Institutional Isomorphism and Performance Management: Exploring the Linkage and Relationship in English Social Housing

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Abstract

This paper investigates institutional isomorphism within English social housing through the theoretical lens of strategic performance management. By employing a multiple case study analysis, we uncover how external isomorphic pressures are sensed within the organization as a strategic dissonance through its strategic performance management system. Housing Associations (HAs) need to respond to these 'sensed' external changes by adapting their internal strategic performance management, which are then measured and reported in a rapidly changing external environment. We argue that by focusing on changes in managing performance, organizational performance can become a lens by which the internalization of isomorphic pressures in social housing can be studied. A conceptual framework for social housing has been developed to study how HAs manage their performance in a rapidly changing context.

Keywords: Performance management, institutional isomorphism, third sector, housing associations, strategic dissonance

Introduction

This research focuses on changes in performance management within four HAs and the regulatory body operating in the UK social housing sector. HAs are defined as providing housing and support for low income and vulnerable groups, and have grown rapidly as local authorities have transferred their housing stock (Mullins, 2010).

English social housing has experienced pervasive change over the past three decades. It began with adaptive change under the banner of new public management across public services in the UK (Hood, 1995), a marketized approach to management which included competitive tendering, outsourcing of services and the creation of arms-length management organizations (ALMOs) (Pawson 2006; Mullins, 2010); financing the acquisition, construction and renovation of housing through bank loans (Mullins and Pawson, 2010); and regulatory compliance and performance management within social housing (Manochin et al, 2011; Manville and Greatbanks, 2020). All of these market mechanisms provided greater freedoms to social housing providers with an aim of delivering value for money to the tax payer. Although considered to be privatization by the back door, they were still largely public sector organizations. As Mullins and Jones (2015) note, it is not a simple dichotomy between state and market—community drivers are important in balancing the tensions of state and market, thus resulting in a three-sector model of competing logics (Mullins and Jones, 2015). For example, in England, HAs work with tenants to manage the transition of agency as a result of the Universal Credit placing more responsibility on the tenant. Other initiatives include supported living to promote independence and partnering with credit unions to provide financial education in order to avoid getting into arrears (Manville and Greatbanks, 2020). Community based organisations such as Credit Unions have also worked alongside HAs (Werner, 2012). Further acceleration of changes in the last fifteen years have included:

legal and regulatory reform (Manville et al, 2016); financing the acquisition, construction and renovation of housing through bond issuance (Aalbers and Christophers, 2014; Wainwright and Manville, 2017); private sector competition (Manville and Greatbanks, 2020). More recently the ALMO model has been in decline since 2010 (Barker, 2019) due to challenges of balancing the books while creating social value (localgov.co.uk, 2023). Consequently, the emergence of the local authority trading company model (LATCO), which permits trading with other councils which provides greater opportunities for competing for new business, has become prominent. The very first LATCO in the UK was conceived by Essex County Council for care provision back in 2009 (Walsh, 2010) and has been extended to a number of other councils.

HAs have needed to respond to these competitive pressures by managing their performance in order to remain competitive. As a result, social housing has been referred to as a hybrid sector on account of the pervasive commercialisation in the sector and the blurring of private and non-profit (Blessing, 2012; Mullins et al, 2012; Manville & Greatbanks, 2020). This study explores institutional isomorphism (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983) within third sector social housing providers such as HAs. Specifically, we explore how the influence of social and competitive isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), interact with the organizational strategic performance mechanisms within HAs and the social housing sector, which are responsible for the development of strategic performance management initiatives.

There have been a number of studies of social housing throughout the world most notably in: Australia (Gilmour and Milligan, 2012; Mullins et al., 2018); Netherlands (Blessing, 2012; Mullins et al, 2018); The United States of America (Nguyen et al, 2012);

Northern Ireland (Mullins and Acherson, 2014) and England (Mullins et al., 2014, 2018; Manville and Greatbanks, 2020). However, English social housing by comparison has undergone the most radical reforms, and thus the English social housing sector appears to operate much closer to a competitive model than most of its European counterparts (Mullins, 2010). It is against this competitive environment that this paper offers its primary contribution—by understanding the transition process from external pressures to changes in strategic performance management, HAs can adapt quickly to changes in external uncertainty and take responsive managerial action to realign with the perceived external changes. Whilst such responses are a typical feature of a competitive environment, they have not been of feature of social housing until very recently.

Conceptual premise of this paper

Previous research in the areas of intuitional isomorphism and performance management has been unrelated and separated in both theoretical context and research field. In this paper we connect these previously unrelated theories and present the operational synergy between them. By considering the performance management perspective the effects and signals transmitted—and sensed—through institutional isomorphism become tangible and real to the organization leadership. Furthermore, by clarifying the transmission and sensing of such signals, organizational leadership can respond and react more rapidly to these signals, and thus align the organization more quickly to benefit from the new societal, economic and competitive pressures.

We argue that organizations will sense isomorphic social and competitive pressures and interpret these as a strategic dissonance (Burgelman & Grove, 1996; Jacobs & Manzi,, 2020), which initiates a response through changes within the organization's strategic performance management approach. In this study we conceptualize strategic dissonance as the discord or conflict which arises when the internal strategic measures of the organization do not align with the external pressures being felt, or sensed by organization, i.e. the internal performance measures are driving behaviour which does not fulfil or satisfy the external pressures on the organization.

Further, we believe the sensed dissonance will exert an internal managerial pressure to modify or develop new strategic performance measures. Once these strategic changes have been interpreted as strategic goals the organization will set about resolving this ‘sensed dissonance’ through fulfilment of such strategic goals. In this way we posit that isomorphic pressures, as offered by institutional isomorphism, are connected to, and influence the choice of, internal strategic performance management approaches within the organization.
The paper begins by reviewing literature on institutional isomorphism including recent studies in a performance management context. A multiple case analysis was utilized involving five organizations from the UK social housing sector.

English Social Housing Development

English HAs have undergone extensive change during the last forty years. Beginning in the UK, the 1979 Thatcher government passed legislation to privatise social housing by allowing tenants to purchase their homes under the “right to buy scheme” facilitated by the 1980 Housing Act which gave rise to the commodification of social housing stock (Forrest and Williams, 1984). The commodification of social housing accelerated following the reform of banking with the Banking Act (1986) known as “big bang” which made credit for mortgages more freely available. The act also facilitated funding for the large-scale asset transfer, maintenance and management of council housing stock to third sector HAs further increasing hybridisation of social housing (Aalbers and Christophers, 2014; Wainwright & Manville, 2017).

The global financial crisis (GFC) of 2008, left a protracted legacy of housing market disruption in many countries—Australia (Gilmour & Milligan, 2012), Netherlands (Blessing 2012), United States of America (Nguyen et al, 2012), New Zealand (Murphy, 2020) and the United Kingdom (Mullins et al, 2012; Mullins & Acheson, 2014), remnants of which still remain to date (Wetzstein, 2019). Such legacy effects have further directly impacted social housing across the globe leaving an array of different housing policy responses (Wetzstein, 2021; Pawson, Milligan & Martin, 2019)). The 2008 GFC increased UK government debt to unsustainable levels, further compounding the impact on public service delivery through reduced spending (Haldane & Allesandri, 2009; Jacobs and Manzi, 2020). Such actions had an immediate impact on both the public sector and the Third Sector, which hitherto relied directly or indirectly on government funding (Cunningham, 2008).

