

“Strategic enactment: an interpretive approach to organizational strategy”

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Strategic enactment: an interpretive approach to organizational strategy

Abstract

The field of strategy is dominated by strategic choice theory which is based on strongly rational and analytical approaches. As a result, far too much agency is invested in human actors especially those considered to be the strategists. The impact of wider actors on strategy-making is neglected and the relationships between strategy and organization have been under-emphasized. Systems and complexity theory pose challenges to the prescriptions of strategic choice. There is therefore a need to seek alternate explanations. The answer lay in interrogating the ontological underpinnings of how strategy is understood. I offer an alternate conception of strategy by way of a new proposed theory of strategic enactment, based on an interpretive approach and an ontology of constructionism. This work, drawing on systems theory, complexity theory, sensemaking and strategic organization, is significant because it is philosophically reflexive, offers radically different explanations from that of strategic choice, is able to embrace emergent approaches to strategy and identifies constructs such as agency, identity and lifestory which are central to strategy but not given attention in the strategy literature. The relationship between strategic enactment and other theories of strategy together with what it means for application of popular strategy tools are also investigated.

Keywords: strategy, strategic enactment, agency, identity, organizational lifestory, complexity theory, complex adaptive systems, CAS, systems theory, ontology.

JEL Classification: M10.

Introduction

The strategy field is a broad but fragmented field of study (Hambrick, 2004; Volberda, 2004). The dominant approach to strategy is termed as strategic choice based on strongly rational and analytical approaches (Child, 1972; Moore, 2001; Porter, 1980, 1981). My contention in this article is that there is an alternate conception of strategy that provides alternate explanations to that of strategic choice. This alternate conception is termed strategic enactment. It is unique in that it adopts a reflexive approach to strategy beginning with the ontology of strategy. I draw on theoretical insights from the literature on systems theory, complexity theory and strategic organization to sketch out the contours of a proposed theory of strategic enactment. This is supported by several propositions. In the context of complexity, the notions of grand narratives and grand theory are eschewed in favor of more tentative and provisional approaches to theorizing and conceptualization. In the light of this, a theory of strategic enactment may be viewed as “small” theory that may be able to provide a contesting set of explanations for strategy-making from that of strategic choice. Notwithstanding the provisional and tentative nature of this small theory development, the implications for the field are quite significant. This is not surprising from the lens of complexity theory which gives us the understanding that small perturbations can have large effects (Anderson, 1999; Brown, 2004).

1. Strategic enactment

I use the term strategic enactment to signal that the theory is based on a constructionist ontology. Therefore, this is an interpretive approach to organizational strategy. In order to develop and build the theoretical framework, I shall offer a number of theoretical propositions. We begin with a fundamental question of what constitutes reality. Is there a fixed, objective reality that exists independently which we can probe, understand and ultimately control? The world of the natural scientist is generally considered to be fixed, tangible and unchanging in its essentials. Therefore, by applying the tools of positivist science, physical scientists are able to probe the material world, develop models of reality, and capture them in their formalisms. It enables us to optimize and control the mechanistic universe. What of the world that the social scientist observes? An objectivist ontology in social science assumes that social reality is also objective. For the positivist, social scientists with the right tools can probe and understand the social world and discover the social laws that apply in an unchanging way and independent of context. The translation of this positivist idea into the organizational realm implies that organizations and environments are objective reality that exists out there. A second ontological position is that although there is an objective reality we cannot fully know and understand that reality. This is the notion of perceived reality. As a result of lack of knowledge or flawed perceptions, we shall never have full understanding. Strategists are subject to bounded rationality and all of the cognitive biases of human beings (Bradfield, 2007; Simon, 1991; Sterman, 2000). One of their tasks is to minimize the

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This paper draws on the work and theory of strategic enactment as developed and presented in the Ph.D. thesis:

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gap between their flawed perception of the environment and that of the real environment. A third ontological perspective is that of enacted environments (Smirchich & Stubbart, 1985). This embraces both constructivist and constructionist approaches. The implication of this is that there is no objective social reality. Reality is enacted by human actors who construct their worlds through their experiences and their interactions (Lissack, 1999). All that exists are material and symbolic actions and interactions.

Proposition 1: Social reality is enacted by human actors who construct their worlds through their experiences and their interactions. All that exists are material and symbolic actions and interactions which become subject to interpretation by human actors.

