



Unpacking complexity, pinning down the “elusiveness” of strategy

A grounded theory study in leisure and cultural organisations

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Abstract

Purpose – The dominant strategy discourse projects strategy as rational and calculable. However, leading academics conclude that strategy is “elusive” and “complex”. The purpose of this paper is to unravel strategy’s elusiveness and unpack its complexity through empirical hermeneutic investigation.

Design/methodology/approach – Strauss’ grounded theory is used to investigate leisure and cultural managers’ understanding of strategy-making. Data were collected through multiple interviews with senior managers of a local authority, and the organisation’s strategy documents were examined. The grounded theory’s transferability to organisations in, and outside, public leisure and culture was provisionally tested.

Findings – It was found that in making strategy, managers engage in purposeful, complex processes, here termed “navigational translation” which have mutually impacting relationships with organisational resources, the environment and managers’ character, explaining its complexity and elusiveness. The provisional testing of navigational translation’s transferability suggests that it has scope beyond public sector leisure and cultural strategy.

Research limitations/implications – As this research focused on theory generation, a main limitation is its small-scale testing of navigational translation’s transferability. Future research could test transferability with more organisations in leisure, culture and other fields.

Practical implications – This explanation provides a robust understanding of strategy that could improve practice. It empowers managers so that they are no longer subjugated to unrealistic expectations that rationalistic strategy tools will work in a complex world.

Originality/value – Navigational translation offers a richer, practitioner-oriented understanding of strategy, which utilises leading academic explanations from the various, competing and divergent strategy schools into a pragmatic, multiparadigmatic framework.

Keywords Management strategy, Corporate strategy

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Volberda and Elfring (2001, p. xi) state that over the past two decades “strategy as a field of study has fallen on hard times” a sentiment also articulated by Mintzberg (1994),



Hendry (1995), Stacey (1996) and others. An increasing number of academics realise that a significant part of strategy research produces fragmented, contradictory and conflicting models (Hendry, 1995; Volberda and Elfring, 2001; Mintzberg *et al.*, 2003; Hambrick, 2004). Indeed, in the past two decades, the very concept of purposeful strategy has been seriously undermined by the recognition that unintended organisational strategies often emerge out of social interactions and adaptation within and outside their boundaries (Levy, 1994; Stacey, 1996; Mintzberg *et al.*, 2003). Studies that predate the current mainstream strategy literature demonstrate that strategy processes, particularly in complex environments, are persistently non-rational, resembling what has come to be known as “muddling through” and “organised anarchy” (Lindblom, 1959; Cyert and March, 1963; Cohen *et al.*, 1972).

We posit that the fragmentary and contradictory representations of strategy may have contributed to its elusiveness. We find these representations in how strategy is defined, how it is formed, and in the intervening conditions that impact and shape strategy. In terms of strategy definitions, Platt *et al.* (1998, p. 518) take an extreme position in noting that strategy is so complex that it is “beyond human cognitive capacity”. However, there is no commonly accepted universal definition of strategy (O’Regan and Ghobadian, 2002). Instead, there are multiple and conflicting definitions, ranging from seeing strategy as an intended plan of action (Ansoff and McDonnell, 1990; Hax and Majluf, 1991; Porter, 1991) to unpredictable emergent patterns (Cyert and March, 1963; Stacey, 1996; Mintzberg *et al.*, 2003) to a perspective that exists only in the actors’ minds (Chaffee, 1985; Mintzberg *et al.*, 2003), highlighting its complexity and ambiguity (Knights and Morgan, 1991; Munro, 1995), and contributing to the confusion surrounding what strategy is and consequently how it is formed.

In terms of strategy formation, there are broadly five schools within the rational-behavioural continuum of thought: sequential rationality, rational problem-solving (Andrews, 1980; Huff and Reger, 1987; Ansoff and McDonnell, 1990; Littler *et al.*, 2000), incrementality and evolution (Quinn, 1981; Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Huff and Reger, 1987), organised anarchy (Lindblom, 1959; Cyert and March, 1963; Cohen *et al.*, 1972), and self-organisation (Levy, 1994; Stacey, 1996). There is a further debate surrounding the intervening conditions that impact and shape strategy. Some prominent academics privilege the resource-based view (Wernerfelt, 1984; Grant, 1991); others, the natural selection view (Porter, 1991) and yet others, managers’ intuition, values and beliefs (Hurst *et al.*, 1989; Singer, 1994). The fact that these schools have competing assumptions results in “debilitating fragmentation . . . in the field of strategic management” (Hambrick, 2004, p. 93), and may in itself point to the elusiveness of strategy. This fact has also led to a divergence between strategy research and managers’ perception of its utility (Hendry, 1995; Aram and Salipante, 2000; Huff, 2000; Partington, 2000; Starkey and Madan, 2001; Tranfield, 2002a). This is problematic for academics in this field, because strategic management is projected as an applied professional field whose principal purpose is to describe, predict and change organisational situations (Gopinath and Hoffman, 1995).

Together, with this disillusion with dominant rational strategy tools that fail to work in practice, and the lack of practical alternatives offered by critiques of these tools, momentum for the field of “strategy as practice” has grown in the academic community since the 1990s, inspired by “Mode 2” research, characterised by a constant flow between “the theoretical and the practical . . . discovery . . . in contexts where

knowledge is developed . . . and put to use, while results . . . fuel further theoretical advances” (Gibbons *et al.*, 1994, p. 9). Accordingly, proponents of the field of strategy as practice see strategy as social action encompassing richly interactive and contextually situated social behaviours (Barry and Elmes, 1997; Hendry, 2000; Tranfield, 2002b; Whittington, 2003). However, the strategy as practice school has yet to come up with definitions of strategy that move beyond specific contexts (Society for the Advancement of Management Studies, n.d.) (www.strategy-as-practice.org/).

