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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# Strategic concepts as micro-level tools in strategic sensemaking

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**Research Summary:** The purpose of this article is to illuminate the role of concepts in strategic sensemaking. Based on a longitudinal real-time study of a city organization, we demonstrate how the concept of “self-responsibility” played a crucial role in strategic sensemaking. We develop a theoretical model that elucidates how strategic concepts are used in meaning-making, and how such concepts may be mobilized for the legitimation of strategic change. Our main contribution is to offer strategic concepts as a missing micro-level component of the language-based view of strategic processes and practices. By so doing, our analysis also adds to studies on strategic ambiguity and advances research on vocabularies.

**Managerial Summary:** Our analysis helps to understand the role of strategic concepts, that is, specific words or phrases with established and at least partly shared meanings, in an organization’s strategy process. We show how adopting the concept “self-responsibility” helped managers in a city organization to make sense of environmental challenges and to promote change. Our analysis highlights how such concepts involve ambiguity that can help managers to establish common ground, but can also hinder implementation of specific decisions and actions if it grows over time. We suggest that under environmental changes, development of new strategic concepts may be crucial in helping managers to collectively deal with environmental changes and to articulate a new strategic direction for the organization.

**KEYWORDS**

concept, discourse, language, practice, sensemaking

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Strategy process and practice research (Burgelman et al., 2018; Floyd, Cornelissen, Wright, & Delios, 2011; Hutzschenreuter & Kleindienst, 2006; Vaara & Whittington, 2012) has focused increasing attention on the role of language in strategic sensemaking (Balogun, Jacobs, Jarzabkowski, Mantere, & Vaara, 2014; Cornelissen & Schildt, 2015; Mantere, 2013). However, in spite of recent advances (Paroutis & Heracleous, 2013; Seidl, 2007), there is a paucity of knowledge of the very micro-level of strategic sensemaking. This is a theoretical and practical deficiency that needs to be addressed if we are to develop a fuller understanding of the role of discourse in organizational strategy work.

To address this research gap, we focus on the key role of “strategic concepts” in strategic sensemaking. We define *strategic concepts* as linguistic expressions, essentially words or phrases with established and at least partly shared meanings, which play a central role in an organization’s strategy discourse. We elaborate on strategic concepts as central tools created and used by managers and other actors in formulating and interpreting strategic issues and initiatives, thus elucidating a key micro-level aspect of strategic sensemaking. This perspective allows us to see how the use of specific concepts forms the basis of discursive, narrative, or rhetorical structures, thus complementing the language-based view in strategy process and practice research more generally (Balogun et al., 2014; Mantere, 2013).

Our theoretical framework is inspired by Wittgenstein’s conception of language as social practice, according to which the meanings that words and claims hold depend on the socially established rules of “language games” (Mantere, 2013; Wittgenstein, 2009). The social practice perspective on language accommodates a symbolic view of concepts (Loewenstein, Ocasio, & Jones, 2012) and a pragmatist understanding of their role as tools for coordination in organizations (Bechky, 2003; Cramton, 2001)—in our case, strategic change. Thus, strategic concepts contribute to the micro-level perspective on strategy, which elaborates how individuals interact in and coordinate strategic sensemaking (Heracleous & Barrett, 2001; Seidl, 2007).

Our analysis is based on a thirteen-year case study of strategic sensemaking in a Finnish city organization called Bay City (a pseudonym), which went through a major strategic change during the period of observation. While we analyzed the use of three key concepts in strategic sensemaking, this article elaborates on the adoption and use of “self-responsibility” as strategic concept playing a crucial productive role in a long-term strategic change process. “Self-responsibility” was originally a part of a broader societal discussion, from where it was adopted in Bay City to play a crucial productive role in a long-term process of strategic change.

On this basis, we develop a theoretical model that elaborates how actors engage in meaning-making through concept-shaping (creation of new meanings, challenging and maintaining meanings, and embedding them in broader systems of meaning) and how concepts may be mobilized specifically for legitimation of strategic change (focusing attention on specific issues and initiatives; justification of strategic choices, decisions, or actions; and ideological legitimation). Our analysis also reveals how the ambiguity of “self-responsibility” enabled the managers to engage in productive sensemaking about environmental changes despite their inherently conflicting viewpoints. Furthermore, it shows how the use-value of the concept changes over time, suggesting that there may be a “life cycle” during which specific concepts can play a crucial role in strategy work and after which they may be replaced by others.

The main contribution of our article is to elucidate the role of strategic concepts as central micro-level tools in strategic sensemaking. By so doing, we add a missing piece to the language-based view

of strategy (Balogun et al., 2014; Mantere, 2005). By unravelling the dynamics of strategic concept use, our analysis has also specific implications on research strategic ambiguity (Abdallah & Langley, 2014; Sillince, Jarzabkowski, & Shaw, 2012) and vocabularies (Loewenstein et al., 2012).

## 2 | STRATEGIC CONCEPTS IN STRATEGIC SENSEMAKING

### 2.1 | Strategic sensemaking and discursive dynamics

Sensemaking is the process in and through which organizational actors develop an understanding of specific issues and enact their environment (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). Strategic sensemaking is a more specific activity, where managers and other organizational members deal with strategic issues to construct shared understanding of the issues under consideration and the actions taken by the organization in response (Cornelissen & Schildt, 2015; Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). This process involves both cognitive (Balogun & Johnson, 2004, 2005) and discursive (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011) aspects and dynamics.

Strategy scholarship has long recognized the role of language in sensemaking, sometimes explicitly (Balogun et al., 2014; Mantere, 2013; Paroutis & Heracleous, 2013; Vaara, 2010) and sometimes implicitly as expression of cognitions (Porac, Thomas, & Baden-Fuller, 1989). Narrative studies have highlighted the ways in which strategies are constructed in and through storytelling (Barry & Elmes, 1997; Boje, 2008; Fenton & Langley, 2011; Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013). Discourse analytical research has focused on the enabling and constraining effects of discourse (collections of texts and use of language) and its implications for subjectivity (Knights & Morgan, 1991), participation (Mantere & Vaara, 2008), and resistance (Ezzamel & Willmott, 2008). Studies on rhetoric have examined the role of persuasion in sensemaking and sensegiving (Jarzabkowski & Sillince, 2007; Sillince et al., 2012). Micro-level analyses of strategy conversations have concentrated on the dynamics in situated collective sensemaking episodes (Kwon, Clarke, & Wodak, 2014; Samra-Fredericks, 2005; Whittle, Housley, Gilchrist, Mueller, & Lenney, 2014). Still others have focused on strategic plans as texts that shape sensemaking over longer strategy processes (Hodge & Coronado, 2006; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011).

In these studies, linguistic concepts (essentially, terms, words, phrases, or tropes) have usually played an implicit role. Yet, despite the lack of theoretical attention, empirical findings have occasionally highlighted the importance of concepts, such as “top-ten public university” in the classic study on sensemaking and sensegiving by Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991). In a seminal theoretical paper, Seidl (2007) reflected on strategy concepts, arguing that organization-specific strategy discourses construct and make use of their own particular concepts. Mirabeau and Maguire (2014) examined how practices of strategy articulation and the stretching of existing strategy categories link autonomous strategic behaviors to articulated strategy, and thereby, facilitate their realization. Their analysis highlights how the existence of concepts such as “service profitability” and “true two-tier support model” played in creating space for new, unforeseen strategic initiatives. Such strategic concepts are thus akin to concepts that make up institutional vocabularies (Loewenstein et al., 2012; Sudaby & Greenwood, 2005), but capture organization-level rather than field-wide patterns.

While recent work on vocabularies has highlighted the importance of concepts as a complementary perspective to the discursive, narrative and rhetorical perspectives on sensemaking, we still have only limited understanding of how the specific concepts that make up vocabularies are formed and how actors use them in strategic sensemaking. To advance our understanding of strategic concepts as tools used in strategic sensemaking, we build on the practice-based theories of language.

## 2.2 | A practice-based perspective on strategic concepts

To conceptualize strategic concepts and their role in strategic sensemaking, we draw on Wittgenstein's view of language as social practice, where the meaning of words and claims depend on shared "rules of the language game" (Wittgenstein, 2009). The view of language as social practice through which actors express their beliefs and perform a variety of speech acts has had a crucial influence on the philosophy of language (Brandom, 1994; Davidson, 1983; Searle, 1995), linguistics (Fairclough, 1989), social theory (Giddens, 1979), and organization analysis (Astley & Zammuto, 1992; Mauws & Phillips, 1995; Pentland, 1992). This perspective combines political (rhetoric) and cognitive-cultural explanations and conceives of language as both the enabler and the product of social interaction (Mantere, 2015).

The practice perspective explains how meanings rest on the established conventions or rules within specific language games (Brandom, 1994; Wittgenstein, 2009). These conventions allow actors to attribute meaning to speech acts; they are essentially normative understandings of how concepts can be used and what their use in various sentences implies (Dummett, 1993). The meanings of concepts boil down to the perceived role they play in thinking, and by extension, in conversations and texts (Brandom, 1994). The conventions ("rules of the language game") that define concepts are themselves produced in language use and driven by a need to cope successfully with the issues at hand. Because concepts are always used within broader discourse, the meanings actors attribute are connected to a broader vocabulary (Loewenstein et al., 2012) or discourse (Knights & Morgan, 1991; Vaara, 2010).

Strategy discourse is characterized by central concepts that attain organization-specific meanings (Seidl, 2007), which we call "strategic concepts." When organizations adopt common business concepts such as "customer orientation," "globalization," "balanced scorecard," or "total quality management," and use them to define new strategic goals or initiatives, these tend to take on new meanings that are shared among the members of the organization. Over time, top management teams, middle management, and employees begin to use the concepts in ways that are somewhat, but not entirely, different from their use in other organizations and the media (e.g., Zbaracki, 1998). Specific groups of actors can share the same meanings to a greater or lesser extent, depending on their exposure to the same conversations and acceptance of the same background assumptions (Seidl, 2007).

While actors in an organization may never fully share the meanings they attribute to specific strategic concepts, they are nonetheless crucial tools for making sense of the organization's situation and its responses; they structure observations and actions along specific shared categories (Zuckerman, 1999; Zuckerman, Kim, Ukanwa, & von Rittmann, 2003). By adopting and adapting strategic concepts, actors create "shorthand expressions" for recurring observations, ideas, and initiatives that help them refer to familiar and legitimate beliefs about the organization and its environment. The strategic concepts and knowledge form a duality where continued use of specific concepts reinforces certain beliefs (Brandom, 1994). Thus, concepts structure knowledge by embodying tacit beliefs, simplifying reasoning, and shaping the formation of new knowledge and decisions, including causal maps (Barr, Stimpert, & Huff, 1992; Fiol & Huff, 1992).

