

The Problems and Possibilities of Reflexivity in Strategy ¹

by: Charles Booth

Reflective [writing] does not have to be 'Reflective [Writing]'. It need only be the heightened sense of experience in our utterances. It need only be a conscious effort to join the conversations around us. It need only be a sense that all narrations are to somebody as well as of something. It need only be an effort to regain the moral force of writing. (Denning, 1996: 126, emphases original).

Introduction

In his recent review of the strategy field, Richard Whipp (1996: 270) describes the lack of reflexivity in strategy as “serious and potentially debilitating ... critical self-appraisal of motivations or core beliefs by those in the strategy literature is not widespread”. Here, the need for reflexivity (which may, perhaps, be defined in this sense as a general scepticism towards one’s own and others’ knowledge or truth claims) is seen as a challenge for strategists²: reflexivity is something wholly to be desired and encouraged. Elsewhere, however, one sees reference to reflexivity as the “epistemological horrors” (Woolgar & Ashmore 1988: 7) or as the “monster: the abyss, the spectre, the infinite regress” (Ashmore 1989: 234). What are we to make of this, perhaps startling, difference in perspective?

At first sight, the problem is a straightforward one: reflexivity must simply be being used in two separate contexts. This seems to be the case: Woolgar (1988: 22), for example, refers to the “benign introspection” which is engendered by traditional calls for reflexivity: here reflexivity is characterised as self-awareness, as thinking “more deeply about what we do” (Ashmore 1989: 32). Ashmore calls this sense “R-awareness”. Reflexivity-as-a-monster, however, implies something else: self-reference, or what Woolgar (1988: 21) calls “radical constitutive reflexivity”, and what Ashmore (1989: 32) refers to as “R-reference” or “R-circularity”. Here, reflexivity refers variously to the propensity/possibility for all statements to refer to themselves³ and to the fact that the social sciences are implicitly self-referential as they concern the study of humans, including social scientists themselves: the double hermeneutic (Giddens, 1976). Accounts and reality are mutually constitutive (Ashmore 1989: 32). In the terms of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), in order to understand an account of something, we must know what it is the account is about: yet in order to know what the account is about, one must have already made sense of the account (Woolgar, 1988). The fear expressed, by those who resist the claims of reflexivity, is that reflexivity therefore locks us into a vicious circle of infinite regress. Conversely, however, some pro-reflexivists insist a reflexive social science must not abjure circularity, but rather should embrace it: to “celebrate the monster” (Ashmore 1989: 88).

In yet another approach to reflexivity, however, Latour and others (Latour, 1988; Chia, 1996a, 1996b) argue that what they describe as “meta-reflexivity”, a label they ascribe to approaches like that of Ashmore, Mulkay, Woolgar and others, is essentially a sterile distraction. Instead, Latour develops a perspective he calls “infra-reflexivity” (1988: 170, emphasis original):

If meta-reflexivity is marked by an inflation of methods, infra-reflexivity is characterized by their *deflation*. Instead of piling on layer upon layer of self-consciousness, why not have just one layer, the story, and obtain the necessary amount of reflexivity from somewhere else? ... [J]ust offer the lived world and write.

My concern in this paper is to explore the possibilities and problems reflexivity presents for a critical perspective on strategy. These three different perspectives on reflexivity I explore and elucidate at greater length, following a brief account of the historical development and present situation of the field of strategy in the next section of the paper. In the third and final substantive section of the article, I ask – “Is Reflexivity Critical?”⁴. I outline a programmatic framework that depicts one, or perhaps four, critical approaches to strategy, and I explore what a modestly reflexive approach to strategy might look like.

Strategy: Historical Development and Current Situation

Strategy is a particularly slippery field to pin down (Whipp, 1996). Any attempt to do so involves making some more or less arbitrary claims. Consider the widespread assertion (for example, see Bracker, 1980) that the concept of business strategy ultimately derives from its political/military usage, which in turn dates from democratic reforms in 5th century BC Athens⁵, or perhaps from a Chinese military treatise of similar antiquity (see McKiernan, 1996). Although “strategic” concepts continued to be developed in a political or military context, strategy in business practice did not emerge until the mid-19th century (Chandler, 1977; Hoskin, 1990). Why, then, in this case was the field so slow to emerge in its own right as a sub-discipline of management research in the twentieth century? As recently as 1982, it was possible for a Harvard academic (Bower, 1982: 630) to ask, of “business policy”:

Is it a course? Or a field of research? What is its literature? What is its future? Some want to make it a science. What does that mean?