There are increasing demands for interlinkages between these competing schools of strategy. Indeed, the Society for the Advancement of Management Studies (n.d.) (www.strategy-as-practice.org/) recommends that links be made from the strategy as practice school to mainstream strategy literatures. Lewis and Kelemen (2002) and Lewis and Grimes (1999) also argue for multiparadigm inquiry (as opposed to modern or postmodern paradigms). Multiparadigm inquiry advocates the use of “divergent paradigm lenses to contrast their varied representations and explore plurality and paradox” (Lewis and Kelemen, 2002, p. 252). Lewis and Kelemen (2002, p. 258) suggest that the main goals of a multiparadigm approach are:

(1) to encourage greater awareness of theoretical alternatives and thereby facilitate discourse and/or inquiry across paradigms, and (2) to foster greater understandings of organizational plurality and paradox.

Multiparadigm researchers apply an *accommodating* ideology, valuing paradigm perspectives for their potential to inform each other toward more encompassing theories.

Given the fragmented state of the strategy field and the various calls for linkages to be made across paradigms, we critically utilise the breadth of the strategy literature in a multiparadigm inquiry, alongside data generated from practitioners and their organisational archives in order to unpack the complexity of strategy and pin down its elusiveness.

Lewis and Grimes (1999, p. 673) identify three multiparadigm strategies: multiparadigm reviews, involving recognition of divides and bridges in existing theory; multiparadigm research, using paradigm lenses empirically to collect and analyze data and cultivate their diverse representations of organizational phenomena; and metaparadigm theory building – juxtaposing and linking conflicting paradigm insights within a novel understanding. Of these, we strive here towards the latter. In this way, we hope to contribute to knowledge not only about strategy, but about multiparadigm inquiry itself. Indeed, Lewis and Kelemen (2002, p. 252) note that multiparadigm inquiry remains under-utilized for (amongst other things) lack of exemplars that articulate an explicit philosophical framework for this approach, and lack of guidance regarding multiparadigm strategies. Below, in our methodology section and the following section that details the development of our grounded theory of strategy, we demonstrate how multi-paradigm inquiry can be operationalised.

Methodology

Grounded theory is often used where a totally fresh approach to the existing theory is warranted because existing theories do not adequately explain a phenomenon (as is the case with the dominant rational strategy discourse and its critiques) or when existing theory on the phenomenon being studied is minimal (as is the case in the strategy as practice field) (Glaser, 1992; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Indeed, a number of authors

have used grounded theory to study strategy for these two reasons (Andriopoulos and Lowe, 2000; Shaffer and Hillman, 2000; Rindova and Kotha, 2001; Tsai *et al.*, 2003; Dougherty and Takacs, 2004). We anticipate that our grounded theory on leisure and cultural strategy will shed new light on the concept, so far obscured by the dominant rational strategy discourse, its critiques, and the strategy as practice field.

Grounded theory bifurcated in the early 1990s with Glaser (1992) stressing the emergent nature of theory development, whereas Strauss (1994) emphasised the need for complex, systematic coding techniques, arguing that this gives the grounded theory rigour and conceptual density. The coding procedures as elaborated by Strauss' (1994) version of grounded theory inform the methodology of this paper (also elaborated in Strauss and Corbin, 1990). We chose Strauss' approach over Glaser's because whereas Glaser (1992) selects an area for study and allows issues to emerge during the research process, Strauss and Corbin (1990) prefer to identify a phenomenon or issue for study, so enabling the researcher to predetermine the general subject of enquiry before entering the research site. Given the vast literature on strategy, we already had a subject of enquiry before contacting managers, hence we deemed Strauss and Corbin's approach more appropriate.

We developed a grounded theory of strategy through the constant interplay between inductive and deductive thinking (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, pp. 111-12), where our concepts induced from the data triggered the deduction of other concepts which we verified against new data, producing "conceptually dense and well integrated" theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 42). We evidence this process of induction and deduction below when we explain how one of our grounded theory categories (translating) emerged. Whilst enabling complex and detailed descriptions of action, Strauss' (1994) grounded theory generates higher order abstractions through its coding methodology, so allowing generalisability (transferability) to be inferred.

We conducted our empirical research initially in a local authority in England focusing on strategy in the leisure and cultural field. We chose to study strategy in this field for two reasons. The first is that the strategy discourse of leisure and culture derives its epistemology from the main discourse of strategic management (Farnham and Horton, 1996; Donnelly, 1999), inheriting the latter's rational analytical characteristics and its critiques. Thus, leisure and cultural strategy may act as an exemplar for strategy as a whole. Secondly, the notions of leisure and culture are intrinsically complex – the former because it is embedded in wider historical, political and economic contexts (Cricher *et al.*, 1996), and the latter because of its elusive "webs of significance" (Geertz, 1993, p. 5). We felt that the more complex the object of knowledge of strategy practice, the greater the capacity of this empirical research to capture the complexity inherent in strategy, thus enabling the elusiveness of strategy to be pinned down.

We addressed the research problem of unravelling what managers perceive they do when making strategy by purposively, and then theoretically, sampling (Strauss, 1994, p. 21) for interview senior managers of the local authority from the Directorate of Leisure, Health and Community Services, and also incorporating significant input from the Chief Executive and Chairs of various Council Committees. Theoretical sampling eventually determined the sample size, resulting in interviews with fourteen senior managers and councillors. We developed a list of questions, based on concepts derived from the literature, commonsense knowledge, and our theoretical sensitivity (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 42) and experience[1] in the form of an aide memoir to guide the

semi-structured settings of the interviews (see Appendix). We negotiated access to the organisation and obtained permission at the corporate and individual manager's levels. We achieved informed consent that included agreement to record the interviews and publish the data and analysis, and that allowed participants to withdraw from the research[2]. We explained our general aim to the participants whilst negotiating access to their organisation. We conducted all interviews in the participants' offices, typically lasting up to three hours at a time with most extending over multiple sessions between 1996 and 2000. In asking managers over a long time period to reflect on their strategy-making, this enabled deep reflection on the complexity of this phenomenon[3].

