

Ideology and the Discourse of Strategic Management: A Critical Research Framework

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Introduction

It is commonly assumed that senior managers in many organizations enjoy a monopoly over processes of decision-making (Alvesson & Willmott 1996), either directly, by taking decisions themselves, or indirectly, by their control over the decision-making of others within the organization. This monopoly is largely regarded as legitimate and necessary; it is felt natural that senior managers should take important decisions and, because they take responsibility for the decisions of others, they should also control them. Yet studies have shown that managerial control can be incomplete and may be resented and resisted by middle managers (Thomas 1996; Westley 1992). In addition, the competency of 'strategic' managers is often derided as they appear to foist half-baked plans and schemes on an unwilling workforce (Watson 1994), and send out contradictory and ambiguous messages to organizational members.

These features of organizational life may raise questions about the legitimacy, and indeed utility, of senior management domination of organizational decision-making, and the 'discipline' that has become known as strategic management. However, such questions are rarely voiced either within organizations or within the expanding discourse of academics and consultants. In the rare event of such questions being raised they tend to be marginalized as esoteric at best and wilfully destructive and seditious at worst. So how do senior managers secure their continued dominance in organizational decision-making, even when their employees believe them to be inept, mis-guided or positively villainous? Why do alternative modes of organizing, perhaps involving a more democratic or dialogic form of decision-making, remain little more than utopian pipe-dreams? How are the dis-satisfactions of employees diffused to the extent that they accept situations which they believe to be irrational or even plain wrong? Answers to such questions have been provided by many critics of organization; some involve the structural inequalities of capitalist economic systems (Scott 1997); some the willing collusion of organizational participants who perceive that they can derive some personal benefit from the situation in the long term (Jackall 1988); and some the belief that although the status quo may be imperfect, there is no alternative but to search for better techniques, a point well made by Watson (1994) and Alvesson & Willmott (1996). This final explanation, which rests on the notion that strategic management is an ideological process that conceals contradiction, conflict and sectional interest, perpetuates organization based on domination (Shrivastava 1986), is worthy of further consideration particularly in terms of how that ideology operates. The focus of this paper is on the discursive actions which contribute to ideological features of organization and which have not been extensively examined.

In this paper I will argue that the critical examination of strategic management should focus on the role of discourse in securing and sustaining organizational inequalities through a process of ideology. This is justified because strategic management is largely a process of discourse, which cuts across a number of spheres of activity, namely: academic work, consultancy work and managerial action in organizations. To critique managerial action alone is to ignore the role of academic and consultant discourses in shaping practitioner discursive action, that is, it ignores the intertextuality of discourses (Fairclough 1992) and results in a critique which cannot fully explain the ideological process of strategic management. The development of a critical understanding of strategic management requires an examination of academic and consultant 'strategists' and the conditions within which they operate, as well as an examination of practitioner 'strategists'. Indeed, it may be argued that many academics and consultants have as much vested in the ideological aspects of strategy as practitioners, and it seems long overdue that this was laid bare. Clearly, this puts any critic who is a member of the academic community in a difficult situation, as one may be critiquing ones colleagues and workmates, and indeed, to some extent oneself, but I would argue that this is a necessary discomfort if inequitable and, at times irrational, organizational practices are to be challenged.

I begin the paper by briefly stating the reasons why a more fundamental critique of strategic management is necessary, focusing upon the inequities of organizational practice and the limitations of the academic discourse which reflects and reproduces, or strives to reform, that practice. I then move on to justify my focus on ideology and discourse, arguing that discourse holds the key to understanding the ideological nature of strategic management, but only if placed within a structural and institutional context. In the body of the paper I present an analytical framework for the study of strategic management discourse which draws on Norman Fairclough's (1992) three dimensional framework for critical discourse analysis. I provide examples of how the framework can be used to analyse the structural, discursive practice and textual features of the strategy discourse and demonstrate how the strategic management discourse is constructed and how 'texts' are used as an ideological resource by academics and consultants, as well as practitioners. Finally, I evaluate the value of the framework and examine its implications for the further critical study of strategic management.

