

Broader methods to support new insights into strategizing

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WAXMAN: 'In other words, you found that your view of the world, your ideology, was not right; it was not working.'

GREENSPAN: 'Absolutely, precisely [...] you know, I was shocked because I have been going for 40 years or more with very considerable evidence that it was working exceptionally well.' (Transcription from hearings by the Government Oversight Committee of the United States House of Representatives, 23 October 2008¹)

'...the situation is manifestly not coming under control. Things continue to fall apart.' (Paul Krugman, 27 October 2008)

Introduction

Crises affecting different aspects of the global economy began to capture public attention as we prepared the final version of this chapter in the last months of 2008. Markets were on a downward roller coaster generating dramatic government responses around the world. While elected officials tended to speak and act as if they were close to calming volatile economic behaviour, other observers were less sanguine, including former chairman of the United States Federal Reserve Board Alan Greenspan and Professor Paul Krugman, who won the Nobel Prize in mid-October for his research on trade and the location of economic activity.

Gradually, the increasing instability of financial institutions, housing markets, employment and other indicators of economic activity became so

significant that we decided we could not finish this chapter without a substantial change in perspective. Our initial draft applauded increasing attention to Strategy as Practice, or strategizing,² recognized the importance of the case studies that provide almost all empirical evidence of the micro-behaviour that is the focus of this area of inquiry, but argued for a broader methodological base. We gave little attention to theoretical arguments supporting strategizing research because we agreed with them. It was time to re-examine that acceptance.

Different assumptions were being made about the nature and extent of disruption in late 2008. Some observers believed that the situation was similar to previous financial crises and would be resolved by relatively predictable government and organizational strategies. An increasing number thought instead that a distinct shift was taking place in the world economy. Richard Rumelt (2008), a pioneer in the strategy field (Rumelt 1974, 1979; Rumelt *et al.* 1994), suggested that:

We are looking at a structural break with the past – a phrase from econometrics [...] that] denotes the moment in time-series data when trends and the patterns of associations among variables change [...] The wrong way forward in a structural break during hard times is to try more of the same. The break and the hard times are sure indications that an old pattern has already been pushed to its limits and is destroying value.

We too believe that structural breaks are occurring at multiple levels of analysis and therefore

¹ Knowlton, B. and Grynbaum, M.M. (2008). Two lions face a reckoning: Greenspan makes rare admission of fallibility. *The International Harold Tribune*, 24 October, p. 1. See also <http://oversight.house.gov/documents/20081024163819.pdf>, p. 37.

² We use the word 'strategizing' rather than 'Strategy as Practice' in this chapter to emphasize our primary interest in non-routine behaviour, but both words are used by researchers interested in micro-behaviour who we wish to engage in conversation.

that more of the same kind of research about strategizing and strategy more generally is suspect. However, by the time we finished revising this chapter we decided that whether or not structural change was underway, strategizing research can be strengthened by trying to encompass the more dire forecasts of late 2008.

Those taking a strategizing perspective need an expanded set of explanatory lenses to consider significant changes in behaviour, in our opinion. This extension in turn helps define the need for data-gathering tools that augment the ethnographic approaches that heretofore have characterized strategizing research. Not only are more and more varied data needed, but also methods that are better equipped to reveal activity patterns in large organizations and across organizational boundaries. Methodological changes cannot be made in a vacuum, of course. Supportive decisions about ontology, epistemology and the involvement of policy-makers, practitioners and academics from other disciplines are briefly discussed at the end of the chapter.

The challenge: new mechanisms and new infrastructure

By the end of 2008, the expertise of many organizational strategists and policy-makers was suspect. Given that problematic conditions persisted in spite of responsive actions, it seemed inevitable that a few early complaints about academic expertise would also grow in volume and that lack of confidence in academic observations might also ensue. Within academic circles, even scholars who had been criticizing business practices were likely to find that some aspects of the status quo they tacitly assumed were fixed had radically changed in character.

Unfortunately, neither strategists nor policy-makers nor researchers had much time for contemplation as the 'meltdown' continued. Two deceptively familiar problems confused those with a responsibility to act – the speed and the complexity of change. Krugman's prognosis (2008) for government policy-makers was that:

The simple mechanics of producing a rescue [...] are very hard. The pace at which things are getting worse is so great that [...] even with the best of understanding [rescue measures] can't come fast enough to prevent a great deal of damage.

But where will 'the best of understanding' come from? Krugman appeared to be looking among his fellow economists for new ideas, yet the challenge is more widely applicable. Actions by various stakeholders, though often consonant with advice from strategy researchers, seemed to increase rather than control variance. As Rumelt (2008) pointed out, many old practices need to change:

Consider an analogy. When oil is cheap and plentiful, we create a vast infrastructure that works well if oil remains cheap and plentiful. When it becomes expensive, we wish we had a different infrastructure. Similarly, when economic opportunities abound, we invest in a management infrastructure that harvests them very well. When the field of opportunities becomes less verdant, we must change our management infrastructure.

As management practices change significantly, strategizing is even more relevant to practice than leaders of the field have claimed (Whittington 1996). However, we believe that research on micro-behaviour to date is too limited in scale and scope when held up against the global, highly interconnected events that currently engage us. A great deal of time has been spent in descriptive study; continuing this effort makes sense. But the current situation not only requires expanded data gathering and analysis, in our opinion, it also calls for a broader set of theoretical or explanatory perspectives.