The hybridization has continued unabated in the UK with the enactment in 2010 of the Housing and Regenerations Act (2008) which ushered in private sector competition into social housing (Manville et al., 2016). As of October 2022, there are more than 65 for profit registered (regulated) providers providing social housing in the UK (HMRC, 2022).

Echoing the previous decade the ongoing economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have a similar effect on HAs as the GFC, and will in turn generate new isomorphic pressures, which will initiate a new cycle of strategic dissonance, strategic goal development and eventual fulfilment to restore a balanced strategic position.

Third Sector development

The Third Sector (TS) is classified as not-for-profit organizations that fall between the public and private sectors (Billis, 2010). For more than two decades, successive UK government social and economic policies have exerted increasing pressure on TS organizations increasing their responsibility for the delivery of public services. This repositioning of the TS began with the Compact Agreement (Kendal, 2000), which paved the way for an increased participation in TS public service delivery. From 2010 the ‘Big Society’ initiative aimed to provide a more balanced public service delivery by reducing dependency on the state (Big Society, 2010). The rebalancing has continued throughout the decade but the term “Big Society” has fallen out of favour (Manville and Greatbanks, 2020).

For almost two decades researchers (Dart, 2004; Maier *et al*., 2016) have highlighted that TS organizations have been encouraged to become more business-like, and as a consequence English HAs have been increasingly viewed as more closely related to the private sector than most not-for-profit organizations, primarily because their *modus operandi* is of an increasingly more commercial footing (Mullins, 2010).

Traditional Institutional Isomorphism perspective

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identify three types of social institutional behaviours: coercive, normative and mimetic. Coercive isomorphism occurs when pressure is applied by external stakeholders in order for organizations to conform to their requirements. Coercive forces could emanate from customers and government sponsored regulators where affected organizations seek legitimacy (Kauppi, 2013). Normative pressures are where accreditations and professionalization is sought, such as from trade associations and/or accreditations (Braunscheidel *et al.,* 2011). The final pressure is mimetic isomorphism and relates to an organization seeking legitimacy by adopting perceived best practice within the sector, minimising the risks of being a first mover in the market (Miemczyk, 2008). This view is supported by Selznick (1996) who argues that an organization's motivation is attributed to its anxieties relating to legitimacy rather than a tendency to be innovative which is associated with competitive isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Tuttle and Dillard, 2007). Scott (2014) suggests that institutions provide structure and stability, and offers a definition as:

> Institutions comprise regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life. (Scott, 2014, p. 56)

Institutional Isomorphism and Strategic Performance Management

Institutional isomorphism has, by necessity, considered performance management largely in an abstract sense, i.e. exploring the influence and interactions of such different perspectives on the development of performance management responses within an institutional frame. Whilst such approaches have explored the concept of institutional isomorphism from a performance management perspective, there has been little consideration of the relationship between institutional models of change and the more tangible operational based definitions of performance measurement (Beer & Micheli, 2018), such as the impact of new strategic performance management approaches, or the development of additional performance metrics as organizational responses to perceived changes in the external environment.

Institutional theory and strategic management present alternative approaches in responding to external sensed pressures upon an organisation. Institutional isomorphism considers the legitimation of organisations through acting 'like' other organisations, within and outside of its sector, as presented by (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Scott, 2014; Manville et al., 2016). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) contend that isomorphic pressures are sensed as normative, coercive or mimetic forces which push organisational leadership towards greater homogeneity. In contrast strategic management theories such as the Resourced Based View (Barney, 1991) or Porter's competitive strategy (Porter, 1996) place emphasis on the development of competitive advantage of a firm, and in doing so develop a unique and defendable competitive position. The obvious tension between conformity and competitive advantage, as put forth by these opposing theories, has been referred to as the 'strategic balance perspective' or optimal distinctiveness (Zuckerman, 2016; Zhao et al., 2017). Other scholars offer a variety of potential solutions, such as Deephouse (1999) who advocates for balance between novelty and legitimacy.

Despite this apparent polarity, both theories rely on an organisational performance component—that to be either the 'same' or 'different' (Deephouse, 1999), both approaches have to deliver this intended position through strategic leadership within the organisation. The role of performance management within strategic leadership theory is well understood (Kaplan & Norton, 1996; Neely et al, 1995; Otley, 1999), however the relationship between performance management and isomorphism, as offered through institutional isomorphism, is less so. We therefore posit that performance management and isomorphism may have a significance inter-relationship which has as not been fully explored.

Institutional isomorphism has been previously linked with performance management in a variety of public sector environments—healthcare (Brignall & Modell, 2000), public services (Denis, Ferlie, & Van Gestel, 2015) and the voluntary sector (Moon & DeLeon, 2007; Krause, Bruton, & Carter, 2019). Performance management is often interpreted from a stakeholder perspective—focusing on the role and influence of key stakeholders of performance (Brignall & Modell, 2000), stakeholder power dynamics (Otley, 1980), its potential dysfunctionality in public sector organisations (Gerrish, 2016; Siverbo, Cäker, & Åkesson, 2019), or the implications of managerial choice in balancing different stakeholder interests (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2011). Others focus on the dimensions of performance—for instance its state of 'balance' or 'integration' (Ittner & Larcker, 1998; Kaplan & Norton, 1996), and social and political legitimacy (Brignall & Modell, 2000; Collier, 2001; Nitzl et al., 2019).

Institutional Isomorphism within an operations context

Institutional isomorphism is an important behavioural construct that has historically not featured in an operations management context until recent years. Kauppi (2013) identified several studies during the last ten years which have explored mimetic and normative institutional isomorphism within an operations context; TQM (Martınez-Costa *et al.,* (2008), Six Sigma (Braunscheidel *et al.,* 2011), and ISO 9000 certifications (Boiral and Roy, 2007; Nair and Prajogo, 2009). Institutional isomorphism according to DiMaggio and Powell (1983) comprises two predominant factors; competitive isomorphism and institutional isomorphism. Competitive isomorphism, which relates to market competition and is relevant to the early adoption of innovation, has been extended by Tuttle and Dillard (2007) who argue it is a function of the pressure to become more effective and efficient and thus contributes to driving change within a field. They add that when the change has become embedded, social institutional forces reassert themselves. As organizations become faced with the same environmental conditions they adopt institutional isomorphic behaviours—the tendency to become similar, and thus business practices begin to converge (Zsidisan *et al.,* 2005). An example of this phenomenon is the issuance of bonds offering a long term low interest financing solution to the GFC. In the wake of the GFC a few HAs begun issuing their own bonds and now the process has become institutionalised as others mimetically followed suit including smaller HAs who have teamed up with aggregators (Manville et al, 2016; Wainwright and Manville, 2017).