The State of Strategic Management

In 'Is Strategic Management Ideological?' Paul Shrivastava provided a compelling critique of the strategic management field designed to "...stimulate researchers to examine their unstated managerial values and assumptions, and to encourage them to generate less ideologically value-laden and more universal knowledge about strategic management of organizations" (1986:364). In order to assess the ideological nature of strategic management research he used five operational criteria (Giddens 1979), namely: the factual underdetermination of action norms; the universalisation of sectional interests; denial of conflict and contradiction; normative idealization of sectional goals; and the naturalization of the status quo. Against these criteria Shrivastava (1986) concluded that strategic management was undeniably ideological and that the ideas of the discourse helped legitimize existing power structures and inequalities in resource distribution. It should be noted at this stage that Shrivastava's critique was of the academic 'field', not strategic practice, though the critique implied that 'field' supports "...repressive managerial practice" (1986:371) and legitimated real inequalities in organizational life. Twelve years on one may ask what has changed? The answer I suspect is very little, though evidence suggests that the sophistication of strategic management schemes, both practical and theoretical, have increased, for example through 'corporate culturism' and attempts to extend managerial control into the affective domain (Willmott 1993). Assessed against the five criteria, strategic management knowledge and practice remains ideological and yet relatively little has been written to extend Shrivastava's critique and challenge this situation.

Shrivastava gave the further critical analysis of strategic management some impetus by conceptualizing strategic management as praxis, that is, practice informed by theoretical considerations. In doing so Shrivastava argued that this could foster the "...acquisition of communicative competence by all subjects that allows them to participate in discourse aimed at liberation from constraints on interaction" (Shrivastava 1986:373). Following Thompson (1983), Shrivastava suggested this would involve expanding the public sphere, recognizing the legitimate interests of stakeholders, rational argument over disputed norms and the institutionalization of autonomous learning. These are laudable but ambitious aims and if we consider them as benchmarks against which to measure progress there is little to indicate either less ideologically value-laden knowledge or less repressive practice. In the UK, it seems that the public have been increasingly locked out of organizational processes which, even in the public sector, have become subject to a marked increase in managerialism (Pollitt 1993). The term stakeholder has, of course, entered the managerial (and political) lexicon but seems to be construed as a further variable for managerial manipulation (for example see Johnson and Scholes' (1996) matrix for stakeholder management). There is little evidence of rational argumentation over disputed norms, indeed there still seems to be little acknowledgment that there could or should be any disputation over norms at all. As for learning, this term has itself been appropriated or colonized by strategic management in the learning organization concept (Senge 1990).

So whilst Shrivastava provided an excellent starting point for challenging the ideology of strategic management and for the development of "ideology-free knowledge" (1986:375) the practice of

strategists seems as firmly ideological as ever and there has been relatively little extension of the critical analysis of strategy. The strategic management literature retains many of the weaknesses described by Shrivastava (and several others before him including: Camerer (1985); Mitroff and Mason (1982) and Tinker and Lowe (1984)) as exemplified in reviews of the field by Hambrick (1990) and Daft and Buenger (1990), and practice remains characterized by a process of domination (Alvesson and Willmott 1995). Indeed, the impact of Shrivastava's own paper is indicative of the ideological status of the strategic management discourse for one struggles to find any reference to it in any mainstream strategy text and it has had little or no discernible impact on the development of the discourse. Despite its potential for providing a starting point for critical reflection, the paper has been largely ignored by contributors to the strategic management literature, suggesting that reflection and the examination of fundamental assumptions is unwelcome. It appears that contributors can express no doubts about fundamental aspects of the discourse, even while they argue vociferously amongst themselves about what form strategy should take.

All in all, one might feel pessimistic about the potential for a critical perspective on strategic management yet I would argue that there are grounds for optimism for a number of reasons. Firstly, the amount of work which develops a critique of management has grown in recent years, exemplified by: important texts such as *Critical Management Studies* (Alvesson & Willmott 1992), *Making Sense of Management* (Alvesson & Willmott 1996); the growth of critically-oriented management mailbases; special issue journals, such as this one; and the establishment of a critical 'interest group' in the American Academy of Management. A critical mass (excuse the pun) of 'critters', as the American organizers of the interest group refer to themselves, has emerged to which ideas can be disseminated, and in turn disseminated further. Secondly, writers like Shrivastava have established some justification for the critical analysis of strategy (see also Knights & Morgan 1991; Alvesson & Willmott 1995) and have set out some jumping off points for further work. It is to the extension of Shrivastava's work that I now turn in proposing how the critique of strategic management might be carried forward.