Expanding the strategizing agenda to consider inter-organizational process and content

The recent book *Strategy as Practice* by Johnson *et al.* (2007) moves conversation about strategizing forward in several important ways. The authors emphasize that understanding micro-level activity requires attending to multiple actors at multiple levels of analysis, can and should use multiple

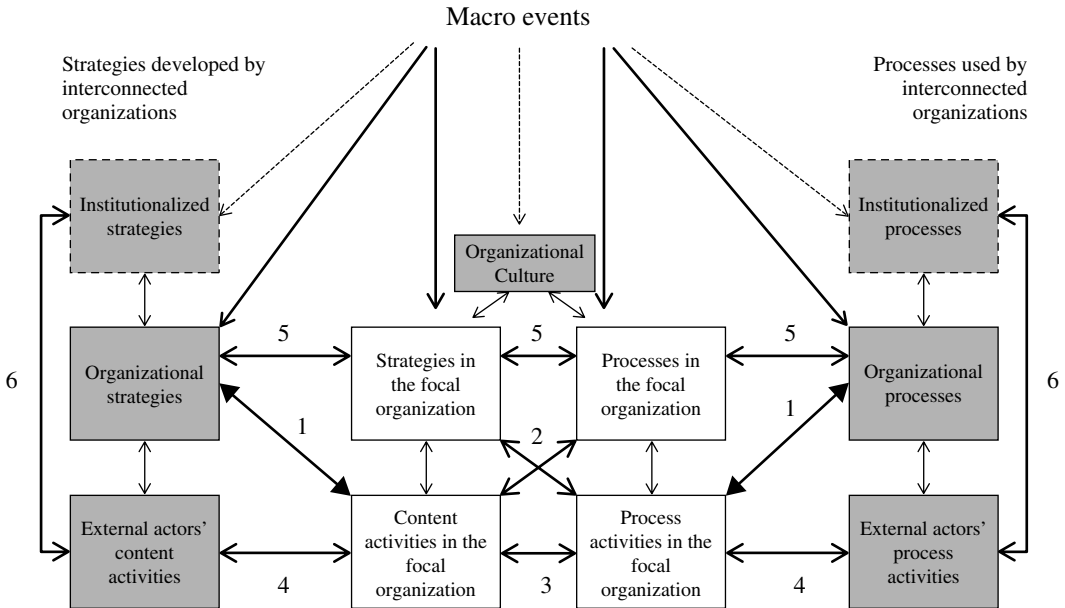


Figure 13.1 Further explosion of the strategizing agenda, extended and adapted from Johnson *et al.* (2007, p. 18)

theoretical perspectives and multiple methods, and can address organizational change as well as routinized behaviour. Their agenda for further research, as summarized in the white boxes at the centre of Figure 13.1, focuses on four connections:

- V1: the interrelationship of organizational processes and systems;
- V2: the link between activities within organizations and the strategies of those organizations;
- V3: the relationship between institutionalized strategic management processes and people's activities within the organizations;
- V4: how institutionalized strategies [are] actually pursued, not only at the organizational level, but in terms of people's activities within organisations. (Johnson *et al.* 2007, pp. 17–24).

Johnson *et al.* begin to outline how strategic change might be examined at these levels, but events over the last year in our opinion reveal insufficiencies in their agenda. First, this and most other proposals for strategizing research have usefully emphasized *how* strategy is made, but it no longer makes sense

to exclude or even marginalize strategy content (*what strategy is about*) in the strategizing agenda. As a start, there are recursive relationships between micro-level content activities and organizational strategy just as there are between micro-process activities and organizational processes.

Second, *activities and strategies by other organizations* become more important as macro-events impinge upon an organization in unexpected ways. This statement can be read as a neo-positivist observation on the impact of changing relationships, but equally as a comment about interpretive sense-making. Both are important in the highly interconnected world revealed by worldwide recession, and suggest that faceless 'institutional forces' can be usefully examined at the micro-level in terms of multiple interactions with specific organizations.

Further, if environmental conditions with negative impacts ('real' or 'perceived') continue, the strength of previously institutionalized strategies and processes should be expected to decline. As new behaviours are found to be helpful, observers of strategizing would expect repetition and

routinization to move towards their institutionalization, but the strength of past *institutional forces* can no longer be assumed.

These observations are not inconsistent with past strategizing research, but they head towards an even broader agenda than strategizing researchers have been pursuing and anticipating. Johnson *et al.* call for ‘exploding’ the strategizing agenda; we believe their call needs to be exploded again. Figure 13.1 shows the subjects they emphasize in white boxes as part of a larger agenda outlined in grey.

The numbers point to six sets of questions that we would like to see strategizing research take the lead in investigating:

1. How are organizational level strategies and processes across a range of organizations affecting micro-activity in a specific organization of interest (especially in times of crisis)? Is there evidence that micro-activities within one or more specific organizations are affecting organizational level strategies and processes in other entities?
2. How are micro-level strategies and processes in a given organization interacting with organizational level strategies and processes, and vice versa, how are organizational processes and strategies affecting micro-level activities? How does organization culture stabilize and destabilize these interactions (especially during crisis)?
3. What is the interaction between micro-processes and micro-content activities (especially in times of crisis when established structures may have been dismantled or become problematic)?
4. How are external micro-activities affecting micro-activities within a given firm? (Can promising new micro-activities be identified in times of crisis?)
5. What is the interaction between content and process within the top management team and on the board (especially activities influenced by and influencing response to crisis)? How are these activities affected by content and process at the top levels of other organizations?
6. How do institutionalized structures and processes affect micro-behaviour? (Are new micro-level behaviours in response to crisis becoming institutionalized?)

The strengths and weakness of ethnographic methods currently dominating strategizing research

Ethnographic evidence cannot satisfactorily answer all the questions outlined above. Our overview of strategizing research indicates that almost all studies have relied on ethnography – broadly defined to include interviews and case studies as well as more traditional longitudinal observation. This observation may not concern those who work in this area. Ethnographic methods provide specific, rich detail unmatched by other methods, and this is an especially attractive approach to understanding little-known contexts and subjects (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). We too have carried out ethnographic studies and benefited from them. We are none-the-less concerned that many studies (including our own) do not achieve the full benefits of ethnography and, further, that even the most intense ethnographic studies cannot provide the range of evidence needed to understand any phenomenon, especially the complex, fast-moving interactions of current concern (Balogun *et al.* 2003).

