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# Searching for Greater Variety in Strategic Thinking

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# **Searching for Greater Variety in Strategic thinking: the Potential of An Analysis of Discourse Approach.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper proposes a use of the discursive approach to explicate variety in ways of strategic thinking. Such an explication of variety is both useful managerially in increasing awareness of greater discursive resources and also theoretically in critiquing views of strategic thinking as homogenous and organizationally contained.

Ways of strategic thinking have been investigated using a variety of approaches including expertise perspectives (Voss, Greene et al. 1983), cognitive mapping (Eden, Jones et al. (1979); Huff (1990) ) and upper echelon theory (Hambrick 1998). More recently the linguistic turn in organizational sciences (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000), and the study of strategy as practice (Whittington 1996; Hendry 2000) have seen the application of discursive methodologies to the study of strategy. One strand of discourse analysis has been used to analyse the impact of discursive changes on organizations (Hardy, Palmer et al. 2000). A discourse analysis approach can also be used to explicate greater variety in ways of strategic thinking (McAuley, Duberley et al. 2000).

This paper argues that the potential of forms of discourse analysis has not been fully realised and may be used to critique the closed nature of organizational discourses assumed in much of the managerial literature (e.g. Sanchez 2001). The evidence that discourse analysis could produce would complement what other methodologies have had to say about the homogenous (Spender 1989) or heterogeneous (Bowman and Ambrosini 1997) nature of strategic thinking.

## Introduction

The literature on strategic thinking is highly fragmented, like literatures in most areas of management (see Whitley 1984; Knights and Willmott 1997). It draws on a wide range of disciplines and philosophical approaches. Reflecting the fragmented literature there is a multitude of overlapping terms to describe what we have and will refer to generically as strategic thinking. These terms include the following; strategic cognition, strategic knowledge, strategic learning, strategic mindset, strategic sense-making, strategic conversation and strategic discourse. The adjective strategic might also be replaced by policy, organizational, integrative, upper echelon, systematic and perhaps innovative. These terms are not perfect substitutes for each other but carry meanings, which often vary with both the user and the context. The ambiguity of the word 'strategy' allows more openness and is likely more familiar than terms such as "integrative issues".

Such openness is desirable in research work where individuals' ways of thinking, including their ways of defining issues are being investigated. Yet while open the word also carries a flavour, which invites us to go beyond functional concerns.

Whereas strategy does not command a single commonly agreed definition in the academic literature there is already a rich and varied literature (e.g. Hellgren and Melin 1993) using the terms "strategic cognition" or "strategic thinking" or "strategic conversations" (Von Krogh and Ross 1996).

The importance of management mindset for managerial decisions has been recognised for sometime. Since Herbert Simon introduced the concept of "bounded rationality" in

the 1950s a growing body of researchers with diverse perspectives has been researching managerial cognition and management mindsets. Within the strategy literature Stubbart (1989:326) asks rhetorically "Since strategic management studies the activities of managers , and since managers must think about strategy , why don't researchers allocate more research to studying how strategic managers think?"

There is clearly a vast literature on the studying of thinking though naturally given the importance of thinking in a vast range of human activities much of this literature has not been concerned with management and organizational issues. The next section of this paper reviews some developments in the study of thinking within organizational studies relevant to the current paper's agenda: the search for and explication of variety in strategic thinking. After the literature is reviewed the use of a discursive approach to the study of strategic thinking is introduced and the argument that such an approach is particularly useful for the examination of differences in strategic thinking is made. Some empirical choices for discursive approaches to strategic thinking are then discussed before the paper finishes with a conclusions section.

### **The Literature on Differences in Strategic Thinking**

#### **Differences between Classical Rationality and Bounded Rationality**

The traditional economics view is that humans are rational in a sense best modeled by formal logic. In 1950s Simon expanded our view of rationality with his model of "bounded rationality". As Todd and Gigerenzer (2003:144) point out, these bounds are conventionally separated in the literature into the external costs of searching for information and the internal features of human cognition. Concentrating on the internal features of human cognition a research stream emerged following the work of

Tversky and Kahneman (see Kahneman, Slovic and Tversky, 1982) in examining human biases in thinking.

These biases in a sense constitute the ‘gap’ between ‘ideal’ and ‘bounded’ rationality. Schwenk (1995) discusses the following biases as being particularly relevant for strategic thinking; a) tendency for executives to claim credit for successes and avoid blame for failures (the causal attribution error), b) tendency for executives to increase commitment to a failing course of action (the escalating commitment error) and c) tendency for executives to have biased recollections which lessens learning from the past. Hodgkinson and Sparrow (2002) also review the work on cognitive bias of relevance to the “competent organization”.

There has been some resistance to seeing these departures from classical rationality as necessarily and always ‘in error’ (e.g. Salanick & Meindl, 1984 as cited in Schwenk (1995). The fact that only depression-prone individuals are exempt from the causal attribution error (Alloy and Clements 1992) might raise suspicions that such “errors” may have a function. Recently Todd and Gigerenzer (2003) have developed an alternative interpretation to the bias-focussed view of Simon’s work, arguing that bounded rationality is an “ecological rationality” that has developed to suit particular environments where so-called cognitive errors are appropriate “fast and frugal” heuristics.

