Constructivist epistemologies in Strategy as Practice research

SIMON GRAND, JOHANNES RÜEGG-STÜRM
and WIDAR VON ARX

Introduction

The practice turn in strategy research and the Strategy as Practice research programme (Johnson, Melin and Whittington 2003) imply an interest in explicitly reconsidering the epistemological and theoretical premises of conducting strategy research (Tsoukas and Knudsen 2002). Particularly, theories, methodologies and perspectives based on constructivist epistemologies play an important role, either explicitly or implicitly. Looking at

main contributions to Strategy as Practice research over the last few years, a few patterns dominate (Johnson *et al.* 2007): on an empirical level, strategy and strategy making are seen as involving multiple processes and activities, with multiple actors distributed inside and outside the organization over multiple organizational layers. On a theoretical level, the study of strategy making as practice requires perspectives which grasp this heterogeneity of processes, activities and actors, and their situatedness, embeddedness and idiosyncrasy; it is argued that a focus on the practice of strategy making implies a discussion of the underlying action theories (Grand and McLean 2007; Jarzabkowski 2004; Tsoukas and Knudsen 2002). On an epistemological level, this emphasis on strategy making as practice requires a reflection of scientific research as practice (Knorr Cetina 2002).

In this chapter, we explore why an interest in strategy practice(s) promotes constructivist epistemologies by discussing important particularities and their relevance for strategy research. To focus our discussion, we ask one main question: How do constructivist epistemologies shape Strategy as Practice research? We explore this question in three steps. First, we introduce influential constructivist epistemologies, exploring their commonalities,

idiosyncrasies and differences. Second, we discuss the impact of constructivist epistemologies on research in the Strategy as Practice field and, in particular, on the study of strategizing practices, the understanding of strategy and the conduct of strategy research. Third, we outline a constructivist research programme in strategy research. We conclude this chapter by identifying critical issues which are essential for extending Strategy as Practice research in the perspective of constructivist epistemologies.

Constructivist epistemologies

Out of the multiple perspectives and approaches, we focus on three central, but distinct approaches, which represent the commonalities as well as the heterogeneities of the constructivist research programme: we discuss the research programme of social construction (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Luckmann 1992), systemic constructivism (Maturana and Varela 1987; Luhmann 1996) and the empirical programme of constructivism (Latour and Woolgar 1979; Knorr Cetina 1981). Constructivist programmes share four fundamental concerns:

1. *Concern 1.* They challenge the predominance of unquestioned dichotomies in the social sciences, between micro and macro, or between situated activities and collective practices (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1996).
2. *Concern 2.* Agency is not automatically associated with particular entities ('individual', 'organization'), but it must be studied as distributed and related in particular ways in particular contexts (Latour 2005).

3. *Concern* 3. The constructivist programmes question a conception of 'reality' as something that is 'objectively given'; this explains why constructivist perspectives imply epistemological considerations.

4. *Concern* 4. Therefore, the constructivist programmes explicitly study the status of 'knowledge' (Tsoukas 2005), the relation to the 'world' (Goodman 1987) or the status of scientific knowledge creation (Knorr Cetina 2002).

Although these constructivist programmes share major concerns, they differ with respect to their basic premises (Knorr Cetina 1989; Hacking 1999).

Research programme of social construction

The research programme of social construction is embedded in a phenomenological reinterpretation of the social sciences (Husserl 1931; Schütz 1932), studying 'reality' and 'knowledge' as resulting from social construction processes; reality is always a reality for humans and from humans. Therefore, it is important to understand how it is possible that particular 'realities' are accepted as 'objective', given 'external' or 'natural'. In the perspective of the research programme of social construction, knowledge is studied as resulting from social construction processes and, in particular, institutionalization, objectivation and legitimization (Berger and Luckmann 1967), describing these processes as leading to the experience of a stable, given, justified background knowledge and social order. Scientific knowledge results from second-order knowledge creation, the construction of scientific 'knowledge' on the social construction of 'knowledge'. Every phenomenon can thus be studied as the result of social construction processes (Hacking 1999), social construction being the 'objectivation' of meaning towards shared understanding and common knowledge. More recently, the research programme of social construction has explicitly turned towards a theory of social action (Luckmann 1992), identifying social action and interaction as the primary locus of social meaning making. This is a coherent extension of the

initial research programme, which emphasizes that common-sense knowledge is a central focus of any sociology of knowledge, similar to the practice turn in the social sciences.

In the perspective of the fundamental concerns of constructivist research programmes (see above), social constructivism focuses on the construction of 'reality' and 'knowledge' as resulting from particular construction processes. Instead of pre-assuming the existence of social order, common knowledge and the world (concern 3), this research programme focuses on the importance of legitimization, institutionalization and objectivation. Therefore, social action is shaped and enabled by the taken-for-granted social knowledge which is legitimate and objective in a particular situation or context, but which gains its legitimacy and objectivity through the social construction processes which transcend individual situations and contexts (concern 1). Although this research programme refers to 'knowledge', the 'social' and social 'action' as a conceptual foundation and an essential theoretical reference ('proto-sociology'; Eberle 1992), their meaning is contextual (concern 2). Therefore, the research programme of social construction is understood as 'sociology of knowledge' (concern 4). Social 'reality' is grasped as 'objective' and 'subjective'. The objective reality, although resulting from social construction, appears to the individual as given; the subjective reality refers to the continuous meaning making in everyday interactions.