The first appearance of strategy (or “business policy”) as a teaching discipline was admittedly relatively early in business education, in Harvard and other US Business Schools shortly before the First World War. The subject’s status as a “capstone” course was confirmed in US business schools by the Ford Foundation report in the 1950s (Gordon & Howell, 1959), although the report criticised the unrigorous nature of the business research and teaching curriculum, urging the business schools to model themselves on more established scientific and social scientific disciplines (Rumelt, Schendel & Teece, 1991). It was not until the 1960s, however⁶, that strategy began to develop a distinctive identity as a research discipline. The canonical account (see, for example, Rumelt, Schendel & Teece, 1994) identifies three 1960s texts as first in the field: Chandler (1962), Ansoff (1965), and Learned, Christensen, Andrews & Guth (1965). Although earlier texts (by, for example, Barnard, 1938; Coase, 1937; Cyert & March, 1963; Penrose, 1959; Selznick, 1957; Simon, 1947) have been seen to be profoundly important in the development of the field, it is these three books which are commonly ascribed foundational status.

Some authors (for example, Lyles, 1990; Thomas & Pruett, 1993) point to the so-called Pittsburgh conference in 1977 as being a fundamental turning point in the history of the field, driving a change from a conceptualisation of the subject as “business policy” to one of “strategic management”. Daft & Buenger (1990: 81) refer to Schendel & Hofer’s 1979 book, which emerged from the Pittsburgh conference, as both “heralding” and “sanctifying” a new research paradigm for the field. Hambrick (1990), similarly, claims to discern a major hinge point in the field in about 1980. The premier journal in the field, the *Strategic Management Journal*, published its first issue in 1980, as did the *Journal of Business Strategy*. The field’s academic society, the Strategic Management Society, held its inaugural conference in 1981. Also at around this time, the subject became strongly influenced by developments in industrial organization economics, which not only opened up a sharp division within the field between the respective literatures of strategy content and strategy process, but which also signalled a shift in research methods employed; from inductive

methods based on single firm or industry case studies towards large scale hypothetico-deductive statistical analyses (Hoskisson, Hitt, Wan & Yiu, 1999: 425).

Since that time, approaches to strategy informed by developments in economics have become more and more influential within the subject. The strategy process literature has continued to lose ground, as approaches to strategy rooted within transaction cost economics, agency theory, game theory and evolutionary economics gain in influence (Rumelt, Schendel & Teece, 1991). Process approaches have informed (and been appropriated by) evolutionary and dynamic theories of strategy in particular (Aldrich, 1999; Helfat, 2000; Nelson & Winter, 1982; Teece, Pisano & Shuen, 1997), with the latter's focus on how firms' capabilities and competences dynamically evolve over time in order to reflect and anticipate changes in their market and technological environments; and on the importance of initial conditions, variation, adaptation and environmental selection in determining organizational success and survival. However, to argue that the field has become more monolithic over time would be a gross oversimplification at best. Strategy is still, variously, either lauded (Baum & Dobbin, 2000; Hoskisson, Hitt, Wan & Yiu, 1999) or decried (Foss, 1996) for its pluralism. Radically different philosophical positions have been espoused, even in the mainstream literature (compare, for example, Godfrey & Hill's (1995) uncompromising scientific realism with Mir & Watson's (2000) modest constructivism). There is disagreement as to whether this theoretical pluralism extends to a toleration of methodological pluralism (see Hoskisson, Hitt, Wan & Yiu, 1999, and Mahoney, 1993, for contrary views). Overall, however, the strategy field appears to be demonstrating signs of greater philosophical and methodological 'maturity', while at the same time sustaining success and growth rates which belie any claims that the field is in some sort of crisis.