### **Differences between Experts & Non-Experts**

An early and continuing stream in the study of managerial thinking has been “the expertise” approach. Here there have been efforts to distinguish individuals who are

'experts' in various aspects of management from those who are naïve or perhaps novice managers, much in the same way that Chase and Simon (1973) distinguished the thinking of chess grandmasters from non-expert players. The expertise literature (see Ericsson and Smith 1991, and Zeitz and Glaser 1994 for overall reviews) finds systematic differences between domain specific expert and naïve problem-solvers. In this type of research differences in individuals' internal cognitions are inferred from differences in their 'thinking aloud' about standardized problems or their 'feelings of knowing' the solution to the problems. For a particular domain experts have shown superior memories. This is thought to be due to the hierarchical nature of the experts' knowledge organization and the dense interconnections between branches of that hierarchy.

Experts seem to approach problems differently, perceiving problems as being grouped into more abstract categories related to their more hierarchically organized knowledge. For experts certain thinking procedures become routinized. This is especially true of metacognition - the self-knowledge of how the individual expert is tackling a problem.

Within the area of managerial cognition, Bacdayan (1996) applies the expertise approach to studying team leadership, Vaatstra, Boshuizen et al. (1995) to auditing, McAulay, King et al. (1998) to management accountancy and Arts, Gijsselaers et al. (2000) to organizational development and human resource management. There are clear problems (disputed domains, ill-defined problem, the ambiguous nature of success) in extending the expertise approach into the domain of social science and

management. Yet much of the expertise work in social science echoes the general findings in the wider expertise literature.

There are costs of expertise (such as increased rigidity in thinking) (Sternberg 1996) analogous to the complexity discussed above concerning the idea of 'cognitive error'. Thus as logical (classical) rationality may not always be better than bounded rationality expertise is not always better than non-expertise. Loehle (1996:18) sees the costs of expertise as quite severe: "As one becomes more an expert, and a larger and more complex network of facts and explanations accumulates and solidifies, making it difficult to entertain radical alternative ideas or to recognize new problems."

### **Differences between Different Experts**

Another of the problems in applying the expertise approach to the study of strategic thinking is the fact that strategy is a disputed domain: There are many different types of expert that do strategic thinking and lay claim to possessing strategic expertise. Worst still- from an expertise point of view - these expertises might differ in what is the correct solution to the strategic problem.

Empirical research confirms that different type of experts give different solutions. Hitt and Tyler (1991:341) - using broad and conventional categories such as accounting, engineering and liberal arts - provide evidence that strategic acquisition decisions vary with education degree type and work experience type. Daniels, Johnson et al. (1994) find that differences in managerial cognitions of competition differ *inter alia*



according to a function. Melone (1996:70) too examines the assessment of potential acquisition candidates by different managers and finds “differences in the attention to and generation of business issues as a function of [differences in] expertise”.

Whereas the empirical literature seems to confirm that different types of experts do differ in their strategic thinking some conclude that this difference is ‘quantitatively’ small: Bowman and Daniels (1995: 165) after reviewing a number of studies found "A small, but significant amount of variance in perceptions of strategic priorities (around 5 per cent) was explained by functional orientation". Chattopadhyay, Glick et al. (1999:784) conclude that "Functional conditioning, whether in the form of past experiences or current rewards and responsibilities, has a negligible [though statistically significant] influence on upper-echelon beliefs." Of course quantitative measures of difference are not achievable without a lot of judgements regarding how differences are measured and weighed.

### **Individual Differences**

There are a variety of measures of what psychologists call ‘individual differences’ that attempt to capture differences in personality, thinking style and intelligence. There have been various studies relating these measures to differences in strategic thinking. For example Haley and Stumpf (1989) relate Jungian / Myers-Briggs type indicator personality type to use of different types of heuristics. Many of the proposed links have remained at the theoretical level due to lack of research or advances in the theoretical debates that make it hard for the empirical research to establish reliability. However some individual difference constructs are pretty clearly associated with some differences in ways of strategic thinking.

Locus of control is an individual difference construct concerning how much control an individual feels he or she has concerning the circumstances in which he or she finds him or herself. Reviewing the literature, to which Hodgkinson himself had significantly contributed, on the relationship between an individual's locus of control and organizational strategy, Hodgkinson and Sparrow (2002:200) conclude that despite dispute concerning the size of the effect, higher internalised locus of control for an individual was associated with higher levels of environmental scanning by that individual and higher organizational performance.

Another individual difference construct is risk propensity. Evidence on how individual differences in risk propensity are related to strategic thinking differences is less clear. Hitt and Tyler (1991: 341) find no statistically significant effect of risk propensity in their highly specified model of strategic evaluation of acquisition candidates. However Papadakis, Lioukus et al. (1998:131) find that higher risk propensity of top management members is associated with less formality in the strategic decision making process of the firm.