Strategic Management and Ideology

Shrivastava (1986) makes two particularly important contributions to the critical analysis of strategic management. One, is his view of strategy as praxis, the other his exploration of how ideology works at a conscious level through the manipulation of communication and at an institutional level through ideas which favour dominant interests. The idea of praxis is important in that it recognizes that managers are not acting alone, but are supported by a range of ideas, theories, models and schemes which are generated for them by strategic 'theorists' of various types, including consultants and academics. The demonization of managers is therefore misplaced, in fact one may feel some sympathy for managers as they seek a way forward, in circumstances that are far from easy, by drawing on communicative and ideational resources that are presented to them (Watson 1994). Shrivastava's critique recognizes that academic ideas need to be scrutinized every bit as much as strategic practices, and to this end he exposes the ideological basis of many mainstream contributions to the strategy field.

The second of Shrivastava's contributions is his analysis of ideology which usefully delineates communication and ideas as the two main components of ideology, however, this aspect of his critique is ripe for further development. In particular, Shrivastava does not reveal a great deal about how the ideological process works other than by,

..the use of artifice or direct manipulation of communication by dominant groups...[and the]...use of idea systems [to] link unconscious sources of conduct...to structural asymmetries in resources and power (1986:365).

How this actually happens in organizations is not expanded upon and the inter-relationship of discourse (communication) and ideas is not explored, though it might be argued that they are very closely linked (Billig 1991; Potter & Wetherall 1987). To examine such processes was clearly beyond the scope of Shrivastava's original paper, but it is unfortunate that few subsequent writers have not chosen to explore the ideological processes of strategic management further. Alvesson and Willmott

(1996) have usefully explored the ideological nature of management in general, identifying the dominance of technocratic conceptualizations of management and the aura of 'science' which is used to legitimize and strengthen this dominance. More specifically, they have criticized the strategic management literature for its tendency to legitimate a managerial monopoly over decision-making in organizations and, recalling Shrivastava's work on praxis, have called for critical studies of strategic management to,

...incorporate investigations of how processes of strategic management exercise power over the way reality is interpreted and enacted so as to enable people to mobilize their capacities to change existing practices in ways that release them from prevailing forms of domination (1995:101).

The remainder of this paper will present and justify an appropriate framework for accomplishing just this task.

Discourse and Ideology

According to Althusser ideology is a process of language; it is through language that individuals are 'interpellated' as subjects and become agents of specific ideologies which sustain social relations. Interpellation involves 'recruiting' and 'transforming' an individual into a subject who believes that they have a relationship with the world which is real, natural and of their own making. The strength of ideological control lies in the fact that subjects regard themselves as in control of the meaning of the discourse they speak; that they are the origin of meaning not the product of it. However, such a relationship is 'imaginary' and involves a 'misrecognition' on the part of the individual who assumes she is the author of the ideology that constructs her subjectivity (Weedon 1987). In the context of organization, Alvesson and Willmott (1996) discuss the identity of managers and suggests that corporate life (especially, I would argue, discourse) encourages managers to identify themselves primarily as managers (as opposed to alternatives such as, 'family member', 'female' or 'employee'). Thus, the ideological structures and discourses of organizations allow individuals to construct themselves as subjects called 'managers', who believe themselves to be self-made and who voluntarily hold dear values of, "... responsibility, loyalty, work morale, result orientation" (Alvesson & Willmott 1996:173).

The notion of ideology perhaps implies that subjects are easily fooled into consenting in situations which they would be wiser to resist, and its use by analysts lays them open to charges of intellectualism and negativism (Alvesson & Willmott 1996). However, as Deetz (1992) suggests, the processes of ideology are subtle and complex and involve 'hidden-forgotten discourses' (Thompson 1984) and common-sense knowledge which claims to be natural and obvious (Weedon 1987). It is perhaps unwise to see every individual as unwitting victims of ideology and as Deetz (1992) has suggested, ideology alone is insufficient to explain domination in organizations, for at times we find individuals who give consent with a clear understanding of their material circumstances. This implies that Foucault's work (1982) which construes this process as a self-disciplining activity might be more suitable for explaining organizational power relations. This explanation involves a technology of power which forces individuals to become "...tied to their identity by a conscience or self-knowledge" (Foucault quoted in Knights and Willmott 1989:550), which sounds rather similar to interpellation. However, it differs in that it acknowledges more fully the positive aspects of the exercise of power, representing it as a means by which individuals can gain security and belonging, and it challenges the exclusively top-down view of power and ideology which is helpful (Fairclough 1992). I do not wish to become embroiled in debate about the relative merits of 'interpellation' versus 'technologies of self' at this stage, for what is of more importance in this paper are the structural conditions and discursive practices which might constitute these processes.