While this perspective has been influential in the social sciences and in most discussions of constructivist epistemologies, it is often cited without a careful consideration of these underlying premises. Furthermore, various difficulties of this perspective have been discussed over time: it is argued that the application of this perspective can become tautological, if 'social' phenomena are seen as resulting from 'social' construction (Latour 2005); it remains difficult to demonstrate in an empirical study that 'something' is socially constructed (Hacking 1999); the approach assumes a collectively shared common understanding of 'reality' and 'knowledge', while their fragility and heterogeneity are underexplored. Overall, the intuition behind the research programme of social construction is a

central reference for constructivist epistemologies, but without a careful consideration of the underlying premises, the simple assertion of 'reality' and 'knowledge' as being constructed becomes trivial.

Systemic constructivism

In line with this critique, and in order to identify a more explicit conceptual foundation, constructivism can be understood as the epistemology and methodology of systems theory. Human cognition in everyday activities and scientific practice is not representing an objective, given world, but is an active process of constructing and inventing reality (Watzlawick 1984). There is no correspondence between an outer world and its 'representation' or construction in our brains. The brain operates according to structures and criteria which do not have the aim of correctly representing the world. The only relevant criterion is viability, understood as the capacity to successfully cope with the 'real' world. As a consequence, the cognition process itself does not work in a given and stable manner. Rather, it itself undergoes a historical development and differentiation process depending on previous cognition and experience. Whatever is recognized to be real, relevant and true has an impact back on the cognition process itself and vice versa. Cognitive structures and content are mutually dependent; this phenomenon is called 'self-referentiality'. On the basis of such an understanding, information or knowledge are not regarded as given entities but as processes of informing and knowing.

Hence, reality is not conceptualized as a given entity, but as a fragile process of becoming. What we call 'reality' or 'knowledge' is an ongoing contingent process of enactment (Weick 1979). Constructivism is therefore understood as an 'operative epistemology' (Von Foerster 1981): any information is 'a difference that makes a difference' (Bateson 1972). Such an epistemological conceptualization fundamentally challenges traditional ideas of reality and knowledge, as well as our understanding of good social research: at the same time, it marks a fundamental epistemological turn in systems theory itself: the shift from first-order to second-order cybernetics (Von Foerster 1981). A first domain where this process of constructing

and enacting reality occurs are cognitive systems. The so-called Radical Constructivism (Glasersfeld 1995; Watzlawick 1984) focuses on processes of cognitive construction, supplemented by insights from genetic epistemology (Piaget 1995) and from the theory of autopoietic systems (Maturana and Varela 1987). A second domain where this process of constructing and enacting reality occurs is communicative systems (Luhmann 1986, 1996). In this perspective, communications (and not human beings) are the basic elements of social systems. What is considered as real, relevant and true in a communication process depends on the context of this process, which is itself continuously created in the ongoing communication process.

From a systems theory perspective, the working mode of cognitive systems and of communicative systems is characterized by operational closure. Any data are processed according to the (cognitive or communicative) structures which have historically evolved. However, cognitive and communicative systems operate structurally coupled. There is a mutual dependence, but nevertheless each system operates autonomously. Particularly relevant for practice research is the aspect that the 'social' represents a separate domain characterized by operational autonomy and with idiosyncratic structures: human beings represent the 'environment' of these social systems. Both social and cognitive systems process meaning and enact structures. But in order to enable (collective) action there is no congruence between social and mental structures required. Rather, thoughts and communications need to be mutually compatible and connective, so that ongoing sensemaking is possible. Systemic constructivism thus strives to explain the social, not from the individual's mental structures, but by conceptualizing the social as an autonomous reality domain (Luhmann 1996).

Systemic constructivism addresses some of the open issues in the research programme of social construction (see above). Particularly, systemic constructivism makes a distinction between cognitive and social systems, thereby not taking individual agency or social entities as the basis for studying social phenomena, but the ongoing processes of communication (concern 2). This leads to a decentralization of agency, which means

relying on communication itself, which has always already taken place and which creates 'reality', independent of individual consciousness (concern 3). Thereby, one focus lies on the processes of drawing distinctions as the fundamental premise for shaping social 'reality' and the organization of 'knowledge'. This allows for internalizing the difficulties associated with many unquestioned dichotomies in the social sciences (concern 1). As a consequence, systemic constructivism is inherently reflexive. It emphasizes the necessity of observing the process of observation as the essence of research (concern 4). Thereby, systemic constructivism is an operative epistemology (Von Foerster 1981), which means that there is never a final description of a phenomenon, but knowledge creation is inherently processual and open towards future development.