Need for achievement (N-ach) is a measure of individual difference concerning the goal driven nature of an individual. N-ach is a natural candidate for explaining at least greater effort in strategic thinking. However Papadakis, Lioukus et al. (1998) report no statistically significant correlates of their N-ach measure in a highly specific model of strategic decision-making, though Hodgkinson and Sparrow (2002:203) do cite empirical work that finds correlations between strategic perceptions and N-ach.

Another difference that can be viewed as an individual one is gender. Hodgkinson and Sparrow (2002 :167) report in relation to one study - which may echo many others -that “there was virtually no diversity of gender or ethnicity in the top teams of the US banks studied”. Another more subtle problem, even for small number research, is the question of how masculine any woman must become to manage in a male-dominated world, for as Orser (1994) reports management characteristics are often seen as masculine characteristics. This issue of the masculinity of management begins to show how looking at gender purely as an ‘individual’ difference can be problematic. This critique of gender as an individual difference may well also apply to other individual-level differences.

### **Organizational Differences**

A much investigated difference in strategic thinking is the difference in strategic thinking between different organizations. Prahalad and Bettis (1986) point out the importance for strategy of the dominant logic by which a management team makes sense of their external and internal environment. Daniels, Johnson et al. (1994) found that differences in managerial cognitions of competition vary *inter alia* according to organization. Hodgkinson and Sparrow (2002:97) in reviewing the literature concludes "there are some compelling theoretical arguments, and, to a certain extent, empirical support, for the contention that organizational-level knowledge structures can and do influence organizational and individual behaviour, not only in terms of strategic analysis and choice but also in terms of the preferred modes of implementation".

### **Sectoral Differences**

Spender (1989:188) has argued that sectors develop 'industry recipes' "as a context and experience bound synthesis of the knowledge the industry considers managers need to have in order to acquire an adequate conceptual grasp of their firms".

Porac, Thomas et al. (1989:412) too assess the industry recipe as not only important for strategic thinking but also for strategic outcomes "In essence, we have suggested that the Scottish knitwear sector exists as it does today because the mental models and strategic choices of key decision-makers intertwine to create a stable set of transaction in the marketplace." In quantitative terms Hitt and Tyler (1991: 339 and Table 3) report this effect as rather small; they report industry characteristics accounting for only 2.2% of variance in strategic acquisition decisions. However Phillips (1994:398) argues from a qualitative study of the wine and museum sectors that these industry "mindsets each individually transcend suborganizational, transorganizational and organizational boundaries to be held in common by members of discrete industries." The greater importance for industry recipe suggested by the qualitative approaches may well be because of the participant-sensitive ways the industry has been defined in these studies. In any case the literature is united in seeing strategic thinking differences across different industries.

### **National Differences**

Hofstede's study on IBM employees in various countries illustrated the variability in the 'software of the mind' attributable to different national cultures. Power distance, collectivism, masculinity and uncertainty avoidance were dimensions on which cultures differ. Though Hofstede initially focussed on the IBM workplace his concepts have been more generally applied (e.g. Hofstede, 1997). With a greater

sociological emphasis Watson and Bargiela-Chiappini (1998) discuss how management magazines in Italy and Britain interact with national cultures to influence the discourse within organizations.

The idea of the relevant cultural context being a nation is as Hofstede (1997:12) himself points out is not without its problems. It can be argued that the idea of a nation is a cultural product given to the world by European colonial activity. However the idea of nation does seem to be a very dominant one and used with caution may have benefit.

As well as macro collective cognitions varying interspatially in the form of different national and regional cultures, one might expect the same culture's cognitions to vary intertemporally perhaps, for example, in line with the fluctuations of the macroeconomy.

In much of the work on strategic thinking discussed above, the differences in strategic thinking are often described in a very limited number of pre-defined dimensions or assigned to a limited number of predefined types. Such dimensions or types have often been derived not from the strategic thinking or thinkers being studied.

Quantitative studies have explored many independent variables that might explain variety in strategic decisions: Hitt and Tyler (1991: 341) report that their research "... suggests that objective criteria play a prominent role in executives' strategic decision models. However, industry and executive characteristics also produced statistically significant but small main effects on strategic decisions, as well as moderating effects on the criteria used in those decisions." So Hitt and Tyler's (1991)

evidence of the existence of variety in strategic decisions attributable to non-objective criteria - yielded from what they themselves describe as a 'conservative' test - does indeed encourage a search for variety in strategic thinking. Papadakis, Lioukus et al. (1998:133) report that “The most striking finding was the dominant role of *decision-specific* characteristics in determining decision processes. ” As such the dominance of the decision-specific characteristics downplays in that study any variety in strategic thinking. However since Papadakis, Lioukus et al. (1998) identified the decision-specific characteristics by factor-analysis or derived them from a review of the literature, variety in strategic thinking may have been made opaque in their study.

### **An Analysis of Discourse Approach to Studying Strategic Thinking**

Discourse analysis is part of (and perhaps in some definitions comprises) the “linguistic turn” in social and organizational research. This turn has been identified as one “of the most profound contemporary trends within the social sciences” (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000: 136). A central point in this trend is that language is understood as more than just a transparent descriptor of reality. Rather the use of language is seen as acting on and creating our reality. This is the case even where language is merely selecting, noticing and highlighting through description.