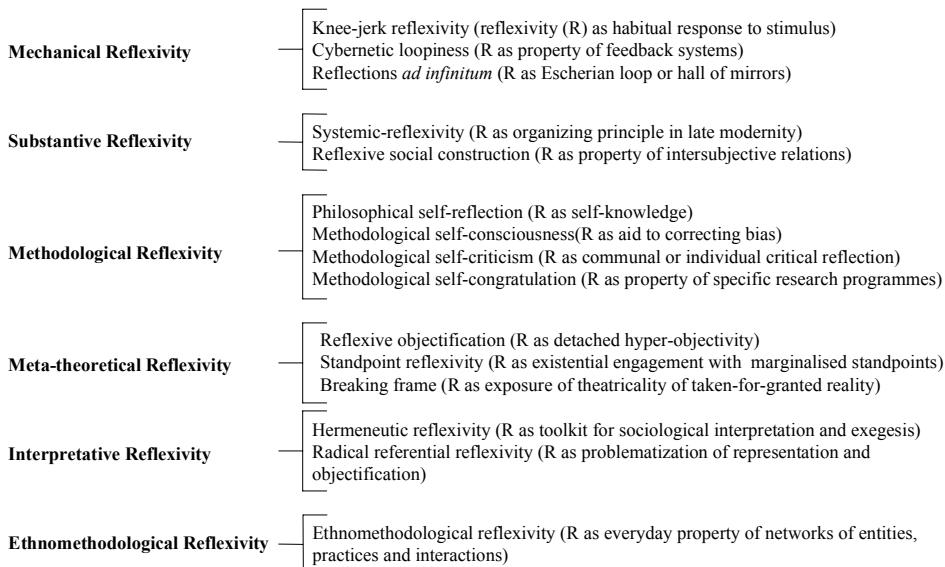
Three Reflexivities

As a number of commentators have pointed out (Ashmore, 1989; Booth, 2000; Lynch, 2000; Woolgar, 1988) reflexivity has many guises. In one sense, the concept goes back to Socrates and the Oracle at Delphi - "Know Thyself" - and it also has a long history in eastern philosophy and in post-Enlightenment western thinking. It is probably fair to say, however, that the idea of reflexivity as a critical and self-critical human action (Lynch, 2000: 26) in social analysis dates back to the 1970s, in the work of Gouldner (1970) and others. In his review, Lynch identifies and critiques a bewildering variety of reflexivities (see Figure 1), ranging from physical reflexivity (a habitual response to stimulus, such as the knee-jerk response), through methodological self-critique (the basis, possibly, of Whipp's (1996) sense of the term), and the kind of radical referential reflexivity embodied by Ashmore, Woolgar and Mulkay, to the ethnomethodological reflexivity articulated by Garfinkel (1967) which Lynch (2000:34) argues is "akin" to Latour's (1988) infra-reflexivity⁷. (It should perhaps be noted here that Latour (1988: 166) himself classes ethnomethodology, along with Derridean deconstruction and the New Literary Forms approach - see below - as "unreadable" meta-reflexivity). In common with some other commentators (see, for example, Pels, 2000, who is considerably more sympathetic to reflexivity but no less scathing about its mobilisation as a source of academic self-privileging), Lynch is critical of the looseness in the way "reflexivity" is defined, and of the way in which it is represented as a source of authenticity and privilege in providing social scientific accounts.

It is not my intention in this paper to explore all or even most of these different reflexivities, nor do I necessarily accept Lynch's categorization as being definitive. However, it is a well worked out scheme, and I draw attention to it as a means of opening up my discussion of reflexivity. What I propose to do, instead of rehearsing Lynch's scheme in depth, is to more or less arbitrarily focus my discussion on the three positions I identify in the introduction to the paper: that is, the self-critical reflexive scepticism argued by Whipp (1996) to be almost wholly lacking from the strategy field; the

radical referential (“hyper” or “meta”) reflexivity extolled by Ashmore (1989), Woolgar (1988) and others, and the infra-reflexivity of Chia (1996a) and Latour (1988). I choose these three approaches not only because they seem to embody some quite interesting (Ashmore, 1989) issues, perspectives and differences, but also because they seem to me to reflect the three most influential and articulate positions on reflexivity as it is held to apply to strategy and to organization studies.

Figure 1: A Taxonomy of Reflexivities



Source: Lynch (2000: 27-34)

To take Whipp first. Whipp is an exemplar of a number of approaches to strategy which seek, from a more or less friendly perspective, to assess and evaluate the contribution of the strategy field (see, for other examples: Araujo & Easton, 1996; Bourgeois, 1984; Bowman, 1990 and 1995; Daft & Buenger, 1990; Foss, 1996; Franke, Edlund, & Oster, 1990; Fredrickson, 1990; Gopinath & Hoffman, 1995; Hambrick, 1990; Lampel & Shapira, 1995; Lowendahl & Revang, 1998; Mahoney, 1993; Meyer, 1991; Mintzberg, 1990; Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 1998; Shrivastava, 1987; Snodgrass & Jauch, 1995; Whittington, 1993; Zan, 1995). Whipp (1996: 262) states that his intention is to “problematize the strategy concept”. After a clear and powerful discussion of the current salience of “strategy”, its evolution in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, and an exploration of opportunities missed and realised in the relationship between strategy and other fields, he concludes that the potential exists to “provide an account of strategic management and market forms which reveals how they are socially constructed, their inherent irrationality, and ... their conspicuous instability” through interdisciplinary work between scholars in strategy, economics and organization studies (1996:129). He then moves on to a consideration of three “resounding silences” which are “almost deafening”, the most serious of which is that of (the lack of) reflexivity. Although Whipp hints in his introduction to the paper that the non-reflexive nature of theorising about strategy has implications for the relationship between academics and managers, his own perspective on the nature (actual and ideal) of this relationship remains somewhat unclear. At times in the paper he approvingly cites work (for example, that of Knights & Willmott, 1992) which is uncompromisingly critical of strategic practice in organizations. He goes some way towards aligning himself, as I suggest above, with a constructivist ontology. He argues that the majority of strategy writers (who perceive their discipline as applied in function and as resting on neo-classical economic assumptions of human behaviour) are uncritical positivists. However, he also justifies the need for reflexivity to the extent that it will be a source of scientific