The term enactment implies that both thinking and action are involved in the process of constructing reality. It is through our interpretation of the world that we construct categories such as organization and environment. We then react to these categories and therefore bring forth reality. Smirchich & Stubbart (1985) alerted us to these different ontologies in their presentation of objective, perceived and enacted environments in the context of strategy. Faulkner (2002) noted that this insight of Smirchich and Stubbart had “profound implications”. I concur with this, but argue that the strategy literature has not fully explored and developed it. This article attempts to do that.

I now proceed to incrementally build on components of strategic enactment such that we realize an overarching framework. We may begin with the individual actor or agent. Each agent has a schema that represents his understanding of reality (Anderson, 1999). This schema is based on his or her life history, and hence embodies his knowledge from his socialization and experiences. It is through the process of interaction between individuals that schemata of agents change, and hence we have a complex adaptive system (CAS) (Espinosa, Harnden & Walker, 2007; Meek, De Ladurantey & Newell, 2007; Nilsson & Darley, 2006; Schneider & Somers, 2006) that is the organization. It is crucial that since the schemata of agents are based on their life histories and their interactions over time, there is a close link with the identity of the agent. Thus, the agent has multiple evolving schemata and overlapping, multiple identities. The agent’s identity is therefore invested in the processes and outcomes of sensemaking (Maitlis, 2005; Pye, 2005; Snowden & Stanbridge, 2004; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005).

At one level, we may assert that the changing interpretations and changing conceptions means that

there is a change in agent identity. This in turn leads to changing actions. Thus thinking and acting are intertwined and inter-penetrating. Since an agent has the power to act in his local circumstances, it means that agency is also an important concept. Thus, we have a strong link between agency and identity of agents.

Proposition 2: Thinking and acting are not separate activities but are intertwined and operate through the mechanism of sensemaking.

Proposition 3: The identity of an agent is related to the changing agent schemata, and is therefore an emergent outcome of interactions between agents in the complex adaptive system of the organization.

As changes in schemata happen through interactions between agents, we need to interrogate interactions in a deeper way. What are interactions? There are two kinds of interactions. First are interactions with other human agents, and second are interactions with other agents in the form of artifacts. The medium of interactions between human agents is discourse and conversation. This is not at the level of “speech acts” only. While it includes utterances, and languaging, it also includes gestures, emotions, change in body tenor, as well as the use of space. Thus, interactions are based on complex communication between agents.

One of the important concepts in strategy is that of organizational routines. Routines are recipes of action that get enacted daily, and become part of the dynamic capabilities (Cavusgil, Seggie & Talay, 2007; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Helfat & Peteraf, 2009; Regner, 2008; Teece, Pisano & Shuen, 1997) of the organization. In the development and application of routines, artifacts play a prominent role. If organizations are systems of meaning and systems of interpretation, then routines and artifacts are embodied interpretations which constrain and liberate further interpretation and action.

Proposition 4: Routines and artifacts are embodied interpretations which constrain and liberate further interpretation and action.

At the level of organization we may now link in with the idea of the organizational lifestory (Boal & Schultz, 2007). This is a shared dynamic narrative at an organizational level. We may equate this with the identity of the organization. This leads us to three findings. Firstly, the organizational lifestory exists everywhere and exists nowhere. It exists nowhere because there does not exist any explicit text, as such, that contains the organizational lifestory. It exists everywhere in that it represents the organization as a whole, and is a shared tacit understanding of the organization and how it has come to be what it is – it

exists in the spaces between (Lichtenstein et al., 2006). Secondly, the organizational lifestory is not fixed, it is changing every moment as interactions are occurring and hence it is fuzzy and vague and constantly changing. Therefore, organizational identity is not something that is fixed, but it is multiple, plural and shifting. Thirdly, a significant shift in organizational lifestory, represents a shift in identity, and hence strategy. Moreover, organizational lifestory is a boundary setting mechanism. It determines the construction of the organization from non-organization. The issue of boundaries has played an important role in systems work (Ulrich, 1996).

Proposition 5: The organizational lifestory is a shared, dynamic but unarticulated narrative at an organizational level. It is not fixed, but it is multiple, plural and shifting. A significant shift in organizational lifestory represents a shift in organizational identity, and hence strategy.

These arguments imply that change is ontologically prior (Tsoukas, 2000). Thus, the organization is a heaving, constant flux, and is not a stable entity. We may think of this as a “sea of change” out of which we identify frozen moments, and when we think of organizations as stable entities then it is these frozen moments that we thinking about. Therefore, whenever we reify things such as organization, environment, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, these represent frozen moments.