Every method has inevitable weaknesses. In the case of ethnographic study, a frequently noted problem is that prolonged, close contact jeopardizes the researcher’s ability to make independent assessments. But published studies often fall short of the ideals of ethnography. For a variety of reasons (especially lack of resources and lack of detailed training) too many conclusions about strategizing based on ethnographic methods are jeopardized by:

- Limited time on site (a few days to perhaps a few months), which is insufficient to understand contextual complexities.
- Limited time with any informant (rarely more than 1–1½ hours), which limits opportunity for detailed questions or answers.

While more could be said (for example, about insufficient attention to artefacts) these two problems alone help explain why ‘simple stories’ have to be told to those who do not have the data to understand greater nuance. A first methodological objective for the field in our view is

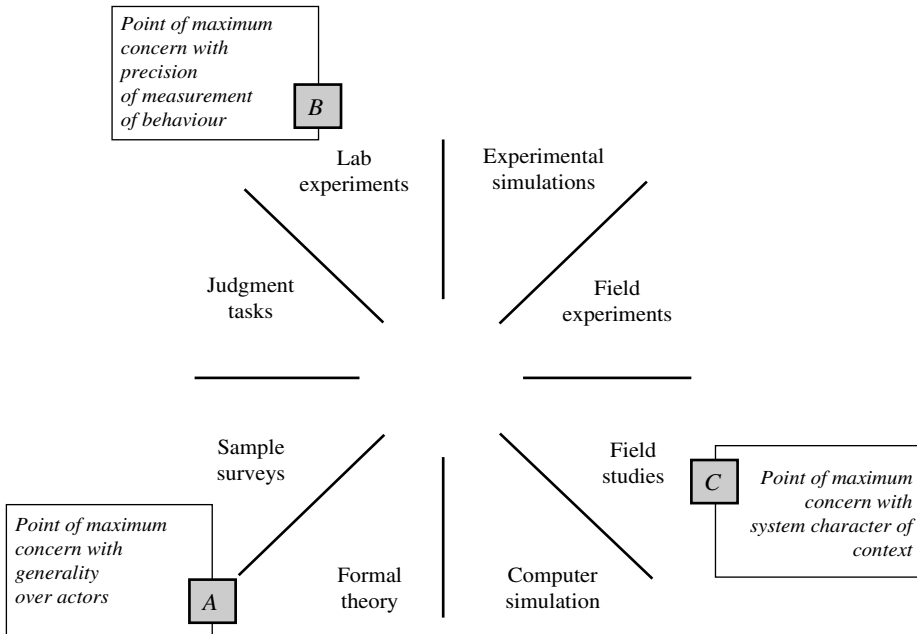


Figure 13.2 Strengths of different research strategies (Huff 2009, p. 186; simplified from McGrath 1982, p. 73)

therefore to improve ethnographic studies. But this is not enough.

Although ethnography continues to be a necessary method, it is not sufficient for robust theory development. McGrath (1982) forcefully argues that researchers face dilemmas that inevitably lead towards multiple methods among a group of conversing researchers, if not by single researchers. Figure 13.2 summarizes his observations about the relative strengths of field or ethnographic studies when compared to a range of other choices. The ‘dilemmatic’ of research this figure describes for ethnography is that it is intrinsically unable to do as good a job of providing either generalizable or precise conclusions as other methods.

Therefore, in our view, a second methodological objective for strategizing is to use a broader range of methods that can provide more general and more precise theory.

There are some moves towards methodological plurality in strategizing research. A good example is a developmental paper submitted for discussion at EGOS 2007 in which Jarzabkowski and Matthiesen

‘propose that rigorous, situationally-sensitive coding of transcripts of everyday practice can render it analysable statistically’ (2007, p. 2). This paper describes the development and use of an Event Database (EDB) to summarize non-participant observations of 198 meetings held in four divisions of a utility company. Data were collected over a period of eighteen months; all pertained to coping with significant regulatory changes.

The authors wanted a ‘methodological solution that could enrich the practice field without sacrificing too much [...] richness of data’ (p. 9). The solution they develop draws on three theoretical arguments published by sociologists: Abbott’s (1990, 1995) consideration of the temporal order of events and causality, Abell’s (2004) discussion of comparative narrative analysis and Heise’s (1988, 1989) event frames analysis.

In addition to tables that give examples of categories and coded material, the paper offers several pictorial representations of the temporal order of discussions in meetings. It also provides descriptive statistics of categories developed from qualitative

observations and a pie chart showing the distribution of event types in one data set. Though their data set is observational, they suggest that the EDB methodology could be used to analyse interviews, diaries and other data at macro-, mid- and micro-levels of analysis. We hope that this chapter is at the beginning of a trend, because an expanded toolbox is needed.

Suggestions for expanding evidence on strategizing

To summarize the argument so far: Ethnographic methods have become the cornerstone of the field and will continue to be useful, despite their inevitable limitations. Especially in times of structural upheaval, more in-depth studies of varied contexts are needed. However, methods with other strengths are also needed. As past strategies are repudiated across industries and new understandings have to be forged, it is particularly important to collect data that can support more generalized and more precise conclusions.

As we see it, there are five desirable characteristics for data gathering – their initials will appear in the summary of specific suggestions found in the next few pages:

Q – Quantity. Increases current capacity to collect and analyse data.

V – Variety. Increases the variety of data currently collected and analysed.

C – Contextual understanding. Improves understanding of system characteristics (or context).