Previous studies lead us to suggest that strategic concepts provide effective ways to access and apply existing beliefs in conversations in ways that help coordinate ongoing organizing. The shared cognitive content of a strategy relies on complex commitments (e.g., Bartunek, 1984); strategic concepts enable rapid communication and processing of complicated issues, providing what some social psychologists have called the economies of information processing (Bruner, Goodnow, & Austin, 1956). Shared meanings allow joint coordination of actions in strategic sensemaking, including formation of strategic choices and their consequent implementation. Because concept meanings need

not be perfectly shared, the concepts may serve to mobilize actors toward a strategic goal even if they include a significant degree of ambiguity (Sillince et al., 2012; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011). Yet, we have limited understanding of how strategic concepts are created and used in strategic sensemaking.

Thus, to understand how concepts enable strategists to make sense of new observations and influence decisions and actions, it is imperative to study how they are formed and mobilized in practice. Such concept-level analysis can help uncover the “rules of the language game” that shape the ability of actors to participate in strategy work. By so doing, such analysis can also advance the language-based view of strategy more generally (Balogun et al., 2014; Mantere, 2013). This leads us to formulate our research questions as follows: How do actors use concepts in strategic sensemaking? How do these concepts enable or constrain strategy work in contexts such as strategic change?

### 3 | RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODS AND ANALYSIS

#### 3.1 | Research design

Our empirical analysis is based on a revelatory longitudinal case study of strategic sensemaking in a medium-sized Finnish city that we call Bay City (pseudonym) during a period of strategic change. This is a revealing case because it illuminates the key role of concepts central to strategic sensemaking over a long period of time and because it enables us to better understand how specific concepts were successfully used to legitimate strategic change.

Bay City is a regional hub with strong links to the capital area of Helsinki. It is an old industrial town of approximately 120,000 inhabitants, having witnessed continuous growth after World War II. In more recent years, the city was hit hard by postindustrial structural changes; many industrial employers have downsized, moved out, or gone bankrupt since the late 1980s, leaving the community to find new sources of employment. The history of Bay City shows a long-term focus on developing the urban structure and public services. Strategic planning had become a key venue for making sense of the problems and challenges of Bay City in the beginning of the 2000s. The strategic planning process in Bay City involved both city administration and politicians. The Office of the Mayor and certain members of the city’s top management were responsible for analysis and preparation of the material for political work. This took place in formal meetings and designated strategy seminars, attended by the members of the City Board and the City Council as well as invited top and middle managers. The City Council as a whole discussed and actively guided preparation of the strategic plan. While formal decisions took place in the meetings of the City Board and the City Council, these meetings did not have a significant effect on the contents of the strategic plans during our period of observation.

Our research team has had unique and comprehensive access to strategic decision-making in this city organization since 2005. In particular, we had the opportunity to focus on six rounds of strategic planning between 2004 and 2016. We were able to follow these strategy conversations in real time during all but the first round. This access has allowed us to observe the introduction of new concepts in strategic sensemaking, changes in their meanings over time, and the diffusion of concepts within the organization and their use in sensemaking. We followed the use of several concepts and analyzed three of the most central in detail: “self-responsibility,” “attractiveness,” and “sustainable development.” In this article, we elaborate and analyze the use of “self-responsibility”; we detail use of the other two in the Online Appendix.

### 3.2 | Empirical material

We collected extensive empirical data that include observations of 181 strategy meetings, 113 interviews, informal conversations, and document data from 1995 to 2016. We focused on six rounds of strategic planning between 2004 and 2016 (see Table 1), but also covered strategic sensemaking and decision-making elsewhere. Although we did not observe the very first meetings between 2004 and 2006, our interview and documentary data have allowed us to reconstruct the beginning of the case in a detailed manner, and we have validated our interpretations with the key participants. We used the qualitative analysis package Atlas.ti to manage all our data.

#### 3.2.1 | Strategy meetings

We had very open access to strategic sensemaking, and were, in practice, able to observe the strategy meetings regarded as most relevant for our purposes between 2005 and 2016. Our data capture the central discussion forums of the management (the Executive Management Group of the city, the three divisional management teams, and a Strategy Team with a coordinating function) and the politicians (the City Council and the City Board) as well as joint seminars attended by both of these groups. We used verbatim transcripts of audio recordings made in these meetings and our observation notes. Altogether, we observed 181 strategy meetings; with very few exceptions, we recorded and fully transcribed relevant strategy discussions. We used a professional transcriber for our audio recordings. We conducted our analysis in the native language and translated the excerpts for the purposes of this publication to minimize the risk of misunderstandings or misrepresentations.

#### 3.2.2 | Interviews

Our analysis also draws on interviews with 68 central participants (30 of whom were interviewed several times). Our interviews cover all the key participants in strategy-making between 2004 and 2016; we interviewed top management, influential middle managers as well as the key politicians across political boundaries. Our semi-structured interviews lasted from 45 min to 2 hrs and focused on strategy work in Bay City and experiences with strategic planning and strategic change. For example, we asked the interviewees to describe and comment on their experiences with the organization of strategic planning in Bay City, key events, problems, and challenges in the planning processes; their views of key strategic ideas, issues, and initiatives as well as successes and failures in strategic planning. The interviewees were also asked to comment on specific events and themes that we had

TABLE 1 Overview of Empirical Data (items and total number of pages)<sup>2</sup>

	2004–2006	2007–2008	2009	2010–2012	2013–2014	2015–2016	TOTAL
<b>Meetings</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>181</b>
	<b>0 p.</b>	<b>1,211 p.</b>	<b>1,297 p.</b>	<b>657 p.</b>	<b>905 p.</b>	<b>506 p.</b>	<b>4,576 p.</b>
Managers		20	19	17	4	11	71
Politicians		17	34	13	35	11	110
<b>Interviews</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>113</b>
	<b>0 p.</b>	<b>842 p.</b>	<b>92 p.</b>	<b>290 p.</b>	<b>0 p.</b>	<b>249 p.</b>	<b>1,541 p.</b>
Managers	5	29	7	16		11	68
Politicians	2	25		7		11	45
<b>Documents</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>208</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>481</b>
	<b>878 p.</b>	<b>1,542 p.</b>	<b>525 p.</b>	<b>920 p.</b>	<b>466 p.</b>	<b>476 p.</b>	<b>4,807 p.</b>

Meetings and interviews are formatted in A4 pages with single-spaced, 12 pt. Times New Roman; the documents are in the original formatting. For the purposes of this table, we have counted all meetings where politicians were present as primarily political meetings. Please note that the interview data gathered in 2007–2008 also focused on the 2004–2006 round. Nine documents covering 131 pages were also gathered as background material to understand the history prior to 2004 (not included in the table).

observed in previous meetings. We recorded and translated the interviews in the same way as the meeting data previously described.

### 3.2.3 | Documents

Last, we collected all the available documentary material used in strategic sensemaking. In addition to strategy documents, our rich documentary data comprise drafts of these documents including comments, internal memos, Power Point presentations, and political speeches made in the City Council. Strategic plans played a key role in our analysis, and we gathered not only the final accepted strategic plans, but also followed the various versions on which the key decision-makers worked in strategy meetings. We also collected a large number of other documents regarding decisions made to implement change in the organization. These documents enabled us to link the use of strategic concepts in meetings and interviews to the specific formulations discussed, and through these formulations, to discussions in other meetings.

## 3.3 | Analysis

Our analysis is based on an abductive approach that aimed to develop our initial empirical insights to a higher level of abstraction, linking them with previous theory through an iterative process (van Maanen, Sørensen, & Mitchell, 2007; Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013). Our analysis proceeded through several iterations as our theoretical and empirical understanding increased. These stages took place over the course of several years, starting around 2012 when we discovered the key role of strategic concepts in strategic sensemaking. This long analysis period enabled us to move back and forth among data collection, the different stages of the analysis, and previous literature, strengthening our understanding as we proceeded.

### 3.3.1 | Stage 1: Analysis of key concepts used in strategic sensemaking

In the first stage of the analysis, we mapped the key concepts used in strategic sensemaking. We started our analysis with a careful general reading of the empirical material to better understand the topics of conversations, their role in the strategy process, and the very rich and varied opinions expressed by strategists. During the first phase we identified the most central strategic concepts, which included “self-responsibility,” “attractiveness,” and “sustainable development.” We structured the data into discussions related to these strategic concepts; this allowed us to track the concept meanings in conversations and written texts over the course of the strategy process. We then developed a preliminary “researcher’s narrative” of how the concept of self-responsibility was used over time. Figure 1 provides a timeline depicting use of the concept during the data collection period. The Online Appendix offers a summary of the analysis we did for the two other central strategic concepts, attractiveness and sustainable development.

### 3.3.2 | Stage 2: Detailed analysis of the use of self-responsibility

In the second stage, we tracked the specific instances where self-responsibility was used in strategic sensemaking. To ensure that we had a complete set of data, we used an automated text search together with careful checks for misspelled or partial occurrences of the concept and identified potential synonyms (e.g., overlap in meaning between self-responsibility and the related description of “active citizens”). Self-responsibility was used frequently in strategy discussions. In the strategy meetings observed during the round of strategic planning in 2007–2008, the concept occurred 293 times (24.7 occurrences/100 pages of transcripts<sup>1</sup>); during the following round in 2009, 152 times

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<sup>1</sup>Formatted in A4 pages of single-spaced, 12 pt. Times New Roman.

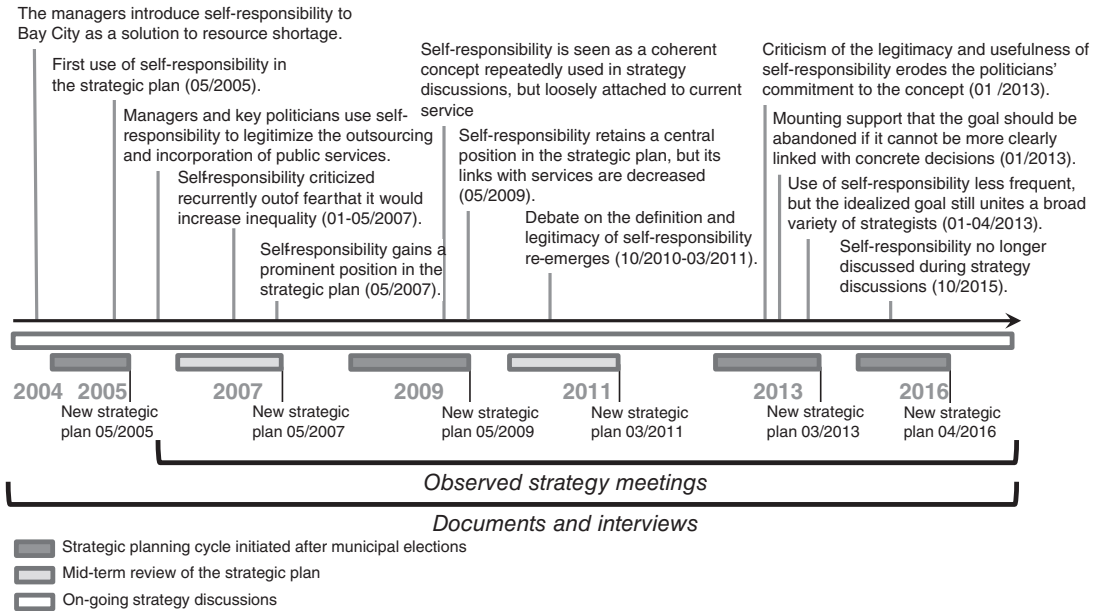


FIGURE 1 Timeline of the use of self-responsibility

(11.7/100 pages); during the 2010–2012 round, 26 times (4.0/100 pages); during the 2013–2014 round, 82 times (9.1/100 pages); and during the last round in 2015–2016, only 10 times (2.0/100 pages). The concept also appeared repeatedly in formal documents, interviews, and informal discussions until 2013, and less so between 2014 and 2016.