Many features of operational performance management literature, established over more than thirty years, largely from research in the private sector (Neely, 2005) have been introduced into the public sector (Radnor and McGuire, 2004; Greatbanks and Tapp, 2007), and latterly the Third Sector with varying degrees of success (Kaplan, 2001; Bourne, 2005; Manville, 2007; Moxham and Boaden, 2007; Moxham 2009). Performance management can range from establishing compliance-based key performance indicators (coercive isomorphism, DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) to holistic strategic organizational performance frameworks such as the Balanced Scorecard (BSC) (Kaplan and Norton, 1996) or Business Excellence model (Conti, 2006).

The recent studies within operations management are a welcome contribution to the body of knowledge, however Kauppi (2013, p. 1340) states that

> "Overall, more work is needed in fetching out the practical implications of institutional isomorphism. It can come across as an overly theoretical lens of how organizations behave, but as "nothing is as practical as a good theory" we should work towards ensuring this is true also for institutional isomorphism."

To date, there has been limited use of institutional isomorphism combined with a strategic operations management perspective, yet this unexplored combination has potentially much to offer the performance scholar, particularly when focused on drawing out the practical organizational implications as Kauppi (2013) suggests.

Social Housing perspective

Within a context of social housing Morrison (2016), and Manzi and Morrison (2018), adopted an institutional logics perspective to understand HA organizational behaviours resulting from the tensions between the state and the market logics, which have characterized the hybridized position of organisations within social housing (Mullins et al., 20212; Manville et al., 2016; Manville & Greatbanks, 2020; Rolfe et al., 2020). Morrison points out that whilst most institutional logics research "invariably adopts a field-level perspective, examining changes in the strength of influence of competing logics on individual organisations within that field", focusing on the strategies and actions at lower levels within organisations provides an opportunity to study 'how' the competing logics of state regulation and market forces influence managerial decision making within the organisation (Morrison, 2016, p 899). It is at this lower level that this paper seeks to further contribute by investigating the relationship between the competing logics and organisational performance management systems.

Model linking Isomorphism and Performance Management

Kauppi (2013) offers a model—building on the earlier work of Haunschild & Miner, (1997) and Huang et al, (2010)—which combines and integrates the two variants of institutional isomorphism—economic and social. At the core of this model is the role of sensed 'uncertainty', which Kauppi describes as "the most visible commonality" between the social and economic perspectives, and which drives isomorphism (Kauppi, 2013 p5) (see figure 1 below). Kauppi suggests that both the social and economic variants have parallels, and often employ forms of benchmarking as a means of making comparisons with other organizations.

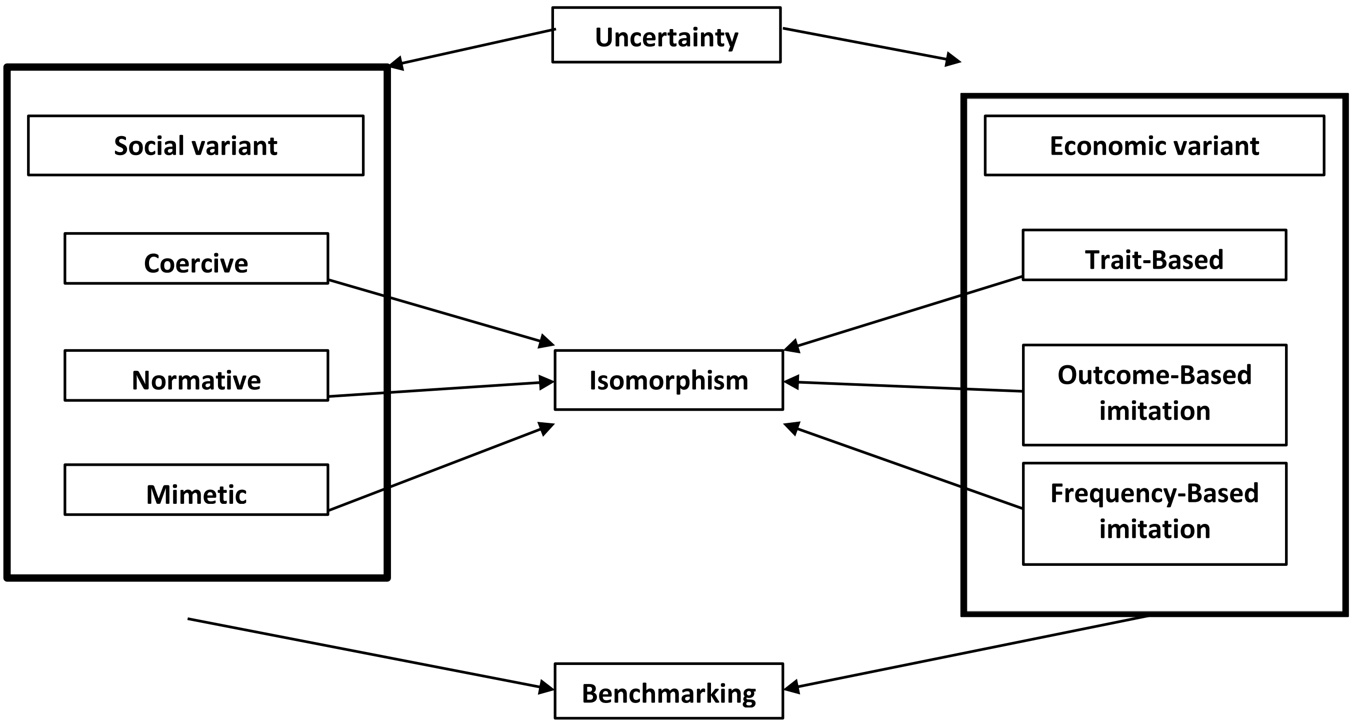

Figure 1: Kauppi (2013) framework

In the above conceptual framework (Kauppi, 2013), DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and Haunschild and Miner (1997), explore how competitive and institutional pressures influence isomorphism within organizations. In their original model, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) define two variants of isomorphism—the social variant, which describes coercive, normative and mimetic pressures, and the economic variant, which was underdeveloped in their paper.

Competitive isomorphism recognises that as organizations strive for competitive advantage, they adopt similar behaviours. Haunschild and Miner (1997) studied organizations faced with economic uncertainty and uncovered several forms of inter-organizational imitative behaviour which they termed trait-based, outcome-based and frequency based. Trait based imitation is based on the size, success or prestige of the comparative organization. Huang *et al.,* (2010) argues that it relates to mimicking organizations within a similar sector or region, whilst Terziovski (2010) contends that formalization is essential for performance improvement. This was also the case within HAs as Manochin et al's., (2008) case study in an English HA revealed that the Directors were considering the possibility of implementing a balanced scorecard (Kaplan and Norton, 1996). Frequency based imitation is when practices are replicated based on the adoption of a large number of organizations. Such behaviour reaches critical mass and becomes part of the taken for granted assumptions. Once it reaches this state, it effectively becomes the norm and hence is associated with normative isomorphism. Further evidence of normalisation of performance management reporting via traffic lighted metrics benchmarked across the social housing sector was revealed in studies by Manville et al., (2016) and Manville and Greatbanks (2020).