progress, rich practical opportunities and insights, and argues that a reflexive, critical strategy literature will “appeal to practitioners for its candour” (1996: 270). Whipp seems hesitantly committed to an ideal of scientific progress and improvement, but it is not altogether clear for whose benefit. Plainly uncomfortable, in some respects, with the rhetoric of strategy as an applied field, he nevertheless grounds his appeal for reflexivity, at least partially, in the virtues of practical application. Given these contradictions, or perhaps, uncertainties in attempting to cash out his argument, it may be unfair to box Whipp up purely and solely as a “benign introspectionist” (see introductory comments above, and Woolgar, 1988: 22). To be sure, though, the main message that comes through from Whipp’s paper is that the reason we (strategists) need reflexivity is to “think about what we do”:

An exercise in introspection is usually concerned with improving the adequacy of the connection between analysis ... and the objects of [that analysis] ... Far from raising any fundamental problem, this kind of reflexivity sustains and enhances the Scientific axiom of the research effort (Woolgar, 1988: 22).

I now want to move to a second reflexivity, one which seeks actively to problematise the relation between object and representation. What has been labelled by Latour (1988: 166) as meta-reflexivity is an offshoot of the sub-discipline of the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (SSK). SSK began to develop a discrete identity from existing sociology of science and sociology of knowledge research programmes in the early 1970s, dissociating itself from the older fields through the emergence of what came to be known as the Strong Programme, which was based on a commitment to a strong constructivism and methodological relativism and the four tenets of causality, impartiality, symmetry, and reflexivity (Ashmore, 1989; see also Bloor, 1976, and Law, 1975, for the full text of the tenets of the Strong Programme). The tenet of reflexivity held that the patterns of explanation of SSK would in principle have to be applicable to SSK itself, otherwise, SSK would be a standing refutation of its own principles (Bloor, 1976: 5). As Ashmore (1989) points out, a number of followers of SSK implicitly or explicitly rejected or failed to comply with some of the tenets and implications of the Strong Programme, including that of reflexivity.

However, a relatively small group of scholars took quite seriously the implications of reflexivity and the necessity for applying the patterns of its own explanation to SSK itself, as well as to scientific practice. A vehicle often employed to this purpose was the so-called new literary forms (NLF) approach (Ashmore, 1989) which attempted to reflexively problematise the form and function of the academic text, thereby moving towards a demolition, or at least an elision, of the distinction between the word and the world (Mulkay, 1985) and between presentation and reality (Woolgar, 1988). Varieties of NLF cited by Ashmore (1989: 66) include the play, the limerick, the parody, the parable, the dialogue (for a definitive critique of NLF which ironically deploys the NLF dialogue form, see Pinch & Pinch, 1988), the parallel text, the narrative collage, the lecture, the encyclopaedia, the examination, and the press-report, as well as looping self-referring photographs and captions (Woolgar, 1988), footnotes, and so on. Such devices seek to render ludicrous the pretences of representational approaches in social science, by blurring distinctions between “fact” and “fiction”. They work against the presumption that knowledge can be considered true if it reflects some aspect of an independent reality “out there” (Pels, 2000). They draw attention to the theatrical (Denning, 1992, 1996) or performative (Pels, 2000) elements and aspirations of their own representational practices, in an effort to seek to prevent their stories being believed too much (Latour, 1988).

A range of critiques have been deployed against such experiments in unorthodox representation, ranging from the trivial (readers get irritated if social science texts don’t conform to standard formats) to the fundamental. A good example of the latter is Latour’s critique (1988). Although

this sometimes verges towards trivial name-calling (meta-reflexive accounts are tedious and unreadable) and inconsistency (Ashmore's "marvellously funny" thesis is somehow corralled off from the tedious meta-reflexivity of Woolgar, p. 168), at bottom, Latour's argument is that the problem is that accounts are not believed enough rather than believed too much. The task for reflexivity is to make our texts stronger, rather than weaker. Paradoxically, the way to make texts stronger is through weak thinking (Chia, 1996a): that is, by recognising that we, and our "subjects", and our readers are all playing the same game – "mobilizing everything at hand and tying their claims to as many resources as possible" (Latour, 1988: 161), or as Pels (2000: 4) puts it: "what everybody does anyway, i.e. extending networks, tying together translations, stabilizing associations". Texts are therefore made stronger by deflating, rather than inflating, levels of narrative and methodology; by replacing methodology with style; by self-exemplification, rather than by self-reference; by writing non-scientific texts, through the hybridisation of languages rather than squatting down within disciplinary boundaries, and through translation ("crossover") rather than building a meta-language; by siding with the known rather than with the knowers; and by providing explanations that in their detailed relation to the situation, and not their allegiance to some overarching theory, are both strong and weak simultaneously (Latour, 1988: 170-175).

