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Understanding Organisational Strategy

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Abstract

'Strategy' is apparently an easily understood concept; this has led academics to overlook research into its meaning in favour of prescribing/describing its formation. Their lack of success in this endeavour may be rooted in an insufficient understanding of the phenomenon, for when prominent writers define strategy they conclude after much elaboration that it is an ‘elusive’ phenomenon. This inquiry unravels the elusiveness of strategy by investigating managers’ perception of strategy. Grounded theory is used, generating data from interviewing a theoretical sample of managers and triangulating with the archives and the literature. Strategy is revealed as a complex, goal-directed, social and psychological process of interactions. The emerging core theme is navigational translation; subsuming the themes of gazing, envisioning, interconnecting, interrelating, translating, navigating and power exercise. The process is conditioned by mutually impacting relationships with the organisation’s resource configuration, the surrounding social and cultural environment, the character of individual managers, and chance/opportunistic occurrences.

Defined thus, strategy ceases to be autonomous, objective or neutral; rather it becomes a social and cultural practice.

This is the first interpretative inquiry that finds the dominant rational discourse problematic. It shows that each strategy is unique, prescriptions are unobtainable, and the deployment of rational tools is inadequate without knowledge of the social/cultural contexts within which strategy is made.

The resulting grounded theory explanation is so highly conceptual that it does not provide a strong explanatory framework. Another methodological implication is that the appropriateness of the method for investigating the micro and macro aspects of strategy is demonstrated.

“As we enter the 1990s, strategy as a field of study has fallen on hard times” (Prahalad & Hamel, 1994). This sentiment is also articulated by Feurer & Chaharbaghi (1995), Hendry (1995) and others; yet the problem of divergence between strategy research and managers’ perceptions of its usefulness is not a recent one. Two decades ago, Schendel & Hofer (1979: 512) expressed a similar concern, they quoted a practitioner to illustrate the point; “by and large you do research that is not very relevant to us”. Indeed, studies that predate the current strategy literature demonstrate that strategy processes are persistently non-rational, resembling what has become to be known as ‘muddling through’ and ‘organised anarchy’ (Braybrooke & Lindblom, 1963; Cyert & March, 1963; Cohen et al., 1972). The disillusionment with the value of the strategy literature had quickly spread to other academics - see Mintzberg (1994). The very concept of purposeful strategy seems to be seriously undermined by the recognition that unintended organisational strategies often emerge out of social interactions and adaptation within and outside their boundaries (Mintzberg & Quinn, 1991; Stacey, 1996a; McMaster, 1996; Levy, 1994). Levy (1994) acknowledges that conventional strategy research,
which is mainly concerned with testing a limited number of hypotheses, has been generally unsuccessful in producing knowledge, particularly the type that can be applied to highly uncertain and rapidly changing environments.

There is thus a growing realisation on the part of academics that the majority of strategy research results in contradictory models which do not relate to management practice, and that as a result this research field is prematurely stuck in a strait-jacket (Bettis, 1991). This is problematic not least because strategic management is projected as an applied professional field whose principal purpose is to describe, predict and change organisational situation (Gopinath & Hoffman, 1995; Summer et al., 1990). In endeavouring to explain and resolve the theoretical contradiction manifested in these models, strategy writers are continuously seen to respond with representations that result in obscuring it; factual situations are thus distorted by their representation (Hendry, 1995; Knight, 1992). This theoretical conflict is significant because strategy is perceived by those who are charged with its formation as rational, but invariably it is not (Hendry, 1995).

This brief background points to problematic issues concerning the phenomenon of strategy which have disillusioned some prominent writers and led others to seriously investigate ways of deconstructing its epistemological underpinnings (Stacey, 1993, 1995, 1996a&b; Knight, 1992).

**Strategy - A Question of Definition, Formation and Intervening Conditions**

Strategy as a means to an end is a position taken by Ansoff (Ansoff & McDonnell, 1990); he defines it as a set of decision-making rules to guide organisational behaviour. He sees objectives as representing the end that the firm is seeking to attain and strategy as the means to this end. He further asserts that objectives interchange with strategy at different points in time and at different organisational levels. His portrayal of strategy as objectives, goals, concepts, rules and policies to deal with the internal and external environments suggests that strategy is a complex phenomenon. Mintzberg (Mintzberg & Quinn, 1991: 12) sees strategy as a phenomenon with many meanings; he proposes five interrelated definitions that "explicitly" acknowledge its multiple meanings and "help people manoeuvre through this difficult field". Strategy, he states, can be understood as plan, ploy, pattern, position or perspective.

As a plan, a “consciously intended course of action ... a set of guidelines to deal with a situation”, strategy is not very dissimilar from Ansoff’s concept of ‘guiding rules’, or from Quinn’s (1991: 4) representation as a concept that integrates the major goals, policies and action sequences of an organisation into a cohesive whole.

