

**Strategy as Practice and the Narrative Turn**

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## **Strategy as Practice and the Narrative Turn**

### **Abstract**

Narrative is believed to be critical to sensemaking in organizations, and previous research suggests that multiple levels and forms of narrative are inherent to the practice of strategy. For example, narrative can be found in the micro-stories told by managers and others as they interact and go about their daily work, in the formalized techniques for strategy-making whether or not the techniques are explicitly story-based, in the accounts people give of their work as strategy practitioners, and in the artefacts produced by strategizing activity. After exploring the various applications of narrative approaches to strategy in previous research, we review two concepts that might serve to integrate micro and macro levels of analysis in a multi-layered view where narrative is seen as a way of giving meaning to the practice that emerges from sense-making activities, of constituting an overall sense of direction or purpose, of refocusing organizational identity, and of enabling and constraining the ongoing activities of actors.

## INTRODUCTION

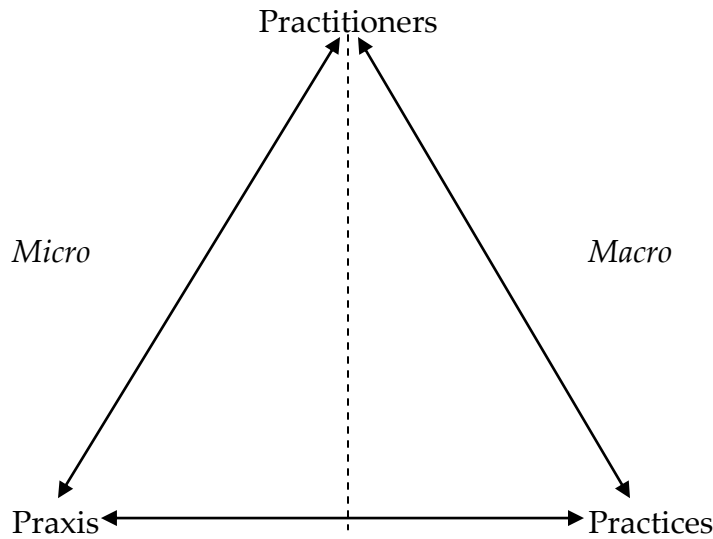
Recent work introducing the notion of “strategy as practice” has taken issue with the traditional view that strategy is a property of organizations, and has suggested that it should be thought of as something that people do (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Rouleau, 2005; Whittington, 2006; Johnson et al. 2007). This change in emphasis follows trends in other areas of management research, such as marketing (Allen, 2002), management learning (Argyris, 1999), accounting (Hopwood and Miller, 1994) and technology (Orlikowski, 2000) that have broadened their approach to include an examination of human activity and practices (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Whittington, 2006). Likewise, researchers in strategy have begun to draw on theories of practice to re-evaluate the way in which strategy has been researched to date and to consider strategy as a human activity through the lens of social practice.

At the same time, it is clear that much of the actual *doing* of strategy in organizations, takes place in the form of talk, text and conversation, thus linking the idea of strategy as practice with a body of literature within organization studies that looks at such human interaction through ideas of storytelling and narrative (Czarniawska, 1995; 1998; 2004; Barry and Elmes, 1997). Indeed, narrative or discursive approaches have always been loosely associated with the idea of strategy as practice (e.g., Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Rouleau, 2005; Laine and Vaara, 2007; Whittington, 2006), and narrative researchers have contributed, sometimes in not fully recognized ways to understanding the practice of strategy (e.g., Boje, 1991; O’Connor, 2002; Mangham, 1995).

We argue here that there is room for deeper exploration of this connection. Specifically, how can a focus on narrative and storytelling improve understanding of the practice of strategy? Can a narrative framework supply theoretical and methodological tools for connecting the micro everyday activities of strategy practitioners with the broader field of institutionalized strategy practices that several writers have suggested is needed (Whittington, 2006; Johnson et al., 2007)? In this paper, we review existing contributions of narrative studies to the understanding of strategy as practice, and consider the potential of two alternative integrative concepts or frameworks grounded in narrative ideas that offer bridges between the micro and macro levels and that might assist in developing an integrative framework for strategy as practice: the notion of narrative infrastructure (Deuten and Rip, 2000) and that of metaconversation (Robichaud et al., 2004).

A first starting point for this exploration is the tripartite conceptual framework for strategy as practice articulated by Whittington (2006) in terms of reciprocal relationships spanning micro and macro levels of organization between the key elements of *praxis*, *practices* and *practitioners*, as shown in Figure 1. Specifically, Whittington (2006) argues that a practice perspective on strategy should incorporate consideration of how strategy “*practitioners*” (most often senior managers, board members and consultants but also others) draw on more or less institutionalized strategic “*practices*” (routines, tools or discourses at organizational and extra-organizational levels) in idiosyncratic and creative ways in their strategy “*praxis*” (specific activities such as meetings, retreats, conversations, talk, interactions, behaviours) to generate what is then conceived of as strategy, constituting in the process both themselves as strategy practitioners, and potentially their own activities as the seeds for new strategy practices.

**Figure 1: Reciprocal Relationships in Strategy as Practice**



A second more methodological starting point for this study is Barry and Elmes (1997) well-known article on ‘*strategy as narrative*’. This article urged researchers to consider strategy from a narrative perspective. We reasoned that recent work adopting a narrative approach to strategy would tend to cite this work. We therefore collected together the corpus of 123 articles citing Barry and Elmes (1997) (as of November 2007) as an initial database for review and analysis for this paper. At the same time, the reference list in Barry and Elmes (1997) as well as those of other works collected in the first stage were also explored to complete the set of relevant

materials. While theoretical and methodological texts were useful to position of the nature and role of narrative, we were particularly interested in empirical exemplars for this exploration.

Thus, combining the Whittington (2006) framework and the ramified search based on Barry and Elmes (1997), we identified four different ways of relating narrative to strategy as practice in existing empirical work. Three of these are linked to the three poles of Whittington's (2006) model. The fourth concerns the materialization of strategy in textual form. Finally, we draw on two integrative frameworks in the literature to consider how narrative-related concepts may be used to traverse and integrate these different perspectives (Deuten and Rip, 2000; Robichaud et al., 2004). We highlight how such frameworks can be seen as one way of approaching research into the notion of strategy as practice that captures the dynamic reciprocal relationships between the constituent parts of Whittington's (2006) model, and which presents the interrelationship between the macro and the micro interactions that cross intra and extra-organizational boundaries.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section introduces the narrative turn in organization studies and locates the narrative approach to strategy as practice within this broader literature. We then examine in turn the ideas of praxis, practices and practitioners in Whittington's (2006) framework from the point of view of previous narrative studies into strategy, and to this we add the consideration of a fourth element: the strategy text. Following this we outline the integrative narrative frameworks of narrative infrastructure (Deuten and Rip, 2000) and metaconversation (Robichaud et al., 2004) and finally, conclude with a discussion of how such frameworks may illuminate research into strategy as practice as a way of accounting for strategizing at both the macro and micro levels of analysis in a single study.

### **THE NARRATIVE TURN IN ORGANIZATION STUDIES**

Czarniawska (1995, 1998, 2004) locates narrative in the social sciences describing it as a notion originating from literary theory and semiology that understands events as happening sequentially, usually in a chronological order and indicating some kind of causality and an underlying "plot" or explanation. Czarniawska identifies three main areas within organization studies where some form of narrative analysis is evident. These are defined as "tales from the field", that is organizational research written in a story like way; "tales of the field", that is

organizational research that collects organizational stories; and interpretive approaches that view organizational life as an ongoing process of storytelling that constructs meaning within organizations. Czarniawska's categories recognise that the narrative view of organizations is a well-established and diverse field employing a variety of notions associated with language and meaning such as 'scripts', (Mangham, 1995); 'rhetoric' (Watson, 1995); 'storytelling' (Boje, 1991, 1994); narrative plot and the collecting of myths and stories (Czarniawska, 1998) and; 'discourse' and discursive activities (Barry and Elmes, 1997; Hardy et al, 2000).