Organizational discourses are often associated with experts and 'technicians', including senior, or strategic managers; it is through these discourses that their expertise is demonstrated and their position secured. As Deetz (1992) argues, in modern corporations control largely rests on the normalization of knowledge and procedures by experts and specialists who can suppress alternative practices. For

example, Power and Laughlin (1992) describe the role of accounting systems in this respect. They also write of 'delinguistication', however, which involves the representation of social aspects of organizational life through the media of money (Puxty 1991). Other 'expert' discourses do not quite share this delinguistic feature, indeed strategic management is principally linguistic; perhaps it is the language of the discourse which invests it with power. As Deetz (1992) suggests where such knowledge and discourses are prevalent explicit power is rarely displayed and when it is it often signals a breakdown of ideologically rooted power relations. What follows from this is that our analysis of the ideology of strategic management needs to examine the discursive practices which take place within organizations but also the management discourses generated by academics and consultants which support those practices. An appropriate framework is provided by critical linguist, Norman Fairclough.

Three Dimensions of Discourse

Discourse is defined by Fairclough as a form of social practice using language, and in *Discourse and Social Change* (1992) he focuses on the position of discourse in political and ideological processes making it pertinent to the analysis of strategic management as an ideological process. Fairclough (1992) proposes a three dimensional analytical framework which examines discursive products (texts), discursive practices (production and interpretation) and social practices and contexts. In doing so he highlights the dialectical relationship between structure and social practice arguing that we should not overemphasise "...on the one hand the social determination of discourse, and on the other the construction of the social in the discourse"(1992:65). Instead, he suggests we regard discourse as a form of social practice both constrained by, and constitutive, of social structures. What follows from this is that ideology is located both in structure and in practices or events as they unfold. Thus an examination of the ideological nature of strategic management requires an analysis of, not only structures of organizational domination, but also practices and events, which in the case of strategic management are largely discursive.

For Fairclough (1992), discourse is not inherently ideological, but becomes ideologically invested within different social and institutional settings, The totality of discursive practice within an institutional setting then becomes recognizable as an 'order of discourse' of which strategic management is an example. Discourse involves both a process of production and interpretation which are social events, therefore orders of discourse are "...discursive facets of social orders" (Fairclough 1992:71), again emphasizing the necessity to place discourse within its social and structural context. Meaningful analysis, therefore, must focus on discursive practices as well as texts, that is, on processes of production, distribution, consumption and interpretation and within structural contexts. The implication of this for the discourse analysis of strategic management is that we must examine: how ideas and discourses are produced, by whom and in what context; how the resulting texts are distributed and consumed; how they are interpreted and then drawn into discursive practices within organizations; and in turn how those practices are interpreted

Fairclough also draws on the notion of hegemony to explain the inability of ideological processes to secure absolute domination. Hegemony acknowledges the need to integrate subordinates rather than simply dominate; to involve them in alliances and offer concessions to win their consent. Again this corresponds to the findings of critical studies of strategic management (Burawoy 1979) and it recognizes the potential for resistance in situations which are fluid and uneven (Jermier et al 1994). For Fairclough the idea of hegemonic struggle, which involves the structuring and restructuring, and articulation and rearticulation of ideological complexes (Gramsci 1971), becomes the focus for investigation. What is implied is that the ideological process is never complete, a situation of complete domination is never attained because the process is not wholly controllable. It is not a process which can be totally engineered as it takes place in a flux of change. This means that analysis needs to account for changes in discursive practices, such as transgression, the crossing of boundaries or the importation of new discursive and ideational resources. The ideological basis of strategic management is likely to change, so we are therefore faced with analysing a moving target, never an easy situation. But analysis may also need to acknowledge more dramatic changes, that is, to orders of discourse. As orders of discourse adapt more fundamental changes may result, whereby established orders are

replaced by new ones, thus our analysis of strategic management discourse should, in the long term, be sensitive to the possibility that it may be superseded by some other order of discourse, perhaps as it adopts new discursive features which then make the original order redundant.

To summarize, the exploration of the ideological nature of strategic management must examine discursive products (texts), discursive practices (particularly production and interpretation) and social contexts, and should acknowledge the interplay of these three levels analysis. To begin by putting the practices into context I will suggest a number of important contextual features of the strategic management discourse.

