it became clear that nothing could be inferred about how teachers *actually* planned from the fact that their planning was represented according to the textual requirements of the planning sheets. Specifically, it could not be assumed that they employed the 'objectives-led' methodology from the fact that their curriculum planning work was *consistent with* this methodology. But neither could it be assumed that, because teachers voiced reservations about the relevance and utility of the methodology in response to the researcher's queries, their use of it was nothing more than cosmetic and 'political'.

### **The rational and the contingent as mutually implicative**

There are significant similarities between the two cases. In describing planning in the Health Authority, we drew a contrast between, on the one hand, the formally designated planning process and its legally required products, the Plan and the Contract, and on the other the decision making processes through which the work of the authority was accomplished and its relations with providers and purchasers managed. In describing planning in the primary school, we noted a distinction between the formally required system of curriculum planning and the ways in which teachers actually organised their classroom teaching. In both settings, the formally defined planning process apparently has more to do with maintaining hierarchical control and accountability than with creating strategy and directing future action. However, while these observations might lend themselves to a conventional theoretical dichotomy, as 'formal planning' versus 'informal planning', matters are considerably more complex and theoretically interesting than this.

For example, in neither case do we wish to claim that these two 'dimensions' of planning have no connection with one another - that the formal planning process has no implications or repercussions for how routine decision making is organised and carried through. Neither do we claim that the two dimensions constitute opposing forms of planning, one 'formal' and chimerical, the other 'informal' and real. Within both organisational settings there are a variety of ways in which the formally rationalistic 'planning system' and the contingent, member-managed processes of 'planning-in-action' are intertwined and *mutually implicative* (Bittner, 1982). The formal planning system and its product, the Plan, can be part of continuing action in at least the following kinds of ways:

1) **Plans provide a context for treating together different types of organisational activity.** A series of activities which are specific in themselves are linked together within a long time frame (a year at least). This means that routine matters (such as hearing complaints in a health authority, teaching topics from the National Curriculum) are put alongside other projects (such as developing a teenage health project or developing special needs teaching) that are not routinely connected. The routine and continuing is considered alongside the special and time-bounded so that both are seen as part of the organisation's activity.

2) **Plans can articulate local priorities and policies for the organisation.** In the school this may be to do with linking the work of teaching teams who might be unaware of each other's problems. In the health authority this might be a way of articulating an issue (such as the reluctance of ophthalmologists to do home visits) as a priority first recognised in a discussion of another topic such as routine finance minutes. These local issues can then be incorporated into the plan (the school plan, the health authority plan) when it is that time of year. In this sense the plan provides an agenda, a list of areas of activity, some of which are new and some of which are ongoing, and all of which are specific for that organisation.

3) **Plans provide a resource for linking the activities of related organisations.** The health authority's plan provided the basis of discussions with local organisations such as the Community Health Council and it linked the activities of what had previously been four different authorities as part of a continuing process of organisational merger. In the school setting the Whole School Plan provided a point of comparison and connection with other

schools and a document that could be shared with governors, parents and the local education authority.

**4) Plans situate the organisation within its larger organisational context.**

In the school this means that its internal curriculum planning is fitted in with the National Curriculum and whatever guidance is issued from local authorities. In the health authority setting the plans specified activities and targets in accordance with the NHS national and regional guidance. In both settings, targets were approved at a higher organisational level as being the proper work of the organisation.

**5) Plans provide a means for managing the public relations or 'face' of the organisation.**

Together with other documents such as annual reports, plans can be shown to newcomers and outsiders as representing overall what the work of the organisation is. In the health authority both the Annual Report and the Plan emphasise what has been achieved and what recent activity has been about. In the school, the presence of a set of planning procedures demonstrates to outsiders that teaching is co-ordinated and goal directed.

**6) Plans provide an occasion for articulating values.**

These will include those required by controlling, superior organisation structures (e.g. through the National Curriculum or Health of the Nation targets). They will also express more local political interests such as those of competing professional groups or sectors within the organisation. For example, in the health authority setting, a particular feature of the production of the 1995/6 Plan was achieving a balance between primary (general practitioner) health care and secondary (hospital) health care. A major concern in the Authority's discussion of the plan was to get this balance altered to reflect their interests.