Interest in narrative as a way of understanding human interactions within organizations can be found across a wide spectrum of people interested in organizations, from the business world and management gurus to academia. The views of the former category tend to be placed in either of the first two of Czarniawska's categories. For example, high profile business gurus such as Peters and Waterman (1982) saw 'excellent' companies as '*collectors and tellers*' of stories (Peters and Waterman, 1982: 282). In academia, from the point of view of Boland and Tenkasi (1995) narrative is a way of considering how individuals understand the world around them placing them within Czarniawska's category of interpretive approaches to narrative research in organizations. In the same way Boje (1991) views storytelling as the currency of human relationships, and Weick (1995) writes about human memory functioning in a narrative fashion by relating and connecting events together in time with a beginning, middle and end. In their detailed review of narrative studies in organizations, Rhodes and Brown (2005) emphasize the roles of narrative in sensemaking, in communication, in change and learning, in power relationships and in the construction of identity.

The implication for organizations is that the relationships between actors are mediated by storytelling and this is how they make sense of events in a variety of ways and situations. For Boje (1991) storytelling is seen as a skill to be performed by managers in influencing others to act in certain ways. Similarly, Watson (1995) views humans as essentially rhetors and sees rhetoric as a prime sensemaking activity in the interactions between actors within organizations, and Hatch (1993, 1997) explores the role of irony and humour in organizations. Narrative is also associated with storytelling as a written form and Mangham (1995) has used the notion of script to argue that people's behaviour in organizations determines, and is determined by some tacit knowledge of 'organizational scripts' that become defined through habitual actions. Such scripts

are reinforced by the formalisation of relationships within organizations through meetings and written documents such as job descriptions. In contrast (Gabriel, 2000) focuses on storytelling in what he calls the “unmanaged organization”, arguing that the development of narrative is an important social process where fantasy is dominant over fact and from where official organizational myths may be challenged as stories may be carried over into the managed organization to become part of narratives in official company discourse (Gabriel, 2000). Table 1 provides a summary of the studies linked to narrative analysis mentioned above.

**Table 1: Micro-Level Studies linked to Narrative Research into Organizations**

<b>Micro-Level Analysis</b>	<b>Keywords</b>	<b>Research Focus</b>
Boje (1991)	Storytelling	Storytelling as a managerial tool to influence actions
Hatch (1993, 1997)	Irony/Humour	Influences of irony and humour on interactions in organizations
Boland and Tenkasi (1995)	Narrative	Sensemaking activities
Weick (1995)	Sensemaking	Sensemaking activities
Gabriel (2000)	Fantasy/Myth	Storytelling and fantasy and the challenge to organizational myths
Mangham (1995)	Scripts	Organizational scripts and human interactions
Watson (1995)	Rhetoric	Influence of rhetoric on human interactions in organizations
Sims (1999)	Storytelling	Storytelling as a managerial tool

The ‘Keywords’ column in Table 1 gives an indication of the variety of linguistic terms associated with narrative analysis at the micro-level.

While many researchers have considered the emergence of stories or narratives at the micro-level, the narrative approach has also been used to refer to discourses involving temporally



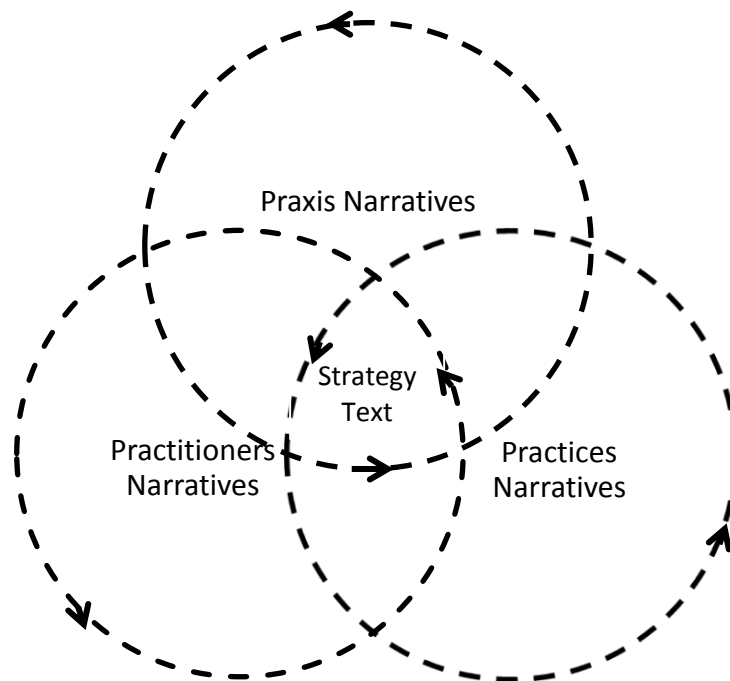
related elements that carry meaning at broader institutional levels. For example, Zachry (1995) describes the discourse of total quality management as embedded in a collection of narratives that are widely diffused including narratives of resurrection, of survival, and of empowerment, Clark and Salaman (1998) emphasize the role of guru narratives in which new approaches are promoted by assigning a central and heroic role to managers, O'Connor (2002) identifies organizational stories used at many different levels – including personal stories of founder-entrepreneurs, generic stories used to justify business plans, and situational stories concerning modes of success and failure in an industry. Thus, the narrative metaphor has a broader resonance than the particular tales told in particular organizations and may refer to more widely diffused generic accounts, discourses, or “master stories” (Deuten and Rip, 2000) that provide meaning within a community of practitioners or a field of organizations.

Within the turn to narrative analysis in organization studies, Barry and Elmes (1997) argued strongly for the potential of a narrative approach to strategy. They defined narrative as “*thematic sequenced accounts that convey meaning from implied author to implied reader*” (1997: 431) and proposed a wide range of applications. For example, they noted that narrative applies to “*both the telling and the told,*” suggesting that narrative approaches can be used to examine the processes of strategizing as well as the strategies that are generated by this process (1997:432). They referred to strategy as a form of “fiction” in that it often creates a story about the future that may or may not be realized. Building on Russian narrativist theory, they argued that effective strategy narratives need to be simultaneously credible yet defamiliarizing. They drew attention to the emergence of a number of genres of strategy narratives ranging from the epic and technofuturist genres based respectively on SWOT models and formal planning, to purist genres associated with the generic typologies of Porter (1980), Miles and Snow (1979) and others. Finally, they proposed a research agenda that considers how strategists engage in story making, how they draw on narratives from mainstream thought, how power and politics are reflected in strategy narratives and how divergent narratives are reconciled. In short, their proposals resonate strongly with the current interest in strategy as practice.

We now build on this resonance by examining how Whittington’s (2006) notions of praxis, practice and practitioners have manifested themselves in specific narrative studies with relevance to strategy. As previously mentioned, we have added a further element to the model - the strategy

text – because such artefacts often constitute an important element of strategy practice, mediating interactions among praxis, practices and practitioners and punctuating the enactment of strategy. Figure 2 below is a representation of the interaction between the four elements described here. Following our consideration of the selected studies, we present narrative infrastructure (Deuten and Rip, 2000) and metaconversation (Robichaud et al., 2004) as research frameworks for understanding the reciprocal relationships indicated in Figure 1 to give two possible accounts of strategy as practice that unites the macro and micro levels of analysis. We shall argue that if strategy as practice focuses on *what people do*, an extended narrative perspective, with its focus on sensemaking and story provides one way of accounting for *how and why people do what they do* in organizations.