3.3.3 | Stage 3: In-depth analysis of the use of self-responsibility in meaning-making and legitimation

In the third stage, we focused on how this concept was used more specifically in strategic sensemaking. Our analysis was based on a pragmatist approach to language as social practice, whereby we conceived the meaning of “self-responsibility” to derive from the shared rules or norms concerning when and how the concept could be properly used, and relatedly, the implications actors should infer from its use. Rather than treating these rules or norms as fixed, we traced them as they were subjected to negotiation and redefinition in strategic sensemaking.

This approach led to a detailed coding of all the material, concentrating primarily on the meeting material, but also including the interviews and documents. We compared and linked specific instances of concept use based on their similarities and differences, allowing us to construct second-order theoretical themes. After several iterations between theoretical ideas and empirical findings, we distinguished between the six specific forms of use summarized in Figure 2. We further grouped these second-order themes into two key categories of strategic concept use: meaning-making (comprising the creation of new meanings, challenging and maintaining meanings, and the discursive embedding of the concept) and legitimation (including focusing attention on specific issues and initiatives; justification of strategic choices, decisions or actions; and ideological legitimation).

During the analysis, we noticed that the partially shared meanings were developed in a process of (re)negotiation and (re)definition, which shaped both the meanings of the strategic concept and the shared understanding of change created through strategic sensemaking. Instead of merely creating new meanings, the concepts were used to challenge meanings held or promoted by others and to maintain certain meanings. In addition, we realized that a key part of meaning-making was how self-



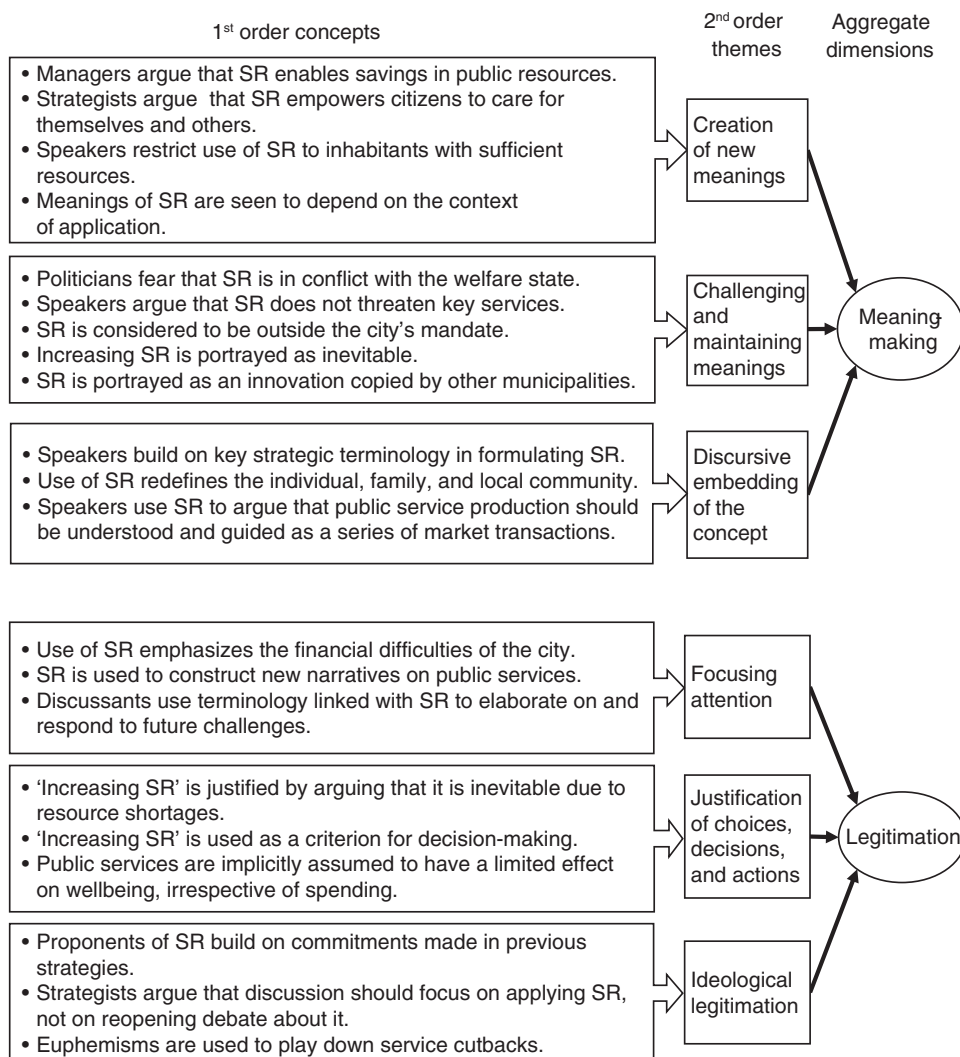


FIGURE 2 Data structure

responsibility was linked with the embedding of the concept in broader systems of meaning through being connected with emerging vocabularies (Loewenstein et al., 2012). While the rich meeting data were the central source for our analysis of ongoing meaning-making, we linked the discussions with the documents they produced—the most important of which were the strategic plans. We did this by following strategic sensemaking from initial ideas and suggestions to later discussion, and finally, the formal approval of the strategic plan in the City Council.

In terms of legitimation, we discovered that the concepts were mobilized not only for straightforward justification, but also in other aspects of legitimation. We distinguished between focusing attention on specific issues and initiatives; justification of choices, decisions and actions; and ideological legitimation. To understand the implications of legitimation on strategic change, we identified and elaborated on specific examples of issues, initiatives, choices, decisions, and actions in relation to how they were made sense of in strategy conversations and how they then resulted in actual changes.

For example, we found that the introduction of self-responsibility was linked with decisions to limit the scope of public services, to enact their partial privatization, to increase out-of-pocket costs to inhabitants for certain nonessential services, and to change the ways in which services were produced in order to increase their economic efficiency.

To elaborate on these types of strategic concept use, we identified and analyzed typical examples of how concepts were used in meaning-making and how they were mobilized in legitimation. This was essential to substantiate the specificities of concept use and to develop a better understanding of its implications. Selected examples are included in the tables and vignettes in the following Findings section.

## 4 | FINDINGS: SELF-RESPONSIBILITY AS AN ENABLING AND CONSTRAINING CONCEPT IN STRATEGIC SENSEMAKING

In this section, we first describe the emergence of the concept of self-responsibility in strategic sense-making. After this prologue, we elaborate on how the concept was used in meaning-making and shaped by this meaning-making, and how it was mobilized in the legitimation of strategic change. Finally, we elaborate on the declining use of self-responsibility in strategic sensemaking.

### 4.1 | Prologue: Emergence of self-responsibility as a strategic concept

Self-responsibility was introduced to Bay City in 2004 by a new Mayor and his team. This concept was borrowed from broader societal discussion related to the financial concerns of the public sector; well-published analyses of the aging of the population and rising healthcare costs led to a lively political discussion about the future of the Nordic welfare-based system and its developmental needs. Managers and politicians in Bay City recognized in this discussion that a change was “in the air” or part of the “Zeitgeist” (as our interviewees later explained), and concluded that a reassessment of the roles and responsibilities of inhabitants and service providers was necessary. From the start, it was clear that the concept was especially useful for making sense of strategic change. One of the top managers who was actively involved in the early part of this process put it like this:

[Self-responsibility] was dictated by necessity. [...] There is no way we can keep offering the services our inhabitants currently demand from us. We need to curb the demand a little in order to have the funds to care for those who require the kind of treatment which they can't provide for themselves. (*Interview, top manager, 2006*)

Based on our interviews and other data, it was not obvious in 2004 that self-responsibility would become such a widely used concept. After its introduction, however, it was increasingly picked up by those involved in strategy discussions, until a decline began in 2013.

### 4.2 | Meaning-making and the evolving meanings of self-responsibility

In Bay City, subsequent strategic sensemaking involved continuous meaning-making with the concept of self-responsibility. This included the creation of new meanings, challenging and maintaining meanings, and embedding the concept in a larger system of meanings. Table 2 provides examples of each.

#### 4.2.1 | Creation of new meanings

To launch strategic change in the organization, the new Mayor and his team introduced the concept of self-responsibility to give sense to the direction taken by the city in organizing its service production.