Notwithstanding the critiques that have been levelled at each of the three reflexivities, I am by inclination an aspirant synthesist, even if striving towards synthesis opens up incoherence. In building my own modest idea of reflexivity from these three positions, I'm inclined to bear the quotation from Denning which opened the paper in mind. The elements of his reflexivity are a (Latour) experience in our utterances, a (Whipp/Latour) conscious inter-disciplinary effort, a (Whipp/Woolgar/Latour) recognition that stories are told to people as well as about things, and a liberal and humane vision of the academy. Underpinning much of this (Denning 1992, 1996) is a commitment (Woolgar) to performativity in representation, to theatricality. But before I sketch out the possibilities for a (modestly) reflexive strategy, it is necessary to deal with the question of critique.

A Future for a Critical, Reflexive Strategy?

As I have briefly alluded to elsewhere in the paper, writings which can be labelled as "critical perspectives on strategy" (which might include, but not be limited to: the papers in this special issue, including this one; Alvesson & Willmott, 1995; Barry & Elmes, 1997; Gilbert, 1992 and 1995; Hirsch, Friedman & Koza, 1990; Knights, 1992; Knights & Morgan, 1991; Mahoney, 1993; Shrivastava, 1986; Stewart, 1995; Weick, 1987) have differed in their assumptions and definitions as to what "strategy" is taken to be. In this paper, I try (not altogether successfully) to limit myself to a sense of strategy represented or bounded by academic and other writing on the strategic conduct of organizations. Thus, my "strategy" is to be found in the pages of *Advances in Strategic Management* and other similar academic journals, on "Proceedings" CD-Roms distributed at academic conferences, in textbooks in bookshops and on the shelves of university libraries, on powerpoint slides prepared for presentation to students on strategic management courses, and so on. My strategy is encoded, "academic", knowledge. Mostly, my strategy is in papers, thousands of papers, in refereed academic journals. This is not, so far as I can see, everybody's strategy. Some critical perspectives have, straightforwardly enough, mainly addressed themselves to strategy as a set of managerial and organizational practices (for example, Alvesson & Willmott, 1995, Knights & Morgan, 1991). Thomas (this issue) argues that strategy encompasses not only organizational action *and* academic practice, but other aspects of strategic discourse as well, such as the influence of consultancy firms in the take-up of strategic practices (both organizational and academic).

It might be worth trying to unpack some of the implications of these labelling issues. One approach might be that of Thomas (this issue) who perceives the totality of strategy "discourse" as an

ideological *melange*, blending the discourses, activities and practices of a number of entities, actors and interest groups into a complex yet (implicitly) a cohesive whole. The recommendation for analysis is to focus on particularly important facets (in this case, contexts, practices and texts) in order to demonstrate the means by which the strategy discourse as a whole is constructed, negotiated, interpreted, and reproduced. A second approach might be that of this paper. Here, I am arguing for a similar distinction in ‘strategy’ as is commonly claimed to exist in ‘history’. The English word ‘history’ commonly enfolds two meanings (Stanford, 1986): a series of past events (history-as-event) and a narration of those events (history-as-account). The histories we tell are not the same as the histories actors experienced⁸ (and I mean this in more senses than the obvious one, of problems of representation and historical knowing). I suggest that to make a similar distinction might be useful between strategy-as-organizational-conduct and strategy-as-academic-field. This is not to argue in any sense whatsoever that the two are entirely separate or that they stand in *opposite* relation to one another. As in the history example, the two are most intimately connected, although relations and connections between the two are subject to significant disagreement and debate, both philosophical and pragmatic. It *may* be that the two are in some respects mutually constitutive, as some critics argue (Chia, 1996a, lists some examples), but in any event I would hesitate to advance anything but a very weak version of this claim (see note 10 below).

My approach is admittedly deeply flawed. Thomas’ scheme might be said to far more accurately mirror the complex nature of the strategy phenomenon. However, it is not my intention to seek an accurate representation, but to construct an analytical space in which to frame, temporarily, a critical strategy project. It is with only the most fleeting sense of embarrassment that I present a depiction of this space in a form most beloved of writers of strategy textbooks⁹ - as a two cell by two cell matrix:

Figure 2: An Analytical Space

		Focus of Attention	
		Organization	Academy
Basis of Critique	Primarily Emancipatory	<i>Focus on ideology of ‘strategy’: structures and processes of domination within organizations and between them and their environments</i>	<i>Focus on structures and processes of ideology and power within the academic strategy field, and within the institutional context of strategy research</i>
	Primarily Epistemological	<i>Focus on radical constructivist, interpretive and other anti-rationalistic approaches to strategy formation, dissemination, realisation, etc</i>	<i>Focus on processes of knowledge creation (philosophical underpinning, empirical methods, argumentative strategies) in the academic literature</i>

