Understanding the challenges of strategizing in pluralistic contexts: Integrating new theoretical perspectives

Peter Smith *
Graduate School of Enterprise, University of Auckland, New Zealand
Email: p.smith@auckland.ac.nz

Dr Yvon Dufour
Department of Management and Employment Relations, University of Auckland, New Zealand
Email: y.dufour@auckland.ac.nz

Dr Liliana Erakovic
Department of Management and Employment Relations, University of Auckland, New Zealand
Email: l.erakovic@auckland.ac.nz

Preferred Stream: 14 Strategic Management

Profile:
Peter Smith is a lecturer in the Graduate School of Enterprise, at the University of Auckland. Aside from teaching in the area of strategy and general management, Peter’s research interests revolve around strategizing in professional service firms. Peter acts as bibliographer for the Strategy-as-practice community (see www.strategy-as-practice.org). He is also the Deputy Director of the Auckland MBA programme.

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ABSTRACT:
Our paper builds on the theoretical base developed by Denis, Langley and Rouleau (2007) that explored the usefulness of three theoretical frames, namely the Actor-Network Theory, Conventionalist Theory, and Social Practices Theories, for understanding and influencing strategy as practice in pluralistic contexts. After stressing that each framework has a predominant focus on one of the key attributes of pluralism Denis et al. suggested that the frameworks are complementary and that together they might offer a multifaceted base to enrich the overall strategy-as-practice research agenda. However as they pointed out their insights clearly need further investigation and validation in particular in respect to the common intersection and the dynamic interactions between the various perspectives. This paper recasts the work of Denis et al. (2007) primarily using concepts from strategy-as-practice and represents a first step in that direction.

Keywords: Strategy practice, Network theory.

INTRODUCTION

Following Weick (1969) nouns such as strategy and organization are increasingly being replaced in the research agenda by gerunds such as strategizing (Whittington, 1996; Wilson &
Jarzabkowski, 2004) and organizing (Fenton & Pettigrew, 2000). The resulting change in focus has resulted in greater attention to the dynamics of social practices and the dynamism of processes over time, the role of different contexts, and a search for more holistic and integrative frameworks (see, for example, Sztompka, 1991; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Our paper builds on the theoretical base developed by a team of Canadian researchers—Louis Denis, Ann Langley and Linda Rouleau—that explores the usefulness of three theoretical frames, namely the Actor-Network Theory, Conventionalist Theory, and Social Practices Theories, for understanding strategizing in pluralistic contexts. We begin by briefly summarizing their contribution. Then we present our own integrative framework and raise a number of issues associated with our research agenda.

**Strategizing in pluralistic contexts: Rethinking theoretical frames**

The authors of *Strategizing in pluralistic contexts: Rethinking theoretical frames* (Denis et al., 2007) find inspiration in three relatively new perspectives—Actor-Network Theory, Conventionalist Theory, and Strategy-as-Practice—that shed light on organizations operating in pluralistic contexts. They define pluralistic contexts as featuring multiple objectives, diffuse power, and knowledge-based work processes. These three distinctive features shape the activities of the various actors who have legitimate rights to pursue differing agendas (Evelyn M. Fenton & Paula Jarzabkowski, 2006 1168).

Whilst the focus of Denis et al. is on pluralistic contexts, to some extent, all organizations exist in pluralistic contexts. For many organisations as they:

... enter into various forms of collaborative arrangements, as matrices and networks penetrate organizational structures, and as knowledge workers play an increasingly important role in the economy, pluralistic forms of organizations are becoming more and more prevalent (Denis et al., 2007, p. 180)

In pluralistic contexts, traditional conceptions of strategy and strategic decision making become problematic (Denis et al., 2007, p. 180), The combined use of the three alternative perspectives in investigating the processes of strategy-making lead to new and exciting insights into the challenges of strategizing particularly in pluralistic contexts. As Denis et al. say:

First, these three approaches provide distinctive insights into how managers practically construct the link between their micro-daily activities and the macro-structures of their organizations and their environment (Johnson, Melin, & Whittington, 2003; Regner, 2003). Second, each provides useful theoretical concepts for understanding what managers and others do when they are strategizing (Whittington, 1996). Third, these three approaches all recognize the importance of dealing with the materiality of the strategizing process, according special attention to the tools and technologies that managers and others use (Whittington, 2004). Fourth,
the approaches suggested offer directions for the possible improvement of reflexivity 