Beyond seeing language as action, discourse analysis is a complex and disputed approach. Discourse analysis has many different meanings, different origins, and is interdisciplinary in its nature.

There are excellent overviews from different perspectives of discourse analysis (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000; De Beaugrande 1997; Van Dijk 1997; Potter 1998)

and it is not out intention to produce another one here. Some flavour of the breath and diversity of discourse analysis is however appropriate. For example what is covered by the term discourse ranges from the very narrow to the most comprehensive: For some discourse is viewed as only spoken conversation in naturalistic settings. Slightly more generally discourse covers “all forms of spoken interaction, formal and informal, and written texts of all kinds” (Potter and Wetherell 1987:7). The meaning of discourse can too be expanded to include not only verbal communication but also communication in terms of other sounds, images, smells, dance, sculpture and so on. Knights and Morgan (1991:254) go beyond even this and view “...discourse as shorthand for a whole set of power/knowledge relations which are written, spoken, communicated and embedded in social practices.” Another area of diversity in discourse analysis is the origins or traditions from which discourse analysts draw. For some, discourse analysis is a form of linguistic analysis above the level of the sentence. For others discourse analysis is mostly inspired by the work of Michel Foucault, in which as Knights and Morgan (1991: 253) point out discourse “takes on a variety of meanings”, but in which discourse analysis is informed by a particular macro-sociological perspective concerning the nature of knowledge/power. For those taking a more micro-sociological perspective the work of Garfinkel and other ethnomethodologists has been the main inspiration (see Potter 1998).

Some might have difficulty with the idea that discourse analysis can be used to study thinking. After all discourse analysis is often described as what talk is doing in interaction. In a cognitive view both thinking and talking are often separated from doing. To adopt a discursive approach is to disagree with that separation and to recognize therefore that in talk we are thinking and doing. Hendry (2000:965) puts it

thus "Discourse ..... is not only the medium through which cognitive activity is observed, but also the medium in which it takes shape." Discursive approaches to the study of thinking involve a view of language that puts the language or discourse itself centre-stage, whereas non-discursive approaches tend to use discourse as a route to, or reflection of, other realms in which the non-discursive researcher is interested. A non-discursive cognitive scientist might attempt to discover the underlying mental model of the interviewee through the haze of biases, deliberate concealments and embarrassments of the interview. As Eden and Ackerman (1992:261) note "If articulation and thinking interact, then elicitation of cognition that depends upon articulation is always out of step with cognition before, during and after the elicitation process". The discourse analyst regards talk as thinking, just as the neuroscientist regards brain activity as thinking. (Hendry 2000:965) puts it more synthetically: "Discourse on this view [that of discourse psychology], is not only the medium through which cognitive activity is observed, but also the medium in which it takes shape." As Weick (1979:5) famously puts it: "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?". For discourse analysts then "discourse is constitutive of mind, not a reference to mind" (Wood and Kroger 2000:10). So talk is thinking even if not all thinking is talk.

There is little doubt that there is more to thinking than talking. For example Gardner (1983) posits linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences. Sims and Doyle (1995:123) note how using sculptures with solid three dimensional objects allowed the expression of ideas that seem to be inexpressible in words alone for "Words alone do not lend themselves to complex statements because of their linear character."



While words are not the all of thinking, in strategic thinking they seem particularly important: "Strategy processes or strategising is essentially a series of conversations" (Roos, Von Krogh et al. 1996:55). Even Gardner (1995:9) - that pioneer of multiple intelligences - claims that the eleven leaders he studied "told stories – in so many words - about themselves and their groups, about where they were coming from and where they were headed, about what was feared, struggled against and dreamed about." Voss, Greene et al. (1983) find evidence that argumentation and rhetoric are more likely to be part of the approach to solving the novel and poorly defined problems of social and management science. Fletcher and Huff (1990) reflecting on the technique of strategic argument mapping, claim that the non-obviousness nature of management and management's need to create understanding particularly in the area of strategy make argument a particular important part of strategic thinking.