The fundamental shift in systemic epistemology lies in its focus on communication. This shift coincides with the linguistic turn in philosophy (Rorty 1989), identifying communication as the central process enacting 'reality' and creating 'agency' in the social world. One important difference from the other constructivist epistemologies lies in the conceptualization of situated activities, which are reduced to manifestations and actualizations of communication. Thereby, some issues and problems of this perspective have been raised over time: while most social theories explicitly take the everyday theorizing of the social actors as an important informant about social meaning, systemic constructivism neglects individual consciousness as being not important for the study of communication and social reality; furthermore, the process of making distinctions assumes the possibility of rather clear-cut distinctions, while it can be argued that most empirical phenomena and social references are characterized by an inherent ambiguity and fuzziness (Latour 1999).

The empirical programme of constructivism

Contrary to the other two research programmes, the empirical programme of constructivism argues that it is problematic to pre-assume any theory of construction, because this implies that the study

of construction processes is pre-conceptualized and not empirically analysed (Latour 2005). The empirical programme of constructivism argues that it is fundamental to studying the multiple construction processes involved in the creation of 'reality', the 'world' or 'knowledge'. They are studied as resulting from multiple, heterogeneous, situated and fragile activities (Knorr Cetina 1989). The research process is not guided by theoretical premises, but by a specific repertoire of research devices and methodological practices. Thereby, the empirical programme is looking for the self-evident, which is taken for granted and must be deconstructed by the research process, opening the black boxes of social 'reality' (Latour 1999). As a consequence, this research programme is interested in studying the inherently controversial, heterogeneous, fragile, situated nature of any social phenomenon.

This explains the prominent status of the science studies in this research programme. Scientific research as the locus of knowledge creation is a prototypical context for understanding the construction of 'true', 'objective', 'valid', 'natural' worldviews in modern societies (Knorr Cetina 2002; Latour and Woolgar 1979). Furthermore, this research interest is closely related to the so-called practice turn in the social sciences (Bourdieu 1977; Foucault 1971; Schatzki *et al.* 2001), which is interested in understanding how the 'stability' and 'objectivity' of 'reality' is created in mundane activities, situated actions, and local practices. Finally, this explains the relation of this research programme to anthropological perspectives (Geertz 1973), which cultivate the creation of an alienated view on the self-evident. Neither pre-specified theories, nor everyday theories of the actors involved, can guide the research process, but they must be described in their creation (Latour 2005). The main preoccupation of research is thus to develop methodologies which allow us to study 'world creation' (Knorr Cetina 1989) as the continuous 'manufacturing' of knowledge under conditions of uncertainty (Knorr Cetina 2002).

This reconceptualization of research provides several insights: the empirical programme of constructivism not only challenges unquestioned dichotomies in the social sciences, but any

unquestioned and taken-for-granted foundation (concern 1). This is relevant for the study of 'reality', 'knowledge' and 'fact', which cannot be taken for granted, but must be described in their creation (concern 3); in parallel, it is relevant for the study of 'agency', which cannot be seen as inherent to any 'individual' or 'organization', but must be seen as situated, controversial and resulting from idiosyncratic creation processes (concern 2). As a consequence, this research programme always reflects epistemological issues, including the status of (scientific) 'knowledge' and the idiosyncratic procedures of (scientific) knowledge creation (concern 4). The research programme propagates an understanding of research which is concerned with the world 'as it could be', instead of focusing on the world 'as it is', because the 'world' is the result of construction processes. The criterion for 'good' research is the creation of unconventional, new worldviews and perspectives (Knorr Cetina 1989), which requires 'discovery technologies', not theories.

This perspective is related to multiple approaches which are important in the practice turn (Schatzki *et al.* 2001). Among others, it resonates with grounded theory building (Strauss and Corbin 1990) and related pragmatist epistemologies (Joas 1992), emphasizing the creative nature of action and research; it also relates to the interest in creative theories of action (Joas 1992; Tsoukas and Knudsen 2002). Furthermore, it is in line with the approaches of social practice (Foucault 1971; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1996), which emphasize the importance of reflecting the practice of doing research, shifting the focus from social theories to methodological issues (Latour 2005). This explains why the empirical programme insists on 'symmetry' as central for 'good' research (Knorr Cetina 1989). It implies that what it explores in terms of the creation of 'reality' and the 'world' holds for scientific research. And it implies that while the other constructivist epistemologies argue for particular theoretical perspectives, the empirical programme of constructivism focuses on the heterogeneity and variety of situated mechanisms and idiosyncratic activities, relevant for the construction and stabilization of 'reality' in particular contexts (Knorr Cetina 1989).

Constructivist epistemologies, practical relevance and research practice

If the world is seen as 'constructed', as it is argued in constructivist epistemologies, this implies that 'it could be otherwise'. Obviously, this awareness of contingency is a methodological issue, but it can also be seen as the starting point for changing the world as it is, and thus as a pragmatic and normative stance, in various degrees of constructivist engagement (Hacking 1999, p. 39). This is of importance for the issue of the practical relevance of research in the social sciences as well as in management research, as it identifies different types of relevance (Grand 2003). Four types of constructivist engagements are particularly interesting.