We transcribed the interviews, and scrutinised the organisations' archives for strategy documents, comprising corporate strategy and leisure and cultural strategy plans, and strategy reviews. Preliminary coding, memoing and analysis of these texts allowed us in subsequent "theoretical sampling" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 176) to look for more properties and variations to saturate the emerging concepts. Through this process we uncovered the minutiae of strategy; the humdrum and the obvious as well as the insightful.

We achieved theoretical saturation (Strauss, 1994), as we: found no more data relevant to the categories that explained strategy, developed dense strategy categories, and established and validated relationships between the categories with reference to emerging theory and the strategy literature (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). We allowed a core category to emerge through rigorous application of Strauss's (1994) grounded theory's coding procedures. We explicate these procedures in the following section, both to illuminate the complexity of strategy and to enable readers to audit this study (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). Indeed, to date only a handful of studies have attempted to utilise grounded theory to understand strategy. Of these, most fail to offer an auditable trail of emerging concepts and categories (Kent and Hellriegel, 1991; Andriopoulos and Lowe, 2000; Rindova and Kotha, 2001; Tsai *et al.*, 2003; Dougherty and Takacs, 2004), or if they do so, fail to rigorously inter-relate categories to generate a core category (Schwarz and Nandhakumar, 2002; Heugens *et al.*, 2004), and so cannot be readily evaluated as to how good their grounded theories actually are.

We provisionally tested the transferability of the core category as an explanation of strategy, by interviewing senior managers from six other organisations[4] from the leisure and cultural industries between 1996 and 2000. We purposefully sampled these organisations to cover a good spectrum of leisure and cultural practices so widening the scope of the grounded theory beyond strategy in the public sector. We also, in the same period, tentatively tested the wider transferability of the core category to two organisations[5] from other industries.

Developing a grounded theory of strategy

Proliferation of concepts, pointing to complexity

We fragmented, examined, compared and conceptualised data, and categorised the emerging concepts using grounded theory's open coding procedure. We chose labels for these concepts which logically relate to the data, and were graphic enough to remind us quickly of our referent (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 67). For example, from the data "Strategy is about looking ahead . . ." (Head of Leisure Services Department, "HoLSD") we generated the concept of "gazing" into the future. In this way, our examination of the data resulted in a large number of concepts: we display an extract in Table I.

Data	Concepts
<p>Strategy is about looking ahead to determine what we believe we need to deliver in the future and how we actually achieve it</p> <p>So it's very much about having a vision as to the type of leisure provision we want to see...</p> <p>The Council does have a strategy, a strategic plan and has two year action plans</p> <p>Obviously it's wide ranging. So the strategic plan covers economic development, community safety ... the environment, arts and entertainment, one community ...</p> <p>The strategy is a process, it's continuous, a cycle of planning, resource allocation, of responding to political demands, also community pressure and expectations</p> <p>... once we have a strategy and a vision</p> <p>... over time we need to continue to refine that</p> <p>We carry out a lot of market research to find out if our strategy is still in accord with what people were telling us two years ago</p> <p>I also want to make sure that everybody has the opportunity to go and use those facilities. So I do feel quite strongly about it, and I think that my decisions will reflect that personal ideology</p> <p>I think it is nice to take a retrospective look, look forward and look back, and say how will we be judged? In terms of looking back we can never plan without looking at the historical context, and if the Council has a vision of that, we've got to look at what we've done in the past and hope we avoid making some of the same mistakes</p> <p>We have a lot of pressures on us. There are a lot of micro issues that we have to look at. (HoLSD)</p> <p>I see it as the 10, 15, 20 year outlook</p> <p>It's got to be the big picture, which then clearly has to cascade down to the smaller picture, making it happen – the building blocks</p> <p>But it's not easy, it's far easier to operate in the present day, it's more certain. (CE)</p>	<p>Purposeful, gazing into future, scanning environment</p> <p>Determining goals and direction,</p> <p>Planning, translating plans into action</p> <p>Envisioning</p> <p>Planning, choosing</p> <p>Long-term and short-term strategies (duration)</p> <p>Wide ranging,</p> <p>Multi-dimensional</p> <p>Continuous, cyclical process</p> <p>Planning, deploying resources, conditioned by political, social and cultural environment</p> <p>Plan, envisioning,</p> <p>Continuous revising</p> <p>Researching, learning</p> <p>Reviewing purpose</p> <p>Influence of manager's character, values, beliefs and ideology</p> <p>Temporal resonance</p> <p>Uncertain outcome</p> <p>Planning</p> <p>Past influence, envisioning</p> <p>Reflecting</p> <p>Learning</p> <p>Influence of external demands</p> <p>Fragmenting into details</p> <p>Gazing, long term duration, emergence of purpose</p> <p>Envisioning the whole picture, broad, integrative</p> <p>Fragmenting into details</p> <p>Resonating in space, realising vision</p> <p>Assembling units</p> <p>Coping with uncertainty</p>

Table I.
Induction: generating
concepts from data
(extract from interviews)

Scrutinising the emerging concepts, we found that some emerged as provisional strategy categories by having the capacity to subsume other concepts as their “subcategories” “properties” (characteristics pertaining to a category) and “dimensions” (locations of properties along a continuum) (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 61). We labelled the emerging provisional categories as: “gazing and envisioning” “interconnecting and interrelating” “power exercise” “translating” and “navigating”. We developed all these categories, allowing them to emerge into conceptually dense strategy categories. However, because of space constraints, we demonstrate in some detail the emergence of only one category, that of “translating”. We underline concepts that translating subsumed as its properties and subcategories as they first appear; show data in quotes, and explain our deductions and verifications.