**Figure 2: Integrating Narratives into Strategy as Practice**



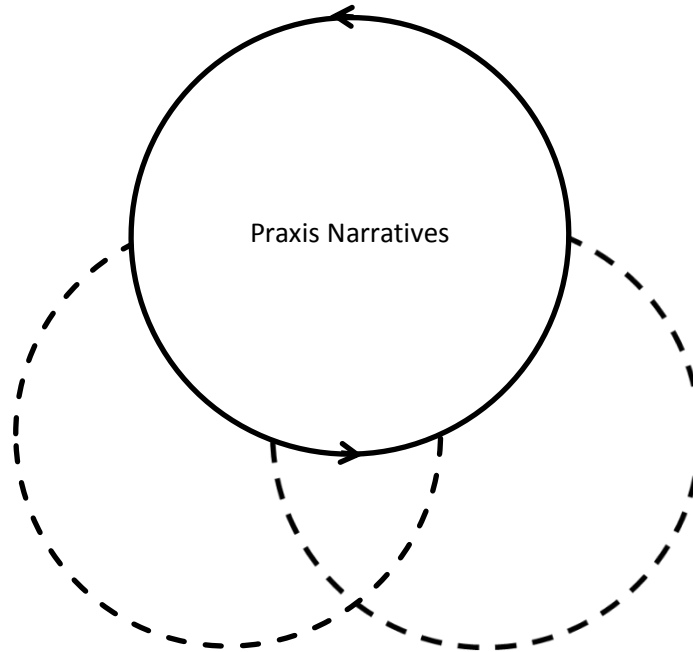
**THE ROLES OF NARRATIVE IN THE PRACTICE OF STRATEGY**

**Strategy *praxis* and narrative**

Strategy praxis refers to what practitioners actually do in their particular everyday activities as they engage with strategy. Part of what they do involves telling stories, or mobilizing narrative in various forms. In other words, narrative can be a form of *praxis*. Boje’s (1991) study of an office

supply company is an exemplar of a study that brings to the fore a narrative view of strategy praxis as shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Focus on Narrative as a Form of Praxis**



While most of the research using a narrative approach within organizations involves the collection of stories through interviews in which narrative accounts are deliberately solicited from respondents in an artificially created situation, Boje's (1991) study is particularly interesting because it examines what he calls "*story performance*" in vivo. Specifically, he observed and recorded interactions and conversations among a group of senior managers in executive meetings, restaurants, training sessions and informal settings – in other words, he captured their story-telling praxis in discussions of the strategic future of the firm.

Boje (1991: 106) makes a very strong claim for the power of stories in sensemaking, arguing that in organizations, they are "*the preferred sensemaking currency of human relationships among internal and external stakeholders*" (see also Bruner, 1990; 1991; Weick, 1995). He also shows in particular how stories are incorporated into live conversations in a very terse and referential manner ("you know the story") in which much of the story is left out, allowing listeners to fill in the blanks and thus conveying meaning to those who *do* in fact know the story, while retaining

ambiguity that enables multiple interpretations to coexist (Eisenberg, 1984). In subsequent work, he has used the term “ante-narrative” (Boje, 2001) to refer to story elements that involve temporally ordered and partial accounts that do not necessarily provide complete narrative plots.

In his study of an office-supply firm Boje (1991) highlighted how, the CEO employed storytelling skills in discussions over strategy with his executives to persuade them to support his strategic vision. For example, the CEO connected story fragments about the firm to lengthier personal stories from his own experience to enact a scenario for change with which his executives could identify. Boje (1991: 113) noted a series of story-line patterns in which past, unfolding or anticipated experiences were interpreted and compared in story performances to draw conclusions about appropriate and inappropriate ways of proceeding. Overall, Boje (1991) observed that storytelling, at least at the time he was writing, was an overlooked managerial skill and that it could be a powerful tool in strategizing when used by a manager with the ability to *perform* (Boje 1991) a story, and in doing so persuade others to take ownership of his/her strategic vision. The successful performance, or otherwise, of a story depends on a variety of factors involved in the relationship between storyteller and audience. These factors relate to the context of the organization within which the strategy formulation episode takes place because it shapes the relationships between actors (Boje, 1991). Such factors add weight to the story, thus influencing whether or not the audience take up the story and in retelling it demonstrate their acceptance and ownership of it.

The use of narrative in strategy praxis is also highlighted as an important element in other work. For example, in another detailed ethnographic study, Samra-Fredericks (2003, 2004) outlined how strategic direction was seen to be shaped by strategists’ use of rhetorical and emotional language in interaction. Of importance in the rhetorical and emotional performance is the necessity for strategists to maintain their effort in engaging others over a period of time (Samra-Fredericks, 2004). As with Boje’s CEO, an understanding of where the company has come from is essential so that they can ‘*selectively draw upon it, bend it and make it meaningfully consistent in the here-and-now given their current projects*’ (Samra-Fredericks, 2003: 166).

In another ethnographic study, Rouleau (2005) revealed how middle managers skilfully enacted the new strategy of a clothing firm in their interactions with key customers. Thus, Rouleau

extends the idea of the strategy practitioner from the traditional view of corporate management to the ‘*middle and lower teams and by extension every organizational member*’ (2005: 1432). She also extends the idea of strategizing beyond simply talking *about* strategy to actually *making it happen* through talk. Specifically, she shows how these managers used different ‘*micro practices of strategic sensemaking*’ (Rouleau, 2005). Most interestingly for this paper, she shows how these managers translated their company’s strategy to outsiders through stories about how and why the new fashion collection was developed that were adapted to each listener and yet were coherent with the speaker’s identity creating plausible accounts that connected customers with firm’s strategic direction. .

In summary, storytelling or more broadly “story performance” (Boje, 1991) is seen in these studies to be a key element of strategy praxis, implicated profoundly in sensemaking and sensegiving about strategic direction. As revealed by Orr’s classic (1990) study of photocopier technicians and Gherardi’s (2002) study of safety on building sites, stories are inherent to practical activity in communities of practice. The studies described here suggest that stories are also inherent to the practice of strategy.

Nevertheless, the focus remains on the micro-level, and when looking at this body of work, the complexity of human-interaction across the intra-organizational level makes it evident that capturing all of what is actually done during the interactions of strategists is elusive (Samra-Fredericks, 2004). Thus these studies offer examples of praxis similar to holding up a photograph at any given moment in time. Moreover, narrative and story-telling are clearly a subset of praxis, whose relative importance in producing and enacting strategy in relation to other linguistically based elements (such as logical argument) or as compared with less discursively-oriented activities remains to be determined.

While storytelling is clearly a potentially powerful element of strategy praxis, a practice-based understanding of strategy should, according to the model in Figure 2, consider how this praxis may be embedded in and reciprocally contribute to broader organizational or institutional level *practices*, defined by Whittington (2006: 619) as “*shared routines of behaviour, including traditions, norms and procedures for thinking, acting and using ‘things’*”. This will be the focus of the next section.

### **Strategy practices and narrative**

Practices are forms of behaviour with regard to strategy that have become institutionalized and can thus be seen as having a degree of stability and routineness in an organizational setting, although they may vary in their specific performance. Practices therefore differ from strategy praxis which is context-specific. The purpose of this section is to put strategy practices at centre stage of the strategy as practice framework as shown in Figure 4 and to highlight how they can be seen as embodied in narrative in different ways and at different levels. At one level, storytelling has itself become an element of certain institutionalized strategy practices. At a second level, practices are activities associated with the part of the larger social field in which any given organization is embedded. These may incorporate a form of grand narrative that makes them meaningful to adopters. Finally, at a third and higher level still, strategic practices can be seen as part of a discourse that legitimates certain ways of doing strategy (Whittington, 2006; Barry and Elmes, 1997), out of which one can develop a meta-narrative for strategy practices. In this section we explore in turn these three levels.