In this paper we utilize Kauppi's model above as the initial position, and attempt to overlay the strategic performance management mechanisms—following Morrison (2016)—which are influenced by the isomorphic pressures of both the social and economic variants. In doing this we posit that organisations which sense uncertainty in their economic and social outlooks as a ‘strategic dissonance’, and will in response seek to change and modify the manner in which they manage their strategic performance. Responding to the sensed uncertainty through strategic performance management the organisation reduces the dissonance and thereby the sensed uncertainty.

In examining this proposition, we utilize a sample of four case studies and a regulatory body in English social housing. The social housing sector has gone through a period of significant social, economic and political change, resulting in HAs being exposed to increasingly greater uncertainty. We use this sample to explore how these organisations have responded to this greater uncertainty, and specifically how they manage their strategic performance as a result.

The pressure for organizations to behave the same whether it is economically based (competitive isomorphism) behaviours or to seek social legitimation (institutional isomorphism) has not been examined extensively. There have been several studies on performance measurement and organizational culture (Prajogo and McDermott, 2005; Bititci *et al.*, 2006; Prajogo and McDermott, 2011; Bourne *et al.*, 2013; Gambi *et al.*, 2015). The fusion of research involving organizational culture and operations is a welcome contribution to understanding the cross disciplinary body of research that is performance measurement and management. The authors believe that for performance measurement to be better understood, additional organizational perspectives need to be explored and developed further—this paper will explore institutional isomorphism by ‘extending’ (Voss *et al.,* 2002) the theoretical framework developed by Kauppi (2013).

In extending Kauppi’s (2013) framework we posit that when uncertainty is sensed, the organization looks to respond to the coercive pressures (usually as a consequence of government policy). Organizations will seek to implement normative or mimetic behaviours which will lessen the sensed uncertainty, and in doing so will innately manage strategic performance goals to track progress towards rebalancing performance with perceived external pressures, as shown in figure 2 below.

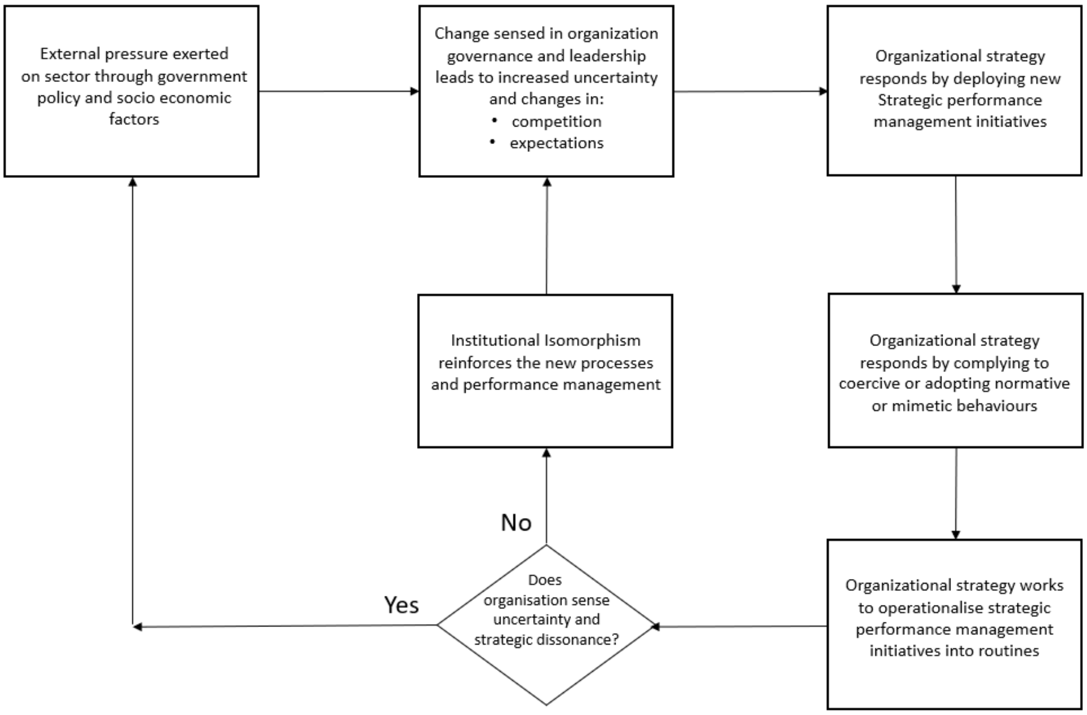

Figure 2 the conceptual framework for the study

Using the Kauppi (2013) conceptual framework as a basis, this paper explores the linkages between isomorphism and performance management.

We argue that one of the first indicators of isomorphic pressures, which Kauppi, (2013) describes as 'uncertainty', is the primary driver for both variants of isomorphism within an organization. We suggest that isomorphic pressures will be sensed by organizational governance and senior leadership through the performance management system as a strategic dissonance, i.e. a discord or misalignment between the external isomorphic pressures and the internal strategic performance metrics. In this way we posit the strategic dissonance will drive the development of modified or new strategic performance metrics which are better aligned with the external isomorphic pressures. Similarly, competitive and economic pressures will also manifest through trait-based, outcome-based and frequency-based performance metrics which take the organization closer to these goals.

The ‘social and economic variants’ model (Kauppi, 2013) has been adapted to reflect our contention briefly discussed above. In figures 1 and 2 above, it is proposed that the existing organizational performance management behaviours are likely to be modified through the actions of isomorphic performance drivers, i.e. organizations will react to isomorphic pressures, which will be reflected within their benchmarked performance measures. The performance measuring will be filtered through the social and competitive pressures the organization is sensing, through a feedback loop. Any future changes in institutional social and competitive pressures will eventually exert more/less change upon performance management initiatives, thus the cycle iterates.

Using the conceptual framework offered in figures 1 and 2 above we put forward three propositions:

Proposition 1 External changes in the social housing sector are sensed internally as increased uncertainty and strategic dissonance by the organisational leadership team.

Proposition 2 Greater levels of external uncertainty in the social housing sector, are sensed as institutional social and competitive isomorphic pressures. These pressures, are then responded to by internal changes in the organisational strategic performance management approaches.

Proposition 3 The adoption of new strategic management approaches will lead to the initiation of new strategic performance measures, which in turn are tracked by leadership to gauge the degree and direction of change in the sensed uncertainty.

We utilize these propositions to extend Kauppi’s (2013) framework, which is focused at the field level, into a conceptual framework which considers the relationship and linkages between isomorphism and performance management at the firm level (Morrison 2016). Each proposition is developed further in the discussion section of this paper.