We induced that in translating, managers were concerned with transforming ideas and thoughts into a desired purpose or vision and planning the required activities to realise that vision: “Strategy is about looking ahead to determine what we believe we need to deliver in the future and how do we actually achieve it” (HoLSD). We deduced from the word “how” in this quote that, while envisioning, managers were also thinking of translating the vision into reality and of the required actions to achieve it, such as planning and deploying resources. These deduced concepts were then verified through induction from subsequent data: “The Council does have . . . a strategic plan and has two year action plans . . . We would like a little more certainty in terms of resources for the next five years . . . to do the strategy” (HoLSD). We also induced from this data the translating concepts of duration and coping with uncertainty.

Through this interplay between induction, deduction, and verification we elevated the concept of translating to a provisional strategy category because it displayed a higher conceptual capacity to subsume the above concepts and many others as its subcategories and properties. Furthermore, each of these concepts had one or more dimensional ranges. To illustrate; the property “purpose” has “urgent – non-urgent” and “clear – unclear” dimensional ranges, allowing the purpose of translating to be described as having varying degrees of urgency and clarity. Each time translating occurred it would have a unique profile consisting of the specific location on the dimensional range of each of its properties, conferring on translating a large number of specific profiles dictated by the surrounding contexts. We show an extract of this in Table II.

We further refined the provisional categories into “conceptually dense” strategy categories by the process of “constant comparison” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, pp. 109, 62-3), offering an interplay between data, induced concepts, the strategy literature, commonsense knowledge and our theoretical sensitivity. We present an extract of the process pertaining to the category of translating below.

“It’s got to be the big picture, which then clearly has to cascade down to the smaller picture; making it happen – the building blocks” (CE). This data concurs with Mintzberg *et al.*’s (2003, p. 6) view of strategy as a perspective, an abstraction that exists only in the minds of interested parties. We induced that managers translated their thoughts into action by envisaging strategy as an all-encompassing, broad process (“the big picture”), and they made strategy by progressively fragmenting this big picture (“cascade down to the smaller picture”). We deduced that this fragmentation produced more controllable operations; and that managers then interconnected and interrelated, integrating these fragments (“the building blocks”) to realise the vision (“making it happen”). Here, managers’ view of strategy-making echoes aspects of the planning approach to strategy,

Category	Subcategory	Properties	Dimensional range		
Translating		Duration	Long	Short	
		Fragmentary	High	Low	
		Integrative	High	Low	
	Purpose	Urgent	Clear	Non-urgent	Unclear
		Deliberate	Emergent	Small	
		Cyclical	Large		
		...			
	Reviewing and revising	Scope	Wide	Narrow	
		...			
	Inducing complexity and resonance	Impact	Large	Small	
		...			
	Deploying resources	Effectiveness	High	Low	
		...			
Making choices	Type	Good	Poor		
	...				
Planning and monitoring	Control	Tight	Loose		
	...				
	...				
Reflecting and learning	Potential	High	Low		
	...				
Scanning	Focus	Internal	External		
	...				
Motivating	Empowerment	High	Low		
	...				
Coping with complexity	Ability	High	Low		

Table II.
Labelling the
sub-categories, properties
and dimensions of
“Translating” (extract)

where guided by corporate (integrative) purpose, a comprehensive and exhaustive (fragmentary) analysis of the environment and the organisation’s resources forms the basis for objective evaluation and selection of choices and strategies (Andrews, 1980; Huff and Reger, 1987; Ansoff and McDonnell, 1990).

We further deduced that the translating process was one of spatial resonance where managers saw the grand vision progressively filtering down (“cascade down”) to encompass all organisational levels. This practice view finds support in Stacey’s (1996, pp. 2-3) understanding of strategy as part of a complex system, highly sensitive to specific small changes in the system’s environment, amplifying them – i.e. inducing resonance – which completely alter the system’s behaviour; it also comes close to Quinn’s (1981) incremental approach to strategy.

We also induced a temporal resonance of translating as managers engaged in the interplay between past, present and future times; reflecting and learning: “... it’s nice to take a retrospective look, look forward and look back and see how we will be judged. ... we’ve got to look at what we’ve done in the past and ... avoid making ... the same mistakes” (HoLSD).

In translating, we induced that, managers were also coping with fluidity and complexity: “nobody can see any clear direction; nobody has any idea what’s going to happen” (Chair of the Strategic Board, “CoSB”). Because of uncertainty, fluidity and complexity; managers showed constant concern with innovating and incorporating flexibility: “... the emphasis has moved ... on building a big empty square ... with

a lot of easily changeable facilities within it, you can meet the changing demands fairly quickly” (Chair of Leisure, Health and Community Services, “CoLHCS”). Nonaka and Toyama (2003) consider continuous innovation as the sole business of the knowledge-creating organisation; and Kay (1993, p. 29) recognises the importance of innovation and flexible “architecture” as a source of sustainable competitive advantage.

In this way, through inducing and deducing concepts from data from one interview (or document) and verifying them with data from another interview (or document), we have uncovered a range of complex and varied mental and physical processes subsumed by translating, which contributed to its emergence as a significant strategy category. We have similarly developed the other provisional categories (i.e. gazing and envisioning, interconnecting and interrelating, power exercise, and navigating) into conceptually dense strategy categories. As with translating, each of these categories had a large number of properties and dimensions giving rise to countless specific profiles. This profile-specificity is significant as it points to the complexity of strategy. Following Strauss (1994), we next explored the relationships between each category and the concepts it subsumed to generate further insight into strategy’s complexity.