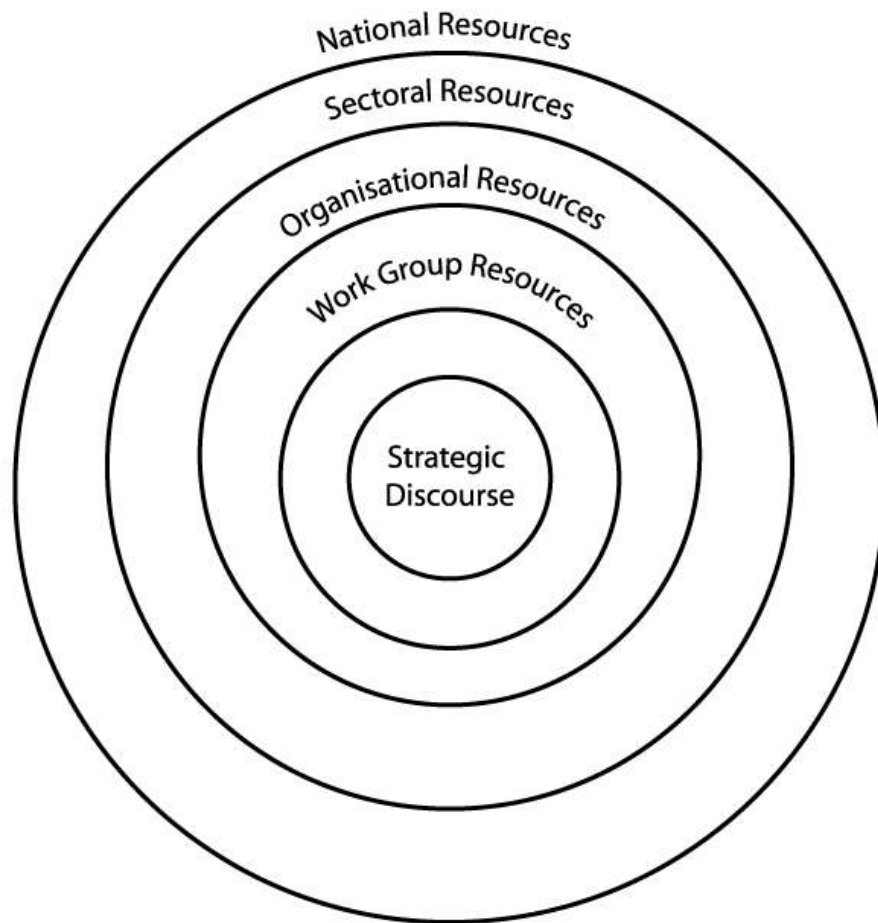
Given the discussion above it is not surprising that analysis of language has been used in looking at strategy. Drawing inspiration from Foucault, Knights and Morgan (1991) develop a genealogy of strategic discourse, showing the conditions which made strategic discourse possible and highlighting the knowledge/power possibilities created by strategic discourse. Kerfoot and Knights (1993) develop this approach and show its operation in a particular sector and organization. On the same macro-sociological level as Knights and Morgan (1991), Rouleau and Séguin (1995) describe four types of strategic discourse societally available, and argue too that a critical discourse is needed in strategy. Lilley (2001) too describes the 'grand' discourse of strategy identifying *inter alia* the centrality of intention in strategic discourse. Hardy, Palmer et al. (2000), trying to steer a middle ground between managerialist attempts

to see discourse as a reliable instrument for achieving unquestioned aims and the more critical approach, have traced the effects of changing discourse within an organization. Drawing more on the ethnomethodological (particularly Gilbert and Mulkay 1984) roots of discourse analysis, McAuley, Duberley et al. (2000) have used the approach to focus on the micro discourses of management and strategy and study the construction of complex meanings of managerial and strategic issues by what might have been thought of as managerially naïve physical scientists. A city government strategy document is the source of rhetoric studied by Eriksson and Lehtimäki (2001). Vaara (2002) draws more on narrative analysis in his study of the discursive constructions of success and failure of organizational mergers in interviews with managers from the merged organizations. Samra-Fredericks (2003) uses the conversation analysis version of discourse analysis to study how the conversational interaction among managers shapes strategic direction.

An analysis of discourse approach overcomes several problems encountered in other ways of studying strategic thinking: Firstly there has been in non-discourse based approaches a concern to capture the ‘real’ internal thinking of strategists and a worry that the elicitation method used might give a distorted representation of the pure cognition of the strategist. Discourse analysis avoids this problem by concerning itself with the thinking in the performance of discourse rather than a hypothesized thinking behind the discourse. Secondly discourse avoids another related problem – thinking is allowed to be dynamic in that it can develop in performance whereas in more cognitive approaches such development complicates the attempt to capture what is ‘truly’ and implicitly static in a thinker’s head.

Many writers on organizational and strategic thinking seem to view the relationship between thinking at the individual, organizational, sectoral, and societal levels as a nested relationship (illustrated in Figure 1 below), with units of analysis only influencing their adjacent units. Sanchez (2001:24), for example, analyses organizational learning as flowing from individual learning through group learning to organizational learning, suggesting that knowledge flow between these levels is only as strong as that which the weakest contact points between these levels allow. Discourse analysts can too confine their foci on the social interaction *within the organization* (e.g. Samra-Fredericks, 2003). Much of the literature regards “organizations not simply as ‘having’ cultures but as *being* cultures” and focuses on the “system of shared cognition” (Salaman and Storey 2002:150) (italics in original).