Locating Strategy Discourse - Social Context

Discursive events take place across three identifiable but closely interrelated spheres: academic work, consultancy and strategic management practice within organizations. Whilst it may be analytically helpful to separate these spheres from each other it is also necessary to examine the intertextual nature of their relationships, that is, the ways in which each sphere acquires textual resources from the others. The interrelationships are many and varied but might include the following examples: academics who, in addition to research and teaching, sell their consultancy services to organizations; consultancy firms carrying out projects within client organizations; managers who participate in management education. It is also important to acknowledge the complexity of these intertextual relationships. Firstly, it is not possible to identify a starting point for the discourse or a definitive account of the cause and effect of its development, a point which is emphasized in Knights' and Morgan's genealogical analysis of strategy discourse,

...discourses change as actors adapt and change the conditions of the process of reproduction...analysis involves a search for discrete discourses and practices that can be seen as having been moulded and reconstituted into a new discursive formation. (1991:254)

Secondly, it is not possible to isolate each sphere from the others as discourse cuts across and develops within each sphere. For example, if we acknowledge Giddens's principle of 'double involvement' (1982), it is not possible to research strategic practice empirically as if that practice takes place independently of previous studies of strategic practice. Practice is created by the research sphere as that sphere creates its own discourse, for humans have the unique capacity to change their behaviour (discursive practices) as they acquire new knowledge (discursive and ideational resources). This is particularly so in an order of discourse which tends to be highly prescriptive, characterized by overtly instrumental reasoning with outcomes tailored to appeal to a distinct clientele.

Thirdly, it cannot be assumed that the members of each sphere are homogenous. There are a number of academic positions on strategy (Whittington 1993; Rouleau & Seguin 1995), consultancy firms seek differentiation from each other (Sturdy 1997) and there are obviously many local differences between organizations. An analysis of discourse which examines discursive practices, products and contexts will need to be sensitive to local differences and changes in these differences, for example the repackaging or re-positioning of academic ideas or consultancy services. I would argue that it is just such complexity that critical discourse analysis can help us understand, as it allows us to tie together local actions and broader structures, however, it might also lead us to be circumspect about reading off generalizations from local circumstances. This though might have the positive effect of encouraging a higher degree of reflexivity on the part of analysts; perhaps doubt can be a healthy state of mind at times.

Fourthly, the boundaries of each sphere might also be regarded as permeable, not just to each other but to other discourses. Indeed, this permeability is likely to be a key element of efforts to reconstitute or reshape discourse. In the academic strategy discourse ideas and discourse from other academic disciplines have often been imported to enhance understanding of the strategy process. For example, 'learning' (Senge 1990), 'diversity' (Herriot & Pemberton 1994), 'complexity theory' and 'chaos theory' (Stacey 1996) have recently been drawn into the discourse from the social and natural

sciences, whilst Gary Hamel (1996) has also attempted to inject the language of 'revolution' into the discourse, though this has not seemingly had a dramatic impact on the field as yet. Similarly, consultants tend to import the ideas and language of others into their discursive practices, for example, though perhaps not strictly a strategy 'guru', Tom Peters (1992) has drawn on, or even misappropriated, the discourse of 'liberation'. In a similar way practitioners also draw resources into their local discursive practices from elsewhere, the images and language of pornography (Thomas 1996) or humour (Watson 1994), for example. Whilst the 'texts' produced in these local instances of discourse perhaps do not have quite the impact on the order of discourse that academic and consultant texts do, they should not be regarded as unimportant. After all, few strategy researchers disregard the importance of more formal aspects of local discourse, such as the 'Corporate Plan' or the Chief Executives' annual address to the organization.

Analysis of the discourse in each sphere would examine the impact of somewhat different social contexts on the practices which take place and the texts which are produced. As mentioned earlier, it is not enough to examine texts or discourse in isolation, therefore, analysis has to attend to social and structural elements within each sphere. In the academic sphere, discourse is shaped by: the social structures of academic life (Whitley 1984); debates on knowledge and the status of management as science (Brown 1992; Whitley 1994); and institutional features of management education (Locke 1989). In addition, the output of most academic research is distributed through the publishing industry which has its own structural characteristics. In the consultancy sphere, the structural aspects of what has become a significant industry need to be examined (Micklethwait & Wooldridge 1996), as do the promotional and rhetorical elements of the consultant/guru discourse (Huczynski 1993; Abrahamson 1996; Kieser 1997) and the relational aspects of the consultant-client discourse (Sturdy 1997). In the workplace, structures of power, hierarchy and function form a complex context, but one which is further complicated by the structures within which organizations operate, for example competitive and collaborative relationships with other organizations. In addition, issues of physical proximity, technology and the control of workspaces might be influential on discursive practices.