Proposition 6: Change is ontologically prior to organizations. It is improvisational, not scripted in advance but the script is written as it is enacted.

We now have two interesting perspectives that have been under-emphasized in the literature. Firstly, these organizational concepts such as strengths and weaknesses are not objective realities, but rather our interpretations of material and symbolic actions. Secondly, even these constructions are drawn from a constant, shifting sea of change, and stabilized as constructs that we can act on and react to.

Strategy now becomes a series of enactments through interpretation and interactions between human agents and artifacts. It is linked with situated activity in practice. There is no such thing as a grand strategy. All we have are micro-processes and micro-actions mediated through interactions and discourse. The outcomes of these are decisions and patterns of actions over time to which we assign coherence, and we may sometimes label as strategy. Integral to this is the process of emergence and self-organization (Plowman et al., 2007; Sundarasaradula, Hasan, Walker & Tobias, 2005). Strategy is therefore not episodic, but rather ongoing and may sometimes be manifested as discontinuous change. This is the case

when we have the emergence of a radically different organizational lifestory. We consider a lifestory that changes in an incremental fashion a result of continuous change. What we mean by discontinuous change is basically that we have a radical revision of the organizational lifestory. Having said this, even this revisionist version of the lifestory is not something that is designed, but rather emerges from changing identities of organizational participants who all contribute to the lifestory in some way. Furthermore, it is interesting that the lifestory is not something that merely changes in a linear way. Rather it is truly revisionist in that we completely rewrite the organizational lifestory because we re-interpret and reconstruct earlier events and milestones that are different from the previous lifestory. Strategy is not something that we do once a year in our strategic planning sessions, it something that is happening all the time.

We now have to consider how organizational lifestory may be changed. Since the organizational lifestory represents the identity of the organization, we may regard it as a composite of the identities of the agents. However, since it is an emergent phenomenon, the law of super-position does not apply (Cilliers, 2000). Therefore, while it is a composite of the identities, it does not reduce to the individual identities. We may think of it as an agglomeration of identities. The changing of agent identities will therefore contribute to a changing of the organizational lifestory. We have already seen that agent identities are subject to the local interactions and changing of schemata, and since interactions are based largely on discourse, changing discourse implies ultimately changing the organizational lifestory.

One of the most powerful ways to change organizational discourse is the use of analogies and metaphors (Boisot & Cohen, 2000; Chettiparamb, 2006; Lissack, 1999). Therefore, we may conclude that if new metaphors and analogies are injected into collective organizational life, it represents a radical departure from ordinary discourse. Metaphors and analogies open up new possibility space, and new “adjacent possibles” (Lissack, 1999). From a dissipative structures point of view, the injection of new discourse through introduction of metaphors and analogies may be seen as akin to injecting new energy and thus pushing the system far-from-equilibrium, to the extent that a new level of order emerges (Hodge & Coronado, 2007; Macintosh & Maclean, 1999).

Proposition 7: Analogy and metaphor may be used as methods for changing organizational discourse and thereby the organizational lifestory, its identity and ultimately its strategy.

It is important to note that this conception of strategy is very different from strategic choice approaches. Firstly, strategic choice is based on an objectivist ontology. Secondly, it invests agency in omniscient actors. The strategic enactment perspective proposed also grants agency to individuals but in a very different kind of way. Agency is restricted to a local level, in that agents have the power to act in their local interactions, but they have no agency in terms of system level outcomes. Strategic choice actually invests agents with agency over system level outcomes. This is clearly not possible in complex systems. Secondly, given that local actions can affect global outcomes, the strategic enactment perspective does not diminish the local agency, in the way that a population ecology view would (Hannan & Freeman, 1997).

Proposition 8: Agents have the power to act in local interactions, but do not have agency over system macro-states.

By drawing on complexity theory and actor-network theory, we note that agency is not limited to human agents but it is also invested in the structural relations in networks of agents and in the artifacts that they create (Czarniawska, 2006; Steen, Coopmans & Whyte, 2006).

Proposition 9: Agency is invested in human agents, structural relations in networks of agents and in artifacts.

The strategic enactment framework is one that is consistent with sensemaking (Gioia, Thomas, Clark & Chittipeddi, 1994; Maitlis, 2005; Pye, 2005; Weick et al., 2005). There are similarities in that it deals with issues of identity in a similar way. The framework tends to also refer to agency that is less emphasized in sensemaking. If we bring in a sensemaking perspective then it accentuates the notion of working with equivocal inputs, and how order is imposed on the world through sensemaking.