#### *Storytelling as a Formal Practice*

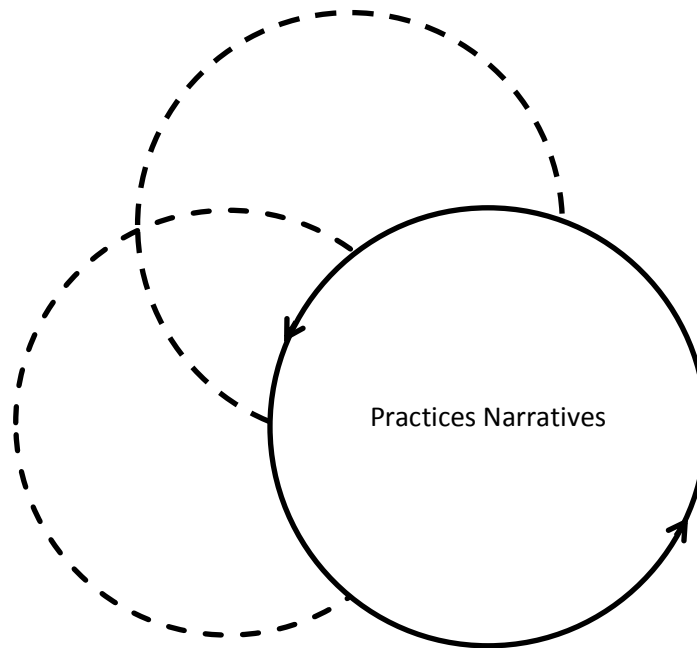
The potential usefulness of narrative as a form of *praxis* has not been lost on practitioners or consultants in search of recipes to assist strategists. Thus a literature has developed around the promotion of storytelling as a strategic “tool” – in other words as a formalized *practice*. This approach was popularized, for example, in a *Harvard Business Review* article about 3M (Shaw et al., 1998) where it is suggested that strategic plans expressed in narrative form may be more effective than those expressed in more traditional analytical language. We will return to this idea in another section of this paper (on the strategy text). Storytelling has also been mobilized not only as a way of *writing*, but also more deeply as a type of consulting intervention that can assist managers in their strategizing process.

An example of storytelling as a deliberate practice embedded in strategy formulation is represented in a study by Heil and Whittaker (2007). This study revisits the notion posited by Barry and Elmes (1997) that at its most basic level strategic management is a form of storytelling and the effectiveness of the strategic stories can be judged by their believability and novelty in engaging the audience (Barry and Elmes, 1997). The authors describe their role as consultants to a telecommunications company. Their stated purpose was to:

*‘create an appropriate strategic narrative, where an appropriate narrative would be one which draws both on the fundamental nature of the organization as a work and the world that people within the organization find themselves in.’ (Heil and Whittaker, 2007: 383).*

As consultants Heil and Whittaker employed another researcher to help with the interview process, an artist and a professional storyteller who met with employees over the period of the research to create a story which gave *‘the people in the organization a voice rather than telling the story of the observer’* (Heil and Whittaker, 2007: 386). The finished story was presented formally as the product of the consultation process as a metaphor designed to reveal the true nature of the organization for the company employees to reflect on in their subsequent strategizing activities.

**Figure 4: Focus on Strategy Practices as Narratives**



Scenario analysis techniques represent another standardized and much vaunted strategy tool or practice in which narrative plays a key role (Wack, 1985; Schoemaker, 1993; Eden and Ackerman, 1998). Although the techniques themselves may involve a number of methods that be qualitative or quantitative and have little to do with narrative as such (e.g., cross-impact models, etc.), the tools generally lead to a set of alternative futures presented in narrative form. As

Schoemaker (1993: 196) indicates, “*People seem to relate best to concrete, causally coherent narratives (...) Scenarios try to accommodate this mode of thought.*”

Of course, formalized *practices* of storytelling or scenario analysis are themselves instantiated in strategy *praxis* in any particular application. As shown by Hodgkinson and Wright’s (2002) study of an unsuccessful application of scenario analysis intervention and by Whittington’s (2006) reinterpretation of it, the practice may have unexpected implications that are themselves of interest to scholars of strategy as practice (see also Hodgkinson and Wright, 2006).

However, most institutionalized practices related to strategy are not directly grounded in narrative techniques or theories. Yet, they can be viewed as embedding implicit narratives, or more broadly “discourses” that give rise to local narratives.

#### *Narratives underlying practices in a social field*

A variety of authors describe the logics underlying institutionalized strategy practices in the language of narrative. For example, Barry and Elmes (1997) refers to a variety of “genres” of strategic narrative used in organizations based on canonical plots that succeed one another as the messages of older genres become too banal or familiar. For example, he refers to the “epic” genre based on SWOT analyses, the “technofuturist” narrative genre based on forecasting techniques, and the “purist” genre of strategic typologies. Clark and Salaman (1998) refer to “guru narratives” as underlying popular management fashions, and Jeffcutt (1994) identifies epic and romantic narratives underlying popular managerial interpretations of organization.

In an interesting study that examines how discourses available in the institutional environment may serve as a “strategic resource,” Hardy et al. (2000) suggest that the degree to which locally produced narratives echo popular and credible plots or discourses contributes to their “performativity” (capacity to engage other actors) and “connectivity” (capacity to create the context they refer to). Specifically, the study examines the mobilization of discourse in the formulation of strategy in a Non Governmental Organization (NGO). The study notes that a strategic practice of the larger social field in which the NGO was embedded was that of ‘*localization*’ (Hardy et al., 2000: 1238). The strategy of localization involved the NGO having its operations in an area run locally as an independent arm of the larger international organization



to provide locally demanded services and can be seen as self-sufficient in terms of receiving local funding. The narrative embedded in this strategy practice by NGOs details it as a response to the environment in which they operate that has seen a reduction in their funding at an international level in favour of sponsorship for locally run organizations together with the perceived need for the empowerment of the local community (Hardy et al., 2000). The study documents how the strategic practice of localization in the social field populated by NGOs applied to one particular NGO and its offices in the West Bank and Gaza in the Middle East.

The purpose of the study was to construct a model of discourse as a strategic resource (Hardy et al., 2000: 1235) that interconnects macro and micro discursive activities in the carrying out of strategy. The influence of the practice of localization by international NGOs is considered in the light of the in situ practice of actually carrying out the policy. The study notes how, over time, the actions of the NGO's local Delegate in trying to realise the strategic practice had a reciprocal effect on the practice of localization. In documenting the work of the NGO Delegate the study provides an example of the difference between practices emerging from the social field in which an organization is embedded and praxis - the in situ activities involved in carrying it out through the practices. In fact, to meet the aims of localization consistent with the discourse the leader recruited a local steering committee as a way of understanding the local demand for services, and established connections with other organizations to secure local funding. However this action led the local steering committee to take actions that contradicted the interests of the leader of the NGO. A new cycle of discursive activity drawing on another set of narratives about the global reach and responsibility of the NGO was then drawn on to reverse these decisions.

Hardy et al.'s (2000) also study reveals the co-existence of multiple plausible narratives within a social and organizational field, which were used strategically and sequentially to successively promote different goals. O'Connor's (2002) study of the narrative threads underlying the foundation of an entrepreneurial internet firm shows in contrast how contradictions between extant narratives across time and between levels can be problematic. O'Connor (2002) identifies six basic narrative types underlying the process of founding a new company classified into three categories: personal narratives, generic narratives and situational narratives. While personal narratives deal with the founder's specific history and vision, generic narratives are typical "marketing" and "strategy" stories prepared to convince investors to invest in the firm. In

O'Connor's study, the marketing story was derived from standard templates (i.e., based on established "practices" in the field) while the strategy story involved choosing among different business models each of which embedded an accepted storyline (related again to an established practice). The situational stories involved "historical stories" about the evolution of the industry, and "conventional stories" about how to make money in internet start-ups (reflecting another dimension of practice). O'Connor (2002) examines the "intertextuality" or interaction among these stories, showing how over time, the entrepreneur's personal stories became increasingly incompatible with the generic and situational stories, creating difficulties for the firm. Thus, as Hardy et al. (2000) indicate, while discourse may be a strategic resource, it is not infinitely malleable. In other words, institutionalized *practices* and the stories that support them both enable and constrain *praxis*.