As a ploy, part of a plan, strategy is “just a specific manoeuvre intended to outwit an opponent or a competitor”(1991: 13); a set of co-ordinated actions to realise intent. However, if plans/ploy are to be realised, the definition of strategy should, in addition, encompass the resulting behaviour; hence, the third definition of strategy; a pattern which emerges from a series of decisions (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985: 257). Thus, although strategy is purposeful, unintended outcomes may emerge.

As a position, strategy is a means of placing an organisation in an environment (Mintzberg & Quinn, 1991: 16). Mintzberg explains that a position may be identified and targeted through a plan, and/or it may emerge through a pattern of behaviour.

As a perspective strategy is an ingrained way of seeing the world, reflecting the organisation’s culture and ideology (1991:16). The implication is that strategy is an abstraction which exists only in people’s minds. Thus, every strategy is an invention; “a figment of someone’s imagination”. Like Ansoff, Mintzberg points to the elusiveness and complex nature of strategy.
MacCrimmon (1993) proposes three definitions of strategy that escalate in complexity. The first is that of "co-ordinated series of actions" which are goal directed and involve resource deployment. He (1993: 115) argues that this concept does not reflect the wide scope of strategy's influence in space and time; he resolves the scope problem by advancing his second concept, that of "comprehensive, co-ordinated series of actions". Nevertheless, he still feels that the full complexity of strategy is not captured by these representations; being internally focused they do not take into account possible changes in the environment, nor the actions/interactions of other actors. He, therefore, introduces his third concept of strategy, "a conditional, comprehensive, co-ordinated series of actions", with two properties. The first is that strategy is conditional upon environmental events including actions of other agents; the second is that strategy takes account of the effect of one’s actions on other units, the possible actions of other units and the various interactions that may arise. The conditionality of strategy on uncontrollable changes in the environment and potential moves by opponents, points to an ambiguous, as opposed to direct and defined, relationship between strategy and the end it is designed to achieve. This concept portrays strategy as a complex process and extremely difficult to formulate. The complex characteristics of strategy are further emphasised by Stacey (1996a: 2-3), who sees it as a "game" managers play, inside and outside the organisation, interacting with each other. He views these interactions as "a circular process" of moves which provokes responses that feed back into counter responses, and so on, "from day to day" causing dynamic patterns to emerge. Thus multiple problematic conceptualisations of strategy have emerged, posing questions concerning its formation and the conditions that constrain its development.

The mainstream literature treats strategy formation as a rational process which requires comprehensive and exhaustive analysis before making decisions (Fredrickson, 1983; Fredrickson & Mitchell, 1984; Huff & Reger, 1987). In this view, the objective analysis of the environment and the organisation’s resources form the basis for an objective evaluation and selection of choices and strategies. The largest body of the rationalist analytic literature represents frameworks and models of the process (Andrews, 1980; Ansoff, 1987; Ansoff & McDonnell, 1990; Porter, 1980, 1985 & 1991; Kay, 1993). Andrews (1980) views the strategy process as consisting of two sequential sub-processes; formulation followed by implementation.

Most of the models of strategy formulation are based on the assumption that systematic rationality, purpose and integration are necessary for a firm’s long-term success (Ansoff, 1965; Steiner, 1979; Ackoff, 1970; Andrews, 1980; Hofer & Schendel, 1978). Other researchers see strategy formulation as conceptually problematic as decision-makers are generally unable to meet the demands of synoptic rationality. These researchers feel that integrated views of formulation and implementation in the form of structured decision processes and other aids, are more beneficial in helping to organise and analyse strategic alternatives (Bartunek et al., 1983; Volkema, 1983; Barnes, 1984; Lenz & Lyles, 1986; Mazzolini, 1980; Schwenk, 1986). Ackoff (1981: 359), however, criticises both decision-aid and planning approaches to strategy making and describes them as “a ritual rain dance that has no effect on the weather ... but makes those who engage in it feel that they are in control”. Indeed, MacCrimmon’s (1993) definition of strategy as a conditional, comprehensive, co-ordinated series of actions reveals the difficulty that faces all the rationalist approaches to strategy formulation and implementation. By being conditional on changes in the environment and the interactions with other 'strategic units', it becomes impossible for a firm to have a complete conditional strategy (Quinn, 1981; Bourgeois & Brodwin, 1984).
Well before the rise of strategic management as a separate rational analytical discourse, Simon (1960) and Lindblom (1959) find that managers tend to seek incremental, evolutionary, satisficing and compromise solutions rather than adopting rational ones. The ‘muddling through’ process of decision making is seen as an example of politically motivated behaviour which arises from the absence of clear organisational goals (Braybrooke & Lindblom, 1963; Cyert and March, 1963). This contrasting behavioural view sees strategy processes as persistently non-rational, its proponents argue that individuals and organisations can achieve, at best, only bounded rationality (Simon, 1957, cited in Hart, 1994: 328). Writers of this school reject the predetermined notion of strategy (Lindblom, 1959; Braybrooke & Lindblom, 1963; Wrapp, 1967). Quinn (Mintzberg & Quinn, 1991: 96.) suggests that the processes used to arrive at the total strategy are characteristically fragmented, evolutionary and intuitive. Mintzberg’s (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985: 258) work on strategy formation suggests that strategies develop somewhere on a continuum between full intention by management to pure emergence despite, or in the absence of, intention. Furthermore, independent individual assumptions about organisational intention may result in a behaviour which resembles ‘the garbage can’ model of choice, where strategy emerges from organised anarchy (Cohen et al., 1972). In this model, strategy evolves out of incidental or opportunistic connections. The wide variations of views reflect the controversy over whether strategy can be formulated, and the sequentiality of the formation process. However, its recognition as a process suggests that strategy can be impacted by a number of factors that condition its course.