TABLE 2 Examples of use of self-responsibility for meaning-making

	Concept use in strategic sensemaking	Managerial meetings	Political meetings	Interviews with managers	Interviews with politicians
Creation of new meanings	Using the concept to establish new meanings (especially about strategic change)	Managers construe self-responsibility as a partial solution to the problem of resource scarcity. "And a part of self-responsibility is that people fund a larger share of the costs for services they get from the city—that improves the balance of our budget." ( <i>Director, Executive Management Group [EMG] meeting, 2007</i> )	Politicians emphasize self-responsibility as a way to maintain services and strengthen shared values. "Our goal is that [self-responsibility is increased—the use of outsourcing is increased so that we can appropriately produce all services. The community is extraordinarily important—we should emphasize it more in the future. The family is the beginning of it all. The resources of the city are limited and we'll need to discuss them more as we go forward." ( <i>City Council member, Council seminar, 2009</i> )	Self-responsibility was construed as an inevitable development. "First, the financial resources of municipalities will not be enough for all that has been promised to inhabitants. Second, if we discuss well-being services broadly, the demand for these services is growing all the time [...] which is a good thing, and may improve well-being. However, public funds will not be enough to pay for it." ( <i>Interview, Director of Social and Health Services, 2007</i> )	Politicians linked self-responsibility with a change of attitude. "Self-responsibility is a funny goal for a city strategy, since its increase is restricted by the statutory, subjective rights [of inhabitants]. It may have more of an attitudinal significance. [...] It concretely means that people would exercise so that they wouldn't come to the health center so often. Or that [...] children could care for their parents at home instead of having them in homes for the elderly." ( <i>City Council member, 2006</i> )
Challenging and maintaining meanings	Negotiating the meanings associated with concept use through challenges and defensive argumentation	Actions related to self-responsibility were criticized as insufficient for achieving the targeted changes in services. "Self-responsibility has been in our strategy since 2005. But has it led to concrete actions in any way? The same question goes for our service system. We wrote a detailed goal for it into our 2011 strategy, but we're still fighting for each single library—for the small things, the peanuts in a huge system." ( <i>Middle Manager, EMG meeting, 2013</i> )	Politicians defended self-responsibility as the maintenance of traditional values in society. "Older members of the audience will remember when we still did things communally. The significance of collective work in sports clubs and elsewhere takes us to the theme of self-responsibility. The city can't organize all kinds of activity—that's a simple fact we can't get away from, there's not enough money. We can't buy the services of youth counselors or sports clubs, and we're not meant to." ( <i>City Council member, Council seminar, 2013</i> )	Managers described the positive, empowering effects of self-responsibility. "During the self-responsibility discussion, some have said that people need services—that they can't carry responsibility. We probably have some people who need guardianship like that, but by and large people take care of themselves and their loved ones. [...] This idea that inhabitants need [services] and the city creates [them], it bothers me." ( <i>Middle manager, 2009</i> )	Participants questioned accounts of the expected change as overtly positive economically and socially. "[Self-responsibility] can be carelessly misused, by saying that even those who are not able to should take self-responsibility. Expecting them to take up the tasks of the city voluntarily and for free feels like self-deception. [...] Supporting the participation of the third sector in [these tasks] will also use up municipal resources." ( <i>City Council member, 2007</i> )

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Concept use in strategic sensemaking	Managerial meetings	Political meetings	Interviews with managers	Interviews with politicians
Creation of broader systems of meaning	<p><b>Managers linked self-responsibility with other concepts related to service offerings.</b></p> <p>M1: "How strongly are community and self-responsibility related? At least moderately." M2: "Or [...] the community and the well-being of inhabitants." M3: "Of course, all these influence each other. And this willingness [of the city] to develop [its services] helps maintain them." (EMG meeting, 2009)</p>	<p><b>Politicians linked self-responsibility with other key concerns.</b></p> <p>"I would add 'security' to the last item along with responsibility, self-responsibility, and social justice. An important part of it is the system of safety nets—a society which takes responsibility and offers security [to inhabitants]." (City Council member, Council meeting, 2009)</p>	<p><b>Managers actively linked self-responsibility with key concerns.</b></p> <p>"Our strategy includes this idea of increasing self-responsibility, increasing the motivation for self-care and so on. That's the most important question in social and health services. And then there is the prevention of social exclusion, which is more complicated. [...] This is how we've implemented [our strategy]." (Middle manager, 2009)</p>	<p><b>Politicians elaborated on self-responsibility links and comparisons with other concepts.</b></p> <p>"Self-responsibility is more closely related with self-care, an active life, a healthy—that kind of self-responsibility. But I'll grant that it includes elements of [efficiency and privatization]. There was tough political debate between council members from various parties about how our strategy should reflect that we've already privatized two health centers...." (City Board member, 2007)</p>

Thus, the proponents called for “a new approach” emphasizing “diversity, opportunities for choice, and self-responsibility” in the strategy conversations. This meant placing more emphasis on the active role of the inhabitants instead of relying solely on the welfare services provided by the city organization:

The central principle of the [current] strategy was to tell people that they should not believe that the municipality would in the future provide all current services. We formulated this in the strategy more positively by stating that the self-responsibility of citizens, inhabitants, will be increased in the future, and it will mean concrete actions [to limit the services] previously supplied to inhabitants. Self-responsibility means, for example, that even elementary school pupils will need to walk or cycle to school up to a mile. That different services, such as the support of at-home care, will be weakened. It is essential [to recognize] that the service system of the past has been weakened, and will be weakened more. (*Interview, Mayor, 2006*)

In the following years, the conversations established self-responsibility as a reason for limiting public spending and promoting market-based solutions. A key decision-maker promoting the concept formulated this new strategic direction as a reaction to the changing society:

I've been telling our inhabitants this for three full years. The situation is changing and without taking self-responsibility and acting communally, supporting one another, we won't survive. We'll need all able-bodied over 65s, the pensioners, to take part in the communal effort to support the elderly who are in poor health. [...] The attitudes and values of people in industrialized societies are not quite in line with an emphasis on such things. But since we don't have a choice, we'll try. (*Interview, Director of Social and Health Services, 2007*)

Thereafter, self-responsibility was very often used in strategy conversations and included in strategic plans. It provided a means for making sense of the city's operations and changes in them; this usually implied a refocus of the city's activities (as in “concentrate on its core tasks” or the previous “prioritization”). The following Vignette 1 provides an example of many such discussions.

#### 4.2.2 | Vignette 1: Creation of new meanings with self-responsibility

This vignette is an excerpt from one of the many discussions in 2007 when the Executive Management Group used this concept to define the essence of the city's new strategy.

D1: Our big goal is that we'll begin to do things in a new way. And self-responsibility is the impact that this change will have on our inhabitants.

M1: And then it means that inhabitants will have a genuine opportunity to choose either public services or other services. And we aim to guide these choices. How we do this is another issue.

Mayor: To clarify, you're suggesting we omit the actor [from the goal]: self-responsibility “increases,” instead of “is increased.” So no-one actively increases it, but it happens on its own [without action by the city organization].

The preceding passage exemplifies how the use of self-responsibility by the key managers constituted new meanings by establishing the shared rules for using the concept. This includes detailed discussion of the linguistic forms used (passive vs. active) when working on a revised version of the strategic plan. The shared rules for using “self-responsibility” emerged as the actors assumed shared

conventions of the particular antecedents for its use (e.g., self-responsibility was to be conceived as something positive that citizens obtain rather than something that is forced on them) as well as the implications of this use (e.g., self-responsibility implies a choice among public and private services). As the actors linked self-responsibility (often explicitly) with a new interpretation of the environment of the city and its strategic direction, they simultaneously co-created shared meanings for the strategic concept and the strategic change they were making sense of.

#### 4.2.3 | Challenging and maintaining meanings

The concept of self-responsibility and related understandings of strategic change were also frequently challenged, especially during the first years between 2005 and 2008. After all, self-responsibility implied a future where a lower level of public services was not only necessary, but also the preferred strategic choice. As the choice of private services implied a need for citizens to spend their own money to get services that were previously freely available, it was easy to argue that self-responsibility was not as positive an idea as it was portrayed to be. Many key decision-makers who were opposed to reorganization of the services and cost-cutting worked to avoid giving self-responsibility an overly central role in the strategy discussions and promoted different meanings with less emphasis on service cutbacks and the scarcity of public resources.

The meanings associated with the concept were challenged particularly when the strategic plans were revised. Revising the plans included key moments of concept-shaping, as texts would “fix” or “freeze” the meanings of the concept and shared understandings of the strategy for a period of time. The following is an example from a council meeting where a council member argued for the reversal of the self-responsibility formulation in the strategic plan:

I do not think that our strategic goal should be to increase self-responsibility and make services more expensive [for the inhabitant]. Shouldn't our goal rather be the reverse—to get services to as many [inhabitants] as possible, as economically and equally as possible? (*Council member, City Council meeting, 2007*)

Those against such changes questioned the implied role of the city organization and criticized the implications of self-responsibility for public services. Many saw in the use of the concept “a sea change” from the universal services of the welfare state model. As a key decision-maker put it, “self-responsibility is used to mean that inhabitants pay for the services they use—and those without money make do with the scraps.”

While critics saw major problems associated with self-responsibility, others—many of them managers working closely with the Mayor—saw it first and foremost as a valuable means to make sense and give sense to an inevitable development. Thus, they engaged in what we call the maintenance of meanings. Such maintenance efforts were often focused on defending self-responsibility as a tool for “useful” or “pragmatic” discussion of the strategic direction, enforcing a shared understanding of how it should and should not be used in conversations. The following Vignette 2 offers an example of such a discussion in the Executive Management Group.

#### 4.2.4 | Vignette 2: Challenging and maintaining meanings

This example comes from a discussion in the Executive Management Group in 2007. The key managers are working on the strategic plan, and here, revisit the definition of self-responsibility.

Mayor: So should we replace this with “active citizens”? You'll remember that the word responsibility was considered too strong, and it was removed [by politicians]. The

new wording [gives a small laugh] was that we don't increase self-responsibility, but instead increase the activity of our inhabitants.

D2: I wonder what that means. [D1 laughs.]

Mayor: I remember that discussion. Responsibility was seen as a negative thing....

M1: ...It gets diluted....

Mayor: ...but "active citizens" was seen as a progressive thing. [Reads from the strategic plan.] "Supporting the activity of inhabitants" was the wording [on which politicians settled].

This excerpt reveals that the managers were aware of the various meanings related to self-responsibility. It also shows a typical example of an active effort to reformulate the concept to maintain some of its initial meanings that had been challenged by opponents. In particular, they were searching for a more positive reformulation that would gain broader acceptance.

#### 4.2.5 | Discursive embedding

As self-responsibility gained popularity, participants increasingly related it to other concepts. These relations embedded self-responsibility in specific discourses drawn from broader societal and field-level discussions; it was thus linked with a "family of concepts" that constituted a new "vocabulary" for making sense of the organization's strategic change and individual issues. The following Vignette 3 illustrates connections formed in a conversation that occurred in a strategic sensemaking session in 2007.

#### 4.2.6 | Vignette 3: Discursive embedding

This vignette comes from a typical strategy meeting where the Executive Management Group members discussed the new strategy of the city organization in 2007. It highlights a number of other concepts that were often used in conjunction with self-responsibility (our italics).

M2: ...*focusing* [on core services] means, that Bay City fulfills the obligations of the Local Government Law. Then the *critical success factor* is that Bay City succeeds in creating a *basic municipality* [which is able to focus on] the things traditionally seen as the most important tasks of a municipality—*social and health services*, and *education*.

Mayor: That means that we should succeed in separating the *responsibility of the city* from the *self-responsibility of citizens*. Isn't that right? [...] What do we need to do successfully to achieve the following goal: the city concentrates on its *core tasks* and increases the *self-responsibility* of citizens?

D1: We need to succeed in the *renewal of our service production*, which is mentioned as a separate *goal* here [in the strategic plan]. Seeing that these two things [self-responsibility and service renewal] go hand in hand, should it be a separate *goal*?