#### *Strategy Practices within a Meta-narrative*

At the higher levels of organizational analysis still, Ghemawat's (2002) historical paper outlining the development of strategy as a competitive business concept highlights a discourse that legitimates certain ways of doing strategy. The paper does not itself use the narrative metaphor but positions itself as a 'review of theories of competition and business strategy over the last half century' (Ghemawat, 2002: 37). Nevertheless, as a review it constructs its own meta-narrative about the development of strategy practices.

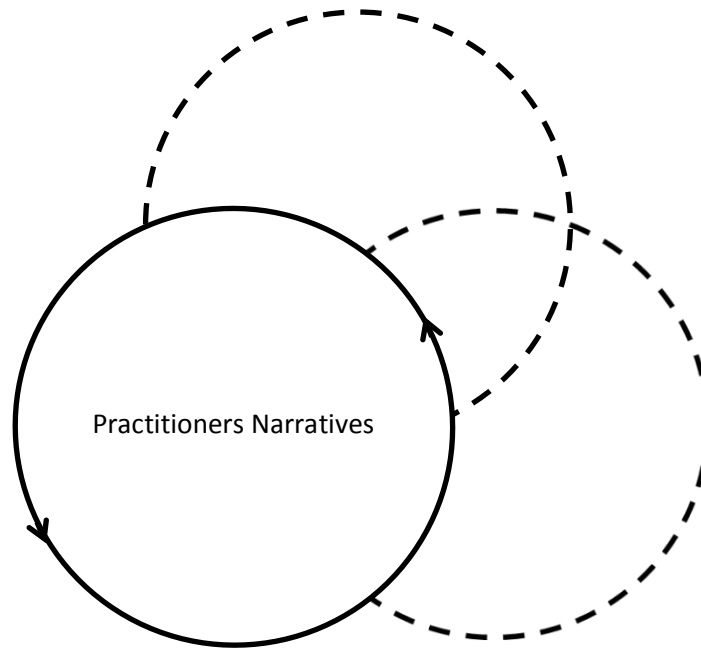
As a meta-narrative the article describes the emergence of a network of actors that helped constitute strategy as a field of enquiry which categorized certain practices as strategic (Hardy et al., 2000). Furthermore, Ghemawat describes competition and business strategy as having developed in a 'linear' (2002: 37) fashion which in itself is a feature of narrative (Boland and Tenkasi, 1995) associated with the development of a plot (Czarniawska, 1995) and a sense of direction (Gergen and Gergen, 1983). As a narrative, the article has characters that are central to the plot in the development of strategy practices. For example, it indicates the hegemony of the Harvard Business School in the development of strategy practices. Ghemawat goes on to demonstrate how that institution can be seen as a gatekeeper to mainstream practices, particularly in the example of the SWOT analysis framework emerging from the business school classrooms to be disseminated throughout 'academia' and 'management practice' (Ghemawat, 2002: 42). Furthermore, the other key characters in the story, the Boston Consulting Group and McKinsey

& Co., both institutions that enact strategy as a management practice, are also products of the Harvard Business School (Ghemawat, 2002).

The development of SWOT as outlined by Ghemawat can be interpreted as the development of the meta-narrative towards a more competitive emphasis in the evolution of strategy practices. This confirms what Hardy et al (2000) describe as a widespread acceptance of the notion of strategy as associated with organizational performance, thus generating an accumulation of practices '*from which it has become difficult to escape*' (p.1230) (see also Knights and Morgan, 1991). Ghemawat's meta-narrative describes the new competitive strategy practices becoming associated with mainstream strategic thinking through the rise of strategy consultants in the 1960s and 1970s. The story of the rise of the consultants as told by Ghemawat is also a story of how praxis reciprocally influences strategy practices. Practices such as SWOT were embedded in the business of strategy practices that consultancies used for assessing a firm's competitiveness. Subsequent interactions between the consultancy firms and their clients through the use of the SWOT analysis tool in situ saw the rise of portfolio analysis and various competitive matrix analysis techniques that then became similarly embedded in mainstream strategy practices (Ghemawat, 2002). The meta-narrative also draws attention to the key roles of *practitioners* such as consultants in the development and propagation of practices. This leads us to focus on the third pole of the Whittington (2006) model.

### **Strategy Practitioners and Narrative**

Strategy practitioners are a wide-ranging group of actors who are involved in some way in the process of defining and carrying out strategy within their organizations (Whittington, 2006). But in a dynamic notion such as strategy as practice, who exactly are these people and how do they come to understand their role? This section looks at how a narrative approach suggests answers to this question, focusing now on strategy practitioners in the strategy as practice framework, as shown in Figure 5.

**Figure 5: Focus on a Narrative view of Practitioners**

As an important element of the “*currency of sensemaking*” (Boje, 1991; 106), narratives express identities (Czarniawska, 1997; Rhodes and Brown, 2005). For example, stories identify heroes, villains, adversaries and helpers. Narratives may be seen as part of individuals’ “identity work” (e.g., Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Beech and Johnson, 2005) as people locate themselves and others in various roles through the stories they tell. More broadly, discourse creates or implies “subject positions” associated with certain power and knowledge claims (Foucault, 1980; Hardy et al., 2000; Rhodes and Brown, 2005). Thus both individual’s micro-narratives about strategy, and broader institutional discourses surrounding the notion of strategy can be analyzed to understand who in fact is being constructed as a legitimate *practitioner* of strategy, and what this might mean.

Traditionally the strategy literature has looked to the top of organizational structures at the corporate management level to locate strategists (Knights and Morgan, 1991; Ghemawat, 2002). Thus critical researchers have viewed the discourse of strategy as contributing to reproducing hierarchy in organizations (Knights and Morgan, 1991; Mumby and Clair, 1997; Vaara, 2002; Laine and Vaara, 2007). In this view, actors engage in discursive activities around the concept of

strategy to further their own position in the social relationships that are reproduced through the strategy discourse (Hardy et al., 2000).

A number of studies have examined how narrative and related discursive activities contribute to creating managerial identities (Clark and Salaman, 1998; Watson, 1994; Dunford and Jones, 2000). We will draw particular attention here to empirical studies by Vaara and colleagues (Vaara, 2002; Laine and Vaara, 2007; Mantere and Vaara, 2008) since this work very directly addresses who the “strategist” might be and how the role of “*strategy practitioner*” may be constructed, defined and reinterpreted through discursive activity depending on who is doing the talking and the specific context of the talk.

Vaara’s (2002) study of success and failure narratives surrounding post-merger integration directly applies a narrative approach based on Greimas’ actantial model (Greimas, 1987). Drawing on interviews, the study identifies four types of narratives labelled “rationalistic,” “cultural,” “role-bound” and “individualistic”. The subject positions and identities constructed around the different types of stories are particularly interesting. Thus rationalistic narratives are associated with identities as managerial change agents in which the personnel or the organization are seen as implicit adversaries. Cultural narratives position the speaker as representing one side in the merger, with the “other side” as an adversary. In role-bound narratives, speakers identify themselves with parts of the organization and see actors in other areas as the adversaries. Finally, in “individualistic” narratives, speakers attribute heroic strategic roles to themselves and constitute other specific individuals as adversaries. Vaara (2002) found that narrators framed their roles to legitimize their own actions and to turn failures into successes by attributing problems to “adversaries.” Thus the construction of identity as a strategist in these narratives was contextualized by the success or failure of the mergers.