Some writers recognise that psychological, social and cultural factors have a significant influence on the process of strategy. For example, Raimond (1996) and McMaster (1996) stress the importance of creative and effective foresight. Hosmer (1991), Goodpaster (1985), Singer (1994) and a body of opinion within the business ethics discipline feel that moral philosophy could inform strategy and counterbalance the contribution from economics. Hurst et al. (1989) and Porter (1991) argue that intuition and vision play an important role in strategy; they point out that the history of business suggests that many strategies develop as a result of managers having creative and intuitive capacities. Mintzberg (Mintzberg & Quinn, 1991) suggests that culture permeate many critical aspects of strategy making in organisations. He argues that culture may be so strong that it becomes an ideology which dominates everything else, and can affect its strategy. He (1983) sees organisations as political entities with powerful individuals and interest groups exerting influence on their strategies. Other authors (Learned, et al. 1965; Christensen et al., 1978; MacCrimmon, 1993; McMaster, 1996) see the development of a set of goals and policies that collectively define an organisation’s purpose and position in the market as an essential condition for a successful strategy.

Yet other strategy writers suggest that past events and choices exert a considerable influence on the way strategy is developed (Porter, 1991; Ghemawat, 1991; Miller, 1994; Burgelman, 1983). MacCrimmon (1993) and McMaster (1996) observe a reciprocal relationship; they argue that strategy influences past, present and future actions of others and is influenced by them. Advocates of the natural selection view suggest that organisations’ strategies are determined by factors in the external environment. Ansoff (1987); Rowe et al. (1994); McKelvey and Aldrich (1983); Hax and Majluf (1991) and Porter (1991), amongst others, argue that the environment has a dominant influence on most organisations, and that strategy development occurs as a response to changes in that environment.

Proponents of the resource-based view of strategy, on the other hand, argue that the resources of an organisation form the foundation of its strategy (Grant, 1991; Rumelt, 1974; Wernerfelt, 1984).
Burgelman (1983) suggests that strategy and the design of organisational structure exist in reciprocal relationship to each other. Greiner (1972) and Mintzberg (1978) demonstrate how structure can impede or enhance "strategic" activities in unanticipated ways. MacCrimmon (1993) views organisational resources as a priori condition for its strategy. The ‘organised anarchy’ of decision making, as indicated by the ‘garbage can’ proposition (Cohen et al., 1972) suggest that chance can have a significant effect on strategy. Stacey’s (1993) visualisation of strategy as part of a chaotic system suggests its future unfold in a manner which depends on what it does, what other systems constituting its environments do and upon chance. Furthermore, MacCrimmon's (1993) observation of strategy as anticipatory with respect to events in the environment and actions of others points to the significance of uncontrollable events. This exposure reveals that a number of conditions are perceived to intervene in the process of strategy and affects condition its course and outcome. It is evident, however, that different researchers have focused on different condition and upheld them as a priori in the strategy process. Thus, a number of problematic issues concerning strategy definition, formation and impacting conditions are thus recognised. These may have contributed to the elusiveness of strategy and impeded its epistemology. Understanding strategy through the actors - organisational managers - who are involved in its formation is, therefore, the preoccupation of this paper. Unravelling the meaning behind the actors' accounts of their experience with strategy constitutes the research problem.

**Conceptualisation - The Grounded Theory**

Hammersley (1990) considers the discovery of the social world as the main assumption that underlies qualitative research. This, he suggests, can only be attained if the researcher, guided by exploratory orientation, directly observes and participates in the natural setting. Similarly, Blumer (1982) states that any phenomenon can only be properly understood if it is investigated in the setting in which it occurs, through peoples’ experiences of it. This entails an in-depth examination of the practices, behaviours and beliefs of individuals or groups as they normally function in real life. Gopinath and Hoffman (1995) stress that in implementing a field research agenda, academics should incorporate practitioners’ perspectives and input. This is because theory building requires observation (Montgomery et al., 1989) and strategy research is ultimately validated in organisational settings (Zinkhan, 1991).