First, a constructivist perspective can be conceptualized as a methodology emphasizing the construction mechanisms underlying particular phenomena. The value of an 'analytical' engagement (Foucault 1971) lies in reconstructing phenomena as they are, and identifying alternatives of how they could be. Second, this can lead to an 'ironic' engagement, which means that the contingency of a phenomenon is taken as a starting point for ironically discussing positions which accept phenomena as 'real' or 'objective' (Rorty 1989). Third, based on a normative valuation of a phenomenon as it is, this can lead to a 'reformist' engagement in which the fact that something could be otherwise is used to criticize the phenomenon as it is (Hacking 1999, p. 40): it is here that we can see the transition towards a practical engagement (Dahrendorf 2005; Elkana 1986). Fourth, this can also lead to a 'revolutionary' approach which opts for fundamental change as the only possibility of transforming the phenomenon as it is. These degrees of constructivist engagement can be found in different constructivist research programmes, including the Strategy as Practice research programme, which does not only focus on describing the practice of strategy, but explores alternative ways of making strategy (Johnson *et al.* 2007; Whittington 2007).

Independent of their level of engagement, constructivist epistemologies share basic intuitions. First, constructivist epistemologies not only discuss the world 'as it is', but reflect the contingency

of 'reality' and 'knowledge', which leads to an interest in identifying *possible worlds* 'as they could be' (Latour 2005) or even in *changing the world as it is*' (Hacking 1999). Second, constructivist epistemologies explore what is required to be able to be talking of individual and organizational 'agency' (Knorr Cetina and Cicourel 1981). Instead of pre-assuming 'agency', it is important to study its *pre-requisites and preconditions*. Third, this implies an attempt to *describe social phenomena beyond traditional dichotomies* (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Fourth, an *explicit consideration of uncertainty and openness* of any social interaction and future development is crucial (Gomez and Jones 2000). Fifth, research is seen as constructing 'reality' and 'knowledge', emphasizing *the creativity and self-reflexivity of research*.

Constructivist epistemologies and Strategy as Practice research

We now turn to the recent contributions and discussions of the Strategy as Practice research programme to see whether and how fundamental premises of constructivist epistemologies are incorporated, explored and reflected. We concentrate on three fundamental 'black boxes' in the Strategy as Practice research programme which are important in the perspective of constructivist epistemologies: the notion of 'practice', 'strategy' and 'research'.

The construction of strategizing practices

A fundamental shift in the Strategy as Practice research programme is the focus on the everyday micro-activities of managers in constructing strategy (Whittington 1996). In line with constructivist epistemologies, the major attempt is in opening the black box of strategy creation, instead of relying on taken-for-granted pre-conceptualization of how strategy is made (Mintzberg 1971); furthermore, the focus is on understanding the particular strategies as they are created (Johnson *et al.* 2003). This approach emphasizes the importance of describing the 'internal life of process' of strategy making (Brown and Duguid 2001), which is not covered by existing strategy research (Johnson *et al.* 2003;

Samra-Fredericks 2003; Whittington 1996). This interest is close to the empirical programme of constructivism. Thereby, it can be argued that *exchange, every managerial activity and local interaction of people within and outside an organization can potentially lead to an idea, opportunity, initiative or project which gains strategic importance*. In parallel, *strategy is understood as the ex post ascription of the label 'strategic' to particular activities, either by the managers themselves, or by the researchers studying them*.

Understanding strategy creation implies that the empirical focus must be extended beyond the interaction of top management teams in formal settings dedicated to strategy. Middle managers (Balogun and Johnson 2004; Floyd and Lane 2000; Westley and Johnson 2004; Floyd and Lane 2000; Westley 1990) and *specialized strategists* (Grant 2003; Pettigrew 1985), *line managers* and *specialized units* (Ahrens and Chapman 2007; Brown and Eisenhardt 1997; Orlikowski 2002), *external stakeholders*, including customers (Christensen and Bower 1996), *investors* (Bower and Gilbert 2005), *strategic partners* (Dyer and Singh 1998), *technology partners* (von Hippel and von Krogh 2003) and *consultants* are involved in strategy creation. This heterogeneity of actors and activities, which are actually or potentially relevant for the creation of strategy, indicates an opportunity and a challenge for studying strategy creation.

Thereby, strategy creation is understood as being shaped by *idiosyncratic, firm-specific, context-dependent, situated and local repertoires of construction practices and strategizing routines* (Feldman and Pentland 2003). In line with the practice turn in the social sciences, and as a result of the empirical study of strategizing practices, it is argued that it is not the dispersed, situated activities themselves, nor the heterogeneous actors, activities and artefacts in different contexts, that are key, but their embeddedness in routinized repertoires of strategy creation practices, which makes them 'strategic'. It is thus important to describe the firm-specific rituals, activities, settings, tools and processes in which strategy is created. Among the various contributions, the studies of metaphorical discourses (Morgan 2006), *discursive practices* (Vaara *et al.* 2004), *styles of engagement* (Chia and Mackay 2007), *micro-processes* (Salvato 2003) or

leadership practices (Denis *et al.* 2001) are exemplary. Thereby, it is important to understand how managers make use of their agency to shape these repertoires of strategizing practices while creating strategic 'agency' through referencing to these repertoires (Balogun and Johnson 2004).