Finding linkages and unravelling elusiveness

We analysed each category, using the axial coding procedure of the “coding paradigm” (Strauss, 1994, pp. 27-8), where concepts that relate to a category are classified as that category’s properties, context, causal conditions, intervening conditions, actions/interactions or outcomes/consequences. This resulted in cumulative knowledge about relationships within the category and between categories. Whilst, space constraints prevent grounding all the categories in the data, we partially evidence the category of translating, so allowing this category to be audited. We then offer a summary of this procedure relating to each of the emerging categories to convey a flavour of these categories necessary to appreciate the grounded theory that finally emerged.

Category: translating. We found that one of the many causal conditions of translating was gazing and envisioning. An emerging vision or purpose required translating: “I want to care for the most fortunate and the less fortunate in society” (CE). Learning, through gazing and envisioning, about community demand and demographic structure caused translating: “. . . strategy will emanate from the community at large . . . in terms of the make up of the community, the demographic aspects, the wealth or otherwise” (DoLHCS).

Identifying the properties of the causal condition of gazing and envisioning and their dimensional locations was important as the latter produced unique translating activities.

We induced, for instance, that the properties of gazing and envisioning included: having purpose and the four-year election cycle: “if we had an election in May and the Council changes political balance, you have different view points coming forward” (CoLHCS); and duration: “The Council does have . . . a strategic plan and has two year action plans” (CE).

The specific properties forming the context under which translating took place comprised being integrative: “It’s got to be the big picture” (CE); and intended: “we actually intend to deliver that” (DHoLSD). Other properties included being: cyclical, incremental, differentiating, fragmentary, broad, fluid, instrumental,

continuous, cohesive, multidimensional, complex, creative and formal. Each property has a dimensional range along which translating was located.

The actions/interactions that managers took when translating included:

- planning and deploying resources: “The strategy is ... continuous, a cycle of planning, resource allocation” (HoLSD); and
- researching, reviewing and revising: “We carry out a lot of market research to find out if our strategy is still in accord with what people were telling us two years ago” (HoLSD).

Managers were also creating and innovating, delegating and collaborating, reflecting, building in flexibility, juggling, co-ordinating and facilitating, motivating and rewarding, designing structures, systems and procedures, and other translating activities.

The above actions/interactions resulted in outcomes/consequences that were not always predictable or intended, such as:

- learning, understanding new meanings and inducing new complexity: “... going out, asking people’s opinions and starting off with an idea ... and finding out ... that people don’t ... like the idea, we can back-track and take another decision” (CoLHCS); and
- motivated workforce resulting from delegating: “... lots of ideas and with a fairly free hand on how to deliver ... made motivation very high” (DHoLSD).

Other outcomes included: flexibility and rigidity; creating intended/unintended realities; enhanced position, and emergence of new purpose/vision.

A number of intervening conditions facilitated or constrained translating and affected its outcome, such as:

- managers’ character (personality, disposition and temperament) and social and cultural background: “You bring a whole load of baggage with you ... You will make the decisions. ... according to where you come from” (CoSB); and
- resources: “... the resource element is again dictated to us and has been cut back in real terms” (DHoLSD).

Other intervening conditions comprised: political environment, community expectations, unpredictable or unintended outcomes; changing values, beliefs or purpose; ties with the past; and unforeseen circumstances.

Category: gazing and envisioning. The causal conditions that gave rise to the strategy category of gazing and envisioning included the need for new purpose as a result of changing political, legal or demographic environments. The properties of the causal conditions were induced and/or deduced by focusing on the category and systematically questioning the data in terms of, for instance, the degree of urgency of the change in purpose and the rapidity and frequency of the change in the specific environment. Similarly, unearthing the specific properties of gazing and envisioning found it to include: direction, ideology, duration and others; each property having a dimensional range along which gazing and envisioning may be located. Together, these formed the context under which gazing and envisioning took place and influenced the actions/interactions that needed to be taken. The latter included: scanning the environment, and searching and

looking intently for similarities and patterns. Undoubtedly, these and other actions and arising interactions resulted in certain outcomes or consequences that were not always predictable or intended, such as: developing a clearer picture of the future and finding similarities and patterns. These actions/interactions were facilitated or constrained by intervening conditions that impacted gazing and envisioning, such as lack of clarity of purpose and manager's inability to gaze or envision.

Category: interconnecting and interrelating. Similarly, the causal conditions that gave rise to the strategy category of interconnecting and interrelating were the need to translate what has been envisioned to a new reality. The properties of the causal conditions included being creative, innovative, incremental, integrative, fluid, and others. The specific properties of interconnecting and interrelating that resulted in managers acting in the way shown below included being instrumental, specific, continuous, calculable, multi-dimensional, and others. In interconnecting and interrelating, managers were attempting to make links between relevant forces in the external and internal environments; and plan, co-ordinate, respond and learn. They were engaged in filtering out irrelevancies and making choices. They were coping with complexity and fluidity, and reflecting on creating a new reality. In the process, they might have dampened some influences and escalated others, and induced more complex and fluid situations; all the time interacting with various intervening conditions such as changing purpose and environment.

Category: navigating. Interconnecting and interrelating often led to the strategy category of navigating. The properties of this causal condition included being fragmentary, differentiating, continuous, integrative, instrumental, situation specific, and others. The specific properties of navigating which formed the context under which the navigating actions were undertaken included: being focused, multi-directional, cyclical, ideological, and orienting. Managers' actions and interactions when navigating included scanning the environment, mapping destinations, determining direction, and correcting or changing orientation. They were manipulating, manoeuvring, measuring and controlling. They would have collaborated and delegated, made choices, planned and deployed resources. They were devising ways to cope with fluidity and complexity, exercising power and striving to survive, amongst other navigating activities. The outcomes of these actions and interactions included arriving (or failing to arrive) at destinations and survival or potential demise. Navigational actions/interactions were variously constrained by limited or inappropriate resources and competences, changes in the environment, unclear purpose or direction, and other intervening conditions.