Being an elusive concept (Ansoff & McDonnell, 1990; Mintzberg & Quinn, 1991), strategy requires empirical investigation to gain a deeper insight of the phenomenon and the meaning it has for those who experience it. Such an investigation lends itself to the grounded theory style of inquiry. Strauss and Corbin (1990) state that underlying the grounded theory research is the assumption that all of the concepts which pertain to a phenomenon have not been identified, or the relationships between the concepts are not well understood or conceptually developed. In this paper, the author explores strategy within a particular organisational setting - a local authority - and from the practitioners’ viewpoint. The usefulness of the grounded theory approach is its capacity to develop explanations of key social processes or structures that are grounded in empirical data. The technique is viewed as an important research approach for the study of social phenomena because it explores the richness and diversity of human experience and contributes to the development of theories that explain them.

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1 Strictly speaking, the exploration will be the author’s interpretation of the practitioners’ perception of the phenomenon.
Strauss (1994: 6) states that although social phenomena are very complex, much of social research is based on quite the opposite assumption; researchers tend to describe or explain such phenomena in relatively uncomplex terms, “having given up on the possibility of ordering the buzzing, blooming confusion of experience”. By contrast, the grounded theory method emphasises the need to develop the concepts that relate to a phenomenon and their linkages so as to capture much of the variation that characterises it. Strauss asserts that grounded theory is not merely an inductive theory; all aspects of inquiry - induction, deduction and verification - are present and absolutely essential. Strauss and Corbin (1990) explain that in a grounded theory study of a phenomenon, theory is first discovered, then developed and provisionally verified through systematic collection and analysis of data. Accordingly, data collection, analysis and theory stand in a reciprocal relationship with each other, where instead of beginning with a theory then setting about to prove it, one begins with an area of study and allows whatever is relevant to the area to emerge.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) describe another fundamental characteristic of the grounded theory which guides the generation and treatment of data, that of “constant comparative analysis”. The concern of the constant comparative method is with generating and plausibly suggesting categories, properties and hypotheses about general problems.

The sample size is determined by whether or not theoretical saturation is achieved by the generated data and their analysis. Sampling is undertaken on the basis of formed concepts that have proven theoretical relevance to the emerging explanation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Context specific saturation is obtained by studying the phenomenon in a single organisation and discovering as many variations as can be obtained within the culture of the setting. For this study, senior managers from the local authority were interviewed, and data generation continued until a dense theoretical sample was obtained. The data and the emerged concepts were validated by triangulating with data from the organisation’s archives and the literature.

Forming a grounded theoretical explanation of a phenomenon involves the coding of data - i.e. forming concepts and integrating them to form main themes and the core theme (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The first level of coding is 'open' coding which comprises very close and unrestricted scrutinising of data. The aim is to create concepts and/or provisional categories - themes - with dimensions that fit the data, thus opening up the inquiry. The resulting coding in this study is grounded in both the generated data and the researcher's authority were interviewed, and data generation continued until a dense theoretical sample was obtained. The data and the emerged concepts were validated by triangulating with data from the organisation’s archives and the literature.

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'Axial' or second level coding involves undertaking intense analysis around each provisional category in order to discover main categories/themes. The procedure is to apply the relational items of the coding paradigm - i.e. the causal and intervening conditions, the context, the actions/interactions and the consequences surrounding a phenomenon. This produces cumulative knowledge about relationships between the categories and sub-categories. Axial coding runs parallel with open coding as fresh aspects of the phenomenon emerge requiring examination and conceptualisation. Strauss (1994: 33) states that “within this increasingly dense texture of conceptualisation, linkages are also being made with the category ... that eventually will be chosen as core”.
The third level, ‘selective’ coding, comprises systematic and concerted integration of the main categories/themes to develop and name the core category/theme. The other categories become subservient to this key category. Generating a theoretical explanation that accounts for a pattern of behaviour which is relevant and problematic for the people involved, requires a core category that encompass most of the variation in that pattern of behaviour. Glaser (1978) explains that the core category must be able to illuminate the main themes of the actors in the setting and explicates what is happening in the data. The core category must be relevant, workable, central and frequently recurring, where most other categories and their properties relate to (Strauss, 1994). Its prime function is to integrate these relationships in a conceptually dense, saturated and complete theoretical explanation.

The Emerging Themes

The open coding examination of the data resulted in a large number of concepts (fig. 1). It also revealed that the concept of gazing emerges as a potential main theme because it groups around it the concepts of intention, duration, resonance and others as its properties (fig. 2). These properties then become its sub-categories. However, each property has one or more dimensions, e.g. the property 'duration' may be long, medium or short, i.e. it can be located along the long-short duration continuum - its dimensional range. Similarly, 'resonance' has a number of properties and dimensions - e.g. field and impact. Each, in turn, has a dimensional range: a 'wide-narrow' field and 'large-small' impact. Every time, gazing would be located somewhere along the dimensional continua of its properties, conferring on the gaze a large number of specific profiles - variations.

