

Projections of Future Time; On agency, institution and narratives.

Recently there has been an increasing interest in exploring the relationship between agency and institutions in Strategy as Practice. This short paper presents a model where agency and institution are explained within the commonly used conceptual framework of practices, practitioners and praxis, and furthermore contrasting the conceptual model with different notions of narrative temporality. What emerges is a model explaining the role of narrative in strategizing, positioning strategy as a narrative proposing projections of future time.

Key words: Narrative, Praxis, Strategy, Time

Introduction

Like the Sword of Damocles, time casts a constant shadow on us and the organizations that we form. Regardless of our motives, it urges us forward plunging our organizations into a struggle with change regardless of us embracing or rejecting the proposition of change. This relentless time, while on the one hand opening up the very field of strategy, also causes a constant and renewing challenge for the strategist. Like the Damocles of the myths, the strategist enjoys a privileged position in his organization but also realizes that the sword above his head is suspended by just one thread; and unlike Damocles the strategist is not simply able to trade places to regain his sense of security. For to make strategy is to live in constant fear of time which at any given moment might plunge the most careful design or the most prudent allocation into obscurity.

In strategy as practice the role of the strategist is widely recognized. Strategy is seen as strategizing emerging through micro-processes (Johnson, Melin and Whittington 2003); with the capacity of influencing the structural level (Jarzabkowski 2008), thus embracing the notion of interaction and interdependency between individual agency and collective institutions. The commonly used conceptual framework of practices, practitioners and praxis further underlies not only the intra-organizational, but also the inter-organizational (Whittington 2006). The linguistic aspects of strategy work have been explored in topics such as discourse as a strategic resource (Hardy, Palmer and Phillips 2000), legitimation strategies (Vaara and Tienari 2008), rhetorical strategies (Suddaby and Greenwood 2005), strategic intent (Mantere and Sillince 2007) and participation in strategy (Mantere and Vaara 2008). It has also been pointed out, that strategy should not be seen as a unified field though it shares a vocabulary (Seidl 2007). Furthermore strategy research, and strategy as practice along with it, is examining narratives as a heuristic for understanding organizations (Barry and Elmes 1997). Narratives are seen as something more than simply stories told inside organizations; they are enacted inside organizations (Pentland 1999). Organizations themselves may be seen as linguistic constructs formed through multiple identity-relevant narratives (Brown 2006). Sometimes such narratives can capture the entire organization,

such as the research on critical dramaturgy at Enron shows (Boje, Rosile, Durant and Luhman 2004). On a more micro-level, the creation of victims, villains and heroes through organizational narratives has also been studied (Whittle, Mueller and Mangan 2009). One angle particularly fruitful for the view taken in this short paper is the intermingling of time and narrative. In this case arising from the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur (1984), it has been amended into the notion of 'Narrative Temporality' (Cunliffe, Luhman and Boje 2004:262);

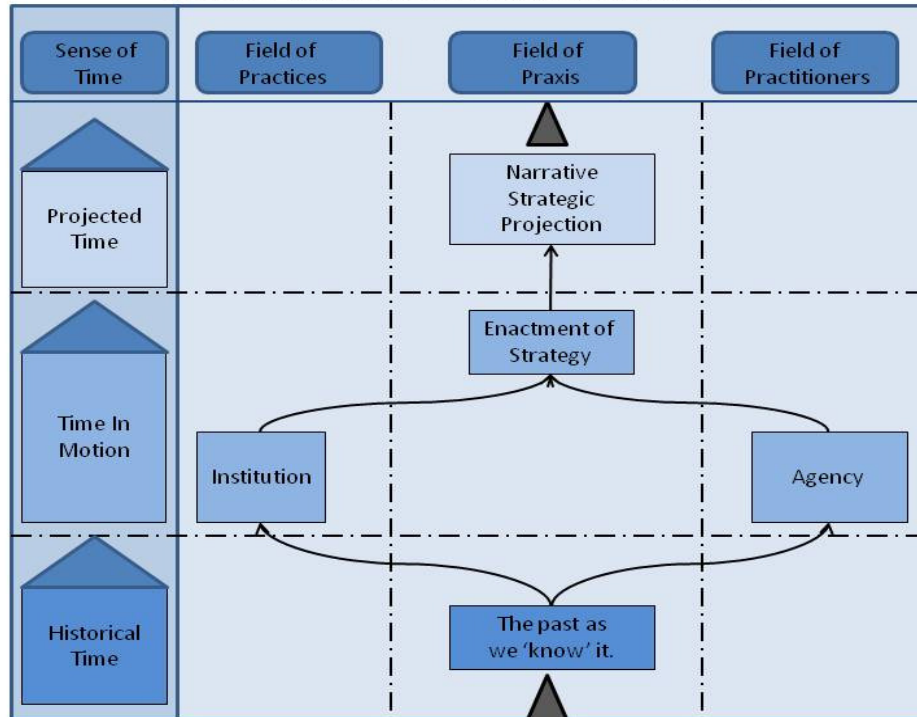
“...narrative research is reframed as a collectively constructed process over time-fluid and dynamic, and open to the interpretations of many participants.”