Parry & Hansen (2007) consider how organizational stories actually constitute leadership. Although this is different to the idea of the organizational lifeworld as used here, there is some relationship between them. We may consider that the organizational lifeworld is an amalgam of the stories referred to by Parry and Hansen, who show how stories are used to make sense of events, and impact on the actions that people embark upon.

“When we tell stories about ourselves to others, they know us not only by those stories, but ‘as’ those stories” (p. 287).

What we discern from this work is that once again stories are a form of identity-construction. Since stories are not one-dimensional and do not depend on the individual alone, what we also note is that it is

through communicative interactions between agents, in this case in the form of stories, that identities are shaped. Even more interesting is that we again have support for the relationship between agency and identity. Given that stories constrain what people can or cannot do, it also determines the degrees of freedom available to them in relation to agency. Another angle on this is that stories embody the constraints and freedoms available for thought and action, decision-making and implementation. Therefore, there is naturally a link with strategy-making. The schemata of agents are shaped by the story telling and re-telling that they are involved in. Parry and Hansen cite Ouchi (1981) who made the point that a management philosophy is a like a general theory that organizational members may use in relation to their particulars. From this perspective, the organizational lifeworld becomes such a general theory of action that determines what people do and not do.

“From the perspective of sensemaking, who we think we are (identity) as organizational actors shape what we enact and how we interpret, which affects what outsiders think we are (image) and how they treat us, which stabilizes or destabilizes our identity” (Weick, et al., 2005, p. 416).

This quotation exemplifies the link between sensemaking and the strategic enactment framework. It highlights the role of sensemaking in identity construction. Thus, the nature of interactions between agents is central to the identity construction of those agents. This link between identity and agent schemata means that the emergence of organizational macro-states in the complex adaptive system is also linked to individual agent identities. What this amounts to is that every agent is not just potentially a strategist, but every agent *is* a strategist, if by strategy we mean the actual organizational macro-states that have emerged.

Proposition 10: Every agent is implicated in the emergence of organizational macro-states and therefore every agent is a strategist.

2. Strategy tools in the context of strategic enactment

It will be useful to consider the relationships between strategy tools and that of a theory of strategic enactment. The strategy literature is replete with tools that are deployed in strategy making. However, there is also an area of fuzziness in defining what a strategy tool is. For example, SWOT, the BCG matrix, and some of the Porterian frameworks such as the five forces analysis and the generic positioning matrix are all considered to be strategy tools. What about scenario planning? While some consider it as a strategy tool, others refer to it as an approach or methodology. Some of the steps in scenario planning

may in themselves contain strategy tools such as a SWOT or a TOWS analysis. Thus, the boundaries between tools, models, methodologies, frameworks and theories are not sharply defined but are rather blurred. Some authors refer to core competencies or even dynamic capabilities as tools whereas in their broader sense they may also be considered as theories. It has been shown by Spee & Jarzabkowski that strategy tools are not applied instrumentally in practice, but rather are shaped by the socio-political process in which they are applied. Strategy tools are therefore used more as heuristic devices and quite often are applied in a way that is quite divergent from what their authors, inventors or originators may have intended. In addition, they are used for conversational purposes rather than purely for their analytic purposes (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2009).

When strategy-making is considered to be episodic as it is in strategic choice theory, then it is during those episodic sessions during which the strategy tools are applied that strategy formulation is considered to occur. However, in the context of a theory of strategic enactment, strategy tools are considered to be artifacts. These then co-evolve and impact on the interactions between agents. Spee & Jarzabkowski (2009, p. 225) state that “[S]trategy tools thus assume the status of an artefact, structuring information and providing grounds for interaction around a common tool that is easily recognizable by participants in a strategy task”. They draw on the literature of boundary objects to show how strategy tools may be considered as boundary objects. Boundary objects are defined as “flexible epistemic artifacts that inhabit intersecting social worlds and satisfy the information requirements of each of them” (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2009, p. 227 citing Star and Griesemer, 1989, p. 393). What this brings is that strategy tools are no longer seen in isolation, but are rather important for how they create meaning in their actual use. Precisely because they are boundary objects, it means that the meanings are not unambiguous across participants from the different social worlds, and that they are applied flexibly. Therefore meaning is not necessarily embedded in the tool itself, but rather meaning is created in the interactions as the strategy tool is applied. This fits in perfectly with a theory of strategic enactment which is preoccupied with sensemaking and interpretation.