G – Generality. Increases generalizability of findings.

P – Precision. Increases precision of data collection and analysis.

Increasing the quantity and variety of evidence can potentially support methods at every point on Figure 13.2. Tools that improve contextual understanding are particularly important for those who continue to carry out ethnographic studies, even though, accepting McGrath's argument, there will be inevitable limits to the generalizability and precision of the data gathered. Tools that provide more generalizable or more precise information (not at all

the same thing according to McGrath) are particularly important for improved theory, even though these data-gathering activities will be inherently incapable of providing broad systemic detail.

While general categories for expanding data collection are offered in Figure 13.2, we saw our task as being more specific in the context of strategizing. Our initial brainstorming focused on expanding data collection in a general way. Redrafting the chapter in the context of a worldwide recession caused us to re-examine and expand the initial list of data collection ideas we identified. In the end, we settled on the seventeen suggestions briefly summarized below. They are presented as a springboard for discussing four generic 'solutions' to the methodological limits we see facing strategizing research: analyse larger data sets, broaden the number and variety of research collaborators, observe unusual contexts, and go beyond ethnographic methods.

Analyse larger data sets

As noted above, the scope of organizational activities has rapidly pulled away from current capabilities for academic observation and analysis. It is not just the scale of global organizations that defeats us, but the speed and complexity of interaction among organizations of many different sizes, in many different locations. One prescription is obvious: work with more data. Our first three suggestions are easy to outline, though they pose significant difficulties in implementation.

1. *Take advantage of data currently collected by the organization. (QVCGP)* Organizations are prodigious producers of data when compared to even the most well-financed research project. There are potential problems with using the data they collect. On the one hand, the data collected may not fit researcher needs, especially in times of crisis. The most useful data are likely to be proprietary and strategic, thus not readily shared. On the other hand, data collection and use are inevitably biased by social and political processes, and may not even be used by the actors in the organization or larger network studied. Against these potential problems,

however, are an interesting set of potential positives:

- a. Organizations collect and use a vast amount of information that is impossible for researchers to collect.
 - b. The information collected and used plays an important role in framing strategizing activities.
 - c. Common data collection and use across organizational units and even across organizations facilitates comparison and generalization.
 - d. The timing of behaviour changes may be signalled by shifts in large data sets, even if the behaviour of interest is not the focus of data collection.
 - e. Willingness to release data to researchers may indicate organizational interest in the research project. If the results of initial analysis are informative, decision-makers may be persuaded to provide additional information, though it should be recognized that researcher independence is paramount in many research paradigms and may be jeopardized by collaboration.
2. *Identify data collected within larger systems. (QVGP)* Databases created by government and other entities may also reveal behaviour and pinpoint changes in behaviour. Some potential problems with this suggestion mirror concerns about availability and interpretability raised by our first suggestion above. The retrospective nature of the data collected and the time that often elapses before posting are particularly problematic in government systems. In addition, it can take even more time to collect and analyse data from government sources than from organizational sources – and time is in especially short supply during a crisis. Still the compensating potential of this approach also should be considered:
- a. Quantitative analysis of large data sets can help target times and places for more labour-intensive and time-consuming observation of micro-activity.
 - b. Data from multiple sources, analysed in different ways, generally strengthen theory development.

- c. If done well, external evaluators tend to be positive about this kind of triangulation.
3. *Use the Internet, cell phones and other electronic tools to collect data. (QVCGP)* The 24/7 interactive capacity of electronic connections offers unique opportunities for collecting data. Of course, there are many competitors for attention on these channels. At the same time, these tools are relatively unfamiliar to some researchers and some informants. Another problem is that it is often more difficult to recognize deceit in electronic transmission than in interpersonal or more researcher controlled interactions, one reason why evaluators may not find these sources of information trustworthy. However:
- a. Electronic data gathering can be the least demanding way to interact with busy strategists.
 - b. These tools facilitate collecting more (and perhaps more precise and time-sensitive) data from strategists and other informants than is likely from other data-gathering tools.
 - c. Prompts and replies can take place directly before, during or after events of interest.
 - d. Currently available software and hardware facilitate interaction with and among informants.
 - e. Interaction may be especially effective with younger, Tweet-savvy respondents, yielding insights that are unlikely to be collected in other ways.
 - f. Electronic tools facilitate longitudinal, repetitive reports from many informants in geographically dispersed locations.
 - g. The possibilities for large-scale, time-sensitive inquiry have been demonstrated by public opinion polls (Gallup, etc.).

Broaden the number and variety of research collaborators

The single researcher is a time-honoured figure across many areas of academic inquiry, though not common in many science and engineering subjects. Experience with large-scale projects in these fields, carried out by teams that sometimes work in many countries, is worth analysing. Researchers

interested in strategizing also have options for more unique contributions, as noted in the suggestions below.

4. *Coordinate researcher efforts. (QVCGP)*

Collaborative research projects with multiple researchers can provide a rich demographic base for observation and theorizing; they also facilitate interdisciplinary designs. Potential problems begin with the time required to design and fund large projects, which can sap participant motivation. Longitudinal projects also require long-term commitment from participants, especially project leader(s). Cooperation can be jeopardized by disciplinary and national differences. Further, the more complex the project the more there will be inevitable variations in project implementation by different individuals and teams – which jeopardizes the generality of findings. The off-setting potential of this suggestion includes:

- a. Increased data collection may reveal patterns not recognized at one or a few sites.
- b. More generally, multiple points of view can increase understanding of system complexity.
- c. International research can be significantly improved by team members with local knowledge.
- d. Opportunities for funding should increase if multiple institutions are involved.
- e. More practically, many funding sources (including the UN, the EU and NSF) are positive about international, interdisciplinary team research, when it is well-designed.