Category: power exercise. When navigating and translating, managers were exercising power – a strategy category. A causal condition of power exercise was the need to maintain or enhance their personal position and undermine the positions of other people, each with varying properties of urgency, survival needs, duration, and others. The context under which power exercise was undertaken, and forming its specific properties, included: being interactive, specific, defensive, offensive, political, ideological, and others. In exercising power, managers were manipulating and cajoling, dictating and controlling, taking the lead to get things done, and establishing presence and authority, amongst other actions/interactions. Power exercise activities were impacted by a number of intervening conditions such as the emergence of unrecognised power centres and unintended play of power and politics. These affected the outcomes of power exercise, including: having an enhanced (or undermined)

position; generating new relationships (intended or unintended); generating satisfaction (or not), and others.

Emerging strategy explanation: complex inter-relationships

We next formed a core category that subsumed all the categories and provided an explanation of strategy in leisure and culture. We achieved this through selective coding, a procedure that involves: validating and refining the relationships between categories, allowing the emergence of the core category; and then systematically relating the core category to the other categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). We present an extract of this process below. We refined and validated the categories (here shown in italics) via the strategy literature.

A principal activity in strategy is the deployment of resources through goal-directed and coordinated actions (MacCrimmon, 1993). The concept of “having goals” was a causal condition of *gazing and envisioning* and the concept of “coordination” an action/interaction of *interconnecting and interrelating*. Proponents of the resource-based view of strategy (Wernerfelt, 1984; Grant, 1991) also strongly argue that the resources of an organisation form the foundation of its strategy; we also found the concept “resources” as an intervening condition which impacts *all the strategy categories* of this study. As “goal-directed” strategy had as a prerequisite a defined purpose or intent. Hardy (1996, p. S5) states that the formation of intent depends on persuading other people on the basis of tenuous or ambiguous data. The concept “persuading” was an action/interaction of *interconnecting and interrelating* and *power exercise*. Also, the “tenuous or ambiguous” data on which intent was arguably formed suggests that managers manoeuvred, manipulated and cajoled (Organised Anarchy School); all were action/interaction concepts of *power exercise* and *navigating*.

Advocates of the natural selection view of strategy (Porter, 1991) see the environment as a primary influence on strategy; we also found the environment as an intervening condition in *all the strategy categories*. In their response to environmental events, we found managers engaged in *interconnecting and interrelating, exercising power, navigating* and *translating*. Quinn (1981) finds that organisational strategies evolve through logical incremental decisions allowing the coming together of internal decisions and external events to create a widely shared consensus for action. We found incremental actions a characteristic of *interconnecting and interrelating* and *translating* (Incrementality and Evolution School). We also posit that the “coming together” of internal and external events is synonymous with “finding a fit” or “alignment” between these contexts. Hardy (1996, p. S3) argues that the process of alignment and the changes it embodies are crucial to successful strategy-making; this view is also central to the rational approaches to strategy (Huff and Reger, 1987; Ansoff and McDonnell, 1990). We found that the concept of “finding a fit” or “alignment” between the internal and external contexts (Sequential Rationality and Rational Problem-solving Schools) was an action/interaction of *interconnecting and interrelating* and *navigating*.

While deploying resources and aligning, managers were looking towards creating a desired future outcome, which McMaster (1996, p. 151) urges managers to develop through “effective foresight”; “developing foresight” influenced by the intervening condition of manager’s character and values, was an outcome concept of the category *gazing and envisioning*. McMaster (1996, p. 153) anticipates that maximum rewards will be reaped by people who develop organisational forms that have foresight and a future reach which will enable them to generate and use information imaginatively,

influence their environment and thus have impact on the structure of the future. “Generating information” indicates “new understanding of meaning” and “learning”; both were outcomes of *all the strategy categories*. “Influencing the environment” and “having impact on future structure” are terms indicated by the concept of “creating intended/unintended reality” which was an action/interaction of *translating* and *navigating*.

Managers reflect on events and actions, engage in sense-making, learn, create knowledge (Stacey, 1996; Weick, 2002; Nonaka and Toyama, 2003), and politically interact allowing new strategic directions to emerge (Pfeffer, 1992; Stacey, 1996). “Reflecting” “sense-making” “learning” and “creating” (Incrementality and Evolution, and Organised Anarchy Schools) were actions/interactions and outcomes of *all the strategy categories*.

Managers engage in planning activities (Ansoff and McDonnell, 1990); “planning” (Sequential Rationality and Rational Problem-solving Schools) was particularly recognised as an action/interaction of the categories *interconnecting and interrelating*, *translating* and *navigating*. As they act and interact, unexpected outcomes emerge (Stacey, 1996; Mintzberg *et al.*, 2003) requiring reorientation, and so on from “day-to-day” (Stacey, 1996). “Interact” was a property of *interconnecting and interrelating* and *power exercise*, whilst “emerge” was an outcome of *gazing and envisioning* and *power exercise* (Incrementality and Evolution, and Self-organisation Schools), “orienting” an action/interaction of *power exercise* and *navigating*, and “continuous” (from day to day) a property of *all the strategy categories*.

In the process of validating and refining the strategy categories via the strategy literature, we found that we have called upon the full breadth of this literature from the various schools. Through this process, we found the strategy categories and their component concepts to be interlocked in circular and complex relationships (Stacey, 1996). We have shown a glimpse of these relationships in the above extract; each relationship was validated by some paradigm from the strategy literature.