3. Strategic enactment and other theories of strategy

We may now proceed to consider the theory of strategic enactment in relation to other theories of strategy. There are close relationships between strategy-as-practice, strategizing-organizing, “strategy as unfinished project” and a theory of strategic

enactment (Jarzabkowski, 2005; McKiernan & Carter, 2004; Whittington, 2004). The focus in strategy-as-practice is on the doing of strategy, with much attention paid to situated activity in practice. Strategic enactment helps indicate how practices are related to agency, identity and interactions.

The focus has shifted from standard forms of theorizing about strategy to that of the *doing* of strategy. Strategic enactment, like strategy-as-practice is consistent with the strategizing and organizing perspective. The strategy-as-practice approach favors the verb form as opposed to the noun form as in strategizing as opposed to strategy, and organizing as opposed to organization (Whittington & Melin, 2003). It also notes that each of the dualities elides into each other, and hence we may refer to strategizing-organizing. This gives further weight to the idea that organizing *is* strategizing (Achtenhagen, Melin & Mullern, 2003).

It is at the level of activities that relate to organizing, especially when these activities lead to a consistent pattern of actions over time that we are referring to strategizing (Tsoukas & Knudsen, 2002). In addition, since activities are being conducted in every practice, it means that by definition we are referring to ongoing change, activity is doing, and doing is change. This suggests that organizing is in a constant state of becoming. Furthermore, activities do not occur in isolation but are as a result of processes of interactions between agents as highlighted in strategic enactment.

Strategic enactment theory is informed by actor-network theory to the extent that agency is not only vested in human agents but also in objects and technology in the form of artifacts, and its focus on micro-activities and interactions. While actor-network theory accentuates the disruption of centrality from the human actor to the network of actors and agents, in strategic enactment this is not as explicit, as the focus in the latter is on the interactions and less on the network. The network of agents is what gives rise to the possibility of interactions, and the nature of the network is constantly shifting. Here, strategic enactment takes its inspiration more from complex adaptive systems than it does from actor-network theory.

What are the relationships between strategic enactment and the resource based view (RBV) (Acedo, Barroso & Galan, 2006; Barney, 1991; Colbert, 2004; Grant, 1991)? The RBV is a strategic choice approach and based on a realist ontology. The implications of strategic enactment on the RBV is that the VRIN (valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable) attributes that are central to it, may not be as clear-cut as originally conceived. Some of the

VRIN attributes may be *interpreted* to be valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable. Furthermore, the RBV tends to assign more agency to actors than that of strategic enactment. It would appear that there is more alignment between the dynamic capabilities approach and strategic enactment. This is because of the focus on capabilities and routines. Strategic enactment explains how routines and capabilities emerge through the interactions between agents.

From complexity theory we may conceptualize an organization as a complex adaptive system, and identify that organizations have the various characteristics of CAS. Based on the premises of complexity theory, no single agent or small group of agents can stand outside of the system. This is embodied in the property of egalitarianism (Bodhanya, 2008). It is therefore not possible to design and implement strategy in advance. This is a radical perspective of strategy and the implications are far-reaching. A complex adaptive systems approach offers a good theoretical basis for evaluating and understanding emergent approaches to strategy. An emergent form of strategy implies that small actions by organizational actors may coalesce in time into a coherent pattern of actions that becomes its strategy. This coalescence happens without any central intelligence organizing and directing it. Rather, it is a form of spontaneous self-organization (Anderson, 1999; Schneider & Somers, 2006; Stacey, 1995; Sundarasaradula et al., 2005) that emerges through interactions between agents, and through everyday situated action in practice. The same explanation addresses even that of organizations that are ostensibly operating on the premises of strategic choice theory. In strategic choice, the organizational elite engage in strategy-making by way of strategy away-days and other forms of strategic management meetings. Participants may indeed be engaging in environmental analysis, examining internal resources, skills, and capabilities, and applying a variety of strategy tools and techniques. The result is articulated in some form of strategy document designed by the “strategists”. These are then issued to the rest of the organization to implement. An emergent approach to strategy as explained by strategic enactment does not deny that this may be happening. However, its explanation is that the strategic designs and plans are merely artifacts that agents co-evolve with. It is not that they do not play any role. They play a role like any other artifact. They inform and may constrain practice, but they do not determine strategy as designed. In short, strategy may not be designed and implemented. It emerges even if we operate from the premise of strategic choice. If we restate this in the terms that are used by Mintzberg we can say that planned strategies are never realized, and that therefore there can be no deliberate

strategy (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). The realized strategy is *always* emergent strategy. Thus, strategic enactment is a theory that indicates how strategies emerge bottom-up through micro-processes of interaction and situated activity in practice, as opposed to that of grand strategy designed from the top.