**7) Plans can be resources for juxtaposing and distinguishing the 'apparent' from the 'real' in organisations.**

The formal, rational plan can provide a resource for identifying the 'real' plan - which typically is asserted to be hidden, usually in the mind of a key actor. The hidden plan is always of course rational in the sense that it is treated as what 'really' guides action. Such claims cannot be understood independently of the tensions that exist within organisational structures about who or what controls the action of various individuals and how they will account for that control.<sup>4</sup>

What these points demonstrate, we believe, is that the notion of rational planning in organisations is not a 'myth', but that it must be seen as a situated

practice. In these and other ways, formal plans are oriented to contingently and given particular meaning and significance within the 'situated rationality' of social action.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper we have counterposed two analytical perspectives on planning, the rational and the contingent, and suggested that this distinction has found new clothing in the modern/postmodern debate. We argued that the key difference between these perspectives concerns the way they conceive the relationship between knowledge and action. The rational model assumes knowledge to be both distinct from and prior to action and that the effectiveness of action is dependent upon the rational organisation of knowledge and the systematic structuring of thought. However, the critique of rational planning as obscuring a more real, contingent practice of planning in the way suggested by Mintzberg and others, does not fully recognise the organisational importance of *both* forms of planning as mutually implicative. To study such situated contingencies requires an analytic perspective which recognises that *planning in all its forms and aspects is itself a practical, situated activity*.

Simple theoretical dichotomies, whether traditional ones such as between 'formal' and 'informal' organisation or contemporary ones such as modernism/postmodernism, are inadequate for understanding the planning process in situations such as our two examples. We do not believe that the way forward in the study of organisational planning lies in the formulation of a 'contingency model' to replace the 'rationalist model'. Nor do we believe that distinguishing 'types' of knowledge that have varying impacts according to the social character of organisations as Tsoukas does (1995: 35) is an adequate approach. Planning, however rational, is also always and at the same time contingent - the distinction has no more than heuristic value.

We believe that our observations of planning in organisations resist distillation into any 'model' or 'theory' and that this is consistent with what we take to be the spirit of postmodern arguments as a methodological critique of conventional social science. While organisations do recognise and seek to implement 'rational systems' of planning, such systems do not relate to action in the determinate fashion envisioned by many social scientific theorists. But this does not mean that the notion of rational planning is irrelevant in understanding what planning means in organisations. In the two

organisational settings that we observed, we have suggested that rational planning has the character of an organisational rhetoric which serves primarily as a resource for those who have to produce plans as accountable, public documents; it provides a means by which the strategy making work of the organisation can be represented as rational. Furthermore, we have argued that participants routinely encounter the practical task of bridging the gap between the rational planning rhetoric and the actual ways they get things done. Studying planning in organisations is thus not simply a matter of asserting that rationalist formulations do not fit what is 'really done' but rather one of noting the ways in which 'the rational plan' is made to fit with decisions taken and activities enacted by participants for contingent and socially situated reasons. In this sense, then, planning in organisations can be described both as rational control *and* contingent activity.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented to the British Sociological Association Annual Conference 'Contested Cities', University of Leicester, 10th -13th April 1995.

<sup>2</sup> We note that, as a methodological move, the shift to a post-modern perspective has some 'family resemblance' to the respecification of social inquiry recommended by ethnomethodologists (Garfinkel, 1967; Button, 1991). Indeed, a plausible case can be made that ethnomethodology anticipated by a couple of decades much of the epistemological critique of social science nowadays associated with postmodernism. For a discussion of these matters, see Lynch, 1994, ch.4.

<sup>3</sup> The health authority studied cannot be claimed as typical. The study was conducted at a time when all health authorities were undergoing a series of organisational changes. The changes introduced in the 1990 National Health Service and Community Care Act were designed to separate 'purchasers' of health care from 'providers' as part of creating a form of public sector market. Traditional planning was as a result largely being replaced by 'contracts' or expressions of intention to purchase services. The splitting of responsibilities of authorities is organisationally further confounded by merging health authorities into 'purchasing commissions'. Despite these massive changes planning was still a feature of the organisational activity that in some formal aspects fitted with a rational planning model while demonstrating contingent features which contradict the logic of a rational planning model.

<sup>4</sup> Bolman and Deal (1991) comment on the role of plans as a sign of good management, ' a ceremony that an organisation must conduct periodically if it wants to maintain its legitimacy'. They cite with approval Cohen and March's 1974 study of planning in universities that

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identified four functions of plans: as symbols, as games, as excuses for interaction and as advertisements (see also Cyert and March 1992, pp 110-113). These are similar points to the points we make above insofar as they point to the contingency of planning on all the other activities of the organisation.

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