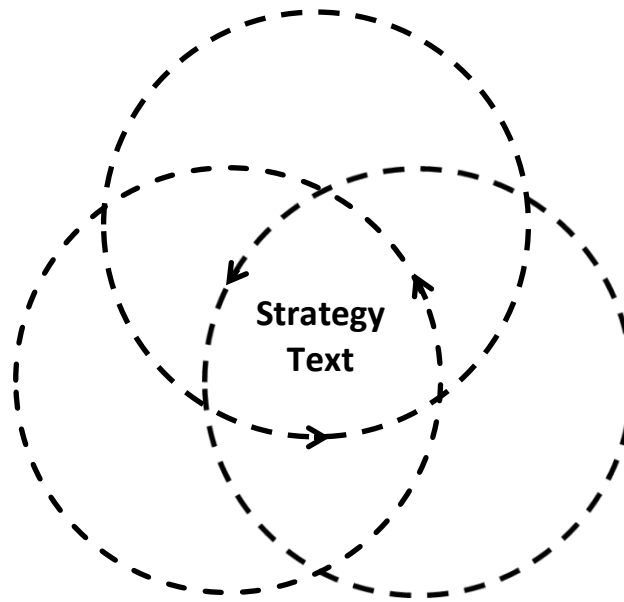
In another study, Laine and Vaara (2007) highlight the discourses about strategy used by three different groups of actors in an engineering firm. For example, corporate management talked about strategy as associated with looking after the interests of the company and its shareholders (Laine and Vaara, 2007), thus reaffirming the key roles strategists are seen to have in organizations, associating them with top management and minimizing the role of other employees. Furthermore, this position was reinforced by their control of resources because

through allocating resources they could create a niche for strategic projects and the carrying out of strategy. In contrast, middle managers constructed their role in satisfying the company's clients as more strategically important than that of top management (Laine and Vaara, 2007) while emphasizing the disconnect of top managers from local issues. In turn, individual engineers constructed their key role in innovation in opposition to “the empty rhetoric” and “fancy posters on the wall” that they see coming from management (Laine and Vaara, 2007: 48). Laine and Vaara's (2007) work shows them resisting the managerial discourse of “participation by command” and reaffirming their strategic identity and importance by telling stories of how particular engineers solved the problems of particular customers.

The studies by Vaara (2002) and Laine and Vaara (2007) indicate that those within an organization who speak as strategy practitioners are generally associated with a management level role. However, if strategy is seen as a narrative, then it is also possible for all actors in an organization to construct a role for themselves in that narrative, much as Rouleau's (2005) middle managers enacted the strategy of the firm in the stories they told to clients. Yet, strategy most often tends to be constructed as a privileged domain accessible only to the few, as Mantere and Vaara (2008) show in their critical discourse analysis of the discursive practices by which the opportunity and right to participate as a “*strategy practitioner*” may be restricted or opened up. The lesson here is that who is or is not considered to be a practitioner of strategy is, to a large extent, a discursively generated category in a given context. This could have important consequences for the potential of strategy praxis to influence organizational direction.

### ***Strategy Texts as Narrative***

Strategy praxis often generates written texts in the form of strategic plans. These texts mediate the interaction between praxis, practices and practitioners. Boudès (2004), Shaw et al. (1998) and Barry and Elmes (1997) argue that the text itself can be viewed as embedding a form of future-oriented narrative – a story in which the firm or the organization becomes a key actor facing a challenge that is resolved through the proposed strategy. This material manifestation of strategy has therefore been added to the strategy as practice framework (Whittington, 2006) in Figure 6, and this section examines the literature that looks more directly at the content of these texts and how they might mediate between praxis, practices and practitioners.

**Figure 6: The Strategy Text as a Mediating Narrative**

A first question raised by the literature is whether and to what degree strategy texts are indeed formulated as stories or narratives and how its textual form influences persuasiveness. Writing in *Harvard Business Review*, Shaw et al. (1998) contrast strategic plans presented in the form of “lists” or “bullet points” (as in power-point presentations) and those presented as “narratives,” arguing that the narrative form is more powerful in conveying meaning as it contextualizes the strategy, provides a dramatic logic and enables readers to relate to it. In contrast, in a study of the content of strategic plans at Lafarge, Chanal and Tannery (2005) found that strategic orientations were largely presented in an argumentative rather than a narrative form. Moreover, unlike many authors discussed so far (Barry and Elmes, 1997; Shaw et al., 1998; Boje, 1991), Chanal and Tannery (2004) question the persuasiveness of the narrative form for strategy discourse, suggesting that historical writing actually distances readers from the text, and demands a resolution that may be contrary to the need to open up alternative futures. They note however that the narrative form was more often used in texts aimed at defining organizational identity or specific practices.

Beyond, these ontological debates, other studies have looked at how strategy texts and the narratives embedded in them mediate strategy praxis. For example, a study of a merger among Canadian hospitals (Denis et al., 1999, 2001, 2008) provides an example of the role of a strategy text as a guiding narrative for the merger process. The text was a signed negotiated agreement around which the different stakeholders could construct a vision of their organization in a post-merger world, and against which the progress of the merger project could be measured. An important feature of the document was the degree of interpretive flexibility it displayed, where interpretive flexibility means not only does an artefact allow for flexibility in how people think of or interpret it but there is also flexibility in the design of the artefact itself (Bijker and Pinch, 1989). In the case of the strategy text this means that different social groups view the artefact in different ways when giving meaning to the strategizing activities of themselves and others. The construction of the text itself also allows for this flexibility and indeed is inherent to its social acceptability and to the capacity of the organization to move towards the merger. Yet, once the merger was promulgated, this same interpretive flexibility became a barrier to future strategizing as the differences in interpretation became manifest.

Abdallah (2006; 2007) also highlighted the role of interpretive flexibility or “strategic ambiguity” (Eisenberg, 1984) of strategy texts in a study that examined the appropriation of strategy in a cultural agency (Abdallah, 2006). The study focused on a particular strategy text, called the ‘strategic plan’ and found that the ‘*structural construction of the text is based on a major or primary duality*’ (Abdallah, 2006: 13) between the main strategic intent of the document and expressions of the values and identity of the organization. Thus, the strategic plan constructed a narrative of the organization as an entity existing over time in the world with a history, an identity and a sense of purpose regarding its future direction. In addition this narrative attributed certain values to the company that were contextualized in the need for change that the strategic plan was proposing, thus legitimating the changes in terms of the continued sense of identity and commitment to these values (Abdallah, 2006). So, the strategic plan was at the same time a reaffirmation of an assumed shared understanding of the organization’s role in the world and a statement of future intent that would ensure it would continue to live up to this role.

The duality in the construction of the strategic plan identified by Abdallah is an indication of a degree of interpretive flexibility in the design of the text. This was apparent in the impact of the



document on the day-to-day routines of employees. The strategic intent of the text resonated with managers in the organization who saw the document as a ‘roadmap’ (Abdallah, 2006: 20) for the implementation of strategy. In contrast, for non-management employees, the document was seen principally as a reaffirmation of the history, values and identity of the organization that resonated with their own personal values (Abdallah, 2006). Thus, it was a symbolic artefact that contributed to the sensemaking activities of employees in understanding their own identities and the roles they saw themselves performing within this company (Abdallah, 2006). The diversity of meanings attributed to the plan initially enabled different actors to appropriate it, while setting the scene for future dissent as actions taken by managers following their “roadmap” revealed the fundamental rift in interpretations.