All of this suggests a somewhat ambitious research programme, and this is before we have even considered discursive practices and texts. However, if we are to develop a reasonable understanding of strategic discourse we need to attend to structural context, otherwise discourse appears to float free from material conditions when it should be considered as a part of those material conditions.

Discursive Practices

As already outlined, discursive practices are those that involve the production, consumption, distribution and interpretation of texts (Fairclough 1992). The nature of the practices differs from context to context but Fairclough outlines a number of features of discursive practices for analysis. Firstly, he suggests it is important to consider who is responsible for text production, and suggests that this is sometimes more complicated than we might think, possibly involving an 'animator' who makes the sounds or marks on paper, an 'author' who is responsible for wording and a 'principal' whose position is represented in the discourse. In the context of strategic management this demarcation of roles fits well, indicating the differing inputs of author, publisher and the persons who are the subject matter of the text. Secondly, Fairclough points out that interpretation takes a number of forms and can involve close scrutiny or cursory attention, for aesthetic, rhetorical or instrumental purposes. Thus the way in which people interpret strategic management texts will be an important aspect of their effect, and it is sensible to acknowledge that the critical academic may interpret a text very differently to a practitioner. What is important to understand are the reasons for the differences. Thirdly, consumption can be individual or collective and can be consumed through different media. A 'guru' business presentation will be consumed differently to the contents of a strategy textbook, for example. Finally, the manner of 'text' distribution is important. For example, a conversation is very different to a corporate newsletter in form and effect, and the way in which information is disseminated will influence its effect, with word of mouth communications perhaps suffering from 'Chinese Whispers' as the messages disperse.

In each sphere discursive practice involves writing, talking, listening and sensemaking. It may also involve performance in a more theatrical sense, in the presentation of discourse in lectures, conferences or commercial seminars. The provision of management education is perhaps a key element in the analysis of discursive practice, both in terms of production and interpretation (and I suppose consumption). Decisions about what form such education should take are important; the curriculum and its form of delivery being significant in terms of providing discursive resources to managers (and 'wannabe' managers) and such decisions obviously take place in the context of debate and policy formulation (Porter & McKibben 1989, Constable and McCormick 1987). Also editing, reviewing and presentational aspects of publishing may be considered as discursive practices, which normally take place within a broader structure of commercial exchange. In the workplace the production of organizational documents (strategic plans, for example) is clearly discursive but less formal aspects of discursive action are also important such as conversations (Shotter 1993; Tannen 1995; Drew & Heritage 1991). Access to discursive resources is a crucial aspect of strategic management discourse and it can be reasonably assumed that access is quite closely controlled. For example, not all employees have access to management training, particularly that which might be deemed to be of a strategic nature (MBA, for example). Although some may choose to 'buy' their own access outside of the workplace, others will be 'privileged' by being encouraged, and often funded through, a course of training. Who enjoys such privilege, who is chosen to join those in the strategic 'know', is usually determined by senior managers. The provision of consultancy services are likely to take place within clear parameters, to agreed specifications and perhaps with guaranteed results (though this is not so likely in relation to consultancy of a strategic nature). The fact that consultancy is paid for and costed, often in great detail, will influence the nature and extent of the discursive practices involved.

Fairclough defines three key issues for the analysis of discursive practices, namely: force (what the text is being used to do socially); coherence (the way in which an interpretation 'makes sense'); and intertextuality (the way in which texts are drawn upon in the production and interpretation of new texts). In terms of force many strategy texts are produced to induce some kind of change in strategic or other organizational activity. Coherence depends on the interpretative principles and assumptions that are drawn on in specific contexts, and Fairclough highlights this aspect of discourse as being most significant for exposing ideological content in discourse. Coherence lies, not in the text, but in the interpretation process; "...a text only makes sense to someone who makes sense of it, that is someone who can infer those meaningful relations in the absence of explicit markers" (Fairclough 1992:84). It is this that makes coherence of such importance to studies of ideology, for ideology lies in the way interpretative principles are associated with discourse types. For example, in the strategy discourse, authors often make the assertion that the business environment is characterized by "...increasing turbulence and propensity to change" (Thompson 1997:3) which necessitates an increased emphasis on strategic management, though few provide any empirical evidence to back up this claim. Thompson and O'Connell-Davidson (1995) regard this as a rhetorical ploy which provides an appropriate context for the messages being disseminated in what they call the 'pop-management' literature. Such ideas "...are increasingly driven by an internal dynamic and the ideas become commodities with their own circulation processes distinct from the real world" (Thompson & O'Connell-Davidson 1995:30). However, if such ideas were wholly divorced from reality it seems unlikely that managers would find them so compelling; there must be some sense in these assertions for them to be made sense of. However, they may overstate the case and be rooted in ideological assumptions which are present amongst readers rather than 'in' the text.