The construction of strategy in practice

The study of strategizing practices implies an emphasis on the situatedness of strategy creation (Tsoukas and Chia 2002). Strategy creation takes place in concrete situations, it gains relevance and significance in those situations, and it must be interpreted in the perspective of these particular contexts. Hence, words and ideas, concepts and terms, including concepts of 'strategy', cannot be understood independently of the language games and local interactions in which they are produced and actualized (Seidl 2007). This implies that similar activities have different meanings according to the contexts in which they occur, as well as depending on the particular perspectives of the actors involved (Engström and Blackler 2005; Samra-Fredericks 2003; Suchman 1987).

Therefore, the definition of what 'strategy' means must be seen as *idiosyncratic and processual* (van de Ven 1993). There are phases in which strategy creation takes place according to established processes, which are taken for granted, while these processes, as well as related practices, are questioned, redefined, adapted and changed in other phases. This is in line with the research programme of social construction, and in particular, the distinction between 'subjective' and 'objective'. Furthermore, there is a continuous interplay between established strategizing practices and strategy concepts, and the implicit, informal strategy-related creative activities of managers and other people in the organization. Over time, these interactions change and develop 'agency' of their own (Burgelman 1996; Greenwood and Hinings 1996; Mintzberg and McHugh 1985), a perspective, which resonates with systemic constructivism.

The Strategy as Practice research programme makes various suggestions with respect to the conceptualization of 'strategy': in line with the *idiosyncratic and situated nature of strategy practices*,

strategy is associated with those practices and concepts which are identified as 'strategic' by the actors themselves (Heracleous and Marshak 2004; Mailis 2005; Weick and Roberts 1993); this perspective is in line with the research programme of social construction. Certain predefined sets of practices are assumed as 'strategic' by the researchers involved (Jarzabkowski 2003; Regné 2003), including coordination and decision making, planning and budgeting, the creation of episodes (Hendy and Seidl 2003) and the allocation of resources (Bower 1970; Bower and Gilbert 2005). These are taken-for-granted concepts of 'strategy' in strategy research. The fact that these concepts are taken for granted, but contingent, resonates with systemic constructivism. Finally, some practices are identified as 'strategic' by the institutional context, both academic and managerial (Whittington 2007).

The decisive activities in shaping the strategy of an organization can only be identified ex post (Bower 1970; Burgelman 1994; Johnson 1987; Mintzberg and McHugh 1985; Pettigrew 1987); in line with the empirical programme of constructivism, this process of strategy creation can be studied as resulting from circulating references, black boxing and translation (Latour 1999; Callon 1986). While research in the area of strategic management in most cases either pre-assumes that it is clear what 'strategic' means, or uses a particular conceptualization of 'strategy', the Strategy as Practice research programme emphasizes the importance of understanding the construction of what 'strategic' means in line with constructivist epistemologies. However, this implies that the concept of 'strategy' is important enough to be reflected in any strategy research project. Furthermore, it can become a research area itself, leading to some fundamental reflection of strategy research (Tsoukas and Knudsen 2002).

The construction of strategy in strategy research

It is on the methodological level where the Strategy as Practice research programme is most ambiguous. On the one hand, major perspectives in this research programme emphasize the radical

implications of the new research programme for the conduct of strategy research (Johnson *et al.* 2003; Tsoukas and Knudsen 2002); on the other hand, it is argued that a new research programme can only succeed if it successfully relates to predominant theories, methodologies and themes in existing, established strategy research.

While many scholars in the Strategy as Practice research programme emphasize the importance of firm-specific, idiosyncratic conceptualizations of strategy, and thus share constructivist epistemologies, other scholars try to reconcile the Strategy as Practice research programme with dominant, non-constructivist streams in the strategic management field in order to relate their research to taken-for-granted concepts of strategy. Strategizing practices are related to strategy concepts like firm-level outcomes (competitive advantage, success) and intermediate references (performance of the strategy process); strategy practices are thus identified as a source of competitiveness (Johnson *et al.* 2007). Organizational performance and realized strategy activities and strategy practices (Bower and Gilbert 2005; Johnson *et al.* 2007). The interdependencies between research streams in strategic management (dynamic capabilities, strategic change, innovation) and Strategy as Practice research are explored (Paroutis and Pettigrew 2007; Regner 2003); this requires us to reconcile existing theories in strategy and theories of social practice. Finally, the heterogeneity of activities, actors, actions and practices is incorporated into integrative frameworks (Bower and Gilbert 2007; Floyd and Lane 2000; Johnson *et al.* 2007).

A fundamental ambiguity in the Strategy as Practice research programme becomes visible in the perspective of constructivist epistemologies: through the emphasis on the idiosyncratic and constructed nature of strategizing 'practices', 'strategy' and strategy 'research', this research programme potentially or actually contradicts taken-for-granted premises of strategy research and strategic management. By striving to reconcile the two, Strategy as Practice research inevitably neglects some of its most fundamental premises and contributions, and in particular, the situatedness, path-dependence, idiosyncrasy and

constructedness of strategy (Tsoukas and Knudsen 2002; Chia and MacKay 2007).