5. *Use student inquirers. (QVC)* Students can be involved in research in various ways: as informants, data gatherers and even research collaborators. Of course, students tend to have little or no relevant training and are typically naïve. Large numbers of students cannot be given detailed training, and even well-trained student assistants may make simplistic assumptions or overlook information of interest to researchers. These problems are recognized by research evaluators, who tend to doubt the trustworthiness of data from students. On the other hand:

- a. Students are a large, widely available and intelligent workforce.
 - b. Students are demographically close to some organizational stakeholders of potential interest (e.g. younger employees and customer groups).
 - c. Students can be highly motivated by work that is relevant to their interests.
 - d. Informants may be more willing to respond to students than to faculty or other inquirers.
 - e. Professors who use student assistants responsibly fulfil their obligation to develop student research capabilities.
 - f. Younger naïve observers may uncover connections overlooked by informants and by experienced researchers; this fresh perspective may be especially valuable in times of uncertainty.
6. *Involve strategists and other organizational insiders as collaborators. (VC)* The concerns of strategizers and researchers can be very close, therefore they are natural research collaborators. Of course, each partner has different priorities and very different task and time pressures; joint projects therefore take time to arrange and coordinate. It is difficult for an individual to understand any other person, and the insider/outsider divide can increase this inevitable difficulty. However, those who have worked as collaborators tend to report that, despite significant difficulties, the benefits of collaboration can also be large:
- a. The two perspectives tend to balance each other: insiders have unique insight and access to data not available to outside academic researchers, but insiders often make assumptions and overlook connections that are more easily recognized by outsiders.
 - b. Useful information about the possibilities and problems of ‘insider–outsider’ research can be found in many publications and web-sites (e.g. Bartunek and Louis 1996).
 - c. Most important, researchers tend to improve their understanding of practical problems through insider–outsider cooperation.
7. *Collect data from, and give research feedback to, groups rather than individuals. (QVC)* It may be useful for strategizers to help each other

reflect (and possibly invent new solutions) in focus groups and workshops. It does take time to prepare for and carry out group work – thus some researchers and organizations may resist this method of data gathering. Further, as noted under suggestion 6, the interests of insiders will inevitably differ from researchers' interests. More generally, convergence within and among groups can be difficult to establish. And once again, this less familiar method is harder to prove trustworthy to outside reviewers. Still:

- a. Interaction with groups can be a more efficient method of collecting some kinds of data than interacting with individuals.
 - b. Knowledgeable insiders can ask more effective and probing questions of each other than outsiders can.
 - c. Focus group methodology has been well worked out in the field of marketing.
 - d. A variety of tools are available to discover overlapping opinions or create consensus.
8. *Consider customers, suppliers and other stakeholders as co-producers of strategy. (QVC)* It makes sense to collect data from the most important external actors affecting the formation and success of strategy, especially those impacting strategic outcomes through networked cooperation. Of course, interaction with buyers, suppliers and other stakeholders may be several steps removed from the focus of many strategizing studies. On the other hand, the benefits noted above for interacting with strategists as individuals and in groups are also potential benefits of this suggestion, and there are more unique arguments for considering customers and other stakeholders as data sources, including:
- a. Stakeholder groups are important to strategic success.
 - b. Unique insights may be generated if interested individuals in these groups are treated as research collaborators.
 - c. Customers in particular are of increasing interest in the strategy literature, but given little attention in almost all conversations about strategizing.
 - d. Suppliers are a second critical group shaping strategy and are especially important

as supply chains and networks become a common form of inter-organizational collaboration.

9. *Interact with those who work with strategists (e.g. assistants, co-workers, superiors). (QVCP)* Less-visible actors in an organizational setting often deserve more attention. Of course researchers cannot assume that all actors are powerful players, and even those who have a role to play may provide information that is one step removed from the focus of inquiry in a strategizing study. Also, the position of less visible informants may be problematic in itself, e.g. information may be influenced by posturing. Organization members may also be motivated to protect or blame a boss, co-worker or subordinate. We nevertheless recommend this source of information because:
 - a. Arguments about the co-creation of strategy are a centrepiece of the strategizing literature, but assistants etc. are rarely the subject of research.
 - b. Reflection on strategizing is part of these informants' jobs and they often directly contribute to strategizing even if they are not formally recognized.
 - c. Assistants and superiors have significant access to data about strategizing; they typically need to understand it to carry out their jobs; and may be more helpful guides to secondary data than more 'central' informants.
 - d. Less-considered actors may challenge currently accepted explanations or provide explanations for behaviour that current puzzles analysts.

Observe and theorize about unusual contexts and less frequently considered evidence and artefacts

Purposeful selection of sites is always recommended. As theoretical arguments are constructed from 'typical' organizations, it is useful to test and extend them with evidence from settings that might extend current understanding. Within an organizational site, it may be useful to look for less considered circumstances, individuals, events and artefacts. While this strategy is familiar to those

who do case studies (Eisenhardt 1989), similar strategies can be used when carrying out quantitative analysis or experimental studies.