In my view engaging with this polyphonic and contested view on narrative and time come the notion of non-deliberate strategy (Chia and Holt 2006); where strategy is seen as something emerging from the everyday coping of people in organizations.

The Model

The proposed model is constructed of many parts. At its heart is the strategic narrative; a particular type of narrative told in organizations specifically in regards to future time. This is the stand on strategy taken in this short paper; that strategy can be seen as a projection of future time. This projection, however, exists in an environment constrained by two factors; namely perceptions of time (Projected time, Time in motion and Historical time) as well as the commonly used conceptual framework of strategy as practice (Practice, Practitioners and Praxis).

Picture 1: Narratives traversing time and practice



It is within this practice-temporal environment that our narrative moves. Temporally we find two types of being in strategy. When we are active in the time of the 'now', or time in motion, we find ourselves in the realm of action. When we are active in projected or future time, or in past or historical time we are in the realm of narratives. This is of profound importance for the view on strategy taken here; because as strategy is positioned as narrative projections of future time its essence is thereby narrative.

In the practice environment this model gives priority to the notion of praxis. With praxis here I understand the enactment of knowledge, skill and intent into practical action. Praxis goes throughout the model. It is something we deploy at any given time actively to our understanding of historical time and projected time; and strategically we do so through the possibility to engage in the enactment of strategy; which itself is an ongoing play manifest in all organizations. Joining praxis within the temporal environment of Time in Motion are the fields of practices and practitioners. Practices here are equated with institutions. It is so because it is within the sphere of the institution that the knowledge and skills of praxis can exist; institutions both enable and constrain our practical knowledge and skills. I view institutions as platforms or theatrical stages on which certain elements are collectively shared by those making up the institution; culture, history, vocabulary, location or discourse to name some. However, institutions do not carry agency. Agency resides with the individuals who come together to form the institution. Thus, when strategy is enacted what comes together is the will to act of the individual brought into a setting for mutual play by that which is invested in the institution. This becomes often a messy narrative indeed; as the agents of free will do not by any necessity share a common understanding of the rules of the institution, nor do they often share a common proposition regarding the strategic projection of future time for the organization. Strategy thus easily becomes fragmented and contested. Let us now examine a bit closer the propositions of the model based on a temporal division.

Historical Time

In this context historical time doesn't refer to the actual past events; rather it refers to the stories and interpretations of the past events that we employ in the enactment of strategy. Strategy is often infused with power in organizations, and thus it is important to realize that strategy carries or assumes the mandate to both use and at times change interpretations of past events. When we as strategic agents join in on the enactment of strategy, our rhetoric and discourse is often constructed through references to past events; we construct a historical time which in itself is often suitable to legitimate the proposition for projected time that we have.

In addition to the reference to past events, I in this model propose that historical time exist solely within the realm of praxis. It is a form of situated, applied and practical knowledge which both for us as individuals as well as for us as an institutional collective becomes meaningful only at the point of enactment; in essence historical time as opposed to actual historical events becomes real in enactment. Historical time also forms a depository or sedimentation of all former strategic narrative projections in memory; one that will be readily accessed by the strategic agents gazing towards projected time. It is the starting point of any strategic plot brought to enactment; because it is in the praxis of historical time that the

practices of the institution are carried onwards; sustained and also changed as the model iterates itself over time. In essence, it is the past as we know it through what we say about it.

Time in Motion

The middle section of the temporal axis, time in motion, differs from the two other sections. In time in motion we are in the happening itself; in the lived experience of the moment. It is not as such narrative to its quality; for narrative resides in historical time as that which we carry with us as a narrative of the past or in projected time as a narrative in which we attempt to configure the future. Time in motion is neither; it is rather the moment when both of these are wielded on the narrative stage in effect creating or recreating both. It is what we say about the past and what we say about the future at the moment when we say it.

Time in motion reaches across the conceptual framework of strategy as practice, including within it the three categories of practice, practitioners and praxis. As its starting point it holds two pairs; firstly the pair of practice and institution and secondly the pair of practitioners and agency. These two starting points should be understood as preconditions for the end point of time in motion; namely the enactment of the strategic narrative. If one thinks about the development of the narrative; at its outset we hold historical time as a mixture of different past enactments of strategy. These form the basis around which both the practices that make up institutions and the agency of the individual practitioner needs to orient when considering possible enactments of strategy.