Given my concern to examine the relationships between the spheres within which strategic management takes place, the notion of intertextuality is of great importance. How, for example, are the textual features of an academic text employed within an organization by a manager in the production of her own texts? How might a consultant draw on academic research in producing his own texts? How do academics decide what aspects of organizational life should be included in their texts on strategy, that is, what organizational texts do they report in their research? Let me examine just two examples of discursive practice and their intertextual relationships, the use of academic discourse in organizational practice, and the reporting of organizational practice in academic discourse.

The production of organizational texts by managers is often seen as operating independently of academic theoretical discourse; "...managers and academics seem to live in two different worlds, and speak two different languages" (Watson 1994:2), but the boundary between the two spheres is permeable and as Watson suggests, "...it is a foolish and dangerous error to maintain barriers between 'thinkers' and 'doers'" (1994:2). Despite demonstrating a scepticism of management theory many of the managers in Watson's ethnography were enthusiastic learners and a number spoke of their 'use' of theories in the workplace. For example, one manager (an MBA holder) reported that she used them 'subconsciously' and sometimes "...expound(ed) them on people at work when they need to understand why this happened this way or that" (Watson 1994:167). Another referred to theory as an 'operating principle' and emphasized the importance of communication in his work (Watson 1994:167). What such examples illustrate is not only the importance of theory to managers but the discursive way in which theories emerge in organizations, providing resources for thought, persuasion ('needing to understand in the way in which the manager requires'), action and communication. More specifically, strategic frameworks may be reproduced in organizational strategy documents (consultants may even provide 'blueprints'). For example, in a recent study of professional relations in NHS hospitals I encountered a 'strategic plan' for a hospital which drew directly on a framework from the academic literature (even going so far as to reference the source (Hax & Majluf 1991)). The framework was applied without adapting the language used in the original source which had been geared towards private sector, commercial organizations and referred to products, customers and markets (as opposed to services, patients and communities). The effect of such language on staff varied but most found it alienating, increasing the distance between themselves and management. Some suggested management had lost sight of the hospital's role, vividly illustrated by the response of one midwife when asked what she felt the senior managers in the organization did, her reply: 'they seem to talk bullshit for a living' (interview transcript). This is a good example of the discursive nature of strategy, intertextuality and the negative effect strategy can have on organization.

In terms of the discursive practices of academics the analysis of the process could usefully examine how academics decide what constitutes the phenomenon they are interested in and how they report on practice in their research discourse. Whilst the first example above drew on available thought about how managers use theoretical ideas, which is a matter of significant interest to academics, there is very little work which helps us understand how academics use empirical work discursively in their own texts. Generally speaking, epistemological issues may help us understand broad principles about framing research questions and conceptualizing 'subjects' for research, but specifically there has been little reflection on the part of strategic management academics on how they identify what is and isn't strategic. As Alvesson and Willmott (1996) report the distinction often seems to be made on the basis of what is a 'big' decision and what isn't. 'Big' decisions (for example those with significant resource implications or concerning scope of activity) are made by senior managers, therefore it follows that strategic management is about senior management and that they are the focus of empirical work. Thus, issues of how senior managers formulate strategy and their role in its implementation dominate the field. This situation also stems from practicalities of the research process, in that to gain access to an organization for a strategic study, one would have to gain the assent of senior managers who may then influence the focus and possibly even the outcomes of the research. Finally, of course, research may be conducted with senior managers explicitly intended as the 'clients' for any outcomes the process produces.

Texts

Fairclough's (1992) third dimension of discourse analysis focuses on the products of discursive practices, that is the 'texts' themselves, examining how the features of the text communicate meaning (that can only be properly understood in the context of practices and structures). Fairclough (1992) identifies vocabulary, grammar, cohesion and text structure as his main analytical dimensions. Vocabulary relates to the words used in a text, grammar with the ways in which words are combined, cohesion with links between clauses and sentences and structure with large-scale properties of texts. It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into great detail on these aspects of discourse analysis, suffice to say that what appear to be minute, perhaps inconsequential, aspects of the discourse are really

nothing of the sort. The elements of texts, when put into context are instrumental in suppressing or bringing about change; why else would we spend time involved in producing and interpreting such texts?

