

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# Response to Spaniol and Rowland: “Defining Scenario”

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Email: chermack@colostate.edu**Abstract**

This article is a response to Spaniol and Rowland’s article “Defining Scenario”. Specifically this article responds to claims made in the categories of scenario definitions, scenario theory and scenario methods. The purpose is to engage in a thoughtful and collegial debate and it contains the raising of some issues the scenario community may wish to consider.

**KEYWORDS**

scenario definitions, scenario theory, scenario methods

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This essay is a response to the “Defining Scenario” article, by Spaniol and Rowland that was published in the first issue of *Futures & Foresight Science* (2018). The core premise of the article is that “Despite claims to the contrary, the authors find that the academic community of futures and foresight science does not seem to suffer from so-called confusion over the definition of scenario, and thus, it is time to sunset the use of claims to this end.” (Spaniol & Rowland, 2018, p. 1). Since my own work on scenario definitions, development of theory, and my remark of “dismal theory” was cited, I will take advantage of the opportunity to further the conversation.

Spaniol and Rowland’s (2018) article is a review of the various claims over the past decade (or more), leveling criticisms about a seemingly constant debate of defining the term scenario and/or scenario planning. Their article contains three main sections (relying heavily on Khakee’s, 1991 contribution throughout):

1. definition confusion, dismal theory, and methodological chaos,
2. a well-defined method of searching, categorizing, and analyzing existing definitions of the term “scenario,” and
3. a description of findings that the authors interpret to contradict the overall claim that there is definitional confusion, dismal theory, and methodological chaos in the field.

Their first section above is the focus of this response. My immediate reaction upon reading the article was that Spaniol and Rowland have conflated definitions, theory, and method in their argument. It may not be appropriate to muddle definitions, theory and methods

into the same cocktail, when the purpose is one of academic analysis. These elements require separate treatment, and while some common ingredients could be expected, preparation does matter—shaken or stirred? Their article concludes with a suggestion that seems to indicate “we are past all this” (with regard to definitions of “scenario”), yet there are things to study further here.

For purposes of clarity, I will separate three aspects of my response: (a) definitions, (b) theory, and (c) methods.

## 2 | DEFINITIONS

Based on common elements among the 77 definitions they reviewed, Spaniol & Rowland posited that perhaps we should not seek an overarching definition with which all will agree, rather a “process for classifying a phenomena as a scenario in the Intuitive logics tradition.” (Sp2018, p. 10) They were clear that their searches were limited to the intuitive logics tradition of scenarios. The first thing to say is “what about non-intuitive logics traditions?” Why are non-intuitive logics definitions of “scenario” excluded from the analysis?

Their overall suggestion to not seek a unifying definition, but rather a set of elements on which we might agree, is akin to my own work with Chermack and Lynham (2002). Naturally, much has been written since then and though our 2002 literature analysis method was different. The goal was the same—to produce a definition constructed of the common elements drawn from existing definitions at the time. Based on their analysis, Spaniol and Rowland have proposed that a scenario should be:

- Future oriented,
- About the external context,
- A Narrative description,
- Plausibly possible,
- A systematized set, and
- Comparatively different.

This set of descriptors has much in common with our findings from 2002 and I am generally ready to embrace them. I agree that the scenario community seems to understand what a scenario is and what a scenario is not. However, I can also see some in our community who would argue that scenarios can be represented by objects, art, exhibits, etc... that do not necessarily involve a narrative description. We may need further conversation about the various media through which scenarios can occur.

I caution, however that if you watch any news channel, the term “scenario” has become so overused that while we might generally understand the term within our community of scholars and practitioners, we have a new audience to consider. News anchors and interviewees throw it around like everyone knows exactly what they mean—and I suggest they often mean something entirely different from what we seem to understand and would not involve Spaniol and Rowland's proposed elements.