Implications of constructivist epistemologies for Strategy as Practice research

From the perspective of constructivist epistemologies, an alternative would be to transcend some fundamental oppositions which underlie the differentiation of Strategy as Practice as a new research programme, and strategy research as it is understood in dominant academic and managerial discourses (Johnson *et al.* 2007). In particular, five points are important:

1. Strategy research should emphasize the importance of constantly unpacking and *deconstructing fundamental, taken-for-granted concepts* in strategy research and strategic management. Opening the black boxes, and disassembling and reassembling strategy (Latour 2005) could be identified as a primary focus. Obviously, this focus is ambiguous, as the pre-assumption of unquestioned black boxes is a precondition for establishing a research programme, while the systematic deconstruction of central black boxes is essential for the Strategy as Practice research programme. However, it is this ambiguity of relying on and at the same time deconstructing strategy-related black boxes which ensures the dynamism and creativity of this research programme.
2. In order to be able to disassemble the black box 'strategy' and strategy-related black boxes, it is important to *cultivate alienating perspectives* (Latour 2005). One common pattern of constructivist epistemologies is exactly this alienating effect, which is often criticized as the usage of abstract vocabulary (Luhmann 2002; Latour 2005). However, this is central to these research programmes, because they explicitly do not build on common sense or everyday theorizing concerning central concepts and terms. They introduce concepts and terms which gain meaning through their translation in particular contexts and specific situations (Latour 1999). Furthermore, this leads to an ongoing
3. It is exactly the insistence on alienating perspectives which at the same time creates a precondition for being able to *consider particularities, contexts and idiosyncrasies* in empirical research. A related approach in empirical research is the attempt to exclude any theoretical perspective and concept from the initial entry into the field (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Obviously, both extremes, alienation through abstraction and alienation through the absence of abstract notions, are impossible to realize in research practice (Latour 1999). However, to take them as references leads to a continuous reflection of the premises and black boxes, which is important for any research programme in the perspective of constructivist epistemologies (Law 2004).
4. This reflection of research indicates that *research is creation and construction*. Whereas traditional epistemologies discuss the inherent creativity of research as a problem which must rather be disciplined through particular methodological tools, constructivist epistemologies would, on the contrary, insist on the central importance of creativity for (good) research (Joas 1992). In this line of thought, the empirical programme of constructivism explicitly emphasizes the importance of understanding methodology as 'discovery technologies' (Knorr Cetina 1989). Research methodologies are understood as enabling, ensuring and fostering creativity in research practice (as it is discussed in the science studies; see Knorr Cetina 2002).
5. If research is interpreted as creation and construction, it must be enabled by particular *methodologies, technologies, practices of creation and construction* (Knorr Cetina 1989). This implies that any closure of a research programme, any predefinition of central concepts and terms, or any unquestioned foundation of research on one particular theory must be understood as relying on black boxes (Latour 1999). As we have discussed above, such black boxes are necessary for research practice, but at the same time they are always also inherently

reflection and reconstruction of concepts and terms in research practice.

problematic (Elkana 1986): they are an expression of a particular thought style and thought community (Fleck 1980) which results from particular creation and construction processes.

In the next section, we explore some implications of a constructivist epistemology for strategy research in general, as well as for the Strategy as Practice research programme in particular.

Towards a constructivist research programme in strategy research

In the perspective of constructivist epistemologies, strategy research would focus on the *creation, construction, translation and transformation of strategy concepts and strategizing practices*. Thereby, it is important to study their self-evident, unquestioned nature. Strategy and strategizing practices are neither something strategy research can assume as taken for granted, nor are they something that is only situated. Strategy and strategizing practices are the result of continuous (re-)construction, through the creative activities of the actors and researchers involved, and through interactions between actors and researchers.

The situated construction of strategy concepts and strategizing practices

Strategy practices refer to taken-for-granted strategy concepts. However, it is a situated, controversial and empirical issue to describe those strategy concepts. Strategizing practices refer to different, firm-specific and general strategy concepts, and they refer to multiple concepts in parallel, at the same time, and over time. What is understood as 'strategic' is changing across situations and over time, and it must thus be (re-)created, actualized and confirmed in each situation. Although strategy concepts and strategy practices are the result of enactment, they are most of the time taken for granted by the actors and researchers involved, and are thus experienced as 'objectively' given. This is a precondition for strategy making in organizations, because these self-evident references orient, stabilize and coordinate strategy-related activities.

At the same time, every strategy concept is potentially questioned and challenged, and replaced and transformed by the actors and researchers involved. The heterogeneity of concepts and practices, and the reduction and extension of this heterogeneity are therefore central issues. While heterogeneity enlarges the flexibility of strategy, it increases the ambiguity among those concepts and practices; while reducing the variety of concepts and practices enables coordination, it introduces rigidity. In the perspective of a constructivist research programme, the construction and deconstruction of strategy concepts and strategizing practices are studied as *simultaneously coexisting* in strategy making.