In the examined organisation, gazing was found to be intended, purposeful, resonating with significant impacts and a fluid field, extending over a 5-20 years time horizon, cyclical, and so on. In another instance/organisation, different gazing profiles would be obtainable. This profile specificity is important because it explains the difficulty encountered in formulating a strategy. Variations in any one of the dimensions or properties will require a new and different strategy profile. Specificity thus prevents generalisation.

Whereas in open coding concepts were derived from data and identified as relating to provisional main themes in the form of sub-categories, properties and dimensions; in axial coding, the same concepts are integrated around their main themes through the process of 'constant comparison'. The mechanics of this involve looking at the theme’s causal conditions, its specific properties or context, the actions/interactions involved and their outcomes, and the intervening conditions.

Taking the theme of gazing (fig. 3), the causal conditions that give rise to gazing may be a combination of factors, such as: the need for purpose, a changing political, legal or demographic environment, and their impact. Specific questions need to be asked about the properties of the causal conditions. These properties can be induced and/or deduced by focusing on the theme and systematically questioning the data. Questions, such as: how urgent is the need for purpose, how rapid and how often is the change in the political, legal or demographic environment, how strong is the impact, where is it coming from?

Similarly, the specific properties of the theme require exploration. Gazing has the properties of intention, range, direction, dimension, space and time resonance, duration and cyclicality. These properties form the context under which gazing takes place and influence the actions/interactions that take place.
The actions/interactions that are involved in gazing include scanning the environment, reviewing, searching and looking intently for similarities and patterns, looking without preconceived ideas, allowing one’s mind to wander. Undoubtedly, these and other actions and arising interactions have certain outcomes or consequences that are not always predictable or originally intended. Clearly, failure to take action has consequences that require exploration. One may deduce that the outcomes of actions/interactions may include developing a clearer picture of the future, finding similarities and patterns, and enhancing the realisation potential of envisioning.

Another set of factors, the intervening conditions, relate to the theme by acting to facilitate or constrain the actions/interactions, thus affecting the outcome - e.g. unclear purpose, inability to gaze, unpredictable future, changeable political environment, unrecognisable similarities and patterns.

The importance of the causal and intervening conditions, as macro structural constraints, arises from their collective impact on the actions/interactions - the micro processes that constitute the theme.

As in gazing, specifying the features of the other main themes - envisioning, interrelating, interconnecting, translating, navigating and power exercise - in this analytical form gives them rigour and contributes to the saturation of their meaning.

**Interlocking Interrelationships - Finding the Core Theme**

The processes that comprise and link the themes of strategy are found as interlocking interrelationships; “certainly, the strategy and the decisions that arise from it interrelate with all of the actions that play a part in delivering it”\(^1\). It may be argued that translation - a main strategy theme - is concerned with activities aimed at realising management intent by employing the agency of other people (Hardy, 1996; Giddens, 1976, Knights & Vurdubakis, 1994). Here, a principal activity is the mobilisation of resources (Andrews, 1980; Schwenk, 1989). A prerequisite to this is a defined purpose or intent (Huston, 1992; Raimond, 1996; Hardy, 1996), which is identified through gazing/envisioning and foresight (Hurst et al. 1989; McMaster, 1996; Raimond, 1996). Managers would then interconnect and interrelate (Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988; Harrison, 1987), triggering the processes of political manoeuvring, manipulating, cajoling and controlling - power exercise (Hardy, 1996). They would simultaneously be orienting and aligning - navigating - to realise the purpose (Hardy, 1996). At the same time they would be looking beyond the immediate resource deployment activities into the expected outcome - gazing and envisioning. While reflecting and planning the next phase of activities (Ansoff & McDonnell, 1990), unexpected conditions and outcomes emerge (Mintzberg & Quinn, 1991; Stacey, 1996a&b) - unintended translation - requiring reorienting - navigating - and may change the pattern of their exercise of power, and so on. Countless similar deductive arguments suggest that the strategy themes are interlocked in circular, complex and evolutionary relationships (Hegel, in Morrow with Brown, 1994; Stacey, 1996a&b) - see fig. 4.

It can be argued that gazing and envisioning are thought of as conceptual translation and navigation; power exercise as conceptual and physical translation and navigation; and interconnecting and interrelating as translating. Therefore, the main themes that are embraced by the phenomenon of strategy can all be integrated around either translation or navigation or both, in their conceptual and/or physical forms. This indicates that the core theme has a higher conceptual power than both translation and navigation which enables it to encompass both, thereby explaining the phenomenon of strategy.

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\(^1\) Head of leisure department, WDC, lines 104-106.
It is found that in experiencing strategy, managers engage in translational activities that are navigated. This indicates that the higher concept - the core theme - that can best describe strategy may appropriately be called **navigational translation**. It was demonstrated, through axial coding, that the concepts that relate to each main theme were integrated around it as: properties, causal and intervening conditions, actions/interactions and outcomes. As the core theme, navigational translation, subsumes all the main themes, it will encompass all their lower concepts (fig. 5).