M2: So, item number five [renewal of service production] would then be a *success factor*.

Mayor: Yes. Should we combine these? The latter [goal] focuses on *process renewal*, while I consider this [self-responsibility goal] an *attitudinal change* on the part of the inhabitants.

D1: The *citizen perspective* should be in the strategy.

D2: The *customer perspective*.

Mayor: The strategy should, in a way, proclaim *the customer perspective*.

This vignette links self-responsibility with “focusing” (a generic concept in strategy). The concept of “basic municipality” captures a stripped-down set of activities, forming a “critical success factor” for continued operations. Self-responsibility is conceived as a complement to non-overlapping “responsibilities of the city,” which are defined as “core activities” (another generic concept in strategy literature). The vignette also shows how a “change in attitude” is implied as a precursor for self-responsibility, then positions self-responsibility as a factor in a stronger “citizen perspective,” or (as D1 quickly corrects) a “customer perspective.” After this shift in framing, inhabitants are not required to adopt a new attitude, but instead to approach their basic needs with the mindset of a customer. Self-responsibility brings with it a customer perspective, which in turn, implies a sense of empowerment and choice for the inhabitants.

Conversations such as the preceding ones facilitated the creation of a web of meaning around self-responsibility, linking it to broader discourses, such as the discourses of strategy and public-sector development which then guided the meanings given to self-responsibility. In other conversations, self-responsibility was linked together with related concepts including “scarce resources,” “active citizens” capable of bearing their responsibility and managing their service needs, and a “service market” where these inhabitants could complement the “core services” offered by the public sector. As a result, an emergent organization-specific vocabulary formed around self-responsibility, linking this strategic concept even more closely with the desired strategic direction. Like other forms of meaning-making, the discursive embedding again co-constructed the shared understandings of strategic issues and the concept itself.

#### 4.2.7 | Building common ground

Over time, self-responsibility became a central strategic concept that facilitated the formation of common ground among actors. The concept of self-responsibility and the shared meanings its use constructed provided a resource for strategic sensemaking that allowed managers and politicians to portray inhabitants as active producers of their own well-being. Various individuals in the city organization used the concept in ways that gave sense to the strategic direction of the city, challenged and maintained existing meanings, and elaborated relationships that embedded self-responsibility in broader discourses.

Meaning-making created convergence in the “rules of the language game” among the managers and politicians. These rules enabled them to understand what was meant by claims or proposals for action involving the concept of self-responsibility. As the concept attained shared meaning itself, it also helped establish common ground about strategic issues and directions in organizational sensemaking. These shared understandings emerged first in the Executive Management Group, where self-responsibility originated, and later, in the broader group of managers and politicians. A key decision-maker put it as follows:

[T]he principle that people would be more responsible for themselves probably wasn't politicized, just the degree of responsibility. [...] It was more important politically to talk about what this eventually makes possible—do we outsource, do we privatize everything—that was the most political discussion there. (*Interview, City Board member, 2006*)

The formulations of self-responsibility in the strategic plans between 2005 and 2011 were particularly significant as they represented established forms of consensus over shared meaning. Table 3 summarizes the use of self-responsibility in strategic plans.



TABLE 3 Use of self-responsibility in strategic plans

Year	Summary of use	Examples from strategic plans
2005	The first formulation of self-responsibility in the strategic plan was directed toward the future; while use of the concept was prominent and urges action, no concrete measures or actions were described.	<p>“Clear opportunities [in the operating environment] are the increasing self-responsibility that citizens take, and....”</p> <p>“The city will need to change the principles of service production due to the rising demand and more stringent financial situation. This means that the city will not respond to all service needs, but will instead support and encourage citizens to assume more responsibility for their own well-being and the well-being of those around them.”</p>
2007	<p>The previous definition of self-responsibility was clarified and linked directly with economic responsibility and a decrease in public funding for services.</p> <p>Self-responsibility was mentioned in four sections of the strategic plan, from the explanation of the vision statement (retained from 2005) to the balanced scorecard (see right).</p>	<p>Strategic goal: “The city concentrates on its core tasks, and the activity of citizens toward self-responsibility is increased.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This goal is operationalized into six broad “success factors,” including the following: “responsibility for basic security and core tasks as well as arranging basic services,” “management of service demand,” and “citizens are aware of their own well-being and the well-being of their community.”</li> <li>• A member of the EMG is assigned responsibility for each success factor.</li> <li>• The concepts used are defined explicitly, for example, “the self-responsibility of citizens means the activation of citizens to see to the maintenance and development of their own well-being, taking responsibility for their communities and environment, and increasing investment in the acquisition and financing of the services they need and use.”</li> </ul>
2009	The formulations of self-responsibility were made shorter and more abstract. Application of goals and responsibility for monitoring success was left to the service units.	Success Factor C2: “The service offering strengthens the self-responsibility and activeness of citizens.” Measures: “Core tasks defined and prioritized in service areas, together with those tasks where self-responsibility can be increased.”
2011	The previous text was left unchanged; a separate addition legitimated self-responsibility by describing its inevitability.	“Improving the productivity [of the city organization] is clearly connected to [...] supporting the self-responsibility and independent initiative of inhabitants. It prepares the city for the [coming demographic changes and the resulting] shortage of labor.”
2013	A complete revision of the strategic plan, where the concept of self-responsibility was detached from concrete decisions. Use of the concept was limited to describing future changes in the scope and financing of services. No goals or measures related to these changes were provided.	“The current growth rate of the debt of Bay City is unsustainable over the long term. [...] It is important to focus on the core tasks of the city while increasing pre-emptive services and the self-responsibility of inhabitants. Preparations for new service provision practices and to an extent a decrease in service levels must be made.”
2016	Self-responsibility is mentioned only in passing in the strategic plan, to refer to the role of inhabitants in local democracy.	–

Creation of common ground began from tentative, future-oriented descriptions in 2005, and evolved by 2009 into concrete definitions with more and more concrete implications on service provision, only to become increasingly abstract again in 2011 and 2013. However, as the previous examples show, the exact criteria for citizens to have “self-responsibility” and its implications included a great deal of ambiguity. Consequently, strategy statements involving self-responsibility had somewhat ambiguous implications for actual practice. Although this ambiguity reduced the usefulness of the concept for coordination purposes, it was also important because it allowed the managers and politicians to participate in the discussion even if their interests or viewpoints diverged. Thus, strategies could be formed even when there was only partial agreement on their meanings and implications.

TABLE 4 Examples of the use of self-responsibility in the legitimization of strategic change

Concept use in strategic sensemaking		Managerial meetings	Political meetings	Interviews with managers	Interviews with politicians
Focusing attention	Using the concept to focus attention on specific issues and initiatives	<p>Managers used self-responsibility to focus attention on the issue of resource scarcity and offered the partial privatization of public services as a solution to this issue.</p> <p>“But does [self-responsibility] mean that inhabitants acquire and fund some of the services currently funded by the city? Producing and funding services on the private market—is that it? If that is what self-responsibility is, and everyone understands it the same way, then we have a clear guideline for further action.” (<i>Director, EMG meeting, 2007</i>)</p>	<p>Politicians used self-responsibility to focus attention on the issue of securing a minimum level of public services for those in need.</p> <p>“We focused on the strategic goal: ‘The city focuses on its core tasks and supports/strengthens the ability of inhabitants to actively take self-responsibility,’ [and] took the concept of core tasks to include the importance of safety nets: When we say that [the city] will focus on its core tasks, it may cause fear in some inhabitants that the safety nets will not hold.” (<i>City Council member, Council seminar, 2009</i>)</p>	<p>Managers used self-responsibility to get coordination of the work and responsibilities of the city on the strategic agenda.</p> <p>“We’ve discussed [self-responsibility] quite a bit, and asked ourselves who has responsibility for issues connected with well-being. We’ve come to think that the city is not the only producer of well-being—it also depends on many others. We—especially the social and health care division—try to tell this [to inhabitants]. [...] It enters my work through discussion of well—for someone else it might take another form.” (<i>Administrative official, 2008</i>)</p>	<p>The self-responsibility strategy specifically aimed at changing the attitudes and actions of citizens.</p> <p>“Self-responsibility [...] includes value-based elements, which guide life across the whole city organization. Self-responsibility will become more and more tangible if more people that commit to this concept, internalize it and maybe act on it and think through it.” (<i>City Council member, 2006</i>)</p>
Justification of choices, decisions, and actions	Using the concept to justify choices, decisions, and actions	<p>Managers justified decisions to direct inhabitants to private services by using self-responsibility.</p> <p>“Since the law says we need to provide [services] to all who want them, we can’t say ‘Why do you call us, you’re a healthy middle-aged man, go elsewhere.’ [...] But we can inform, motivate, and coach the customer on first contact—health care professionals say that this resolves [the needs of] three quarters of these customers. If it’s explained effectively that they can get service just as fast [at a private contractor], and their [financial] self-responsibility is to pay so much, and the city funds the</p>	<p>Politicians justified decisions to limit the scope and quality of public services by referring to self-responsibility.</p> <p>“[Increasing self-responsibility demands] that we maintain an adequate level where we cover the lives [of inhabitants] and take care of them, although some things are not part of that equation.” (<i>City Council member, Council meeting, 2007</i>)</p>	<p>Managers used self-responsibility to show that uncomfortable decisions were necessary to guarantee the survival and future vitality of the city.</p> <p>“Changing that collective awareness needs to build on something concrete, even if it’s as abstract as a strategy, or slogans [such as] increasing the self-responsibility of inhabitants. [We must] show what our decisions to cut the salaries of at-home careers are based on. They are based on our strategy, and the strategy is based on avoiding bankruptcy.” (<i>Mayor, 2006</i>)</p>	<p>Politicians used self-responsibility as a broadly accepted account of service development to justify specific decision proposals.</p> <p>“The strategy formulates our key goals, for example, self-responsibility, and we believe that these generally guide the work of our officials. [...] My experience from the City Board is that our officials often refer to the strategy in their proposals. They’ve internalized it quite well, and like to have something they can lean on if they get in a tight spot with our board members; they can say that they’re only following our decisions.” (<i>City Board member, 2006</i>)</p>

TABLE 4 (Continued)