Looking at institutions and practice, the view held in this short paper is that institutions themselves do not as such carry any agency. Institutions are places where people come together. In its arrangement the institution does not necessarily treat people equally, but such divisions within the institutions are all outcomes of human agency. Thus narratively institutions are platforms, stages or spaces for the enactment of strategic plays. Such plays come with their practices; which essentially are ways of conducting the play. Such common ways of conducting the play are important, because it allows multiple agencies to enter the stage and interact but also limit the kind of resources and plots that can be attempted.

However, while institutions here are seen as passive repositories it is with the individual agency that the true enactment of strategy rests. Everyone involved in an organization has a role to play; though often those actively seeking to have a role will be in a dominant position which can furthermore be underlined by institutional pedigrees such as status, power or access to resources. In a given play, a number of actors take to the institutional stage in order to engage in the play of the strategic narrative. If no-one does, then it is possible there will in fact be no strategy at all within the institution.

Where institution and agency meet up with praxis again is the point of enactment. This is the actual play of the strategic narrative. It is basically where the agents who have chosen or forced to have a role in the strategy enter and enact on the stage; reaching for the emplotments of historical time, constrained and enabled by the practices of the institution, carrying the unique initiative of their own agency, competing and collaborating with one another in the formation of the narrative projection of time. It is important to stress that this

enactment of the strategic narrative is likely to include elements that attempt to dominate it, however it is also likely that such dominations will likely fail to at least some degree. What emerges from it all is a complex and often paradoxical projection of future time.

The time in motion phase of strategy can exist in several forms. In a sense it is happening constantly, with the small micro work of strategizing that is ongoing in organizations that have small and incremental but possibly over time substantial impacts of strategy. At the same time the enactment of strategy becomes more visible when it happens as a part of something more formal, such as an annual strategy planning process.

Projected Time

It is in projected time that we find the essence of strategy as proposed in this paper. It is a narrative of projected time; of how we would like to see the story of the institution unfold. Again, just like in historical time, it is important to realize that this is not the way actual future events will be; it is rather how we as agents within the organization's sphere would wish future events to be like. It is the very reason that we enter the stage where strategy is narrated; to share our view and to attempt to influence how other people will come to perceive of this strategic narrative.

Projected time is yet again the domain of praxis. It is about how we through our activity now shape the stories of the future. Projected time is the end point of what is in reality a cyclical activity; for in the next iteration of strategy what is now projected time will become historical time and thus contribute to the set of practices from which institution arises. In this sense what I am proposing here is that strategy is seen as an ongoing activity or process, where one iteration folds naturally into the next one.

While this model takes a birds-eye view of the entire unfolding of strategy in an organization, it does not as such contain insight into the qualities of successfully narrated strategy. On this point the work of Barry and Elmes (1997) lift up two important characteristics of a successful narration; credibility and defamiliarization. A strategic narrative has to be sufficiently plausible for people to embrace it, yet it has to be sufficiently novel so that it captures our curiosity.

Discussion

What this short paper proposes is an amalgamation of a number of concepts. From the strategy as practice perspective, Whittington's (2006) conceptual framework of practices, practitioners and praxis is well known and widely accepted. What this short paper attempts is to expand on this framework from the narrative angle, by attaching to it the notion of narrated time. Furthermore it takes a stance on the question of institution and agency, linking these respectively to practices and practitioners in attempt to explain the interplay between the organization and the individual.

It is my opinion that strategy as a phenomenon is about future time. What people in organizations do when strategizing is engaging with an activity aiming at managing this future time in some manner; manifesting all the multitude of strategic activity that we see on

a daily basis. Thus, it is important to realize both the quality of historical time as the source of our narration and projected time as the source of our inspiration.

Assuming such inspiration can be linked to strategizing, in this short paper I also present an angle greatly favouring agency over institution. This is intentional; for what I am saying here is that institutions are platforms of narration for individuals. Institutions do constrict and enable, shaping borders and even defining what can be known but the stage created in institutions will remain empty unless there is something that inspires the individual agent, intentionally or without intent, to stand up on it and act. It is when the acts of many are assembled that emplotment happens. This emplotment, drawn from the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur (1984) is a notion in which we first through our preunderstanding of historical narratives propose new arrangements for projected time that, if our endeavour turns to be successful, result in a reconfiguration of the strategic narrative.

Finally, while this paper presents a fairly clear view on what strategy is in the form of narratives projecting time in organizations it does not intend to give this as a paradigm. It is rather an attempt to show the phenomenon of strategy from the angle of Brunerian narrative understanding (Bruner 1986). In strategy this matters; because being about the future, barring the downfall of quantum physics, narrative is the only way our mind can travel there. And it seems to me we humans are eager to travel.

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