Abdallah’s study illustrates well the location of the strategy text at the intersection of praxis, practices and practitioners as shown in Figures 1 and 5. Strategy texts are produced by strategy praxis, draw on practices embedded in both the history of the organization and in the institutional environment, and translate the intentions of their author-practitioners. At the same time, strategy texts escape those intentions by becoming available for consumption in possibly unexpected ways (De Certeau, 1984) by the same and other practitioners in future praxis while contributing to the potential formalization and institutionalization of their embedded narratives (practices). The strategy text seen as an artefact with an embedded narrative through which strategizing activities are mediated adds to an understanding of strategy as practice as a process of dynamic reciprocal relationships.

### **INTEGRATIVE NARRATIVE FRAMEWORKS FOR STRATEGY AS PRACTICE**

Having completed the consideration of the four basic elements identified in Figure 2, the paper now turns to consider two narrative theoretical lenses through which to view research into an integrated notion of strategy as practice. While we have shown so far that narrative approaches clearly have some relevance for and resonance with the elements of a practice approach, critics might argue that they also miss many dimensions of practice to the extent that they focus exclusively on language, neglecting other forms of agency in organizations. Both of the frameworks we shall now describe focus on human agency and seek to integrate extra and intra-organizational activities. First we consider strategy as practice from the viewpoint of the notion of narrative infrastructure (Deuten and Rip, 2000) and then from the perspective of metaconversation (Robichaud et al., 2004).

### **Narrative Infrastructure**

The notion of “narrative infrastructure” (Deuten and Rip; 2000: 74; Llewellyn, 2001) was originally developed as a way of understanding the work of project teams involved in product creation processes and is defined as “*the evolving aggregation of actors/narratives in their material and social settings that enables and constrains the possible stories, actions and interactions by actors. It can be seen as the ‘rails’ along which multi-actor and multi-level processes gain thrust and direction*”. Although the context of product development is somewhat distinct from that of strategy, (e.g., it implies a somewhat more tangible and bounded endpoint), the emphasis on the role of narrative infrastructure in generating thrust and direction suggests that the ideas are worth exploring as a possible angle for developing an integrated narrative approach to strategy as practice.

Deuten and Rip (2000) argue that in product creation processes, actors deliberately try to address uncertainty and reduce complexity through storytelling. The storytelling begins with the *start-out story* that outlines the product-to-be and the benefits it will bring to the company. This is followed by the *project plan* - a prospective story that sets out the stages of the project journey and acts a roadmap that the project team will be held accountable to (Deuten and Rip, 2000). These activities provide a linear account of the project as a roadmap to be followed. An effect of this however, is to constrain the actions of the project team who as they are enrolled enact the *start-out story* and *project plan*. Within the project team itself role expectations develop between stakeholders internal and external to the firm which are carried through stories that make sense of their ongoing actions and interactions. Complexity is further reduced through key themes that emerge out of the sensemaking activities of the project team and around which further actions and interactions are concentrated. These are *master stories* (Deuten and Rip, 2000) that give the project a sense of direction, the cumulative effect of which is the emergence of a narrative infrastructure. The result is that: “*When a narrative infrastructure evolves out of stories, actions and interactions of the actors involved, actors become characters that cannot easily change their identity and role by their own initiative.*” (Deuten and Rip, 2000: 74).

So how can this notion of narrative infrastructure capture the elements of strategy as practice and understand it as a dynamic evolving process? As a starting point the basis of both ideas is the role of human agency. Deuten and Rip (2000) build on Czarniawska et al. (1995) to argue that

not only does narrative describe action, but that narrative is constitutive of action. In other words, stories shape the organizational landscape as individuals and organizations become actors in their own stories. The strategy as practice approach involves understanding how the different elements within its framework are linked together in what people actually do in carrying out strategy. Narrative infrastructure attempts to explain why people do what they do within organizations traversing both the micro and macro levels of analysis. The rest of this section aims to outline how a notion developed from an account of a product creation process can be extended to give an understanding of the practice of strategy within organizations. It follows the structure of the previous sections of the paper with a consideration of praxis, practices, practitioners and texts.

At the micro-level, our understanding of strategy as practice is as a multi-actor, multi-level process that cannot be fully captured by a particular episode or snapshot of praxis such as those described earlier. In the same way narrative infrastructure explicitly looks at the aggregate effect of such human interactions and the '*mosaic of stories*' (Deuten and Rip, 2000: 74) through which character roles emerge within a guiding narrative. Therefore, both ideas seek to capture a sense of the cumulative effect of micro-level human interaction.

At a more macro-level, as indicated in the section on strategy practices, organizations do not exist in isolation but operate within a social field that has institutionalised norms of behaviour. Such institutionalised norms can be seen as the building blocks (Deuten and Rip, 2000) of a wider narrative infrastructure emerging from the actions and interactions in the historical development of strategy as a priority of business. This therefore indicates a clear narrative link between a single organization's formulation and implementation of strategy and the influence of norms of behaviour that direct an organization to act in accordance with an expected role in its social field. SWOT analysis and strategy practices emphasizing company performance and competitiveness can be seen as building blocks of a narrative infrastructure influencing the norms of strategizing activities towards more competitive notions of strategy analysis, which in turn influenced the formulation and implementation of individual companies.

We now turn to strategy practitioners from the perspective of narrative infrastructure and simultaneously consider the role of texts. It is useful to compare the strategy text to the role of the project plan in Deuten and Rip's (2000) work. The project plan specified the actors and

assigned them roles. It is out of the actions and interactions of actors positioning themselves as characters with a role in realising the vision in the strategy text that an infrastructure emerges to influence and gives direction to their subsequent activities. For example, Abdallah's study saw managers assume the role of meeting the stated strategy aims of the strategic plan (Abdallah, 2006), whereas other employees assumed the role of maintaining the values and identity they saw in a historical narrative of the organization.

We end this discussion with a practical example of strategy as practice from the perspective of narrative infrastructure that illustrates this integrated view. Dunford and Jones' (2000) study of a government department in New Zealand reveals evidence of a narrative effect resulting from the global debate on government modernization. In this case, the key narrative themes emerging from the strategy text were '*we must think of ourselves as a business*' and '*think of the public as customers*' (Dunford and Jones, 2000: 1220) thus reflecting a much wider set of practices and practitioners emerging from a narrative of a global modernization strategy that had developed over the previous decade based on Osborne and Gaebler's influential book '*Reinventing Government*' (1992) which laid down a list of entrepreneurial principles for how government should operate and on longstanding debates around comparisons between the public and private sectors (Cochrane, 1994, Ferlie et al., 1996; Lowndes, 1997). This modernization strategy was formalised in strategy practices that became the building blocks (Deuten and Rip, 2000) to government modernization, such as the use of customer relationship management systems, and the Internet to deliver better services (Fountain, 2001; Dunleavy et al., 2006). As these practices were seen to be located in the private sector, practitioners also emerged from business to assume a subject position in government modernization strategies, and to assume character roles in the narrative together with their public sector counterparts. Dunford and Jones (2000) collected narratives of praxis based on these practices drawn from three different organizations, reflecting the well-documented highly contextualised nature of government modernization (Fountain, 2001; Dunleavy et al., 2006) emerging through the interaction of praxis, practitioners and practices.

### **Metaconversation**

An alternative approach to integrating narrative views of strategy draws on the notion of “metaconversation” developed by a group of scholars who view communication to be the key constitutive element of organizations and organizing (Robichaud et al., 2004; Taylor and Van Every, 2000). The concept of metaconversation (Robichaud et al., 2004) is presented as a way to bridge opposing views of organization that are seen at one and the same time, to be ‘*pluralistic and unitary, multivocal and univocal, polyphonic and monophonic, many and one*’ (Robichaud et al., 2004: 618). For example, in the traditional strategy literature an organization can be presented as an entity that *has* a strategy, yet at the same time individuals in organizations may also speak for strategy, establishing particular subject positions for themselves (Whittington, 2006). In this way, the notion of metaconversation is multi-level in its analysis again traversing micro and macro-level influences in human interactions. For Robichaud et al. (2004) language, spoken or written in texts, is the key to understanding how an organization can be both a single entity and be made up of many different elements, and it is through an analysis of organizational talk and text that a metaconversation can be identified.