Research Method

The study was conducted using a multiple case study analysis (Yin, 2014). A multiple case study was employed to improve generalisability and minimise subjectivity (Stake, 2006; Harrison et al., 2017). Yin (2014, p16) argues that case studies suit experimental study as the topic is investigated in a "real world setting" and that careful screening is employed to ensure relevance and replicability. A case study approach is also supported by Eisenhardt (1989) who argues that it provides novelty, testability and empirical validity. As this topic area of extending Kauppi's model is not well researched, case study is further validated as it "is particularly well-suited to research areas where the theory is deemed inadequate" (Eisenhardt, 1989, p549).

The researchers were familiar with the sector having previously led a triple helix project (Leydesdorff, 2000) involving academia, industry and government to implement a performance management framework in an English HA (Manville, 2007; Manville et al., 2019). This experience provided the research team with both a detailed knowledge of the competitive nature of the sector and the social capital and credibility for securing access at a senior level within the case organisations. A representative selection of cases of English HAs was chosen which reflected the diversity of the sector. This research focused on four case studies—case organizations one and two were HAs representing the operational delivery and competitive pressures of the sector. Case organization three was an arms-length management organization (ALMO) owned by a borough council, and provided a community context to the research. Case organization four was a council which had asset transferred part of its housing stock to the ALMO. Additionally, a regulatory body for the social housing sector was also interviewed for this work.

Although this selection of cases is representative of the supply network within the English social housing sector, the unit of analysis was the individual organizations rather than the supply network itself, thus addressing Morrison's call for more individual organization focus rather than field level studies (Morrison, 2016).

The selection criteria for the social housing case studies were that they employed performance measurement and compliance monitoring within the sector and included a representative supply chain of social housing.

Case Organisations

Four case organizations were involved this study as follows:

ALMO - An ALMO is an Arms Length Management Organisation which is a separate legal entity owned by a Council with the purpose of managing housing stock. ALMOs have their own budgets, business plans and have autonomy from Councillors. They managed approximately 4000 housing units.

Council - The council owns around 9000 social housing stock and also manages an additional 4000 units via an ALMO.

HA1 A mid-sized HA based in the South of England employing over 300 staff and approximately 1000 units. The service users are generally vulnerable members of society

HA2 - A small HA based in the South of England employing approx. 200 staff with four hundred housing units.

In addition to the above a senior manager from a regulatory body (HAREG) was also interviewed as a supplementary perspective. The role of the regulatory body is to monitor all social housing providers and ensure compliance of performance across a suite of agreed key performance indicators. The role of the regulator is to assure value for money for the tax payer and that social housing bodies provided good service for their tenants. The regulator also shares best practice by benchmarking performance.

Data Collection

A total of ten interviews were conducted across the five organisations. The selection criteria for the interviewees required they held a senior management level position with boardroom responsibility in the chosen cases. An interview framework was developed to facilitate consistency between the interviews whilst providing flexibility to capture rich data. The interviews lasted between 45 and 95 minutes. A total of ten semi-structured interviews were carried out across the five case organizations. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and were subsequently summarised on separate contact summary sheets as a form of data reduction to prevent getting "lost in a welter of detail" (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p51). This facilitated manual thematic coding to elicit themes within the findings. Hennink et al. (2011) recommend that further inductive codes can be added after reading approximately 30% of the verbatim transcriptions. The coding began with descriptive coding, followed by pattern coding to yield a smaller number of emergent themes. A coding list that defined the codes and related them to the research questions was devised for this study. The coding process followed the quality assurance guidelines identified by Hennink et al. (2011, pp 229-230).

In addition to the interviews, secondary data was also used such as annual reports, performance reviews, scorecards, business plans, policy documents and company websites which aided triangulation to facilitate validity and reliability (Jick, 1979; Flick, 1998). The list of case study organizations and their respective sectors are shown in table 1 below. The data was analysed using summary contact sheets and data reduction to facilitate thematic analysis using a iterative approach adapted from Miles and Huberman (1994).
Insert Table 1 here

Findings

In seeking to address each propositions, several emergent themes, relating to the conceptual model, arose from the qualitative data analysis of the interviews and the analysis of the secondary data. A table of the emergent themes is presented in table 2 at the end of this section. The following themes emerged from the data analysis process:

(1) Competitive Isomorphism

(2) Coercive and Normative Isomorphism

(3) Mimetic Isomorphism

(4) Performance Measurement to Performance Management.

Competitive Isomorphism

Although ALMOs have more commercial freedom, they do not have trading facilities and their business model is based on a management fee paid by the council.

"We are a bit cocooned almost I suppose…our fee is our income which is agreed between the ALMO board and the council" (ALMO)

Moreover, the ALMO was more insulated than the other HAs, they have had to negotiate cuts to their management fee and to also look for grant funding which is becoming increasingly competitive.

"we've opted to have a cut in our Management Fee, and we've successfully applied for grant funding for financial inclusion teams to help our tenants" (ALMO)

There were similarities amongst the other social housing cases as their respective competitive environments were changing, albeit at different rates. All found the austerity measures following by the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) had affected their organizations. For instance major customers from social housing were asking their suppliers to demonstrate continuous improvement and value for money. Additionally, increasing levels of competition were recognised—historical contracts and relationships with customers would now be subject to increasing competitive tendering requiring improvement and/or cost reduction. This was emphasised by a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a HA who stated that they were

> "Having to compete for the chance to carry on running services that (we have) run for 20 years, in a very, very competitive environment." (HA2CE).

HAs routinely use banking finance to fund new building, maintenance and refurbishments of existing housing stock. When Banks lend money to HAs, they will impose bank covenants as part of the due diligence of their credit agreements which will require HAs to demonstrate that they can continue to service the loans and fulfil their future interest payment obligations.

> *"Bank covenants refer to what level of profit banks require you to have in order to service the loans…it will usually be a ratio of loan interest to surplus. We base the surplus we target so that it will provide a comfortable coverage of that bank covenant rather than maximising our profit. In our sector we don't get funded for everything we do so we will spend money out of our reserves or our income to fund projects". We don't have to maximise profit for shareholders but we have to get enough to prevent banks taking back the properties and potentially making people homeless (HA1CE)*

According to LexisNexis (2023) the leading provider of regulatory intelligence, there are four key bank covenants in social housing, namely: loan to value; interest cover; gearing and rental income cover. These metrics are highly regulated and are collated and available from the Social Housing Regulator's Annual Global Accounts of Private Registered Providers (Gov.UK, 2023). A Benchmarking agency for the housing sector, House Mark was established as a joint venture between the National Housing Federation and the Chartered Institute of Housing. House Mark reports on a comprehensive list of non-financial KPIs required by the regulator and facilitates subscribing HAs and ALMOs the ability to compare themselves against their peers in a traffic light dashboard (Manville & Greatbanks, 2020; HouseMark, 2023). From the above it is clear that economic, productivity and customer relationship drivers exist and contribute to greater levels of uncertainty for both case organizations. As Kauppi (2013) argues uncertainly is the primary driver for isomorphic social and competitive pressures.