A theory of strategic enactment also incorporates strategic leadership that is consistent with complexity theory and not in contradiction with it. There are very significant implications for strategic leadership when organizations are conceptualized as CAS. Several of the leadership theories that ostensibly draw on complexity theory, fail to fully account for it (Boal & Schultz, 2007; Hazy, 2006; Marion & Bacon, 2000; Plowman et al., 2007). A theory of strategic enactment attempts to overcome this failure. It accounts for strategy based on an ontology of social constructionism and interpretation of reality. It is consistent with the notion of change as ontologically prior to organization and with the ideas of organizations as shifting conversations through first-order and second-order constructed realities (Ford, 1999). Thus, leadership in strategic enactment does not focus on the dyadic relationship between leader and follower, but rather considers leadership as a systemic meta-capability. Since leaders like any other agent in the system do not have agency over macro-states of the system, leadership is much more diffuse and is distributed throughout the system. We may thus refer to dispersed and distributed leadership. This view of leadership supports that of Lichtenstein (2006) who identifies it as a complex, dynamic process that arises in the interactive spaces between people. Leadership is therefore an emergent phenomenon and an outcome of the relational processes that people are engaged in. Strategic enactment places much emphasis on interpretation and sensemaking that have been largely neglected in the leadership literature.

A theory of strategic enactment offers a number of benefits. It may serve as a synthesising framework that draws together the various approaches to strategy including strategic choice, population ecology, learning and emergent approaches.

Moreover, it resolves a number of the false dichotomies that are prevalent in the strategy literature. These include formulation-implementation, thinking-acting, process-content and strategic-operational. These are not distinct phenomena but are rather intertwined; they may not be separated out. We need to understand strategy not as a noun but as a verb. This naturally raises the question of who does strategy. This means that we are also concerned with what strategists do in their everyday activities. The idea that strategy is largely episodic or something that is done once a year

say, is inconsistent with strategic enactment. Strategists do strategy every day. Since they are not in strategy workshops every day, it means that there are a myriad other activities conducted by strategists that also constitute strategy.

Strategic enactment also clarifies the relationships between strategy content and strategy process through its support of strategy-as-practice. Strategy-as-practice offers an integrative view of process and content. The activities that strategists engage in are part of strategy process. The outcomes of the strategy process results in the strategy content. The practice approach offers a way of understanding the application of strategy tools, and therefore enables a bridge between different schools of strategy. For example if one takes an Industrial Organization (IO) view (Porter, 1981), and applies Porter's 5 forces (Porter, 1980), then a practice approach sees this as the activity of doing strategy where the 5 forces model is considered as a strategy tool to assist in that process.

From a research point of view, strategic enactment is broad enough to embrace many different approaches. The focus, however, will, like in strategy-as-practice, tend to be on situated action in practice. We shall be interested in the micro details of what strategists engage in as they conduct their practice. This naturally lends itself to thick description and close interaction with the unit of analysis. However, we need to ask what exactly is the unit of analysis? In conventional approaches to strategy, the unit of analysis is the industry (IO view), firm (learning, culture etc.), resources (RBV), capabilities (dynamic

capabilities), or the collection of firms (population ecology). In the case of CAS it is likely to be the actors (strategists and others). In the practice approach, the unit of analysis tends to be the activity.

Conclusion

The strategy field tends to be philosophically unreflexive. The dominant strategic choice theory is based on an objectivist ontology. The underlying assumptions as well as the consequent implications of such an ontology have not been sufficiently interrogated in the literature. A theory of strategic enactment yields an alternate conception of strategy that provides different explanations to that of strategic choice. Strategic enactment is based on an ontology of constructionism. I have drawn on theoretical insights from the literature on systems theory, complexity theory, sensemaking and strategic organization to sketch out the contours of a proposed theory of strategic enactment supported by a set of 10 propositions. These serve as an overarching framework for strategic enactment. It is notable that constructs such as identity, agency, and organizational lifestory that barely feature in the strategy literature are shown to be central to strategy. The relationships with other theories of strategy and the application of strategy tools have also been explored. A theory of strategic enactment may serve to fulfill the purpose of a "wild card" as defined by McGahan & Mitchell (2003). Wild cards in their conception are concepts and ideas that are ill-fitted to existing conceptual frames and that serve as a bridge amongst existing theories and offer potential for new theories.

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