A fundamental interest in strategy research is to understand whether, how and why particular strategy concepts and strategizing practices relate to any realized strategy (Bower and Gilbert 2005), organizational performance or other outcomes (Johnson *et al.* 2007). Thereby, a specific repertoire of concepts and measures has been established as robust and relevant for studying performance, and for studying performance differences among organizations (Barney 1991). However, it is important to study dominating concepts of 'realized' strategy and 'performance' as they are defined in a *particular situation and context* (Pettigrew 1987). Furthermore, to study the strategic references and measurement systems for performance is important, because they have an impact on the identification of strategizing practices evaluating the 'strategic relevance' of planning and budgeting, and of particular meetings and workshops, concepts and issues.

A constructivist research programme brings the contingency of strategy concepts and strategizing practices, and the uncertainty and ambiguity of related concepts of performance to the centre of research. Thereby, strategic management as an academic discipline, research field, teaching area and managerial practice has an impact on the contextualization and change, and stabilization and destabilization of particular definitions and conceptualizations, both within particular organizations, as well as for relevant communities. The interaction and reflexive relationship between the construction of strategy in managerial practice and

the construction of strategy in strategy research is a central precondition for conducting strategy research (Tsoukas 2005).

Uncertainty, strategy concepts and strategizing practices

Strategy is conceptualized as crucial for successful organizational development in future-oriented, fundamentally uncertain, contested and open situations (Schendel and Hitt 2007). It is in those situations in which it is challenging, but important, to build and stabilize strategy concepts and strategizing practices as taken for granted and self-evident (Gomez and Jones 2000). Binding concepts of performance and success, established repertoires of procedures and methods, and unquestioned tasks and issues are central for productive, coordinated strategy making under uncertainty and ambiguity. They are necessary to conclude endless discussions about the appropriate conceptualization of 'strategy' and infinite regresses of defining such references as 'success' and 'performance'.

Paradoxically, taken-for-granted references must be stabilized as given, knowing that they are contingent and potentially questionable. This is in line with a constructivist research programme which focuses on the dynamic interplay of confining and transforming, routinizing and deconstructing, and actualizing and revising strategic references. The 'practice turn' in the social sciences emphasizes promising perspectives here, including the concepts of: routines as routinization (Feldman 2003); habits as the embodied repertoire of practices, which define whether someone is part of a particular community (Bourdieu 1977); structuration as the continuous confirmation and adaptation of action patterns (Giddens 1984); black boxing as the activities and artefacts, which translate and transform situated ideas into stable references (Latour 1999); conventions as a way of understanding the constructive, but unquestioned nature of the references (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991; Gomez and Jones 2000); and common knowledge, which results from the collective objectivation and typification of embedded experiences and situated interactions (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Wenger 1998).

A constructivist research programme in strategy research can relate to existing research on organizational processes and managerial activities under uncertainty and ambiguity: these activities are described as situated and local, embedded and contextual, specific and task oriented, focused and operational (Mintzberg 1971). However, various empirical patterns can be identified, including the observation that decision-making under uncertainty and ambiguity is proactive and assertive (March and Shapira 1987), involving experimenting (Cherardi and Nicolini 2002), continuous sensemaking (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991; Weick 1995) and framing and interpretation (Bower and Gilbert 2005). Thereby, actors and organizations anticipate the fact that they must react to and work in the context of unexpected events and new situations (Weick and Sutcliffe 2001). While most strategy research emphasizes the importance of considering the uncertainty of strategy making (Porter 1985), it builds on epistemological and theoretical perspectives, which are often not really sensitive to uncertainty (Grand *et al.* 1999). A constructivist research programme demonstrates the implications of taking the openness of the future and its inherent uncertainty seriously.

The stabilization of strategy concepts and strategizing practices

Talking about self-evident strategy concepts and unquestioned strategizing practices does not mean that they are 'stable', but are seen as 'stabilized'. As has been shown (Garfinkel 2002), facts or concepts, insights or routines, have to be confirmed, actualized and reproduced anew in every situation (Feldman and Pentland 2003). By understanding strategies and strategizing as resulting from the enactment of these practices and routines by the multiple situated activities of the people involved, the focus lies on how managers and other people in the organization create and construct the stability, coherence and robustness of a strategy (Westley 1990). At the same time, it reminds us of its contingency and fragility. It is thus important to understand how taken-for-granted strategy concepts and strategizing practices are constructed

and stabilized by the managers and other people involved in strategy making.

To transcend the contingency and situatedness of taken-for-granted references, they must be stabilized and anchored as self-evident and unquestionable. In this context, the practice turn provides important perspectives, conceptualizing construction and stabilization as discourse formation (Foucault 1978), language games (Wittgenstein 1967), circulating references (Latour 1999) or translation activities (Callon 1986). Thereby, dispersed strategy-related activities are coordinated and aligned in the organization and, over time, due to the formation of shared expectations and 'objectivized' interpretations, tools and methods are recognized as relevant for strategy making. Thereby, practice communities not only actualize and confirm the repertoires and routines of strategy making, but construct and constitute their identity as those who make strategy (Brown and Duguid 2001); furthermore, the emphasis on the importance of a 'porte parole' points to the fact that the ability to construct reality depends on the power position of the respective actor and action (Bourdieu 1982); finally, the material culture of strategy making is emphasized, including the artefacts, tools, methods and techniques of strategy making (Knorr Cetina 1999; Latour 1999). They condense repertoires of strategy making in the form of templates and analytical tools, ways of presentation and representation, and visualization and documentation (Orlikowski 2000, 2002).