Figure 1 A Nested View of Discourse Resources Implicit in Much of the Literature



Whereas the view of organization as culture is not at issue, a concern is that strategic thinking which while interacting with, drawing from and constructing the current organization also expresses and draws resources from social contexts other than the current organization. For "...we are mindful of the fact that discourses are not contained by organizations but cross through them and are related to the wider social, political and culture contexts of which they are part ..." (Palmer and Dunford 2002: 1065). Or as Watson and Bargiela-Chiappini (1998:285-286) put it "Managers have numerous sources to draw upon in making sense of their situation, these ranging from their national culture, a corporate culture, an occupational culture, a popular culture

and so on.". So while the social processes of the current organization are vital in developing thinking, thinking of individuals and suborganizational units is not an exact miniature copy of the whole organization's thinking template. As Starbuck (1993:907) reminds us "Although skilled experts share values, standards, habits, mental frameworks, and language, the culture they share is supraorganizational ....". As argued above this supraorganizational variety in strategic thinking is likely to be suppressed where the focus is kept within the organization. This can be the case even where a discourse analytical approach is used but discourse analysis does point us towards a more interactional view: Lyotard (1979:17) for example points out that discourse that occurs within the organization is likely to repress the variety of discourses about the organization, for "... an institution differs from a conversation in that it always requires supplementary constraints for statements to be declared admissible within its bounds. The constraints function to filter discursive potentials, interrupting possible connections in the communications networks: there are things that should not be said." Tannen (1994:12-13) talks of conversations in an organization as always being in some sense a test. Von Krogh and Ross (1996:222) explain how strategic conversations may be particularly affected "Managers frequently apply the same rules to these [strategic] conversations as they do to operational conversations, especially those of authority, intimidation and closure." Rather than the nested view of strategic discourses depicted in Figure 1 we propose a less easily divisible view of strategic discourses as depicted in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2 An Interactional View of Strategic Discourse Resources



Research on organizational agenda formation (e.g. Pitt, McAulay et al. 1997) focuses on the issues that arise from the social interaction within the organization or those even more narrowly confined within an elite group. The focus of this paper is on the diverse discourses of strategy whether or not these discourses arise within the organization's collectivity. Of course there will most likely be a strong connection between the two - issues that are raised 'publicly' within the organization will both come from and influence the potential pool of discourses available.

## **Some Empirical Choices in the Analysis of Strategic Discourse**

### **Choice of Research Sites.**

Strategic discourses can be studied in a vast range of organizations differing on such dimensions as corporate objectives, size, nationality and sector. Knights and Morgan (1995) study how strategic discourse entered into an insurance sector firm in late 1980s United Kingdom, as the sector became more competitive. This site allows them to trace the introduction of the new strategic discourse into what had been a very paternalistic organization, the resulting change, the resistance to that change and how strategy was abandoned in favour of more immediate concerns for certain sections of the company. The choice of this particular case allowed (Knights and Morgan 1995) to see how societal and sectoral conditions particularly favouring a move to strategic discourse were played out in the microcosm of a particular organization.

Hardy, Palmer et al. (2000) choose to conduct their empirical research in a large non-governmental (NGO) national children aids agency. This included a look at how a European-based organization localized and reinternationalized in the turbulent background of the West Bank and Gaza. As Hardy, Palmer et al. (2000) are concerned to study discourse's use as a strategic resource a government funded NGO was a good choice as it was probably familiar with the kind of openness that their research required. Like Knights and Morgan (1995), McAuley, Duberley et al. (2000) choose a site where there were societal and sectoral pressure to adopt the language of corporate strategy. McAuley, Duberley et al. (2000) examined the meaning professional scientists gave to understanding management and strategy in public sector scientific research laboratories in a period in which the kind of push towards strategic discourse described by Knights and Morgan (1995) in the insurance sector

was occurring for the United Kingdom's public sector. Eriksson and Lehtimäki (2001) studied the strategic discourse of a Finnish city government in relation to the location of information and communication technology firms in a 1997 public strategy document. Discourses collected between 1992 and 1997 concerning Finish-Swedish mergers stretching from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s were the subject of Vaara (2002). Samra-Fredericks (2003) was based on the conversations among strategists in a UK subsidiary of a French company engaged in the building of a major new facility.

The empirical studies discussed above show the importance of the context in which strategic discourse is studied for what can be argued from those studies and for the methods used to make those arguments. There are many other contexts in which strategic discourses can be studied. All of the organizations mentioned above were large organizations - it would be interesting to study the nature and consequences of strategic discourses in small organization. Being large - and in three of the cases government or government funded organizations - the strategic discourses studied were at least in part influenced by the large nature of the publics to which the organizations were accountable. It would be interesting to know if organizations with a lower requirement of public accountability (perhaps privately owned firms) use the same strategic discourses in the same way. In this aspect two of the Knights and Morgan (1991:264-265) power effects of strategy might be studied more closely: strategic discourse as "a demonstration to outsiders of how the organization is apparently rational and in control of its destiny" and the internal power given to those who possess expertise in strategic discourse. It may well be that researchers might have to be open to the absence of strategic discourse in such situations (Inkpen and Choudhury 1995). It would be interesting too to produce more work outside the



United Kingdom given that country's Anglo-American style of capitalism, culture, language and particular economic structure.

**Choice of Data Creation Method and Sources.**

Table 1 below outlines some of the ways strategic discourse data might be obtained.