Concept use in strategic sensemaking		Managerial meetings	Political meetings	Interviews with managers	Interviews with politicians
Ideological legitimation	Using self-responsibility as part of ideological legitimation (including naturalization of specific views and silencing of others)	rest...." ( <i>Director, EMG seminar, 2013</i> )  Managers referred to self-responsibility as an indispensable means for dealing with the strategic challenges. "People in other major [Finnish] cities are extremely envious about how Bay City already started thinking about the self-responsibility issue a few years ago. Because at the moment, we have big cities heading economically toward a wall, and they're just starting to consider this issue. And they're afraid that some [cities] can't discuss it at all, [forcing them to] just 'shave off' [services]." ( <i>Middle Manager, City Board meeting, 2009</i> )	Politicians portrayed self-responsibility as inherent to social life. "We can't imagine that doctors stand by and watch how patients exercise and eat—that's where self-responsibility comes in, and it has great significance now, when we're threatened with type 2 diabetes and who knows what other lifestyle diseases. Self-responsibility does not mean that we'd become our own doctors, but you can't demand society to take care of everyone." ( <i>City Board member, Council seminar, 2009</i> )	Managers criticized specific attempts to change the meaning of self-responsibility. "At the last moment, probably in the Board, self-responsibility was changed into 'the active nature of citizens.' These changes in formulation [seem small], but they also change the idea behind, and lead to these situations we've had, where those who haven't been at the core of the process cherry-pick in the strategic plan—selectively take the parts which legitimate their ideas, even if it completely reverses the original idea." ( <i>Mayor, 2006</i> )	Politicians described self-responsibility as part of the Welfare State ideal. "Self-responsibility belongs [to us all]. [...] This is how it must be. It's the Finnish, and the Nordic model, and it has just proven to be good—this reliance on the community, to put it that way. And society needs to take care of those who can't care for themselves or others." ( <i>Chairman of the City Council, 2007</i> )

### 4.3 | Legitimation and the mobilization of self-responsibility

Our analysis also reveals how the concept of self-responsibility was mobilized in the legitimation of strategic change. This included focusing attention on certain issues and initiatives rather than others, justifying specific strategic choices, decisions or actions, and ideological legitimation. Table 4 provides examples of each.

#### 4.3.1 | Focusing attention

Self-responsibility proved to be a concept that was relatively easy to relate to and use in conversations. The concept allowed participants to make sense of the strategic challenges facing city organizations and to focus the conversation on key issues and initiatives on the agenda of the decision-makers. These included the costs and scope of services provided by the city, the overall financial situation of the city, the increasing costs of healthcare, activation of the inhabitants, and the overall role of the welfare state model in Bay City. These concerns were previously illustrated in Vignette 3. While focusing attention on some issues, self-responsibility also curtailed the attention devoted to other specific themes. Thus, focusing attention served as an initial step in legitimation. The following Vignette 4 offers a typical example.

#### 4.3.2 | Vignette 4: Focusing attention

This is a typical situation where participants, in this case, the Executive Management Group, are making sense of the city's strategy with the concept of self-responsibility.

M1: An interesting issue related to basic services emerged in the press: "granny logistics," or [subsidized] transportation for the elderly [based on the Elderly Care Act]. We have an obligation to organize it, but we can increase self-responsibility by giving the opportunity and directing inhabitants to use [shared] services, combining the trips of several people. This increases their self-responsibility when people commit to adjusting their schedules to fit such transportation. Hence, self-responsibility very often happens within the basic services.

D1: Should we divide this in two: the responsibility of society and the [inhabitant's] self-responsibility? I mean, there is a lot of self-responsibility there, when we think of the actions you've taken.

Mayor: Here, for instance. [Draws on a whiteboard.]

D1: Yes, there. So that [self-responsibility] isn't excluded, or seen as only related to services outside basic services.

Managers use self-responsibility to make sense of organizing and financing transport for the elderly. The two first speech acts show how this new concept enabled participation. "Armed" with the concept of self-responsibility, D1 is able to participate in the discussion by elaborating the issue in familiar terminology. The mayor then uses self-responsibility to visualize the discussion on the whiteboard. By so doing, the participants focus attention to specific aspects of the issue of transportation for the elderly, namely, the cost side. To elaborate the issue being discussed, D1 builds on and explicates the salient distinction between the responsibility to be borne by society, that is, the city, and that of the inhabitants. This effectively formed a basis for rethinking the service strategy, and later, led to a reduction in the amount and proportion of the costs paid by the city. In sum, the concept was a central tool for actors to elaborate ongoing strategic challenges. When used, it created a specific problem framing that directed attention to specific kinds of potential solutions.

#### 4.3.3 | Justification of choices, decisions, and actions

Both managers and politicians regularly used self-responsibility and the meanings associated with the concept to justify particular strategic choices, decision, and actions. Most prominently, self-responsibility was used to justify reorganizing the services offered by the city, increasing service fees, re-engineering service processes, increasing outsourcing, and establishing public-private partnerships. The following Vignette 5 shows how self-responsibility was used to justify increases in service fees.

#### 4.3.4 | Vignette 5: Justification

This vignette is a fairly typical discussion in the Executive Management Group in 2009. The participants are formulating preliminary decisions about the city's services and the fees charged.

Mayor: My dear friends, let me ask you a question. If one of our strategic goals is [reads aloud] "The city concentrates on its core tasks, and the self-responsibility of inhabitants is increased." And now one of our directors says that this is all well and good, but increasing self-responsibility does not really work in their field....

D2: We have very few ways of influencing it. If increasing self-responsibility refers to [inhabitants] acquiring the services they need or paying more for these services. We can work on the fees, but we can't make it so that the inhabitants acquire the services by themselves—that they order a tractor to plow the streets.

Mayor: Yes?

D2: We can't shift that responsibility to them. [...]

Mayor: Then you can specifically respond to this goal by developing the costs dimension.

D2: That we can do. I mean, we can concentrate even more on our core tasks. Or every time we find we are doing something superfluous, we can stop doing it. Our role in achieving this goal is very small. I think that the best focus for increasing self-responsibility might be in [social and health services], although the legislation will restrict that as well. This could be done by counseling and creating markets.

This vignette shows how self-responsibility—as it was written in the strategic plan—became a key tool for justifying increases in service fees. The Mayor refers to the strategic plan to focus attention on self-responsibility. This triggers a comment by D2 and a subsequent exchange with the Mayor, paving the way to a discussion about the possibility of raising service fees. The discussion ends in a justification as the Mayor logically concludes that an increase in service fees is needed as the other courses of action are limited. This discussion also led to an actual increase in fees after confirmation of the strategic plan.

#### 4.3.5 | Ideological legitimization

The increasingly frequent use of self-responsibility implied acceptance of a specific perspective on the city organization and the key issues it faced, implying ideological legitimization. In particular, self-responsibility brought with it a new conception of the role of the city organization (as a provider of "core" services) and a specific relationship between the city and its citizens (as individuals not to be taken care of but to be enabled to do it themselves). In practice, this meant that using the concept, even critically, tended to reproduce and naturalize a specific kind of understanding of strategic change and its implications. Our analysis shows that, especially between 2007 and 2012, it was very difficult to change the meanings associated with the concept or the ways in which the concept was

used to legitimate strategic change. The following Vignette 6 provides a vivid illustration of such naturalization and silencing in ideological legitimation.

#### 4.3.6 | Vignette 6: Ideological legitimation

This example comes from a City Council meeting that focuses on the city's new strategy in 2009. The discussion on strategy is led by a top manager who refers to preparation of the strategic plan and the issues that have been dealt with in previous discussions.

P7: Self-responsibility [...] is a difficult goal. Every time we choose to withdraw [a service] from our inhabitants, we can say that now is the time for them to take self-responsibility. I understood we would support [new alternatives outside the free market] and not just cut down our own services and push [demand] that way. [...] I think that this formulation of self-responsibility is OK, but you can hide behind the self-responsibility [formulation].

P8: I'd like to add the term *security* to the self-responsibility formulation. This theme builds on the existing system that acts as a safety net: The society that takes its own responsibility and offers security [to inhabitants].

M3: We're a bit busy, so please let me summarize the discussion. These topics still need clarification, and I'll gladly accept your comments by email or otherwise. But these things need to be specified: for example, let me show you how the question of responsibility has been specified based on your group work. This theme includes basic services, caring for the needy, the division of responsibility. This is such a profound task that it can't be done today; we need to take it as a starting point for later discussion. We'll need to clarify these choices in later strategy discussions, and discuss how our units can implement them. But if I interpret the discussion correctly, the general opinion is that this terminology is accepted, even though individual formulations....

*Cries from the public: "No!" "It's not accepted!" "Why is it not accepted?" "Yes it is!"*

P9: I'd like to add that the City Council can't define the self-responsibility of individual inhabitants in its strategy. Their willingness to care for themselves and take self-responsibility is better included in the [separate goal of] participation of inhabitants. We shouldn't even have to include it in this part of our strategy as a separate term.

M3: This topic seems to call for a bit more work. I'm happy to take comments on it. I'll take one comment, and then we must move on.

The preceding initial comments question the implications of self-responsibility and attempt to broaden the discussion. However, the top manager chairing the discussion (M3) effectively silences the opposition by reiterating the existing commitment to self-responsibility as "accepted" by "the general opinion" in the room, and by excluding the open questions as disconnected issues to be discussed later in relation to strategy implementation.

Although this particular example includes silencing based on the manager's key role as an expert leading the discussion, control of the conversation is intrinsically related to the ideology of market-based service reorganization, which many saw as a shift from a Nordic welfare model to neo-liberal ideals. This essentially meant that the inhabitants would pay more for their services, creating concerns about the people who were less well-off. Critical views were often obscured by the inability of the discussants to find a formulation that would effectively challenge the established view on the necessity and desirability of greater self-responsibility. These observations were supported by our

interviews. For example, a council member complained that “they don’t mention poor people,” and one manager described the strategy conversations as “a rhetorical cover-up.”

#### 4.3.7 | Outcome of legitimation: Promotion of specific strategic choices and actions

We were able to trace the use of the concept of self-responsibility to performative effects. Beyond the ability of managers to foster desired changes in shared understandings, use of the strategic concept in legitimation was associated with concrete material outcomes in the form of a series of decisions and actions. These decisions and actions included formal decisions made in the City Council and the Executive Management Group (e.g., prioritization of basic services in the city’s offering and introduction of market-based solutions alongside public service provision) and service development projects sanctioned by the self-responsibility strategy (such as the shared transportation of the elderly described in Vignette 4 and the increased service fees in Vignette 5).