This framework is, of course, presented somewhat ironically; and I do not want to discuss its content extensively, or in any way treat it too seriously. However, the idea of holding at least a temporary distinction between these issues does offer a purchase on, or at least a means of eliding, the vexed question of what constitutes critique in strategy. First, I want to assume that a critical strategy project is an inclusive project; that no purpose is served by drawing arbitrary lines between different critical

positions and declaring one or another illegitimate. This should not prevent argument and dispute between different positions (Mahoney, 1993). Second, by stipulating it to be an inclusive project, I am not suggesting anything but a pluralist project; that is, that it might permit critique founded in both philosophically and politically radical commitments. Third, we must admit the sense of strategy as a set of organizational practices, and as a body of academic knowledge, to be separate though intimately related (perhaps, members of a *network*). In arguing all this I am in effect arguing two potentially contradictory things: on the one hand, that it is not ultimately possible to critique strategy in one sense without in some way critiquing it in the other, but also on the other hand that, although we know very little about the relationship between “the two strategies”, it is not helpful to pretend that they are one and the same thing.

What I have tried to do so far in this paper is, in rather a mechanistic fashion, to delineate different varieties of reflexivity and to discuss the implications for a critical approach towards strategy. What I have failed to do is to address the further question (silent, unvoiced) in the title of the paper; that is to try to sketch out some future possibilities for a reflexive approach to strategy. I have contended that Whipp’s (1996) version of reflexivity is essentially one which enlists reflexivity as a resource in pursuing “better” strategy research. This remains a significant problem for the critical strategy project unless it becomes possible to de-couple strategy from its normative focus towards “improving” strategies in organizations; from the practical, applied nature of the field which is (implicitly) valorised by so many strategists. I regard it as axiomatic that the study *of* organizations and managers should be precisely that, not the study *for* organizations and managers. Although it might be argued that one of the reasons the strategy field has become so successful is that it has retained a normative, applied focus, I find it difficult to accept that much empirical or theoretical work currently undertaken in the field is of direct benefit or even interest to strategic managers. Instead, as strategy has matured as a sub-discipline, it has developed a set of research priorities and agendas which serve the interests of academics and other institutions of knowledge production, rather than those of firms and managers who, according to the traditional view, are the consumers of the field’s research¹⁰. One glance at the pages of *Strategic Management Journal* will convince any reader that the consumers of this material are fellow-academics rather than practitioners. In this respect, the pretensions of normative application are useful to some academics working in the field insofar as they provide a rhetorical justification of their existence, but they should not mislead us further.

I want to suggest in this section that in many respects, the strategy sub-discipline represents an exemplar of the wider discipline within which it is embedded - a paradigm, in the original, pre-Kuhnian, sense of the word. In a sense it does not matter what this wider discipline is called, but let us label it “management research”. I suggest strategy is an exemplar for management research in a number of ways. First, in its aggressive expansion since the 1960s it closely mirrors the expansion of the broader discipline since that time. Second, like management research, strategy tends to label itself, or be labelled as, a practical, interdisciplinary, applied field closely aligned to dominant interests in organizations. Third, like management research generally, strategy is both extremely catholic in its influences at the same time that it seeks to model itself on, and is profoundly influenced by, the discipline of economics (a seriously contested point, and one which has generated quite a literature: see, for example, Barney, 1990; Donaldson, 1990a and 1990b; Foss, 1996; Hesterley & Zenger, 1993; Hirsch, Friedman & Koza, 1990; Mahoney, 1993; Porter, 1981; Rumelt, Schendel & Teece, 1991; Teece, 1990). This last issue is a curious irony for both strategy and management research. It is a commonplace assertion that both discipline and field lack a base body of disciplinary knowledge and have borrowed extensively from other areas. Management research is characterised as being particularly influenced by theoretical fads and fashions¹¹, and strategy is no exception to this. This is not always perceived as a negative issue; in fact, commentators (such as Jemison, 1981; Baum & Dobbin, 2000) often *celebrate* the multidisciplinary pot-pourri of economics, sociology, psychology,

and political science that they perceive as making up strategy. On the other hand, economics is sometimes held up (usually - see Pfeffer, 1993 – to discipline errant pluralists or relativists; the two seem to be represented as interchangeable in this form of discourse) as the discipline to whose status both strategy and management research are held to aspire.

I believe that in its contradictory insistences that it is both scientific and practical; that it serves the interests of both social science and of managers; that it is both interdisciplinary yet seeks to model itself on one discipline in particular; and that it is somehow under threat while at the same time evincing every sign of expansion and success, the strategy field is making a set of claims that are both difficult to secure in fact or defend in practice. As Denning (1996: 127) puts it: “A [discipline] that is seen to believe its own fictions is a fraud and a bore. It loses moral force on both scores”. The question becomes how to regain this moral force.