These are options are further discussed in the rest of this subsection.

**Table 1: Methods for obtaining discourses**

<b>Parties Involved</b> \ <b>Role of Researcher</b>	<b>Active in data generation.</b>	<b>Absent from data generation</b>
Dyadic	Active interview	Dyadic conversation
Group	Focus group, cognitive sculpting, workshop	Meeting / Away-day / Company conference
Formal Organization	Researcher does on the record or public interviews.	Company reports, publications, organizational reports, minutes, websites

One way to generate appropriate data would be to use what has been called the 'the active interview'. The basic stance of the active interview is best described thus: "The active interview eschews the image of the vessel waiting to be tapped in favour of the notion that the subject's interpretative capabilities must be activated, stimulated and cultivated." (Holstein and Gubrium 1997:122). The data produced is not so much collected as negotiated. This view of the interview as co-producing data has a long history and can be seen *inter alia* in the causal or cognitive maps of Eden, Jones et al. (1979). The active interview method is further described by Holstein and Gubrium (1997), Holstein and Gubrium (2000), and Fontana and Frey (2000). Such an active interview allows exploration of a diversity of discourse that might not be

voiced in a group, particularly if that group were from a single organization: the kind of diversity that might be constrained by the norms of the organization. Silverman (2001:160) cautions against interviews as a method of data collection arguing that pre-existing texts are often available, that with appropriate imagination difficulties of access can be overcome and that the authentic appearance of interviews stem from 'the temptations of the interview society'. In the specific context of strategic discourse Samra-Fredericks (2003) too has argued in favour of using 'real-time' interaction of strategists rather than interview data. The relevance of interview data to anything but the interview can be raised: will not thinking/talking arising in an interview situation not be specifically constructed for that interview and perhaps bear no relationship with the constructions of thinking/talking used in the informant's day to day activity? Certainly thinking/talking engaged in during an interview is specifically constructed for the purpose of the interview. Yet Mintzberg (1973:31) work shows that managers' activity is "characterised by brevity, variety and fragmentation" so that strategic thinking is unlikely to be often vocalised, or collected, coherently in the wild. Von Krogh and Ross (1996:221) point out that "While most companies are proficient in carrying out operational conversations, they lack the mastery of strategic conversations." So diverse strategic talking is difficult to collect as naturally occurring data. As Holstein and Gubrium (1997:126) put it "By inciting narrative production, the interviewer may provoke interpretative development that might emerge too rarely to be effectively captured 'in their natural habitat', so to speak." Given that strategic thinking is such a reflective activity and that reflection is difficult for the pressurised strategist to engage with, such provocation may be particularly important in the study of strategic thinking. This may well explain why Knights and Morgan (1995), Hardy, Palmer et al. (2000), McAuley, Duberley et al. (2000) and

Vaara (2002) though taking different approaches to discourse analysis all used interviews in their empirical studies concerning strategic discourse.

The concerns of Silverman (2001) do raise issues for the construction of the atmosphere in which the interview is conducted and the roles to be played.

Pitt and Sims (1998) explored some roles used by managers. The role played by the interviewee will primarily be a matter for analysis as such roles will reflect and influence the discourses being used. There ought to be an attempt to discourage the interviewee from playing standardized roles where they constraint the variety of discourse. Such roles might include the roles of spokesperson for the organization, examinee seeking to give the interviewee the correct answers, a confessing penitent and a police informant exposing the evils of the organization. Of course any of those roles may usefully provide discourse diversity produced in the dyadic interaction between the interviewee and the researcher. The roles played by both ends of the dyad do of course interact but the roles played by the researcher are perhaps more worthy of attention at the data generation stage. Obvious dangers are the researcher taking the role of the teacher instructing the learner, or of the journalist providing the dangers and opportunities for organisational promotion, or of the judge morally appraising or of the examiner testing competency. The researcher's role could be one that conveys an admiration of the accomplishments of directors while provoking them to draw on as many strategic discursive resources as possible.

A conversation between two members of the same organization but without the researcher present would perhaps provide an opportunity for the capture of naturally occurring talk constructed primarily for the sense-making of members of the

organization, rather than the interest of the researcher. Furthermore a dyadic conversation is likely to be freer from organizational constraints than a larger gathering of company members or even a small group of three or four. Of course to gather the data the influence of the researcher will be felt in the presence of a recording device. A recording device is unlikely to have the incitement to discourse production discussed above and much data may need to be collected. Indeed records of non-interviewee interactions may involve the collection of so much data that the researcher becomes very active in the selection of data even if passive in its production.