10. *Collect data from unique contexts and extreme conditions. (VCGP)* Population and temporal extremes help calibrate central tendencies. The suggestion to gather data from atypical situations must be treated with care: identifying an 'extreme' assumes knowledge about a distribution that may not be available. Some unique conditions may not be relevant to other organizations or relevant over time. We nonetheless recommend considering this data-gathering approach because:
 - a. Key issues may be more clearly revealed under unique and/or extreme conditions.
 - b. Actors can be more purposeful, or less driven by routine, under extreme conditions.
 - c. While actors may hope that a current situation (like the economic crisis that began in 2008) is atypical, some circumstances are likely to persist and baseline data are needed.
11. *Collect information on use of time, money and corporate tools. (VCGP)* It is perplexing that strategy researchers do not pay more attention to the information that many strategists spend a great deal of time analysing. On the other hand, relatively few of us have expertise in accounting, finance or similar technical subjects, and it is true that assistants (not the strategist of interest) may handle many decisions involving time, money and other routinely collected information. It is also possible that no one is making conscious decisions based on these data over a specific time of interest. However:
 - a. Allocation of time and other resources can be an excellent unobtrusive indicator of strategy.
 - b. Many strategic decisions are data-based.
 - c. Often these data are used in similar ways across organizational units, facilitating comparisons.
 - d. A significant contribution to the strategizing literature may be made on the basis of these neglected data.
- e. Interest in these areas can be expected to be much stronger in the current period of financial crisis.
12. *Treat internal and external events as natural experiments. (PGV)* We recommend that some strategizing researchers apply logic from data gathering in laboratory settings. Of course, ideal laboratory conditions cannot be replicated in the field. For example, strategists have diverse personal characteristics and work in disparate settings. It may not be plausible to assume that exogenous variables are the same, especially across organizations. When unusual events occur (like the current economic crisis) the researcher may not have enough understanding to frame the 'experiment'. Further, many events cannot be predicted, and thus the researcher is not immediately available for observation and other data-gathering tasks. Finally, as for many of these suggestions, reviewers may be sceptical about natural experiments while colleagues working with ethnographic tools may not be convinced by laboratory logic. Still we are positive about this suggestion:
 - a. Laboratory experiments enable researchers to come to more precise conclusions, which would be valuable for strategizing theory.
 - b. Credible laboratory experiments are almost impossible to conduct with strategists, but organizational contexts provide many opportunities to analyse differential responses to the 'same' event.
 - c. It may be possible to assume that important contextual influences are held constant when comparing responses within the same unit, organization, industry or country.
13. *Observe strategists as instructors. (VCP)* The researcher who can evoke an instructional mode (for example, via student inquirers, organizational newcomers or shadowing) may be able to get insights into strategists' knowledge and beliefs that are unlikely to be gathered in interviews or through observation of strategic events. The researcher should worry that instructions are often based on ideals rather than common practice. They tend to

convey explicit rather than implicit knowledge, though demonstrations can meld explicit and implicit understanding. And finally, awareness of social desirability on the part of instructor and those instructed tend to bias interaction. Potentially balancing these concerns is evidence that:

- a. People are often 'at their best' (less self-centred, more helpful, etc.) when trying to help others.
- b. Interaction with those who need or want to learn what the strategist knows can generate information not collected by more knowledgeable inquirers.
- c. Problem solving (and response to crisis) can prioritize and focus information transferred.

Consider non-ethnomethodological methods

We have argued that ethnography is desirable but not sufficient for understanding strategizing. While any research methods textbook can be used as a source for alternatives, we generated several alternatives that directly relate to the strategizing agenda.

14. *Experiment with organizational participants around real tasks. (PCVQG)* It is possible to create laboratory experiments that relate to real strategic issues. However, it may be very difficult to capture strategists' time for experimental purposes, especially if they do not find the task interesting or relevant to their primary concerns. Evoking 'real' situations may also generate unanticipated bias, since informants may be thinking of disparate past experience rather than the experimental prompt. However:
 - a. Engaging tasks may be seen as predictive and therefore accepted.
 - b. Strategists may find it useful to interact with each other over a task that is not directly connected to high stress or high stakes decisions.
 - c. The information generated in an experimental setting may be useful grounds
- for interaction between researchers and strategists.
15. *Compare reasoning via protocol analysis. (QVGP)* Protocol analysis is a method of recording verbal reports from actors as they carry out a task. Those who follow the requirements of the method sometime complain that it can be intrusive, and strategists may be unwilling to take the time to verbalize their thoughts while engaged in important activities, such as responding to a crisis. On the positive side:
 - a. Protocol analysis captures insights during actual task performance, rather than retrospectively when many insights are likely to be lost.
 - b. The Strategy as Practice and strategizing literatures are particularly interested in performance of repetitive tasks, which are monitored relatively easily.
 - c. Validity and other standards have been well documented (cf. Carnegie studies of decision-making).
16. *Use prototypes to observe future oriented interactions. (VP)* Strategists can be observed as individuals and in teams as they develop tangible presentations of new strategy (sketches, PowerPoint slides, physical examples of products, etc.). Of course, a prototype is by definition incomplete and may prove to be uninteresting or unworkable. It is also true that some individuals are more interested in and talented at developing prototypes. Further, this action-oriented research design may not be accepted by some evaluators. Still, evidence from many settings, especially engineering, is promising.
 - a. There is considerable evidence that interaction around tangible job-related artefacts elicits implicit knowledge.
 - b. Interaction around prototypes is arguably closer to strategy than interaction within established routines.
 - c. A prototype can become a 'transitional object' (Winnicott 1951) that generates new information.
 - d. Practitioners are likely to respond positively to future-oriented prototyping.

17. *Use tangible objects to elicit descriptions from informants.* (VCG) Sims and Doyle (1995) are among the small number of researchers who have asked members of an organization to use physical objects to describe past, current and future situations. They use a specifically designed 'play box,' while others have presented pictures and abstract objects such as Lego (Roos *et al.* 2004). It is true that some strategists will be more engaged by using physical 'props' than others. And once again, this approach is used infrequently in strategy research, and thus may not be easily accepted by academic evaluators. We nonetheless recommend considering this method for several reasons:

- a. Physical objects may evoke information about some aspects of a strategic situation that is not elicited with other data-gathering tools.
- b. Use of the same objects may generalize comparable responses across informants.
- c. Focus on an object can shorten the time required to gather interesting data from individuals or small groups.