The core theme - navigational translation - is an integrative and theoretically dense representation of strategy. It satisfies the criteria for judging its suitability as a core theme (Strauss, 1987: 36), as it:

a) explicates what is happening in the data and links the various data together;

b) elucidates the main themes of practitioners in organisational settings;

c) appears frequently in the data;

d) is central in that it relates to all other themes and their properties, and accounts for much of the variation in the pattern of the processes that comprise strategy.

The capacity of navigational translation to account for variation in the strategy phenomenon across different organisational settings was demonstrated\(^1\), indicating its suitability as a more general theoretical explanation of strategy.

It is argued that navigational translation is comprised of intricate, contradictory and interlocking social and psychological interactions. It is also revealed that the phenomenon is constrained by equally intricate and contradictory intervening conditions. Induced from the data, these conditions were identified generically as the **organisation’s resource configuration and inherited structures**, the **social and cultural context inside and outside the organisation** within which strategies are deployed, the **character of individual managers and their purpose and objectives**, and **chance/opportunistic occurrences**. It is further found that navigational translation processes evolve through reciprocating impacts between their inherent contradictory forces and the structural conditions that constitute the social reality of organisational life (Hegel, in Morrow with Brown, 1994: 94). Complex interrelationships are thus deduced that account for the fluidity, resonance and joint evolution of the processes that constitute the phenomenon (Stacey, 1996a&b).

For example, a particular set of navigational translation activities may be triggered by changes in the external environment. Resources will then be mobilised in a specific configuration, guided by management purpose and their perceived structure of the future. The availability and configuration of resources will influence the choices made, and this will in turn be affected by what happened in past periods and the current interpretations placed on these events. The availability of choices and the opportunity cost of foregoing some of them will further influence managers’ navigational translation. The choices they make and the way they deploy their resources are governed by their cultural, social and psychological constructs. As actions are set in motion, some intended outcomes will be realised and some will emerge which were unforeseen/unintended. However, the resulting outcomes, whether intended or unintended, may bring further changes in the environment; enhance or undermine the organisation’s resource configuration and the choices available to it, and may modify management purpose. While resources may remain mainly deployed to realise the original purpose, some will have to be channelled to adjust, align and cope with the fluidity of the emerging outcomes and the evolving realities, and so on. The interrelationships are, therefore, circular and intricate; they change

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\(^1\) The same core theme, main themes, and constraining condition emerged from studying 15 different organisations.
and evolve through impacting interactions across the interlocking linkages: “I think strategy must affect the factors which influence it. ...it is a distinctly two way process. ... To change strategy will naturally rub off on each other. Things will change, people will change. To be influenced as well, so ... it is a circular push”. The problem is compounded by many ‘coincident symptoms’ that make specific predictions of what is likely to happen in specific space and time extremely difficult (Stacey, 1996b: 296).

**Conclusion**

Strategy is revealed as a purposeful psychological and social process of translation of thoughts into action and of navigation. In translating ideas into structured thought managers are found to engage in gazing and envisioning, and by translating thought into action they are also found to interconnect, interrelate and navigate. As they translate and navigate, they often engage in power exercise. These are the main themes that appear to describe strategy in the examined organisation - a local authority.

The conditions that link with strategy and affect its processes and outcomes cluster around the configuration and structures of organisational resources, the social and cultural contexts within which strategy is deployed, the character of the organisational agent, and chance/opportunistic occurrences.

The transferability of the main and core themes of strategy and the intervening conditions to different organisational settings was demonstrated; however, in each setting different organisational specificities were noted. For, although the themes are transferable between contexts, their properties are not. The interactions that arise in each setting are, therefore, unique. Indeed, even within the same organisation, navigational translation properties are likely to change from one instance of social interaction to the next by occupying different locations on their dimensional continua. Infinite number of possible combinations may arise as a result of the fluid and evolving dynamics of the psychological and social processes that comprise the context within which a strategy is deployed. Viewing strategy as navigational translation suggests that its processes are not repeatable and cannot be prescribed. This implies that each strategy is unique to its social and cultural context.

The concept of navigational translation implies that although strategy is goal-directed, the relationship between the end and the means is not always direct or clear. The need to navigate points to conditions which are unpredictable and uncontrollable, and to an ambiguous means/end relationship. In its least complex form, strategy as a plan with rationally calculable and controllable means/end relationship, little navigation is required, and strategy is predominantly of the translation type. As unpredictable conditions set in, the means/end relationship becomes less calculable and strategy more complex. This requires an increased navigational - interpretative - input geared to negotiate and understand the social, cultural and psychological contexts within which the strategy is deployed. The debate on strategy is largely centred on the conception of strategy as a means serving an end - i.e. a direct, objective and calculable translation. Although there has been a persistent tendency among writers to regard the relation between means/end in strategy as direct and clear, a growing number of them have recognised the ambiguous relation between means/end in strategy. Strategy has thus emerged as more than a rational, neutral instrument. Ansoff (Ansoff & McDonnell, 1990), whose approach to strategy is marked by a strong emphasis on its instrumentality, admits that strategy is far more complex than decision-making rules. His acknowledgement of the interchangeability of strategy with objectives demonstrates the fact that more than mere