Each of the three perspectives seems to emphasize one of the key dimensions of pluralistic 
contexts. Broadly, Denis et al. (2007) use Actor-Network Theory, to explore forms of 
strategizing relating to meaning making in contexts where power is diffuse. Because of the 
dispersion of power, actors seek “to make different meanings mutually compatible and to 
‘enroll’ a network of actors so that the object [strategy] may come into existence” (Denis et 
al., 2007, p. 184). As such, these translation processes emphasize the ‘micro’ in the form of 
the actor’s agency.

Denis et al. (2007) go on to use Conventionalist Theory in exploring the processes used as 
actors seek to strategize within fixed sets of logics. Actors in this situation seek compromises 
between pre-existing logics competing for legitimacy in a multiple objective context. These 
accommodation processes are operating on more macro levels than those of the translation 
processes.

Finally, drawing on social practice theories, Denis et al. (2007) examine the processes of 
practical accomplishments by skilled social actors in a knowledge-based work organization. 
These processes relate to the use of situated knowledge, so one cannot detach them from the 
wider social, cultural, and historical context. Consequently, social practices span not only the 
‘micro’, as manifest in the actions of the strategy practitioner, but also on the ‘macro’ in terms 
of the practitioner’s contexts and the ways in which the micro and the macro constitute one 
another.

Thus, the three perspectives emphasize three different processes: accommodation, translation, 
and social practices.

Acknowledging that there will always be a level of incommensurability between the 
perspectives, Denis et al. (2007) argue that because of the inherent nature of pluralist 
contexts, the need for ‘requisite variety’ may dictate a plurality of perspectives in order to 
comprehend the phenomenon of strategizing. They regard the three perspectives as much 
more than alternative lenses; for them, between the perspectives exists a “zone of intersection 
… that would lead to more focused propositions about strategizing compatible with all of 
them” (Denis et al., 2007, p. 207).

In summary, the three perspectives, when cumulated, offer a rich view of the process 
of strategizing in pluralistic contexts that has real plausibility. This combines political 
maneuvering in networks, rehearsal of societal and organizational value systems, and 
the mobilization of the tools, routines and interactions of everyday organizing … For 
researchers, the insights we derived above from the three frameworks clearly need
further investigation and validation. More generally, and perhaps more importantly, our multifaceted framework suggests a need for strategy researchers to direct studies towards a more dynamics, processual, and contextual vision of strategizing, that adds richness and depth to the conventional view of strategy formation which does not take into account the specific nature of pluralistic contexts (Denis et al., 2007, p. 210).

We consider it worthwhile to take up their challenge and to focus on the holistic and systematic nature of both strategizing and organizing. Whilst agreeing with Denis et al. that strategizing in pluralistic contexts is dependent upon a set of complementary processes within the organizations, we extend their work by disaggregating social practices into the practices of strategizing and organizing. As will be seen, using strategizing and organization, together with accommodating, and translating, we obtain a model that provides a richer understanding of the day-to-day activities of organizational life that have strategic outcomes (Johnson et al., 2003). We content that as strategizing, organizing, accommodation, and translation interact, they becoming different configurations with different outcomes. Successful strategizing depends on understanding the implications of these complementary and contextually appropriate processes. The contribution of each individual process in strategizing is less than the pay-off of their combined effort: the sum of the marginal contribution of each of the processes individually is less than whole. When analyzed together the contribution of each process should be exhausted by the full system of complementary interdependencies. The next section of this paper takes up the challenge and raises a number of research propositions and hypotheses in particular in respect to the common intersection and the dynamic interactions between the various perspectives to understand the dynamism of strategizing in pluralistic contexts.