Complementary research design decisions

The suggestions listed above are not exhaustive, of course, but they illustrate our general argument that strategizing researchers can do more to create and capture relevant data. However, it is important to recognize that effectively carrying out these and other broadening ideas requires compatible decisions in other areas of research design, including:

- ontological and epistemological commitments
- disciplinary anchors
- literature reviewed
- connections with themes of interest to policy-makers and practitioners
- choice of empirical contexts to observe, and
- theoretical perspectives.

In illustration, key decisions made by Jarzabkowski and Matthiesen (2007), are shown in Figure 13.3. Beginning at the 12:00 position

and moving to the right, the paper is written, as virtually all strategizing papers are, from an interpretive perspective. It makes a substantive contribution to conversation about strategizing (though it uses the term 'Strategy as Practice'), among other things by drawing a distinction between what are called 'discursive' and tangible events. The execution of the study relies on ideas from three conversations in sociology, as discussed above. Though it does not emphasize the content of discussions observed, the fact that they are policy relevant is important and obviously more could be said in this or other reports. The primary data are from a non-participant observer of utility board meetings, quantitatively summarized. An important contribution of this working paper is that it shows how qualitative and quantitative analysis can be used in a complementary fashion and it uses the idea of sequencing to bring 'descriptive fluidity' to data report and interpretation. From a methodological point of view, the paper relies on activity analysis, a perspective Jarzabkowski (2005) has been instrumental in introducing to the field.

We admire this paper. While we will resist the urge to suggest alternatives in each decision area highlighted in Figure 13.3 for other research projects, we remind readers that alterations in methods like the ones we suggest will require similar supportive research design decisions. As we stand at the end of 2008, we would be very interested in strategizing research carried out in public organizations. Relatively few business professors have good contacts with strategists in government. A promising research design might involve joint work with political scientists or behavioural economists.

We worry that in these times of structural change, too many strategists and academics will continue down well-established paths. While further contributions can undoubtedly be made, this field and all others miss a significant opportunity if they carefully catalogue ineffective activity when there is greater need to discover the effective. More challenging decisions could be made in all areas shown in Figure 13.3 (taking a critical ontological position, for example), but an especially important area of choice seems to be theoretical.

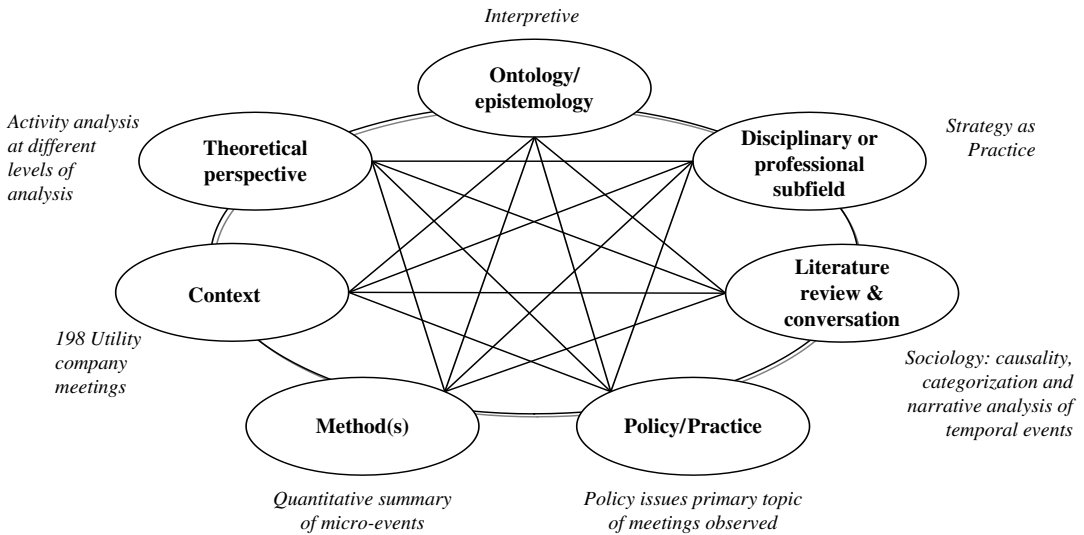


Figure 13.3 Summary of Jarzabkowski and Matthiesen (2007) in a figure adapted from Huff (2009)

Key collections of papers (Johnson *et al.* 2003; Jarzabkowski *et al.* 2007; Johnson *et al.* 2007, and the Strategy as Practice website at www.s-as-p.org/) provide accessible summaries of the theoretical foundations that have been guiding strategizing research in the first years of its independent existence. Four perspectives stand out in the review by Johnson *et al.* (2007):

- Situated learning.
- Actor network theory.
- Institutional theory.
- The Carnegie School of sensemaking and routines.

These and other perspectives used to investigate strategizing have inevitable strengths and weaknesses. However, in a radically changing environment, it is problematic that all are so firmly rooted in the past. For example, Lave and Wenger (1991) stress co-construction of knowledge, embedded in a specific environment, in their development of situated learning. This idea is certainly relevant in times of uncertainty, but their examples assume the existence of knowledgeable practitioners (midwives, tailors, navy quartermasters, meat cutters and recovered alcoholics) who have useful, tested advice to pass on and this has become a hallmark of subsequent research. In contrast, the current

crisis reminds us that expertise from the past can not only be ineffective but disastrous.

A similar complaint can be made about the other three perspectives highlighted for their support of the current strategizing agenda. We agree that all action is situated or embedded to some degree, but the ‘backward view’ of theorizing up to this point makes less sense now than it did in what seems in hindsight to be relatively stable conditions. The four perspectives listed above have been very useful for directing attention away from a research agenda focused on rational, economic plans and their performance outcomes, yet more future-oriented perspectives need to be available.