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1 Deputy head of the leisure department, WDC, lines 302-306.
instrumentality is represented by the notion of strategy. Thus a constant tension arises from the attempt to give strategy an instrumental explanation by defining it in terms of means/end relationship, and the subsequent recognition of strategy's ambiguous relation to objectives. It is this ambiguity which is catered for by the term 'navigational' in the explanatory concept 'navigational translation'. The same ambiguity is present in Mintzberg's (Mintzberg & Quinn, 1991) five definitions of strategy: plan, ploy, pattern, position and perspective. Although the instrumentality of strategy is evident in its conceptualisation as plan - a 'conspicuously intended course of action' - the instrumentality becomes invisible in the notion of strategy as an emerging pattern - the unintended consequence of action. In the notion of strategy as a position one can see recognition of strategy both as intended and unintended consequences of action. The ambiguous relation between strategy and its objective becomes even more evident in Mintzberg's portrayal of strategy as a perspective. The ambiguity in strategy is recognised in the elusive character attributed to strategy by both Ansoff and Mintzberg.

In MacCrimmon's (1993) three definitions of strategy the emphasis on instrumentality is evident in the first one, strategy as 'a co-ordinated series of actions'. In his second definition - strategy as a 'comprehensive, co-ordinated series of actions' - he includes the contributions from all parts of an organisation, thus widening the spatial basis of strategy and demonstrating his recognition of the inadequacy of defining strategy merely in terms of intended actions. As the scope of activities is widened so the need increases for navigating between the various domains within an organisation. In his third definition of strategy as a ‘conditional, comprehensive, co-ordinated series of actions’, MacCrimmon incorporates the temporal dimension. In this definition the ambiguous relation between strategy and the end it is designed to serve is further highlighted, and strategy is predominantly of the navigational type.

Thus, it can be noted that the more complex the concept of strategy the more removed it is from an instrumental rational mode of action. This characteristic is recognised by the conceptualisation of strategy as navigational translation. The objective instrumental rationality (Weber, 1949) of the actions/interactions of organisational agents, is primarily recognised in the themes of interrelating, interconnecting and translating. The more complex, substantively rational (Weber, 1949) and subjective characteristics of the actions/interactions are seen in the themes of navigation and power exercise. This progressively complex conception of strategy that has emerged reflects the growing recognition of strategy as a process made of interactive elements at various levels of relationship - economic, political and cultural. This also means that the notion of strategy cannot be adequately understood unless it supersedes its organisational framework and is grounded and interpreted in its social context. When strategy is considered as context-bound it can no longer be assumed to be entirely morally neutral or cohesive since it has to reflect the incompatible conditioning forces operating in the context.

The problem of credibility associated with the issue of distortion from a single data source and personal biases is minimised by triangulating across multiple sources of data collection, thus enhancing the truth-value of the emerging themes. Credibility is further ensured by the author’s theoretical sensitivity and reflexive account of his experience, and by the richness of the data that enabled theoretically saturated themes to emerge.

The dependability of the study can be demonstrated, as the processes that permeate the investigation were systematic, rigorous and consistent, lending themselves to auditing.

The author would argue that the core theme - navigational translation - provides a meaningful and plausible explanation of the strategy phenomenon in the organisations studied. This is because: a)
makes sense; b) it is credible to the sample of managers interviewed, who were subsequently made aware of it; and c) it presents an authentic portrait of the investigated phenomenon.

The research makes a significant contribution to the study of strategy. It is the first qualitative study that finds the strategy discourse problematic. Hitherto, the discourse has been problematised from a behavioural, Foucauldian, and natural science perspectives.

For management practice, the research shows that the complexity of the phenomenon is such that prescriptions for success are difficult to obtain; short-term outcomes may be predictable but the long term futures of organisations are unknowable\(^1\). However, cumulative interventions and learning may help create or uncover desirable future structures. The subsequent implications for organisations are: the need for learning, foresight, creativity and the tapping of tacit knowledge (Nonaka, 1991; Stacey, 1996a&b; McMaster, 1996); and the understanding of the psychological, social and cultural contexts of organisational life (Mintzberg, 1983; Harrison, 1987).

The implication for research methodology is that the complexity and richness of any organisational phenomenon can best be explained if researchers focus on unveiling the interactive processes that are subsumed by it and the conditions that constrain these interactions. This calls for interpretative research of a critical and reflexive type. More importantly, the contribution of this research to methodology is that it demonstrates the suitability of grounded theory as a critical social research technique. Hitherto, grounded theory was portrayed as a research tool that is only appropriate for investigating the micro phenomena of human interactions. The author has demonstrated that this style of research can be used to identify the macro structures that shape these interactions, and provide an insight of the nature of the interplay between the micro and macro aspects of phenomena.