Our starting point is Denis et al. objective to “develop a better understanding of the practice of strategy” (2007, p. 179). To our mind, this locates their quest firmly within the domain of strategy-as-practice (Jarzabkowski, 2004, 2005; Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007; Whittington, 1996; Wilson & Jarzabkowski, 2004). In discussing the use of the three perspectives together, Denis et al. (2007, p. 180) couch the resultant benefits in the language and the literature of strategy-as-practice. The strategy-as-practice perspective embraces paradigmatic pluralism (Cook & Brown, 1999; Jarzabkowski, 2004; Spender, 1998), and strategy-as-practice welcomes moves to break the ‘paradigm mentality’ (Willmott, 1993). And yet, we wonder if the existing strategy-as-practice perspective already contains enough conceptual slack to ‘meet’ and understand pluralistic contexts with a requisite variety of ideas without the need for additional theoretical frameworks.

CENTERING STRATEGY-AS-PRACTICE
Theories of practice, such as strategy-as-practice, are primarily concerned with praxis, practices, and practitioners (Whittington, 2006). We use the word praxis to refer to bundles of activities in which an actor engages (Jarzabkowski, 2005). Practices are a set of resources on which actors ‘skilfully’ draw; after all, actors do not simply follow the rules laid down by convention and practices, they “are seen not as simple automata, but as artful interpreters of practices” (Whittington, 2006, p. 615). In effect, praxis relates to the activities of an individual, whereas practices are shared routines that exist between individuals. Finally, practitioners can be described as:

The actors; those individuals who draw upon practices to act. Practitioners are thus interrelated with practices and praxis. They derive agency through their use of the practices – ways of behaving, thinking, emoting, knowing and acting – prevalent within their society, combining, coordinating and adapting them to their needs in order to act within and influence that society... They “shape strategic activity through who they are, how they act and what practices they draw upon in that action (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007, p. 10).

With regard to the practice of strategizing, Figure 1 shows the relationships between these three elements. Strategy praxis—“the doing of strategy” (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007, p. 8)—can be distinguished from other activities because of the consequentiality of those activities (Johnson et al., 2003).

Figure 1 Strategizing as the nexus of praxis, practices, and practitioners (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007).
Strategy-as-practice considers activities that affect strategic outcomes—such as the firm’s survival, direction, competitive advantage (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2003; Whittington et al., 2003) and ultimately resource redeployment (Bower & Gilbert, 2005)—to be ‘consequential’. There are two components to consequentiality. Firstly, consequential activities necessarily have an impact beyond the immediate realm of the strategist. That does not imply that strategic activities need to result in some form of firm-wide change. Rather, it means that the strategist sought to have an impact beyond their immediate sphere of influence, i.e. at a layer more ‘macro’ than the actor’s layer. This may mean at the level of a team, a business unit, the organization, its industry, or even at the societal level (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). In this way, the consequentiality of an activity is a function of where one sits in the organization (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). Secondly, activities are consequential when they result in, or the strategist seeks to achieve, material resource redeployment. By material, we mean significant as opposed to trivial; we do not mean tangible as opposed to intangible. For example, hiring a replacement telemarketer when the organization already has hundreds of them is probably not material. However, promoting someone in the organization into a new role of “Director of IP Sales” may well be the result of material (significant) resource deployment.

**Translating and accommodating**

With the vocabulary of strategy-as-practice in hand, we can begin to recast the work of Denis et al. (2007), and in particular their notions of translation and accommodation. As already mentioned, the translation processes are activities relating to meaning making whereby actors seek “to make different meanings mutually compatible and to ‘enroll’ a network of actors so that the object may come into existence” (Denis et al., 2007, p. 184). As such, translation processes emphasize the ‘micro’ in the form of actor’s agency (Sztompka, 1991). Given such a process, many of the consequences of ‘translation’ can be articulated in terms of strategy-as-practice. Specifically, translation seems to parallel the idea of sensegiving (Rouleau, 2005). From the perspective of strategy-as-practice, translating is a process whereby a strategy practitioner, through their praxis of sensegiving, augments the array of practices used by others. This has the effect of co-opting those other practitioners as carriers of the new practice (Schatzki, 2002).