We systematically related the categories to each other, and through close inspection we found that *translating* and *navigating* together subsumed the categories of *gazing and envisioning*, *interconnecting and interrelating* and *power exercise*. Indeed, as Table III illustrates, the categories of *translating* and *navigating* together embodied all the subcategories and properties which relate to all the other categories. Therefore, the categories that leisure and cultural strategy embraced were all integrated around *translating*, *navigating* or both. Since, the core category should have a higher conceptual power than either *translating* or *navigating*, we have labelled the core category that best described leisure and cultural strategy “*navigational translation*” (Table III). In developing leisure and cultural strategy, we found managers engaging in translational activities that were navigated.

As mentioned earlier, we provisionally tested the transferability of our grounded theory to six other leisure and cultural organisations. We again applied Strauss’ (1994) coding techniques, and the same categories and core category that formed the grounded theory of strategy in the local authority organisation emerged as a grounded theory of strategy in these organisations. Thus, the core category displayed a capacity to account for variations in the strategy phenomenon across these organisations, allowing it to potentially become a more general, formal grounded theory of strategy within leisure and cultural organisations. We also mentioned earlier that we tentatively tested the wider transferability of our grounded theory by interviewing senior

Category	Category	Category	Category	Category	Category	Core category
Gazing and envisioning	Interconnecting and interrelating	Power exercise	Translating	Navigating	Navigational translation	
Properties/subcategories Intended/unintended	Properties/subcategories Intended/unintended	Properties/subcategories Intended/unintended	Properties/subcategories Intended/unintended	Properties/subcategories Intended/unintended	Properties/subcategories Intended/unintended	
-	-	-	Cyclical	Cyclical	Cyclical	
-	Multidimensional	-	Multidimensional	Multidimensional	Multidimensional	
Resonating	Resonating	-	Resonating	Resonating	Resonating	
Complex	Complex	Complex	Complex	Complex	Complex	
Integrative	Integrative	-	Integrative	Integrative	Integrative	
Ideological	-	Ideological	-	Ideological	Ideological	
Fragmentary	Fragmentary	-	Fragmentary	Fragmentary	Fragmentary	
-	-	-	Cohesive	-	Cohesive	
-	-	Defensive/offensive	-	Defensive/offensive	Defensive/offensive	
-	-	Overt/covert	-	Overt/covert	Overt/covert	
-	-	-	Formal	-	Formal	
-	Deploy resources	-	Deploy resources	Deploy resources	Deploy resources	
-	Plan	-	Plan	Plan	Plan	
-	Emergence	Emergence	-	Emergence	Emergence	
...	

Table III.
Developing the core
category, navigational
translation (extract)

managers from two organisations in other service industries (health and education) and found that it represented strategy in those organisations, so increasing its potential of becoming a general theory of strategy.

Discussion and conclusion: unravelling the elusiveness of strategy

Our construction of navigational translation as an explanation of strategy emerged through analysing managers' understanding of their activities as they engaged in making strategy. Whilst space constraint prevents an exhaustive presentation of data and generation of concepts, the emerging core category of navigational translation is auditable given the data selected for presentation, and the explanations provided on the various coding stages. Others may, therefore, draw their own conclusions regarding the plausibility of our interpretation.

We offer, in the concept of navigational translation, a number of contributions to knowledge, discussed below:

- A richer classification of strategy as purposeful and complex processes that give rise to intended and unintended outcomes because of the fluidity and inter-connectedness of the processes involved in strategising.
- A strategy concept that utilises, rather than discards, divergent and competing paradigms of strategy from the rational schools and their critiques from the behavioural schools, depending on the context of strategising, into a more comprehensive framework that unpacks the complexity of strategy, pinning down its elusiveness.
- A strategy concept that, by utilising divergent and competing paradigms on strategy, demonstrates that multiparadigm inquiry is useful in explaining complex organizational phenomena.
- By providing a multiparadigmatic framework of strategy, the grounded theory of navigational translation offers guidance as to how multiparadigmatic analysis can be operationalised.

These contributions are discussed below.

Analysis of the literature showed that academics see strategy as complex, ambiguous and therefore elusive. Our empirical study unravels the notion of strategy's complexity, and by offering a fuller insight into strategy, pins down its elusiveness. The strategy that emerged from this study is a set of purposeful and complex processes of navigational translation. In translating ideas into structured thought, managers engaged in gazing and envisioning, and by translating thought into action they were interconnecting, interrelating and navigating. As they translated and navigated, they were simultaneously exercising power. These were the main categories that emerged to describe strategy in the examined organisations.

Whilst grounded theories do not seek generalisability (especially Glaser, 1992), Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 23) suggest that transferability of the core category should be sought. Our provisional testing of navigational translation as an explanation of strategy indicates that it is transferable across both public and private sectors in leisure and culture and beyond, to health and education. However, we note that strategy formation in leisure and culture may be sector-specific in its complexity, dealing as it does with the intrinsically complex concept of culture. Similarly, health and education

are multi-dimensional concepts with varied goals and constraints. It is possible that in other sectors where the object of strategising is not so complex, our grounded theory may not be transferable, with some strategy schools appearing as more dominant than others. As such, we stress that navigational translation should not be regarded as a metanarrative of strategy: as Lewis and Keleman (2002, p. 261) observe, a challenge for multiparadigm inquiry is that the resulting theory may “appear as a closed and authoritative metanarrative”. Rather, navigational translation is our interpretation of the data and strategy literature within a given set of UK-specific contexts.