The multiple strategy tools, strategic frameworks and strategizing methods in an organization are an expression of multiple ways of packaging and focusing strategy concepts and strategizing practices; the same holds for the multiple frameworks, concepts, methods and models in strategy research, which are an expression of different ways of conceptualizing strategy. Thereby, it has been suggested (Latour and Woolgar 1986; Orlikowski 2000) that technologies, artefacts, symbols, tools and instruments have their own agency. They transform strategy concepts and argumentative patterns into stable structures and tangible references, which are used by the managers and researchers involved. In the perspective of a constructivist research programme, to study strategy making

implies to *describe and reflect the construction technologies* (Knorr Cetina 1989) which managers and researchers use to create, establish, maintain and change particular strategy concepts and strategizing practices.

The deconstruction of strategy concepts and strategizing practices

In the perspective of a constructivist research programme, it is finally important to understand how taken-for-granted references are deconstructed and questioned, and creatively enacted and reassembled (Grand and McLean 2007; Joas 1992). In particular, this includes a conceptualization of strategy in the perspective of the creativity of action (Grand and McLean 2007; Joas 1992), situated action (Suchman 1987), symbolic interaction (Goffman 1971) and interpretative flexibility (Callon 1986). It is important that strategy research considers this creativity in strategizing and the distinctive forms of how this happens in practice fields (Tsoukas and Knudsen 2002). This creative reinvention of strategy practices explains why taken-for-granted references and practices shift and transform themselves across situations and over time (Joas 1992). Stories and repertoires, and tools and artefacts, referring to strategy are never unambiguous; they have to be reinterpreted in any new situation. In the perspective of a constructivist research programme, this can be seen as one source of creativity, innovation and strategic renewal in strategy making.

Another driver for the deconstruction of unquested strategy concepts and strategy practices is changing contexts (Pettigrew 1987). Whereas strategy process research often predelineates and conceptualizes contexts in general terms, it is important to consider contexts as they are continuously enacted by the actors themselves. Thereby, given strategies and strategizing practices are deconstructed and reinterpreted, and translated and transformed. The idiosyncrasies in each context, as well as the situated improvisations of each person involved, lead to the invention of new strategic concepts and strategizing activities. Over time, these new concepts and activities become objectified new concepts and practices which transcend the individual situation and context. Finally, entrepreneurial and

managerial activities themselves challenge and reflect the appropriateness of established strategies and practices, either in formalized or informal ways and settings. Thus, the deconstruction of the current strategy itself is enacted and shaped by particular strategizing practices.

This indicates an important methodological and epistemological starting point for the empirical study of strategy concepts and strategizing practices. It is fundamental to open the central black boxes of the strategy field, instead of accepting and pre-assuming their taken-for-granted nature in an organization and in strategy research. In the perspective of a constructivist research programme, epistemologies, theories and methodologies have the essential role of enabling the study of the creation and construction, as well as deconstruction and transformation, of these black boxes. It is a programme to *foster stability and instability, creation and destruction, and action and reflection in strategy making and strategy research*.

Conclusions

A constructivist research programme in strategy research implies the development of alienating perspectives. Although constructivist epistemologies differ in their premises, they share a scepticism against anything which is just taken for granted, self-evident and unquestioned (Hacking 1999). At the same time, more recent perspectives in these epistemologies share an in-depth understanding of the importance of taken-for-granted, self-evident, unquestioned references, concepts and practices for robust managerial action and scientific research, given the fundamental uncertainty and ambiguity in these contexts (Gomez and Jones 2000).

In parallel to a call for theories of creative action to advance the conduct of strategy research (Tsoukas and Knudsen 2002), we plead for the advancement of a constructivist research programme for strategy research. In essence, this implies the following points. First, this implies a research focus on the *creation and construction activities* of the actors studied (Joas 1992), in relation to the construction activities of strategy research itself (Knorr Cetina 2002); second, this

implies an emphasis on the *creative and constructive nature of research*, which is in line with earlier methodological perspectives (Glaser and Strauss 1967); third, this implies a *focus on the ambiguity of taken-for-granted references*, which at the same time are essential for action under uncertainty, and are always potentially problematic (Theriot 2006); fourth, both *managers and researchers require discovery technologies*. These are methodologies and theories, and concepts and tools, which support the deconstruction and reconstruction of the self-evident (Knorr Cetina 1989; Latour 2005). In this view, one central criterion for evaluating 'good' research and 'good' management is the ability to create new perspectives on what we take for granted (Weick 1989).

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DAMON GOLSORKHI,
LINDA ROULEAU,
DAVID SEIDL AND
EERO VAARA