As well as having to plan against the unthinkable such as loss of major contracts which could have a devastating effect on sustainability, HAs believe the manner in which councils and other commissioning bodies phase-in their planned cuts will affect their sustainability of their organization:

> “We’re having what they call the “salami slicing approach”, where you know, 10% off this year, 10% off next year, 10% off the year after that. And you know we are at risk as an organization … I don’t see why being run on business-like lines needs to undermine our ethical approach to our work or to our claim to be able to be a player in that field really.”(HA2CE).

Coercive and Normative Isomorphism

The regulator’s role within social housing is to champion the service user and guarantee efficient use of taxpayers’ money by assessing providers against a standard set of criteria and they regulatory stated:

> “(Our role) is to ensure the integrity of the sector, and to ensure that residents and tenants receive a good service, but also that the sector is well managed, it’s financially viable, and it’s well governed as well.” (HAREG).

> “I would sort of summarise our key role, or purpose to be firstly to secure a fair deal for our over 8 million tenants, who are living in Housing Association and Local Authority homes. But also to safeguard the public investment within the Housing Association stock, and also the Local Authority stock. It’s also one of our roles to provide an assurance to private investors; there’s currently over £40billion of funds invested in Housing Associations, but also to safeguard what I would summarise as the good quality of life in communities by setting standards in areas such as anti-

social behaviour and the quality of management; also repairs and maintenance as well." (HAREG)

The regulator provides benchmarked data available to HAs and tenants.

"We have established a national database, so that not just to be used internally, but tenants and other stakeholders can, via our web portal, directly compare landlords' performance against a number of performance indicators."

(HAReg)

The role of the HA regulator is perceived in a purely audit based role as stated by one of the interviewees.

"They (Regulators) have a set of rules, and they tick you off against a set of rules. Well that's certainly our experience." (HA1CE).

The regulatory body has not been immune to reform either and during the past fifteen years the regulatory body has been reformed several times from the Housing Corporation to the Tenants Services Authority (2008); to the Homes and Communities Agency (2012) to Homes England (2018) [Murie, 2008; Manville et al, 2016; Manville & Greatbanks, 2020]

Mimetic Isomorphism

With respect to HAs, the organizations sampled had performance measurement frameworks in place which varied from an off-the-shelf balanced scorecard proprietary software package to a suite of graphs, tables and reports collated into a formal management report. All of the HAs sampled were familiar with balanced scorecard and Business Excellence Model (BEM) frameworks. The HA regulator responded that this level of performance reporting was quite widespread among HAs when he commented that:

"When you receive Board reports for example, there is often a quite sophisticated suite of performance indicators within it, often using the traffic light methodology, so that Board members can identify quite quickly whether there are areas that the business is not performing in line with the targets that it's set itself."(HAREG).

All four case studies reported or reviewed on a wide variety of KPIs, although, the HAs conceded that there were still opportunities to tailor this to their context. Although the majority of the KPIs are externally imposed via regulatory compliance, there was evidence of lean business practices by eliminating non-value adding performance monitoring by reducing the number of KPIs that were reported.

"I've got roughly about 60 different performance indicators on the scorecards. Those are now being reviewed because we are having an upgrade to the scorecard system in the next month or so. So there will be additional scorecards being developed; there's indicators being deleted off, so a full review is taking place at the moment." (HA1FD).

The overwhelming majority of the KPIs are monitored because of institutional pressure by the regulatory body. Only one HA had a BSC framework in place which was adopted in order to use the externally specified KPIs to drive their business strategy.

Performance Measurement to Performance Management

The HAs also had documented strategic plans which were approximately a dozen pages long and they were articulated to service users in non-management jargon which was easy to digest.

Whilst HAs are some way behind the private sector in terms of performance management evolution, they have developed sophisticated performance measurement frameworks for compliance purposes. The higher performing (with respect to regulatory

KPIs) HAs viewed themselves as a “social business” rather than simply non-profit organizations and believed that some HAs will not be able to make the required transition—they will either be left behind or will have to work with other organizations in a consortium to achieve the critical mass necessary for sustainability. The CEOs interviewed found that having a professional business approach was entirely compatible with the mission and values. Size or ethical stance should not be a barrier to developing a coherent business strategy as articulated by one not for profit CEO:

> *“It may be two sheets of paper, as opposed to 20 sheets of paper, or whatever. But any good business that’s well governed and well managed, should actually know what it’s doing, and have some objectives, even if say, two or three objectives, for its business.” (HA1CE).*

(Social) business strategies should also not be static documents or rigid action plans as contracts may not be automatically renewed or won despite a history of good service delivery. Competitive tendering and the lowering of barriers to new competition will mean greater uncertainty for HAs. The findings from the interviews reveal that the more entrepreneurial HAs recognise this threat and are taking action:

> *“So, whereas previously we might have known that we’d have sort of you know, three or four local competitors, and we’d know what the position was, there are other organizations coming in from London, from wherever, to try and win the work! So you know, we are doing scenario planning; if (we) lost two or three of its big contracts, we could be looking a lot less of a viable organization than we are today. And that could happen in the next two years.” (HA2CE).*

Performance management may involve a change in mind-set rather than simply adopting a performance measuring culture. The resultant challenge caused by the strategic dissonance in the social housing sector is to remain sustainable without compromising their mission and values as a well-meaning organization with no business competence or high performing laissez fair approaches are both untenable in this new economic climate:

> *"Well we've had to get people moving from just a values culture to a values and performance culture. And so that's a mind-set shift, because a lot of people working in charitable organizations for all the good reasons, to do good for people and help each other. But we've had to say values without performance, and performance without values, isn't something that we want in the organization."…"the word "business" is not a dirty word in (our company), and 10 years ago, people didn't use the word "business" you know. And I think in some respects, that is what I would see, is a shift, is recognising that we need to be run very efficiently as a business." (HA1CE).*

ALMO and HAs have access to benchmarking data from the regulator and a separate sector service called House Mark and this allows them to manage by exception and address areas below target.

… If we were a little bit worried about let's say, we're increasing our costs of repairing an empty property, I would want that to go Managers' desktops a bit quicker to say, you know, "You might want to have a look at this one"."
(ALMO)

Insert Table 2 here

Discussion

The three propositions were used to examine the role and relationship of each HA's strategic response to increased uncertainty within the social housing sector. Utilizing the Kauppi (2013) framework

We posit the first proposition as the primary mechanism by which external change is sensed by the organization. For example, this may be sensed as the requirement for HAs to tender competitive bids for contracts they have held for several years, or the increase in competition from Registered Providers now offering alternative housing services. As perceived levels of uncertainty increase regarding the externally driven changes organizations will start to develop new response strategies—proposition two. Such different strategic responses may include the issuance of bonds to access low cost capital (Manville et al, 2016; Wainwright & Manville, 2017), or the provision of tenant budgeting advice to help tenant manage their finances (Manville and Greatbanks, 2020).

The final proposition posits that such new strategic management approaches will in turn result in new performance metrics—proposition three—which are used to track organizational change in relation to the perceived external changes. In this way external changes, sensed as growing uncertainty (proposition 1), are transmitted through a strategic management response (proposition 2), and into new performance metrics (proposition 3) which guide internal behaviour within the organisation to reduce strategic dissonance sensed by the original uncertainty. We now examine evidence for each proposition in greater detail.