### 3 | THEORY (DISMAL... MAYBE NOT)

Spaniol and Rowland's article does not separate the issue of defining scenarios from setting foundational theories that may serve as a core of our field. Rather the issue of “dismal” theory was buried within the discussion of definitions. It is also fair to say that our scholarship has grown and developed significantly in the past 16 years—much of it relating to theory. There is simply no acknowledgement of this in Spaniol and Rowland's contribution. To be clear, it was 2002 when I wrote “the status of theory development in the area of scenario planning is dismal” (Chermack, 2002, p. 25), and I meant every word of it. My claim about theory was a strong one and at the time it was appropriate given the absence of attention to theory in the scenario planning literature. To be fair, Spaniol and Rowland did not include the term “theory” in any of their keyword searches, and theirs was not a thorough treatment of theory related to scenario planning. Nor was it a key purpose of their article—so why introduce the idea at all?

My position remains that we have not yet defined any set of foundational theories that most would agree underpin the work we do. Though I would no longer use the term “dismal”, there is still serious work to do.

Gardner (1961) wrote: “An excellent plumber is infinitely more admirable than an incompetent philosopher. The society which scorns excellence in plumbing as a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy: neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water.” (p. 97). While scenario planners may have

evolved toward excellence in practice, I question the excellence of our philosophy and theorizing. And because the phenomenon originated in practice, our theories to this point need only hold water for the client organizations we serve. I challenge the discipline that we might check for leaky pipes—if the goal is to make progress toward becoming an academic discipline. If this is not a goal of our field, we might as well just strive for excellence in our own ‘plumbing’, hope we have a society which does not scorn it and attend to leaky pipes as they burst.

If we choose to attend to this gap in the field, one idea is to undertake the same kind of study conducted by Spaniol and Rowland, but directed at the various scenario planning theorizing efforts that have occurred over the last 17 years. I wonder what common theories might repeatedly appear in the literature, that could form a starting point for dialogue about our theoretical foundations?

Many may take the view that we should not be limited in the selection of theories that could apply in any given scenario instance. Yet, I again challenge our discipline, its scholars, and practitioners to consider that there must be a minimum set of foundational theories that are operating in any scenario project. The intent is not to limit the use of additional theories that may be context dependent (e.g., natural resource scenario work vs. corporate scenario work, among so many others), but would inform our discipline with a commonly understood foundation.

### 4 | METHODS

2×2 matrix, cross-impact analysis, La Prospective, and many other methods are available. It could be that methods matter less that we might have previously thought. If you have a set of scenarios that is judged by users to generally be plausible, relevant and challenging, what difference does it make how they were developed? In fact, Napier Collyns once told me a story that he and Jay Ogilvy set up a kind of experiment in which one used the 2×2 matrix approach, and the other used a more organic process without prescription, and both arrived at remarkably similar scenarios. Suffice it to say I again agree with Spaniol and Rowland's claim that it may not be accurate to suggest our discipline suffers from “methodological chaos” (Bradfield et al., 2005; Khakee, 1991). There are well documented methods—many of them—and all arrive at a set of scenarios. It would be a detriment to the field if we all followed some rote process and dismissed the flexibility and creativity from the work we do.

### 5 | CONCLUSIONS

I generally agree with Spaniol and Rowland that we seem to know what a scenario is—and it could be time to sunset the claims of confusion and chaos. The clear caveat involves the new general audience mentioned above. Second, we have room for much

deeper conversations about theory related to scenario planning and I argue this should not be confused or conflated with defining terms. They may be related, but require separate treatment and analysis. We might further consider closing the debate about methods and accept that varying methods exist and none are superior. There is room, however for conversations about quality and outcomes within each given method (for example, a one-day scenario project simply cannot compare with a 1-year scenario project).

Finally, in my view, the value is in the debate, not in any one conclusion. It is sometimes appropriate to communicate remarkable things in order to provoke a response—thus dialogue, disagreement, clarity, and progress. This kind of process reflects the application of what we ask of our clients. If we cannot apply our trade among ourselves, challenge each others' views, disagree, and work toward a new understanding, maybe we are hypocrites?

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