A reflexive strategy practice, sceptical about its own fictions, would possess some central features. Foremost among these features would be a sense of genuine interdisciplinary pluralism; a de-coupling from normative practical application and a disassociation from the interests of dominant actors in organizations (see above); and a modest and reflexive scepticism not only with regard to its own knowledge claims but also towards its representational practices. So far as interdisciplinarity is concerned, in the philosophy of science Galison (1996, 1997) has argued for the existence of “trading zones”, marketplaces for ideas where different disciplines and paradigms can bargain, barter, exchange: or even build new disciplinary languages in a kind of theoretical *bricolage*. The trading zone becomes a space for productive (mis)understanding. Similarly, Fuller (1993, 1996) uses the linguistic metaphors of pidgin and creole, bastard trade languages arising from the contiguity of disciplines, paradigms, cultures¹². In common with Galison (1997) and with others of widely differing political, philosophical, and disciplinary commitments (for example, McCloskey, 1985; Oakeshott, 1962; Rorty, 1979) I argue that disunity and pluralism brings strength and stability when the different parties, interests, disciplines enter into conversation and exchange. Compare also Wittgenstein’s (1958: §67) metaphor of the thread that gains its strength, not from one fibre that runs through its whole length, but from the overlapping and interconnection of many fibres. In Galison’s terms (1997: 783, emphases original):

[G]roups with very different systems of symbols and procedures for their manipulation ... can agree on rules of exchange even if they ascribe utterly different significance to the objects being exchanged; they may even disagree on the meaning of the exchange process itself. Nonetheless, the trading partners may hammer out a *local* coordination despite vast *global* differences. In an even more sophisticated way, cultures in interaction frequently establish contact languages, systems of discourse that vary from the most function-specific jargons, through semi-specific pidgins, to full-fledged creoles rich enough to support activities as complex as poetry and metalinguistic reflection.

The conception of strategy as a liminal site (or language, or process, or practice) demands a strong subscription and commitment to interdisciplinary pluralism, through the mobilization of local accounts arising from the contiguity of global disciplines. Such accounts are hard-won (Scherer, 1998; Scherer & Dowling, 1995) given the temptations of incommensurability claims; and in crafting such accounts reflexive strategists might wish to adopt both a suitable modesty about the truth claims of their accounts and an awareness of the theatricality of their representational practice (Denning, 1992, 1996). Despite Latour’s (1988) nice distinction between concerns that texts might be believed too little, and concerns that they might be believed too much, in some respects the distinction is not compelling; is it not the situation that texts might be believed too little *and* too much at the same time? The challenge is then to provide accounts that are both robust, plurivocal,

situated, polysemic and persuasive on the one hand, to elicit belief; but which on the other always carry with them the possibility of the drawing of the audience's attention, from the part being played to the playing of the part, to allow suspension of that belief. Together, the I that is the presenter and the you that is the audience participate in the creative process of the (re)presentation (Denning, 1992: 372); but you don't have to, if you don't want to (Pels, 2000).

Notes

1. This paper has been very significantly revised following its first submission for the Special Issue. This revised version should be cited as Booth, C. (2000) The Problems and Possibilities of Reflexivity in Strategy. *Electronic Journal of Radical Organization Theory*, 4, 1. My thanks and acknowledgements to all my colleagues who helped contribute to the development of the original paper and to this revision. Particular thanks to Clive Gilson for his comradeship, encouragement and understanding.
2. In this paper I am primarily concerned with strategy as a field of academic knowledge production rather than strategy as an organizational or managerial activity. When I discuss "strategy" and "strategists", therefore, it is to the academic sub-discipline and its practitioners, rather than to organizational practice and to managers, that I mainly refer. This is a somewhat different perspective from some critical perspectives (for example Alvesson & Willmott, 1995, or Barry & Elmes, 1997, both of whom primarily focus on strategy as a managerial practice rather than an academic sub-discipline). It does, however, raise the spectre of the "reflexive" infinite regress. Does my strategy also include papers such as, to give just one example, Mahoney (1993), which critically assesses academic writing about academic writing about organizational strategy? Does it include this paper, which briefly comments upon Mahoney (academic writing about academic writing about academic writing about...)? Or to take another step back, does it include any paper which might in the future comment upon this paper? And so on. My answer to these questions is a Feyerabendian "firm *Yes and No*" (Feyerabend, 1981:156, emphasis original). Despite the philosophical *legerdemain* involved in making such an assertion (Chia, 1996b) the paper is written both *in* strategy, and *upon* it. See later discussion in the paper, especially figure 2 and note 10.
3. Thus, for example, we see the argument much beloved of anti-relativists: that the statement "there is no truth" amounts to a (self-refuting) truth claim. This type of claim may be seen also in its (ironic) inversion by Ashmore (1989: 88):
Logical positivism demarcates meaningless from meaningful statements by the principle of empirical verification: if a statement cannot (in principle) be empirically verified, then it is meaningless; if it can be, it is meaningful. Unfortunately [or rather fortunately], a statement of the verification principle cannot *itself* be so verified and is therefore meaningless.
4. I therefore attempt in the paper to highlight, but not necessarily to explore, among other question one which appears to be of importance to what might be loosely termed the *critical management project*, and one which was also quite recently the topic of a special issue of the journal *Social Studies of Science* (Richards & Ashmore, 1996): the relationship of a radical epistemological commitment (with its implied relativist and sceptical stance towards meta-narratives) to a radical political commitment. Needless to say, to paraphrase Ashmore (1988: 28) this paper concludes with a conclusively inconclusive conclusion.