We noted earlier that the strategy field suffers from debilitating fragmentation. Indeed, in developing a rich, grounded theory of strategy – navigational translation – we show that it also draws upon the full breadth of the strategy literature. This reinforces the view that any one of these explanations is only a very partial representation of what really happens (Hax and Majluf, 1991; Hendry, 1995; Hambrick, 2004, and others), whilst also demonstrating that each contributes towards our understanding of some aspect of strategy. As such, our grounded theory of navigational translation is an example of metaparadigm theory building – juxtaposing and linking conflicting paradigm insights within a novel understanding (Lewis and Grimes, 1999). Here, multiparadigm inquiry has proven useful in explaining a complex organizational phenomenon, particularly as it “strives to respect opposing approaches and juxtapose the partial understandings they inspire. Paradigm lenses may reveal seemingly disparate, but interdependent facets of complex phenomena” (Lewis and Keleman, 2002, p. 258). Thus, we contribute to management knowledge by delivering a rich classification of strategy, generated by examining managers’ understanding and reflections on their practice and utilising competing strategy paradigms. In this way, navigational translation produces a more encompassing and practice-oriented framework of strategy that, by unpacking its complexity, pins down its elusiveness.

This study also has a significant implication for managers. Whilst many academics have problematised the idea that strategy is a rational process (Cohen *et al.*, 1972; Hendry, 1995; Whittington, 2003), nevertheless, many managers continue to struggle to make sense of, and implement, unrealistic text-book tools on strategy, most of which assume that strategy is a rational process (Starkey and Madan, 2001; MacLean *et al.*, 2002; Tsai *et al.*, 2003). In highlighting the inadequacy of the strategy discourse to capture the totality of strategy we, through navigational translation, add to this discourse by offering explanations as to why strategies may or may not work. In understanding strategy as navigational translation, managers can see that strategy is a set of complex processes impacted by a fluid and interlocking set of intervening conditions that are beyond managerial control and that may change the dimensional location of the properties of the strategy categories so generating unintended outcomes. This usefully alerts managers to the complexity of strategy and hence the problems inherent in rational strategy formation. In doing so, we empower managers so that they are no longer subjugated to the dominant academic discourse on strategy (Knights and Vurdubakis, 1994), which generates unrealisable expectations that rationalistic strategy tools will work in a highly complex and interconnected world.

Notes

1. The first author worked in senior managerial positions in the private sector, including the posts of Executive Director, Managing Director, and Principal Partner. In his current role as

Principal Lecturer, he is involved in decisions with organisation-wide strategy implications. The second author worked with a small promotions company in a management capacity (1996-1998); and has had strategic management experience in her roles as Course Director for taught Masters in Media and Culture, and Departmental Marketing Coordinator.

2. One manager did in fact withdraw and was not included in this research.
3. Whilst we were aware that the rationalist and behavioural literature on strategy has been found wanting, we did not want this to bias our research, and managers were asked questions that allowed the rationalist and behavioural paradigms to emerge (see Appendix). As Lewis and Keleman (2002, p. 263) observe, researchers conducting multiparadigm analysis: "must remain acutely aware of their own predilections, stating their frame of reference up front and stressing the insights and biases enabled by each paradigm lens".
4. We interviewed a director of a leisure institute, a top executive of a government cultural department, the marketing manager of an airline business, the coordinator of a children's play charity, a director of a national sport organisation, and the chief executive of a sport, leisure and conference centre.
5. We interviewed the chief executive of a NHS hospital and the chief executive of a HE institution.

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Further reading

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Appendix. Interview aide memoir

We used the following questions as a guide in the interviews. These questions were not always asked in the same format as presented below, as we wanted to keep the interviews as informal and conversational as possible to generate more insight (REF). Varying lengths of time were spent on each question, according to the responses received. Usually, these questions extended over several interviews, depending upon the depth of response received and other lines of thought generated. Not all questions were asked in all the interviews, again dependent on the interviewees' responses:

- What business are you in? [What is the nature of the organisation?] (This easy question was asked first to warm up the interviewee and establish rapport.)
- How do you perceive strategy? [What do you understand by strategy?]
- Does your organisation have a strategy? If you have a strategy, how do you form it?
- What influences strategy; what is the nature of these influences? Are there any dominant influences; do these influences change with time? Do they interrelate with each other (if so, how), or do they remain separate?
- Do strategy decisions impact these influences? If so, how do they do that; what do you find from your own experience?
- Can you describe your usual way of making strategic decisions? How do you make strategy decisions? (This is to explore if the interviewee uses strategy theories, or if they have their own ways derived from their own experience.)
- Do you see strategy as a process? (Some strategy theorists see strategy as a tool rather than a process.)

- Does strategy theory help in making your decisions? If so, how does it help; if not, why not? Do you have your own practice theory? (This question was only asked if interviewees identified that they used theory in making their strategy.)
- Did your strategy evolve over time? If so, can you identify where your strategy evolved from? Would you explain? (This difficult question encouraged the interviewee to reflect deeply on possible causalities.)
- How far in the future does your strategy take you; how clear is the direction and goal of strategy? How long is the long-term of the organisation?
- To what extent do the day to day management decisions relate to the strategy of the organisation?
- How does the present performance of your organisation compare with past performance, how does it compare with future expectations?
- Some people think that conditions of stability and predictability are essential for business success. Others see instability and unpredictability as preconditions for success. What do you find from your own experience?
- Can you describe the culture within your organisation? [By culture, we mean values, beliefs, ideologies, etc.]
- To what extent is your strategy tied up with the culture of the organisation?
- Can you tell me about your background; do you think it bears any influence on the decisions you make? Do you think your decisions reflect your personal beliefs and values; can you explain?
- Are strategic decisions taken by individuals or by groups; would you explain?
- Do you engage in planning? If so, are you able to describe the process of the last planning period; were you able to achieve your goals?

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