Unlike the translation processes, the accommodation processes explain the way in which actors seek to strategize within fixed sets of logics to find compromise between those pre-existing logics as they compete for legitimacy. Consequently, the accommodation process
focuses on the ‘macro’ in the form of the ‘conventions’ which each set of logics represents. From the perspective of strategy-as-practice, accommodation is about the selection of sets of practices from the array of practices available to the practitioner. In this way, the practitioner is interacting with the more ‘macro’ world. This process shares similarities with *sensemaking* (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Rouleau, 2005; Weick, 1995). Thus, the accommodation processes emphasizes the constraining and enabling influences of ‘the macro’ exhibited by structures (Sztompka, 1991).

One can juxtapose translating and accommodating. Translating is the ‘micro’ orientated activity of sensegiving, in which individuals seek to change the array of practices available to other practitioners. On the other hand, accommodating is a more ‘macro level’, whereby practitioners choose which subset of practices to utilize. Thus, translating and accommodation have different consequences for practice. Translating seeks to add to a practitioner’s repertoire of practices, whereas accommodating seeks to have practitioners choose amongst an array of practices. What may not be obvious is that having successfully added to the array of practices through translating, accommodating needs to occur so that the practice is actually used. Thus, our first conjecture is that translating and accommodating are meta-activities that individuals invoke either to add to their repertoire of practices, or to select amongst the practices already available to them.

**Strategizing and organizing**

The strategy-as-practice perspective would define strategizing as being “those actions, interactions and negotiations of multiple actors and the situated practices that they draw upon in accomplishing that activity” (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007, p. 7). However, as it stands, such a definition fails to distinguish between those activities that are strategic as opposed to other, non-strategic, activities. As already noted, the distinction between strategic and non-strategic practices is a function the consequentiality of the activities.

What are those activities that are not considered to be ‘consequential’, and do not result in significant resource redeployment? We choose to describe those activities as organizing. As such, organizing is “the creation and use of structural practices and coordination processes by internal stakeholders to enact identity, culture and interests of the organisation” (Evelyn M. Fenton & Paula Jarzabkowski, 2006, p. 3). If strategizing is concerned with material resource deployment, and hence change, then organizing is concerned with the on-going processes that produce a state of homeostasis. Transitions or changes in what, traditionally, might be called organization are strategic events; they are, after all, material resource redeployments.
Our second conjecture is that all activities in an organization fall somewhere on a continuum between the poles of ‘strategizing’ or ‘organizing’.

The location of an activity on that continuum is a consequence of their consequentiality in relation to the level of analysis. This issue of level of analysis leads to our third conjecture, that one actor’s strategizing may be another actor’s organizing. In other words, the strategizing/organizing ‘split’ is determined by an actor’s perspective on the activities and context involved—it is a comparative, relative distinction—and not an absolute measure (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). Nevertheless, it is possible to juxtapose those two constructs. Fenton and Jarzabkowski (2006), explore the impact that different types of organizing can have on strategizing. In particular, they consider integration and differentiation. We contend that these two forms of organizing arise through parallel processes similar to accommodation and translation. Fenton and Jarzabkowski, echoing Lawrence and Lorsch say that differentiation is “…the state of segmentation of the organization system into subsystems, each of which tends to develop particular attributes in relation to the requirements posed by its relevant external environment.” (Evelyn M. Fenton & Paula Jarzabkowski, 2006, p. 8). To our mind, such a situation can only exist where multiple sets of practices can sit alongside each other, and practitioners have adopted and accepted those practices. In other words, competing sets of practices, that are not consequential, lead to the organizing that is differentiated.

DISCUSSION: THE MODEL

Taken together the notions of strategizing and organizing, alongside translating and accommodating, are forms of practice. We have represented these two components pictorially in Figure 2 (below).
For any particular strategist within the organization, it may be legitimate for their praxis to be located anywhere on the grid shown in Figure 2 above. For example, one can imagine an ‘idealized’ situation where the praxis of a CEO may be located towards the top left of the grid; i.e. a CEO’s activities would be largely about strategizing via the introduction new practices to the organization. In contrast, the praxis of a ‘stereotypical’ operations supervisor may be located towards the bottom right of the grid; their day-to-day work is about keeping things going (organizing) through the ‘right’ practices. Obviously, these examples are somewhat normative. The reality is that, depending on the situation in which the strategist finds himself or herself, any location on the grid may be appropriate.