Proposition 1 External changes in the social housing sector are sensed internally as increased uncertainty and strategic dissonance by the organisational leadership team.

Within the sample of housing organisations utilized in this study there appears to be evidence that sensed change and the resulting strategic dissonance is present. An example of such sensed dissonance (Burgelman & Grove, 1996; Jacobs & Manzi, 2020) are the HAs response to political agency pressure to bid for contracts which have been operated by HAs previously for years. Such change sends a strong signal that the political expectations have changed and that a more competitive dynamic is now present within the sector. A second example are the changes related to welfare reform, where the tenant now receives directly the rent subsidy, rather than this being paid directly to the HA (Manville et al., 2016). Both of these external changes have had a significant impact on how the HAs within the sample responded. Both changes resulted in greater uncertainty within the social housing sector, and as a result an increased strategic dissonance was felt by the HA leadership.

Regarding proposition 1, the relationship between increased external change and organisationally sensed change, such as social, economic or political, is therefore considered to be a strong positive relationship, i.e. as greater levels of external change and uncertainty are sensed, the level of internal strategic dissonance also increases. Our findings reveal that some organisations are concerned about the changes and dissonance relates to social isomorphism and feelings of mission drift (Morris, 2012). Whereas other HAs sense a more competitive isomorphism and perceive themselves as a "social business" and not feeling that "business" is a dirty word.

Proposition 2 Greater levels of external uncertainty in the social housing sector, are sensed as institutional social and competitive isomorphic pressures. These pressures, and are then responded to by internal changes in the organisational strategic performance management approaches.

Here again we see evidence to support that HAs respond to the sensed uncertainty by developing and initiating different ways to strategically manage their performance. Examples of the internal response by reframing their behaviours to this strategic dissonance i.e. one organisation ensures that values and performance are not mutually exclusive nor lead to mission drift but they are a compatible approach to navigate the "new normal" of a changed world (Tuttle & Dillard, 2007). The aftermath of the strategic shock of the GFC compelled organisations to do more with less as austerity cuts deepened (Manville and Greatbanks, 2020). The post Covid 19 pandemic cost of living crisis & the effects of the 2022 Russian-Ukraine War are other examples of a strategic shocks which will cause dissonance and HAs will have to choose whether to change their performance management as competitive isomorphism or resist the temptation to change and report on performance as part of the existing social structures.

Examples of an internal response by utilizing different strategic performance management approaches include tracking rent arrears, and offering assistance to tenants in managing their budgets, or balancing the bedroom requirements of tenants with the size of housing stock to reduce voids (Manville et al, 2016). The adoption of continuous improvement approaches also indicates a coercive isomorphic response to the increased sensed uncertainty, through local authority and regulatory expectations for HAs to adopt continuous improvement to reduce operating costs. Another example of an internal response was that the ALMO in this study was dissolved in 2022 and the housing stock reintegrated back into council control.

Regarding proposition 2 we see another strong positive relationship between the sensed external changes, and a different strategic response. Many of these responses can also be classified as one of the social or competitive institutional isomorphic pressures (Jacob & Mansi, 2020).

Proposition 3 The adoption of new strategic management approaches will lead to the initiation of new strategic performance measures, which in turn are tracked by leadership to gauge the degree and direction of change in the sensed uncertainty.

The third of our propositions tests if new performance metrics (key performance indicators) are introduced following the introduction of different strategic management approaches. Here we found very little supportive evidence that different strategic management approaches—as identified through proposition 2—resulted in the development of new operational performance measures. On the contrary many of the performance measures identified in the HAs in this study were pre-existing based on regulatory compliance or normatively through industry benchmarking (Manville et al., 2016; Manville & Greatbanks, 2020). As such the sample HAs did not either see the need for, or were not encouraged to develop, a customised suite of performance measures that sat beneath the new strategic management initiatives. This is explained by previous regulation regimes requiring a set of largely static metrics to be reported in a highly compliance-based environment.

Insert Table 3 here

On this basis we accept propositions one and two as supported, and reject proposition three as not supported by evidence found in this study. We now developed develop Kauppi's (2013) model by incorporating the performance management linkages as described above. As proposition three was rejected this has been excluded from this model.

Linking performance management and institutional isomorphism

The model presented in figure 3 below, adapted from Kauppi (2013), and represents the addition of the performance management relationship as considered in the discussion of propositions one and two above. In adapting this model—following Morrison (2016)—we attempt to connect institutional isomorphism at the field level with strategic performance management mechanisms at the organisational level. This represents an important development for institutional isomorphism and opens up the possibility for greater integration of operational concepts by linking to the strategic performance management mechanisms within the organisation. Starting with the existing performance management initiatives, external change in the social housing sector is sensed through social and competitive intuitional pressures, and interpreted within the organisation as an increased uncertainty and strategic dissonance—proposition 1.

As a response to the social and competitive pressures and the internally sensed increased uncertainty and strategic dissonance, the organisation leadership develop different strategic performance management approaches—proposition 2. In doing so the cycle repeats itself, thus influencing the choice of strategic response through modifying the organisational strategic performance management approaches adopted.