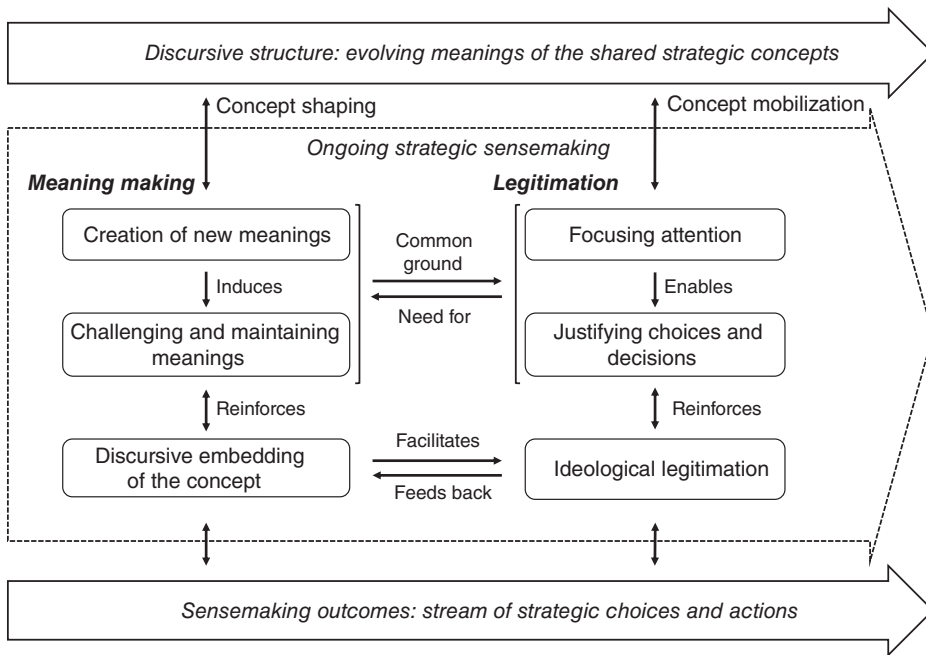
These decisions and actions—that were at least in part motivated by self-responsibility—constituted concrete and systematic changes in public services and new work practices, thus enacting strategic change. At the same time, realization of these decisions relied on continuous legitimation work to succeed. Vignette 6 illustrates a central example of this; although concentrating on “core tasks” was a broadly accepted strategic choice associated with increased self-responsibility, implementation of these choices encountered criticism.

#### 4.4 | Epilogue: Decreasing use of self-responsibility

As wider acceptance of meanings implied by the concept of self-responsibility had important strategic implications, it is no wonder that use of the concept increased between 2005 and 2012. However, as the emphasis shifted from strategic discussion of self-responsibility to development of individual services, it was less frequently used in forward-looking strategy conversations. Since the application of self-responsibility to service development included prioritization and cutbacks, detailed discussion of the concept became increasingly difficult for political decision-makers. As the focus of the strategy discussions shifted from cost-cutting to new issues and initiatives, the concept of self-responsibility took a more peripheral role in the strategy conversation in 2013–2014. In the strategic planning rounds of 2014–2015 and 2015–2016, self-responsibility was seldom mentioned and only in passing. After having played a central role in strategic sensemaking, the concept was gradually replaced by other concepts that helped participants in the process formulate different challenges for the city organization and responses to them.

## 5 | A MODEL OF STRATEGIC CONCEPT USE IN STRATEGIC SENSEMAKING

On the basis of this empirical analysis, we derive a theoretical model of strategic concept use in strategic sensemaking, which is summarized in Figure 3. Strategic sensemaking is the key process (in the middle of the figure) that is linked with the shared meanings of strategic concepts within the evolving linguistic structure (pictured above the central sensemaking process) and the stream of strategic choices and actions conceived and legitimated in strategic sensemaking (below sensemaking). More specifically, our analysis highlights two co-occurring but analytically distinct subprocesses of strategic sensemaking: meaning-making and legitimation. Meaning-making involves concept-shaping—establishing and modifying concept meanings while forming shared understandings based on those very concepts. Legitimation, in turn, implies concept mobilization, the application of a strategic



**FIGURE 3** Model of strategic concept use in strategic sensemaking

concept to draw attention and to justify specific decisions, actions, and choices with ideological implications, thereby also reinforcing the shared meanings of the strategic concepts.

### 5.1 | Meaning-making and concept-shaping

Our analysis highlights how meaning-making processes construct shared understandings of strategic change by applying and simultaneously shaping the meaning of the strategic concept. In particular, our analysis elucidates three specific forms of meaning-making: (a) creation of meanings, (b) challenging and maintaining meanings, and (c) discursive embedding. First, actors create new meanings with the strategic concepts in their efforts to collectively make sense of their environment. In our case, self-responsibility became a “shorthand expression” that helped to make sense of particular aspects of strategic change. While participants sometimes defined the concept explicitly, the meanings were predominantly implied “between the lines,” constituting implicit “rules of the language game” shared among the participants in strategy discussions.

Second, this creation of meanings induces challenging and maintaining meanings. As our case vividly illustrates, the meanings embodied in concepts are seldom neutral and are thus likely to be contested. In our case, this was particularly salient as the implicit assumptions of self-responsibility aligned with specific strategic changes that were resisted by many. Some participants also actively maintained the meanings of the concept by defending and partially adapting the meanings and the broader understandings it was mobilized to construct. In our case, those initially opposed to self-responsibility tended to challenge its more specific meanings while the initial proponents of self-responsibility were those who tended to most actively maintain its meanings. This maintenance of meanings meant enforcing the nascent “rules of the language game” in terms of how and where the concepts should be used.



Third, all this meaning-making reproduces a specific system of meaning in which the concept in question is embedded within wider discourses, which in turn, reinforce the creating, challenging, and maintaining of meanings. In our case, self-responsibility became embedded in a wider system of meanings where specific words and terms—including vocabulary of customers, markets, and choice—were more naturally connected with self-responsibility than others. As the concept of self-responsibility was linked over time to broader discourses, it became a key “node” in an emerging strategic vocabulary (Loewenstein et al., 2012), organization-specific strategy discourse (Vaara, 2010), or structure (Paroutis & Heracleous, 2013).

As meaning-making produced partially shared meanings, it formed “common ground” (Cornelissen, Mantere, & Vaara, 2014; Weick, 1995) or “mutual knowledge” (Cramton, 2001) among participants, thereby facilitating strategic sensemaking. Common ground as a set of shared assumptions is close to what other scholars have conceptualized as consensus (Kellermanns, Walter, Lechner, & Floyd, 2005; Ketokivi & Castañer, 2004; Wooldridge, Schmid, & Floyd, 2008) or shared views (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Kwon et al., 2014) in strategic sensemaking. However, in contrast to consensus or shared views, common ground does not imply full agreement on strategic issues or initiatives, but rather agreement on the vocabulary and basic assumptions from which arguments can be constructed. Thus, common ground allows co-orientation by facilitating discussion of ideas, issues, and initiatives even when agreement on exact meanings or definitions is lacking (Cooren, 2010; Taylor & Robichaud, 2004).

Our micro-level analysis suggests that shared meanings are partial and temporary. Thus, strategic concepts also involve ambiguity (Abdallah & Langley, 2014; Jarzabkowski, Sillince, & Shaw, 2010; Sillince et al., 2012), and our analysis shows how ambiguity is increased or decreased by the dynamics of creation of new meanings as well as challenging and maintaining these meanings. This ambiguity has two sides. On the one hand, ambiguity may hamper strategic sensemaking; the creation of common ground becomes difficult or a perceived formulation of consensus proves untenable. On the other hand, ambiguity is needed to accommodate multiple viewpoints and interests precisely for the purposes of establishing common ground or co-orientation.

## 5.2 | Legitimation through concept mobilization

Strategic concepts also play a key role in legitimation, that is, the construction of a sense of positive, beneficial, ethical, understandable, necessary, or otherwise acceptable action or choice (Deephouse, Bundy, Plunkett Tost, & Suchman, 2017; van Leeuwen, 2008; Vaara & Monin, 2010). Our analysis highlights three forms of legitimation processes: focusing attention on specific issues and initiatives, justification of choices, decisions and actions, and ideological legitimation.

First, our analysis shows that strategic concepts play a key role in focusing attention on specific issues and initiatives (Ocasio, Laamanen, & Vaara, 2018), leading certain issues and initiatives but not others to be included in the strategic agenda; this can be seen as a tactic of cognitive and social legitimation that precedes explicit evaluation of choices. What is likely to be brought up depends on the nature of the concept itself, its underlying assumptions, and on the ability of managers and organizational members to make use of the concept for specific purposes. In our empirical data, the concept of self-responsibility was connected with service reorganization and cost-cutting, and actors thus often used it to bring up such issues.

Second, this focused attention, in turn, enables justification of specific decisions or actions. Thus, attention works as a step paving the way for justification of decisions. Our case provides numerous examples of the use of self-responsibility for such purposes. Sometimes the concept was used actively to articulate reasoning behind specific decisions and actions. At other times, it was used to

link present discussion to previous strategy statements to create legitimacy. Our data show that the efforts to focus attention and to justify choices fed back to the need for meaning-making (captured by a feedback arrow in Figure 3). For instance, proponents actively created and maintained positive meanings in the same conversations where they leveraged them to justify choices. The efforts at focusing attention and justifying choices likewise instigated challenges to concept meanings from those who opposed them.

Third, our analysis also reveals how use of the concept can also involve ideological legitimation (van Dijk, 1998; van Leeuwen, 2007). By ideological legitimation, we mean sensemaking that normalizes or naturalizes the understandings associated with the strategic concept and the implications they represent. In particular, our case shows how frequent use of self-responsibility made it a taken-for-granted part of strategic sensemaking in general and strategic change in particular. This also involved more or less active silencing of alternative viewpoints or ideological assumptions.

Finally, ideological legitimation is also directly connected to the discursive embedding of the concept. Related vocabulary “indexed” by the concept facilitates ideological legitimation. The concept use in ideological legitimation can, in turn, feed back and further strengthen the discursive embedding of the concept. This self-reinforcing dynamic can be seen as a key part of strategic concept use that easily passes unnoticed. However, our model illustrates that it is this underlying link that both sustains coherence in the emerging meaning-system and contributes to ideological legitimation.

### 5.3 | Discursive structure and evolution of strategic concepts

Our analysis highlights how ongoing strategic sensemaking both draws on and reproduces the surrounding discursive structure, including the rules of the language game. Importantly, our analysis also captures the “life cycle” of the use of self-responsibility as a central practical and political tool from its emergence through frequent use to decreasing use. Although our case has idiosyncratic features, it is likely that other cases can also be characterized by dynamics related to the use-value of the concept and its centrality in strategic sensemaking.

Strategic concepts have use-value for the managers and other organizational participants involved in strategic sensemaking. This value derives from the ability of the concept to embody a rich set of meanings that enable the formation and articulation of shared understandings. Such value is likely to be particularly high at the beginning, when the concept is adopted to help make sense of new issues and initiatives. Over time, the value may decrease as viewpoints that the concept helps articulate become broadly accepted. However, our case demonstrates that the pragmatic value is also related to the ability of managers and other participants to use the concept for socio-political purposes, for example, for legitimation of strategic change or resistance to it. In this way, use-value is dependent on the unfolding of strategic change and the discursive ability of managers and other participants in context.