A way to focus the data generated, yet capture it more naturally might be for the researcher to be an active facilitator of a group. Doyle and Sims (2002) recommend cognitive sculpting as a data generation method in creating in particular *strategic* knowledge. Cognitive sculpting does have several advantages: It encourages the generation of metaphors, it may activate non-verbal intelligences, and encourages a certain playfulness all of which may be important for strategic thought. Another advantage of cognitive sculpting is that it saves group participants from the pressures of social interaction reducing the need for eye-contact and the attribution of ideas to particular individuals. However cognitive sculpting is aimed at "... principally of elicitation and discovery for the benefit of the person whose model of the world is being elicited...." (Sims and Doyle 1995:117). Cognitive sculpting may not be as useful for the creation of knowledge for every academic purpose: it may be useful to create consensus in strategic discourse for "It may be easier to accept the ambiguity of objects than any ambiguity with words ....". (Sims and Doyle 1995:119). However where the aim is to note diversity in strategic discourse, cognitive sculpting and

indeed group discussion moderated by the researcher may be useful in encouraging diversity in an organizational setting.

Another route to obtaining strategic discourse is where the researcher is absent from a group meeting with an organization but has access to a complete audio or video record of the meeting (e.g. Samra-Fredericks 2003). Again this has the advantage of creating more naturally occurring data, discourse produced in a context where the participants really are involved in creating the strategic conversations of the organization. A problem is that the researcher is either deluged with data or selects occasions where that researcher believes 'strategic' discourse is likely to take place e.g. company away-days, conversations between senior managers on a major project or board room discussions. Picking such occasions necessitates that the researcher decides what is to be considered strategic and so limits us what the data can tell us about how practitioners construct the meaning of strategy more generally. The disadvantage may again be the organizational constraint on discourse diversity.

The lowest left-most cell of Table 1 contains official organizational data generated and perhaps activated by the researcher's presence. This would mostly obviously happen where the interview is conducted publicly by the researcher or if interviews are conducted with the knowledge that they will be published along with the identities of the participants (e.g. Kenny 2001). However it may well be an aspect of such individual public interviews that the interviewee is considerably disciplined in their talk by the dominant logic of the organization, even though the interview might be not a formal organizational activity.

Another class of data source which has been used in discourse analysis of strategy has been various written texts produced by the formal organization. This would include formal minutes of meeting, annual reports and press statements. Eriksson and Lehtimäki (2001) used such material in their study of a city government's strategic rhetoric. Hardy, Palmer et al. (2000) too in their work on the effects of changing strategic discourse supplemented interview data with such written materials. These materials are particularly useful for studying the effects of strategic discourse, as they in a sense represent the dominant discourse within the organization which is most likely to have effects (both intended and unintended). However formal texts are less likely to expose contemporary diversity of discourse, given that one of strategy's 'functions' is to present a rational face to the outside world (Knights and Morgan 1991).

The selection of appropriate data providers is an important issue. Often the study of strategy has taken an upper echelons approach and this is clearly appropriate if strategy is seen as a top management function. Critical discourse analysis, sensitises us to the power effects of strategy and alerts us to the potential usefulness of looking at how groups other than top management might resist and use strategic discourse. Of the studies of strategic discourses discussed above McAuley, Duberley et al. (2000) was interesting in this regard as the interviewees were professionals (mostly physicists) whose interest were under threat. If one is searching for diversity in strategic discourse the greater variety of interviewees, including perhaps employees who have exited the organization, might be the most appropriate. On the other hand sticking to the traditional top management interviewees might make any diversity discovered more interesting, and does not preclude a critical approach.

## Conclusions

Having reviewed the literature on differences in strategic thinking this paper makes the argument that diversity in strategic thinking can be further studied using an analysis of discourse approach.

An important point made in discursive approaches is that discourse is thinking. This is not to deny that discourse is also a social practice, nor does it necessarily deny that other non-discursive (or at least non-linguistic) activities can be thinking. Furthermore in applying this line of reasoning in the field of strategy the literature (Voss, Greene et al. 1983; Fletcher and Huff 1990; Gardner, 1995; Roos, Von Krogh et al. 1996) indicates that language may be particularly important.

The paper also argues that the differences in strategic thinking are under-explored for three sets of reasons. The first set of reasons is ontological: the tendency for organization to constraint variety in discourse. Such an argument has been made quite often and persuasively (Lyotard 1979 ; Tannen 1994; Von Krogh and Ross 1996). The second set of reasons is theoretical – much of the theory takes a nested view of organizational thinking that tends to focus on talk *in* organizations rather organizational talk that can be conducted in, and draw a variety of resources from, extra-organizational contexts (Palmer and Dunford 2002). Another set of reasons that the variety of strategic discourse may be underexplored is methodological: many of methods used to study strategic thinking tend to look for commonalities rather than differences. In at least some of its forms discourse analysis (e.g. Potter 1998) seeks out difference and variety.

This paper also highlighted some features of various discursive approaches that have been used in learning about strategy. The suitability of the active interview approach for studies aimed at the explication of variety in strategic discourse was particularly noted.

The exposure and description of variety in strategic discourse may - from a managerialist perspective - identify additional strategic resources potentially available to organizations which can be quite valuable (Prahalad and Bettis 1986). More critically the options discussed may point to a way to explore the nature and the extent of the suppression of diversity in strategic thinking even among management elites. The further evidence that discursive approaches might produce would complement what other methodologies have had to say about the homogenous (e.g. Spender 1989) or heterogeneous (e.g. Bowman and Ambrosini 1997) nature of strategic thinking.

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