5. In a paper never published in a journal but very widely cited given its “precarious” status as a conference presentation, Hoskin (1990) disputes the canonical account of strategy as being linearly descended from military/political strategy in the ancient Greek city state. Instead, he argues it is a distinctively modernist project emerging from the management of the Springfield armory and the US railroad system, both themselves significantly influenced by disciplinary (in the widest sense) practices instituted at West Point by Sylvanus Thayer and his successors in the second and later decades of the nineteenth century.
6. Rumelt, Schendel & Teece (1991) imply a causal relationship between the changes following the Ford Foundation report and the emergence of strategy as a research discipline. They argue that following the report an increasing number of economists, particularly, were recruited as business faculty, bringing with them their disciplinary assumptions regarding the value of publication in refereed journals, etc. Over time, they displaced or replaced the older business policy teachers who had tended to cast themselves as practical problem solvers and consultants to organizations. Thus, the reputational and promotional effects of publication came to supplant those of practical involvement and consultancy. Rumelt, Schendel & Teece (1991) imply that the effects of this shift were unanticipated by the authors of the Ford Foundation report, who were keen to see an improvement in both rigour and relevance, rather than the substitution of one by the other.
7. It should be pointed out that Lynch’s categorization is not strictly speaking a taxonomy as the different categories are not mutually exclusive and he admits that there is significant overlap, mutual conversation and influence between the several categories. However, his approach is taxonomic in its intent, which is to classify and pathologise the different reflexivities.
8. For one perspective on events and accounts, see Fuller (1995: 121):

The moral of this story is that history does not arrive in a neat ontological package, with some bits labeled ‘necessary’, ‘universal’, or ‘true’, and other bits labeled ‘accidental’, ‘particular’, or ‘false’. Events happen in bundles, and only after some time has passed are they unraveled and labeled. This is the stuff of which historical narratives are made. And only through such retellings of the past do we come to have any strong sense of what the world obliges, forbids, or merely permits.
9. And others - see for example, Latour (1988: 165) or Chia (1996b: 88).
10. This is where I must depart from strong claims of mutual constitution or co-construction of academic knowledge and organizational practices. Such arguments are worthy of further investigation, and doing so would significantly strengthen the burgeoning literature (see, for example, Newell, Robertson & Swan, forthcoming) on management fads and fashions, as well as our understanding of organizational practices generally. Taking the possibility of realist understanding seriously for a moment, the problem is that we simply do not know enough about the processes and relations of influence between academic and organizational practices to sustain such claims. At another level, I would like to suggest, in the light of Latour’s (1988: 159) and Woolgar’s (1988: 20) discussions of explanation “at a distance”, that any claims, including my own in this paper, of the separation of knowledge and practice are inherently problematic. In mitigation, I return to my earlier point that I am not trying to describe a (f)actual state of affairs, but am merely trying to create a temporary and local analytical space (see figure 2).

11. The critical management area itself is not immune to certain magpie tendencies. It would be an interesting project to analyse the appropriation and reproduction of concepts and ideas such as actor-network theory in critically-oriented organization studies, for example, or the series of persistent (mis)appropriations from the philosophy and sociology of science/scientific knowledge that are so evident in, for example, Booth (2000).
12. Denning (1998: 85-7) uses yet another metaphor in his approach to disciplinary boundaries and much more:

The “Beach” has long been a metaphor of my understanding ... for life itself. I am not alone in seeking a metaphor of this sort, of course. Spaces-in-between have long held a fascination for many social thinkers ... [the] space between cultures where two sides reconstitute themselves and find new identities ... These spaces where we are neither one thing nor another are spaces of defining rather than definition ... a beach of sorts. It is a place in-between, a limen, a middle ground, where to share that space one has to give a little, where everything is new by being somehow shared, where everything is in translation, where we see ourselves reflected in somebody else’s otherness.

Despite our conceptions of beaches as sites of pleasure, as evinced by Lencek & Bosker (1999) for example, beaches can, as in Denning’s own work (1980, 1995) be sites of misunderstanding and violence. Conceptualising a critical and reflexive strategy as a “beach” or a “trading zone” as I do in this conclusion, therefore, does not rule out possibilities of contradiction, disagreement (Mahoney, 1993), or attempts at domination.

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