As already noted, a characteristic of pluralistic contexts is many actors legitimately pursuing differing agendas. Thus, one needs to attend to the relative density of actors across the grid. For example, too much translating in an organization—too many people trying creating new practices, together with too much strategizing—would result in the “divergent strategic responses” (Evelyn M. Fenton & Paula Jarzabkowski, 2006) and lead to “collective paralysis” described by Denis et al. (2007, p. 182).

In the same way in a context featuring primarily diffuse power, one would expected that the selection of a subset of practices to utilize would involve making numerous compromises between the pre-existing logic until a working agreement is finally reached. As long as it remains the dominant contextual feature, the various actors would make new compromises in
their search for alternative solutions in order to make sure that the various stakeholders are involved and that they are committed to the final solution.

Too much accommodation in an organization—too many compromises—with the intention of allowing action to take place, leads to “inflationary consensus” (Denis et al., 2007, p. 182). This can lead to inflated expectations, and can be experienced as disappointment, strategic instability, and cynicism. In this situation, the decision regarding the selection of a set of practices is simply a convenient agreement which reflects no overall agreement regarding purpose. Nevertheless, it brings expectations into momentary convergence and moves compromising process to temporary closure.

In a context featuring primarily knowledge-based processes it could be expected that management capacity to influence organizational action is limited particularly at the level of the operating core (Lamothe and Dufour, 2007). As long as it remains the dominant feature of context, tacit and explicit collective knowledge would be mobilized by managers. In particular, they use conversations, routines, and social interactions in an attempt to generate collective direction among multiple sub-cultures that would otherwise act in an autonomous and self-interested manner. Too much strategizing however can lead to tunnel vision. As Miller points out:

> An increasingly monolithic culture impels firms to focus on an ever smaller set of considerations and rally around a narrowing path to victory. Reporting relationships, roles, programs, decision-making processes – even target markets – come to reflect and serve the central strategy and nothing else. And policies are converted into rigid laws and rituals by avidly embraced credos and ideologies. By then, organizational learning has ceased, tunnel vision rules, and flexibility is lost (1990, p. 4).

Furthermore, structure practices and coordination mechanisms need to be put into place. Too much organizing though would lead to bureaucratization and to Balkanization. As Fenton and Jarzabkowski (2006, p. 5) indicate, in such an unbalanced situation, “organizations may be trapped into a continuous cycle of catch-up between organizing and strategizing: adjusting some practices in response to unintended consequences only to find that this triggers other unintended consequences”. As pointed out our main thrust is that strategizing in pluralistic contexts is at any point of time dependent upon a set of complementary processes that interact, becoming configurations of processes. That suggests that positive and negative performance of cannot be explained by any single process but by the relationships, coherence and synergy between them.
CONCLUSION

The extent to which strategizing, organizing, translating, and accommodating occurs is a function of how pluralistic are the contexts in which the firm operates (Denis et al., 2007; Evelyn M. Fenton & Paula Jarzabkowski, 2006). However, pluralistic contexts are not required in order for the model to be useful. Our goal has been to recast the work of Denis et al. (2007) solely using concepts from strategy-as-practice. The principal advantage of doing this is that it removes the element of incommensurability that arises from using notions of social practice, Actor-Network Theory, and Conventionalist theories. In addition, we seek to augment their model by differentiating social practices as either organizing or strategizing.

In that process, we also highlighted that accommodation and translation are meta-practices. These change the array of practices that are available to the strategists.

There are a number of benefits that have arisen from these moves. Firstly, for strategy as practice it provides a theoretical connection between the praxis of actors and the practices. The model posits ways in which praxis can lead to new practices. Some research is now necessary to assess if this is the way things happen. The model also provides a more complete view of the work of strategists. In real-life, the boundaries between the work of strategizing and organizing are fuzzy, as are the boundaries between formal and informal strategic activities. This model allows for those fuzzy boundaries to exist and acknowledges that in a particular situation both strategizing and organizing can be occurring at the same time, and that some of those activities may be formal or informal—after all formal or informal are just categories of practices. In total, the model presented provides for a fuller understanding of what occurs in organizations when there is a surfeit or a dearth of any of strategizing, organizing, translating or accommodating.
REFERENCES