To illustrate the notion of “metaconversation,” Robichaud et al. (2004) present a detailed example involving conversations at a town council meeting, in which citizens raise particular issues to which the mayor responds. Individual citizens bring stories of particular problems related to the state of the roads in their locality as well as to tax issues. The mayor is able to build on these narratives and to widen them bringing in new actors and issues, at the same time identifying with citizens’ problems. Robichaud et al. (2004) show how the mayor discursively draws the citizens into a wider collective identity – the town – for whom he enacts a right to speak through his own meta-narrative about its actions and interactions with other collective actors, cast in the roles of adversaries (e.g., the unions) or allies (e.g., the central government). Robichaud et al. (2004) describe meta-conversations as constructed recursively through interaction. Each new element of conversation may build on previously established meta-conversations that become “black boxed” as shared assumptions about which collective actors exist and what roles they play. Successive conversations may also contest existing interpretations and lead to reformulation of a meta-conversation.

To the extent that strategy is concerned with the definition of organizational identity, it can be seen as strongly related to the idea of a metaconversation. Strategic activity can be seen as an attempt to reorient, disrupt or open up previously closed meta-conversations to introduce new narratives into ongoing interactions. The recursive interplay of conversations in organizations recalls the recursivity of praxis and practices in Whittington's (2006) model and in Jarzabkowski's (2004) description of recursion and adaptation of practices-in-use. Moreover, the way in which conversations and meta-conversations enact actors and subject positions instantiates the role of practitioners. As Robichaud et al. (2004) indicate, "*The function of a metaconversation is thus double: (1) to situate, in the narratively grounded texts through which the conversation is mediated, collective actors, such as departments, services, divisions, and branches, and (2) to instantiate the individual participants in the metaconversation as actors entitled to speak for their respective conversations and as recognized members of the metaconversation—in other words, the management of the organization.*"

Not mentioned so far is the strategy text in metaconversation. For this we return to the image of the strategy text presented in Figure 2 above. If praxis, practices and practitioners can be seen as conversational domains, then the strategy text can be seen as a metatext '*linking one conversational domain to another*' (Robichaud et al., 2004: 624). The strategy text is therefore a reference point between different communities within an organization providing continuity and stability over time and space within a metaconversation (Robichaud et al., 2004) as different conversational worlds meet to construct an organization seen as both a single entity with a strategy and as many parts each with their own strategy, translated within the text to take a coherent form. Such a view of the strategy text is evident in Abdallah's (2006) study of the physical document which highlighted the duality inherent in the strategy text and noted its effect on how different actors understood their strategizing roles within the organization.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This paper has considered how the narrative turn in organization studies might contribute to an understanding of strategy as practice. After reviewing studies that focus respectively on narrative approaches applied to the concepts of praxis, practice, practitioners and texts, we examined strategy as practice from the perspective of two integrative narrative frameworks.

Applying the notion of narrative infrastructure enables us to see strategy as practice as a multi-actor, multi-level process of actions and interactions between actors making sense of their role and the roles of others in relation to the carrying out of strategy. It views storytelling (praxis) as the principle discursive activity underpinning the actors' (practitioners) actions and interactions and over time, and out of the mosaic of stories, certain dominant themes (practices) emerge around which further interactions are focused. These dominant themes, such as those mentioned above with regard to government modernization strategies, are the building blocks (Deuten and Rip, 2000) from which a broader narrative emerges that guides the direction of the strategy as a result of strategy as practice. However, in looking at strategy as practice in this way the guiding narrative is not seen as being influenced by any one actor, but is an aggregate of the activities of all actors at multiple levels. Therefore, the strategy actions of any given person should be seen as being subject to the influence of the sum of everyone else's actions.

The notion of metaconversation sees organizations as constituted through language in a process of conversation between actors where each conversation narratively frames the previous one (Robichaud et al., 2004). The metaconversation emerges from the underlying understandings that are taken for granted by individuals and carried from one conversation to the next to construct an organization both as an entity and also as a collection of communities of practice or cognitive domains (Robichaud et al., 2004). In practice, strategy can be seen as a disruption to the perceived order of things in an organization and so generates storytelling (praxis) as the basis of sensemaking activities of those affected (practitioners) to construct a new shared understanding of the organization in the process of implementing the strategy. Participants in the conversation also speak on behalf of previous closed conversations (practices) which may be subject to re-opening in the ongoing process of sensemaking.

The similarities between these two concepts are that they see strategy as practice as a sensemaking process between actors. The basis of sensemaking is a view of praxis shared by both concepts, the features of which can be seen as the focus of studies of human interaction detailed in Table 1. These micro-level interactions however, do not operate in isolation, they are influenced by broader narratives or black-boxed conversations at the macro-level that have embedded in them taken for granted institutionalized norms of behaviour regarding strategy. But as well as being influenced by pre-existing strategy narratives or conversations the execution of

these broader strategy practices in situ through praxis reflects back and can cause further sensemaking around the broader strategy narratives, or re-open black-boxed conversations about strategy practices.

Both narrative infrastructure (Deuten and Rip, 2000) and metaconversation (Robichaud et al., 2004) extend the idea of who in an organization is involved in doing strategy from what may be regarded as traditionally the domain of ‘managers’ to a notion of strategy that could involve many people throughout the organization. Important in this idea is the strategy text that we have included in the notion of strategy as practice. For narrative infrastructure the strategy text represents a project plan around which role expectations emerge to give the resulting strategy project a linear sense of direction (Deuten and Rip, 2000). Similarly, metaconversation sees the strategy text as the black-boxed outcome of conversations between different communities of practice in an organization (Robichaud et al., 2004). In both instances, the strategy text impacts the way in which everyone sees their role in an organization as sensemaking around role expectations or through new conversations between communities of practice is mediated through it. The actual influence of the strategy text in practice manifests itself through the degree of interpretive flexibility displayed by individuals in making sense of the impact of the organization’s strategy on how they carry out their own roles.

The particular limitations of the notion of narrative infrastructure are that it was born out of the study of a project team in carrying out a single project in an organization. This is a narrower focus than researching strategy as practice which can extend to much broader involvement in an organization as well as less well-defined temporal boundaries and less concrete outputs. The main differences between the concepts of narrative infrastructure and that of metaconversation lie in their emphasis on human agency vs. discursive elements. For the former concept, narrative incorporates practice since storytelling and action are regarded as reciprocal and cannot be separated when looking at narrative influences (Deuten and Rip, 2000). In contrast, for metaconversation the main limitation appears to be the apparently exclusive focus on talk and text. Although scholars in this stream view organization as communicatively constituted, there is little focus on what actually gets done. Discourse analysis of texts and talk can reveal macro-level influences, but in practice the approach seems deeply focused on the micro-level of interactions. It is also difficult to get a sense of what is to be done in an organization as a result



of revealing a metaconversation because the approach tends to be retrospective in its viewpoint, focusing more on shared understandings that have already been black-boxed.

Indeed, a critical question that underlies the analysis in this paper is the degree to which approaches based on discourse or narrative offer potential to develop a more complete understanding of strategy as practice. We have seen in this paper that narrative can be found in the stories told by strategists, in the practices of strategy-making, in the accounts people give of their work as strategy practitioners, and in the artefacts produced by strategizing activity. The two approaches outlined above offer ways of studying strategy as a dynamic multi-level, multi-actor process that integrates other levels of analysis. However, further work is needed to develop these ideas, to elaborate methodologies that can capture the recursive interactions among narrative praxis, practices, practitioners and texts, and to mobilize the potential of these integrative frameworks in empirical research.

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