Another significant contribution to methodology is that the grounded theory style of research produces the highest level of abstraction; this paradoxically prevents ‘strong’ explanatory frameworks.

Employing a qualitative approach using grounded theory to the study of organisational strategy has clearly resulted in an explanation that unravelled its elusiveness, uncovered its complexity and problematised its discourse.

\(^1\) These findings are supported by other studies based on chaos, complexity and system theories.
Fig. 1  Conceptualising data generated from an interview - extract

I see it as the 10, 15, 20 year outlook.  
It’s got to be the big  
picture, which then clearly has to cascade down  
to the smaller picture;  
making it happen - 
the building blocks.  
...  
In 1991 the Council undertook its first extensive market  
research.  It found that the top four concerns of the public,  
purpose  
this Council was doing nothing about numbers 1,  2 and 4.  
...  The Council  
... didn’t put it in the bin, they actually responded  
to it and they allocated ... sums of money to  
get stuck into what the public wants us to do.  
They... agreed they’d do market research every 2 years to  
ever again be caught like that by surprise. ...  
But I do like recognising it in paper.  I have an A5 sheet  
of paper and that’s my statement of belief ...  
We decided which areas we were moving into ...  
... If we’re  
paid to deal with the year 2010 we must stop ... with the  
immediate phone calls and the pressure and actually take  
this longer term view.  Because otherwise when people  
get to  
2010, they’ll look back and say what clowns were these  
in’95  
when all the decisions should have been made.  
But it’s not easy, it’s far easier to operate in the present  
day, it’s more certain.  
I hope they reflect ... They may to some extent- yes.  
I want  
the best for the people in the district, and I hope my  
decisions do reflect that.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sub-category</th>
<th>properties</th>
<th>Dimensional range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gazing</td>
<td>Cyclical</td>
<td>Long interval</td>
<td>Short</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wide ranging</td>
<td>Wide</td>
<td>Narrow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Duration (5-20 years)</td>
<td>Long</td>
<td>Short</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Direction:</td>
<td>Many</td>
<td>Few</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Future</td>
<td>Past</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>Clear</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dimensions</td>
<td>Many</td>
<td>Few</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intended</td>
<td>High degree</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Penetrative (degree)</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Needing purpose (degree)</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resonance:</td>
<td>Field</td>
<td>Wide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Effects</td>
<td>Effects</td>
<td>Immediate</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Researching:</td>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning potential</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reviewing</td>
<td>Scope</td>
<td>Wide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Narrow</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fig. 3  Relating the theme of 'gazing' to its concepts

CAUSAL CONDITIONS
Needing purpose
Changing political environment
Demographic changes

PROPERTIES OF CAUSAL CONDITIONS
1) Degree of urgency
Cyclical
2) Rate, frequency, degree of intensity, and source of change
Needing purpose
Intended
Penetrative
Multi-directional
Multidimensional
Resonating in space & time

MAIN THEME
Gazing

CONTEXT OF THEME
Under conditions where gazing has the above specific properties.

ACTIONS / INTERACTIONS REQUIRED FOR / INVOLVED IN THEME
Scanning the environment
Researching, reviewing and revising
Searching and looking intently for similarities and patterns
Looking without preconceived ideas
Allowing one’s mind to wander
Contemplating

OUTCOMES AND CONSEQUENCES OF ACTIONS / INTERACTIONS
Developing/inability to develop a clearer picture of the future
Finding/inability to find similarities
Forming/inability to form patterns
Enhancing/detracting from envisioning
Learning and developing foresight

INTERVENING CONDITIONS
Unclear purpose
Past events and experiences
Unpredictable future
Unforeseen events
Political/legal environment
Absence of recognisable similarities/patterns
Inability to gaze
Fig. 4 The strategy phenomenon

Intervening conditions

Gazing

Envisioning

Navigating

Interrelating

Translating

Power exercise

Intervening conditions

Interactions
## Fig. 5 Developing the core theme of navigational translation (extract)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main themes</th>
<th>Main themes</th>
<th>Main theme</th>
<th>Main theme</th>
<th>Main theme</th>
<th>Core theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gazing &amp; Envisioning</td>
<td>Interconnecting &amp; interrelating</td>
<td>Power exercise</td>
<td>Translating</td>
<td>Navigating</td>
<td>Navigational translation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Properties:**
- Needing purpose
- Cyclical
- Intended & unintended
- Penetrative
- Multidimensional
- Multidirectional
- Wide ranging
- Resonating
- Having duration
- Fluid
- Impacting
- Anticipatory
- Timeless
- Complex
- Situation specific
- Broad
- Intuitive
- Creative
- Integrative
- Ideological
- Fragmentary
- Instrumental
- Emergent
- Paradoxical

- Needing purpose
- Cyclically
- Intended & unintended
- Penetrative
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References