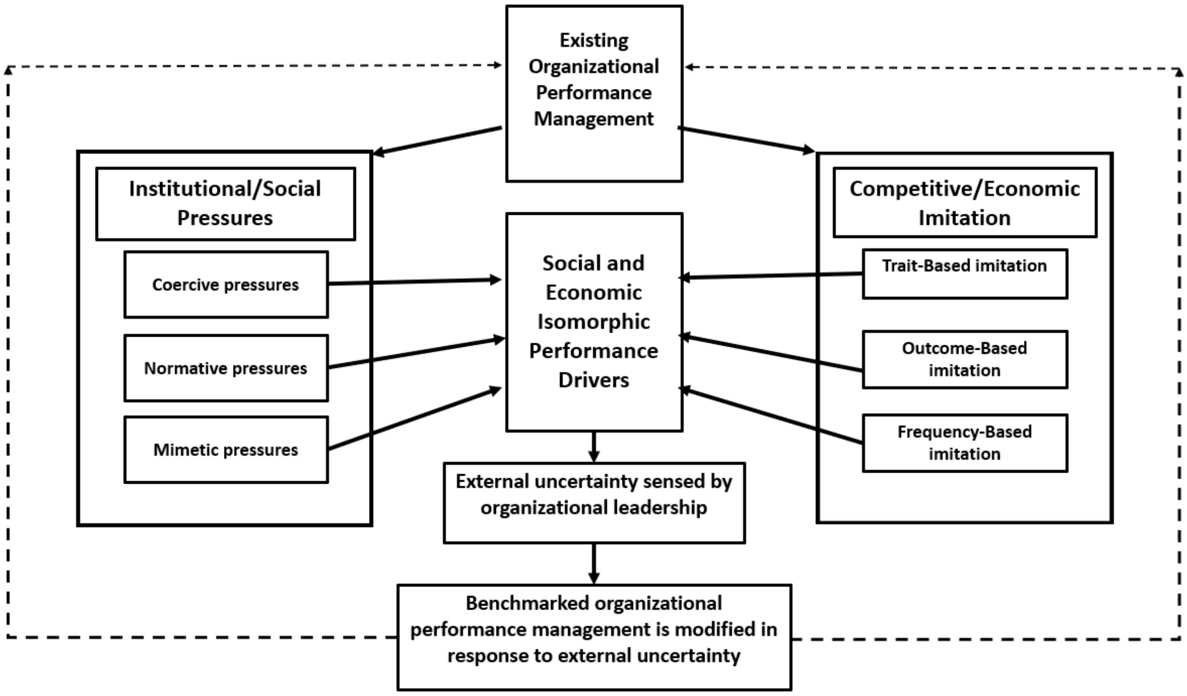

Figure 3: The modified conceptual model showing the linkage and relationship with organizational performance measurement. Adapted from DiMaggio and Powell (1983), Haunschild and Miner (1997) and Kauppi (2013)

Conclusion

With respect to the English social housing context, hybridisation is not simply institutional isomorphism for organisations to be similar by compliance based coercive isomorphism or by copying “best practice” from the private sector (mimetic isomorphism). Our study shows that HAs are experiencing competitive isomorphism as registered providers vie for competitive advantage. New entrants such as for-profit regulated providers, competitive tendering and being eligible for the lowest interest payments on bond repayments require HAs to continually evaluate their strategic plans and respond to change in the sector or run the risk of losing ground to competition or be forced to merge with a larger competitor.

This research asserts there is an as yet undefined relationship between the isomorphic mechanisms at play within institutional isomorphism, and the functioning of strategic performance management within the organization. As Morrison (2016) suggests, only by looking at the organization, rather than the field, can these relationships be explored further. We note however that such organizational focus has not been highly utilized in Institutional Isomorphism research to date, and as such this paper offers a potential insight on this relationship.

At the organizational level there appears to be a synergy between Kauppi’s model, detailed earlier in the paper, and the adapted model offered in figure 3 above. Essentially, and using Morrison’s (2016) perspective, these two models represent the ‘field view’ and the ‘organizational view’ of how Institutional Isomorphism functions. This research defined three propositions in order to test this organizational functionality—propositions 1 and 2 were supported, in that there appears to be an evidential basis that strategic dissonance did result from sector changed as an increased sensed uncertainty—proposition 1—and that such dissonance did lead to the changes in the strategic performance management approaches within the organisation—proposition 2. However, we found little evidence to support the third proposition—that new strategic performance measures will emerge from this dissonance. Here we make a distinction between strategic approaches, i.e. doing some strategic activity differently, and the development of new strategic performance measures that reflect these different approaches..

At the sector level, and specifically regarding proposition 3, we consider the highly regulated environment of social housing has had some dampening effect on performance measure development, which might not be found in other less regulated sectors. The findings reveal that the regulatory process is perceived to be bureaucratic and a box ticking exercise for compliance by the HAs but the more successful HAs recognise that aligning the growth and strategic plans to those metrics and managing the performance rather than simply reporting for compliance sake. This supports what Radnor and McGuire (2004) uncovered in their study of the public sector. The regulator for HAs has sought to address these concerns by reducing the regulatory burden in 2010 when the Housing Corporation was reformed several times, initially as the Tenant Services Authority and more recently as the Homes England (Manville *et al*., 2016; Manville and Greatbanks, 2020).

The competitive and institutional pressures acting upon the not-for-profit sector are moving towards a more market orientated environment based upon renewable contracts—such driving forces are not likely to subside. On the contrary the pace of change may increase as funding is cut further and long-term commissioned contracts previously enjoyed by TS organizations may be subjected to competitive tendering in the future. The danger for not-for-profit organizations is whether they will be ready and able to take advantage of such opportunities. HAs with their experience of management control (Walker and Jeanes, 2001; Manville, 2007; Manville & Greatbanks, 2020) are better placed than other TS organizations to rise to these challenges, but they recognise there are still obstacles to overcome.

HAs are required to report performance to their regulatory bodies and the local authorities—this is a form of coercive isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). The experience of performance measurement of HAs has been likened to a tick-boxing bureaucratic measurement regime, as Radnor and Maguire (2004) concluded in their assessment of the public sector. An important finding of this study was the highly regulated environment could be responsible for stifling the development of new performance measures as tested by proposition 3 which is not supported by this work. However, we also noted that HAs had mimetically adopted the BSC and employed it to inform the organizational strategy. This is becoming increasingly important as further deregulation and increasing private sector competition may mean that HAs would have to demonstrate more self-determination. This supports the work of Tuttle and Dillard (2007) in that this observed competitive isomorphism is a form of early innovation of performance measurement. When other HAs eventually replicate such performance frameworks, it will become the norm within the sector and eventually social isomorphism i.e. the tendency to become similar will reassert itself.

The influence of competitive forces and environmental change in English HAs are more acute than other international HAs because of the extent of the reforms introduced following the global financial crisis. Although this study focused on English HAs, we believe it will have policy and practical implications for international social housing too! Especially in Europe, as the imminent global downturn exacerbated by a Russian Ukraine war could prompt governments to look to English HAs for inspiration to address their social housing provision in a changing context of rising interest rates, lower economic growth and an increasing dependency on public services.

Limitations and further research

A limitation of this study is that only four case studies were selected. As a result further research could highlight the importance of organizational size and the extent of performance measurement and the emergence of the LATCO business model. As LATCOs are on the increase, the amount of ALMOs in England has reduced by 50% since their high water mark and the ALMO in this study ceased to operate in 2022 with the housing stock reintegrated within council control. Further research could be conducted internationally into HAs in other countries to understand the effect that external uncertainty (highlighted in figure 3) has on institutional isomorphism and the resultant performance measurement and management.

Notwithstanding, this research makes a contribution in three ways. First, this study extends the conceptual framework of institutional isomorphism in a strategic operations management context, first developed by Kauppi (2013), by incorporating a strategic performance perspective to illustrate how performance management is shaped through external influences in the form of social and competitive isomorphism. The resulting modified framework offers an explanation of how externally sensed uncertainty, Kauppi's primary driver of isomorphic pressure, is transmitted through an internal strategic dissonance, to be ultimately resolved by changes in strategic management approaches within the organization. This organizational level framework compliments Kauppi's field level framework.

Second, this study provides empirical evidence of the adoption of mature performance measurement frameworks including the Balanced Scorecard and Business Excellence Model—in the social housing sector. This research indicates that organizations which adopted the performance frameworks did so as a proactive competitive response using competitive imitative behaviour. Finally, this paper also answers Morrison's (2016) call for more Institution Theory research to be focused at the organizational level, rather than at the field level, in order to test and explore the functionality and relationships between

Instructional Theory and other managerial and strategic mechanisms. We acknowledge that further research is needed to fully understand the potential implications of the relationship between strategic performance management and institutional isomorphism.

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