Concept use is closely linked with its centrality in strategic sensemaking, including strategy conversations and strategy texts. Strategic concepts can thus obtain power over the managers and other participants to the extent that their use in strategic sensemaking becomes difficult to avoid. In our case, self-responsibility became an almost “obligatory passage point” (Latour, 1987) in strategy conversations, especially between 2007 and 2012. However, over time, this power decreased—undoubtedly in part because many of the key changes had already been enacted and the managers and other organizational members needed to focus on other strategic choices, issues, and initiatives.

## 5.4 | Outcomes of strategic sensemaking

Our study shows how strategic concepts have substantive impact on concrete outcomes through their influence on meaning-making and legitimation. By facilitating a shared focus of attention, enabling justification, and propagating a broader ideology, self-responsibility played a central role in the enactment of strategic change in Bay City. This is not to say that the use of strategic concepts per se will lead to strategic change; they are better seen as instruments or tools through which key actors can enact their interests and ideas. However, our case does show that the systematic use of specific concepts in meaning-making and legitimation can lead to a coherent stream of actions that together constitute widespread strategic change in the organization.

## 6 | DISCUSSION

Our article has been motivated by a need to better understand the role of strategic concepts in strategy work. The main contribution of our study is to offer an empirically grounded theoretical framework for understanding how strategic concepts are used as central micro-level resources in strategy work, thereby strengthening and enriching the language-based view of strategy. By so doing, our analysis has also implications to research on strategic ambiguity and vocabularies.

### 6.1 | Concepts as micro-level resources for strategy work

We introduce strategic concepts as a crucial micro-level component in strategy work that prior research has largely overlooked (Paroutis & Heracleous, 2013; Seidl, 2007). By doing so, we offer a missing link to the language-based view of strategy (Balogun et al., 2014; Mantere, 2013; Vaara, 2010). By investigating the concepts used in strategic sensemaking at the micro level, scholars can develop better explanations of how and why managers and other organizational actors formulate specific understandings of their environment and related strategic responses, and how the actors are able to legitimate them. Thus, our analysis shows how concepts serve as key building blocks for the discourses (Knights & Morgan, 1991; Mantere & Vaara, 2008), narratives (Barry & Elmes, 1997; Fenton & Langley, 2011), or rhetoric (Jarzabkowski & Sillince, 2007; Sillince et al., 2012) used in strategic sensemaking.

Our analysis also shows how actors can use strategic concepts to advance their agendas in the strategy process by incorporating a specific concept in their rhetoric (Samra-Fredericks, 2003), given that they have the discursive competence (Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011) to do so. In practice, managers who can use this concept skillfully and show their expertise through it can become key strategists while other actors may struggle to have their voices heard (Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Oakes, Townley, & Cooper, 1998). Yet, our study also illustrates how the increasing prevalence of a specific concept “forces” actors to use it in their argumentation. In a sense, the strategic concepts may have power over actors.

Thus, our analysis illuminates that strategic concepts can be seen as tools in strategy work (Dameron, Lê, & LeBaron, 2015; Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015). Strategic concepts can enable actors to collectively formulate new understandings of the organization’s environment and craft new strategic responses. As our vignettes show, the concept of self-responsibility allowed the actors to articulate problems and solutions in conversations and its invocation signaled a break with the past. While participants did not always agree on the desired change, the concept helped direct their attention to a particular kind of future. Thus, use of the concept enabled managers to break with the past,

construct a new strategic future (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013), and create a sense of novelty while avoiding overt unfamiliarity (Barry & Elmes, 1997) by simultaneously incorporating familiar themes.

Future research could expand on these insights by systematic analyses comparing strategic concepts and their use in different institutional and organizational contexts. Such research could also examine whether and how skillful and timely use of strategic concepts empowers managers in strategic sensemaking, and how the concepts may also, at times, constrain their sensemaking (Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Rouleau, 2005).

## 6.2 | A micro-level view on strategic ambiguity

Our concept-level analysis has implications for the recent discussion of ambiguity in strategic sensemaking (Abdallah & Langley, 2014; Jarzabkowski et al., 2010; Sillince et al., 2012). More specifically, our findings highlight “concept ambiguity” as a complement to the existing focus on what we call “proposition ambiguity.” *Proposition ambiguity* represents the ambiguity in beliefs and claims, connected to the equivocality and uncertainty concerning their factual validity or acceptability. Proposition ambiguity for the statement “increasing citizens’ self-responsibility saves us money” captures the extent of certainty with which actors accept it. In contrast, *concept ambiguity* relates to the meanings of a concept, such as equivocality or uncertainty as to what constitutes “self-responsibility” in the first place.

Actors can appear certain and decisive by making seemingly certain claims and endorsing policies. Yet, if their statements include relatively ambiguous concepts, they may convey limited information or fail to create substantive commitment. At the time of writing this article, the prime minister of Great Britain, Theresa May, argued that “Brexit means brexit,” using concept ambiguity to make a simple declarative sentence with apparent certainty and authoritativeness, while actually offering little or no information. In contrast, when concepts are defined more exactly, ambiguity of facts and commitments becomes more transparent.

Concept ambiguity both constrains and enables strategic sensemaking. As our case of self-responsibility illustrates, while ambiguity can hamper effective sensemaking, a degree of ambiguity may be crucial for the creation of consensus or co-orientation in conditions of multiple interests and points of view. Toward the end of our observed period, the concept became increasingly ambiguous, and its perceived usefulness and use decreased. These findings on the micro-level of concept ambiguity add to the view of ambiguity as a double-edged sword (Abdallah & Langley, 2014; Jarzabkowski et al., 2010; Sillince et al., 2012).

Future research could provide more comparative studies of concept ambiguity, examining how the breadth of strategic concept meanings influence their popularity and perceived usefulness. While research has noted how managers use ambiguous concepts in symbolic management (Abdallah & Langley, 2014; Jarzabkowski et al., 2010; Sillince et al., 2012), there is a surprising lack of attention to their role in both internal strategy conversations and the resulting strategy texts. A comparative longitudinal perspective might help elucidate how ambiguity and use of strategic concepts evolve over time.

## 6.3 | A dynamic perspective of vocabularies and strategic concepts

Our study provides a pragmatist view on the use of strategic concepts, complementing the more quantitative orientation in research on vocabularies (Jones & Livne-Tarandach, 2008; Jones, Maoret, Massa, & Svejnova, 2012; Mohr & Duquenne, 1997). Our analysis illuminates the specific ways the concept of self-responsibility was used in organizations and how its meanings evolved as actors

shaped the “rules of the language game” (Brandom, 2000; Dummett, 1993). Our analysis specifically shows how the use of self-responsibility induced a broader system of meaning or a vocabulary in our case organization. Thus, our analysis offers an example of a dynamic micro-level perspective that can enrich research on organizational and strategic vocabularies (Loewenstein et al., 2012).

The life-cycle view of strategic concepts suggests that a focus on vocabularies can help understand change and permanence of strategic cognitions (Barr et al., 1992; Nadkarni & Naryanan, 2007). Although the new understanding of a “smaller” public sector and its stripped-down “core tasks” preceded the concept of self-responsibility, it did not become widely shared until after the strategic concept became a staple in discussions and documents. By enabling actors to condense and communicate relevant meanings effectively, strategic concepts shape how attention is allocated, knowledge accumulated, activities coordinated, and decisions legitimated (see also Ashforth & Humphrey, 1997). Similarly, the prevalence of a concept in conversations and strategy texts may also explain the persistence of cognitions. These observations suggest that emerging beliefs “coalesce” around vocabularies (Loewenstein et al., 2012), and that once established, such vocabularies provide a certain permanence to the ideas they embody, in a manner similar to strategy texts (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011). Thus, there is a need for future research on the forms and dynamics of these processes.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

The present study offers a new perspective on strategic sensemaking with theoretical, methodological, and practical implications. Theoretically, this analysis helps us to understand the very micro-level of strategy work as it unfolds in organizations, thus responding to calls to develop this dimension of strategy process and practice research (Burgelman et al., 2018; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). In this view, concepts are not mere means of communication, but key components that make up an organization’s strategy. Strategic language is not something abstract that resides in discourses, narratives, or rhetoric; instead, concepts are created, negotiated, debated, and even abandoned over time in the ongoing language games of strategic sensemaking (Mantere, 2015). Accordingly, concepts are important tools that actors use in strategy work. Thus, our analysis not only adds to the nascent stream of strategic concepts (Paroutis & Heracleous, 2013; Seidl, 2007), but even more importantly, offers a sorely needed missing piece to complement the language-based view on strategy (Balogun et al., 2014; Mantere, 2013).

Methodologically, concepts offer a new level of analysis to move down from examination of strategy discourses (Knights & Morgan, 1991; Mantere & Vaara, 2008), narratives (Barry & Elmes, 1997), or conversational practices (Kwon et al., 2014; Whittle et al., 2014). Contextualized analysis of strategy work provides a dynamic practice-based understanding of concepts as key micro-level tools that managers and other organizational members use when making sense of organizational strategy. By focusing on concepts, one can thus open a new line of inquiry in strategic sensemaking that can concentrate on the emergence, shaping, mobilization, and replacement of strategic concepts as well as the complexities, contradictions, and ambiguities that all of this may entail (Cornelissen & Schildt, 2015; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). By focusing on the use of concepts, rather than on their role in larger textual networks, our analysis can also pave the way for a new dynamic stream of research in strategic vocabularies (Loewenstein et al., 2012). A focus on concepts can also inform other areas of strategy process and practice research; for instance, by studying how these concepts are linked with attention, one can also significantly enrich the emergent attention-based view of strategy (Ocasio et al., 2018).

We thus hope that our article will encourage others to complement the more established linguistic approaches with a closer attention to strategic concepts. We believe that this perspective can be useful for a variety of research areas beyond strategic change—including broader interorganizational and institutional processes where specific concepts play a key role. Finally, although we have laid out an example of such analysis, there is work to be done to develop this perspective further. We have already highlighted the role of various kinds of struggles in concept use, thus deepening the understanding of how shared meaning is established in Wittgensteinian language games in the strategy context. Future studies could elaborate on the various ways in which managers and other organizational members define and redefine the norms and rules of the language games, including challenging and taking distance from the meanings, norms, or rules implied and imposed by others.

Finally, our analysis of strategic sensemaking in Bay City shows that concepts hold practical relevance for managers. Strategy work is “concept-mongering,” and this use of concepts has implications that easily pass unnoticed with more conventional lenses. Concept-shaping and mobilization, however, require discursive and social skills, and not all managers or organizational actors are equally equipped or disposed to participate in these language games. We firmly believe that by examining strategic concepts as enabling and constraining tools, future research can create strong explanations of strategic sensemaking and help managers to better understand how to participate in and influence the outcomes of strategy work.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

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