Six promising ideas are summarized in Table 13.1 as examples to be considered by strategizing researchers. In each case the theoretical base of the perspective shown is still being constructed. However, in our opinion each might expand the domain of strategizing research by suggesting new areas of observation and theorizing.

As we envision a future-oriented agenda for strategizing we are particularly interested in sensemaking, though not the routine-based sensemaking explained by the Carnegie School (Johnson *et al.* 2007, pp. 37–38, 40–42). As indicated above, we are drawn instead to the book *Managing the Unexpected* by Karl Weick and Kathleen Sutcliffe

Table 13.1 Additional explanatory perspectives for understanding strategizing

Perspective	Potential strengths of research evidence and theoretical explanations
Sensemaking under uncertainty. The current crisis has escalated uncertainty, yet an increasing number of organizations have already been operating under persistent uncertainty. Weick and Sutcliffe's (2007) study of hospital emergency rooms, forest firefighting and other situations emphasizes, among other things, that in these environments expertise is more 'relational' – it is an 'assemblage of knowledge, experience, learning and intuitions that is seldom embodied in a single individual' (p. 78).	Considering the 'mindful' response of groups to uncertain activities may balance conclusions from less considered routine practices by individuals.
Appreciative inquiry. Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) and the Center for Positive Organization Scholarship at the University of Michigan (www.bus.umich.edu/positive/) summarize a set of practices aimed at engaging the positive potential of all employees to change organizational culture as well as outcomes. Rather than diagnosing problems, this perspective begins by appreciating and valuing the best of 'what is'.	Recognizing positive behaviour and results may balance a tendency in many areas of inquiry to focus on standard outcomes and problems experienced in meeting those expectations.
Open distributed problem solving. The phenomenal success of open source programming has inspired activity in many other areas. Karim Lakhani and Panetta (2007) describe how broadcasting problems is a radical departure from traditional problem solving. Instead of asking small groups of insiders to work on problems, broadcasting requires that insiders do as little problem solving as possible, while trying to interest a heterogeneous set of external actors in finding solutions.	Voluntary problem solving by a large and varied group of outsiders balances emphasis on assignments given to individuals and small groups within an organization. Whether or not distributed problem solving is formally adopted, this perspective reminds researchers to be aware of exogenous activities and ideas.
Experimentation and prototyping. Experimentation has long played an important role in the development of ideas and concepts. While the focus has been primarily on controlled laboratory experiments, rigorously designed field experiments might be a stronger way to generate information relevant to the strategizing agenda. The German management researcher Eberhard Witte has impressively summarized the pros and cons of real-world piloting and field experimentation for management research in Germany, a country with a strong culture of field research (Witte 1997).	Experimental construction of new solutions in real-world contexts balances emphasis on the functions of solutions that have already been implemented.
Collaborative research. Shani <i>et al.</i> (2008) are among those who show how different research foci and outcomes result when managers join researchers in collaboratively identifying questions, choosing methods, collecting data and analysing results.	Projects executed with organizational members may expand or redefine the results of projects designed, executed and interpreted by academics.
Use value. A focus on value-in-use reaches beyond abstract calculation of pure value and value appropriation to look at processes of value co-creation with customers and users (Vargo and Lusch 2004). The logic being developed requires abandoning distinctions between products and services while emphasizing interactive relationships (Lusch <i>et al.</i> 2008).	The word 'value' has been primarily used by strategy researchers in company-oriented calculations, as in 'appropriating value'. Continuing to use the word, but with a new definition, may help researchers collect overlooked or undervalued data.

(2007). Their summary includes five pieces of advice from the observation of 'mindful' managers:

1. *Preoccupation with failure.* Small events can lead to huge failures. Treat any lapse as a symptom that something may be wrong with the system. Be aware that you have yet to experience all of the ways your system can fail.
2. *Reluctance to simplify.* Get comfortable with the idea that the world you face is complex,

unstable, unknowable and unpredictable. Welcome diverse experience and scepticism.

3. *Sensitivity to operations.* Be less strategic and more situational. A person with situational awareness can identify anomalies while they are still tractable and isolated, and then make the continuous adjustments that prevent errors from accumulating and enlarging.
4. *Commitment to resilience.* Be mindful to keep errors small and be committed to improvising workarounds that allow the system to keep

functioning. Use what you have learned from unexpected events to revise operating procedures and update plans.

5. *Deference to expertise.* Remember that the person with the most experience is not necessarily an expert when coping with the unexpected.³

These suggestions are surprising and evocative. They provide an interesting counterweight to observations of behaviour from organizations designed to produce standardized, controllable outputs and are an energizing vision of what might be achieved with a broader theoretical agenda as well as a broader set of observational tools.

Conclusion

Methods typically play a supporting role in research design, chosen after theoretical direction and project purpose have been established. This chapter argues for a more egalitarian relationship and suggests giving methods and theoretical tools a more central role when significant, unexpected events have an impact on the organization studied. Our claim that strategizing researchers should move in this direction is underscored by the assertion that some basic, taken-for-granted assumptions appear to no longer pertain to the world economy (Alan Greenspan), formerly effective actions no longer yield desired outcomes (Paul Krugman) and established patterns of behaviour may destroy rather than create value (Richard Rumelt).

In conclusion, however, we remind readers and ourselves of the essential indeterminacy of strategic situations. It is problematic to assume that the world presents 'problems' that can be 'solved'.⁴ It makes more sense, in our view, to think of strategy as a precarious, ongoing activity. The current crisis is thus only a useful prompt for improving our understanding of all strategic efforts.

³ (<http://www.bus.umich.edu/KresgeLibrary/Collections/Dividend/2007-fall-dividend.pdf>)

⁴ See de Rond (2003) for a more complete discussion of the theoretical difficulties of assuming there is a unique solution to strategic problems.

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