In the case of strategic management, as with most discourses of 'expertise', vocabulary is an important aspect of the discourse. 'Technical' language characterizes much of the field, yet is powerfully blended with highly rhetorical language. Phrases such as 'core competence', 'differentiation' and 'cycle time' appear in texts alongside more prosaic language like 'stick to the knitting', 'the balanced scorecard' and the more vague 'excellence'. Such language contributes to the development of identity and social reality. How strategic language helps construct identity can be exemplified by my experience at a conference some years ago, when a professor of strategy described himself as a 'strategist' not an 'organizational analyst'. When I asked why he felt it necessary to differentiate between the two he looked perplexed and effectively refused to answer the question, encouraging the chair of the session to press on with the next question. Clearly, he had not expected to be asked a question which cut to the issue of strategy and his own identity, despite having a professorship based on the concept.

The construction of reality is perhaps rooted in the repetition of phrases which come to signify aspects of the social world. For example, the term customer has entered the vocabulary of many organizations who once had 'clients', 'patients' and 'students' and the term has perhaps altered the social relations between those people and the organizations they are involved with (du Gay & Salaman 1992). Also, as I describe later, Porter continually repeats the words 'competition' and 'competitiveness' at the opening of *Competitive Advantage* (1985), seeding the idea that competition is the central element of strategy. In some ways the repetition of certain phrases in the discourse seems to serve as a means of countering insecurity and ambiguity, bringing to mind Horkheimer and Adorno who wrote,

The doctrine of the equivalence of action and reaction asserted the power of repetition over reality, long after men had renounced the illusion that by repetition alone could they identify themselves with the repeated reality and escape its power. But as the magical illusion fades away, the more relentlessly in the name of law repetition imprisons man in the cycle - that cycle whose objectification in the form of natural law he imagines will ensure his action as a free subject. (1947:12)

Strategic management is perhaps an example of an arid and fantastic wisdom (Horkheimer & Adorno 1947) which is based on the assumption that what has worked in the past will work in the future, that what is to come will simply remake what has already been. Indeed, such a point might be borne out by recent empirical work on the SWOT analysis framework (Hill & Westbrook 1997) who found little evidence of 'analysis' in firms using the framework. The use of the framework was characterized by: a lack of clarity and significant ambiguity in how terms were defined; the tendency of managers to ignore conflicts and contradictions; a lack of verification of statements with empirical evidence; and the common failure to link the 'analysis' with any implementation outcomes. As Hill and Westbrook describe, frameworks like SWOT are seductive as they tend to "...overlay corporate diversity with generic solutions" (1997:51); the repetition of phrases and words, without even struggling to understand and define them, will allow managers to control the destiny of their organizations. This is the very principle of myth that Horkheimer and Adorno write of.

Grammatically there are many aspects one could consider in the strategy discourse, but one perhaps worth mentioning following the alleged mythic power of the discourse to allow control over 'nature' is the construction of the field in anthropomorphic terms in clauses such as, "The adolescence of strategic management..." (Hambrick 1990) and "As strategy scrambles from adolescence to adulthood it is beginning to ask questions about its new identity" (McKiernan 1997:790). Such clauses have two effects, one being the construction of the discourse as an 'agent' with some life of its own which, whilst being a pleasing rhetorical device, also has the effect of obscuring the fabricated nature of the discourse by 'interested' contributors. The second effect of such clauses is to suggest that the discourse is one which is developing positively and quickly. Consider the effects of substituting

'middle-age' and 'dotage' for adolescence and adulthood in the second example; there is still a progression from one age to another, but the appeal of the development is lost. In the way that vocabulary evokes 'science' and 'control', grammar often implies progress and at times inevitability.

In terms of cohesion it is rather more difficult to make general points on the discourse as this aspect may also derive from an author's 'style' of writing as well as rhetorical intent. However, I would like to use an example to illustrate the possible importance of cohesion, that is, the opening paragraph from Michael Porter's *Competitive Advantage*, which goes,

Competition is at the core of the success or failure of firms. Competition determines the appropriateness of a firm's activities that can contribute to its performance, such as innovations, a cohesive culture, or good implementation. Competitive strategy is the search for a favorable (sic) competitive position in an industry, the fundamental arena within which competition occurs. Competitive strategy aims to establish a profitable and sustainable position against the forces that determine industry competition (1985:1)

Leaving aside issues of unfounded assertion, reification and lack of definition, the passage contains much more than is contained in the words alone. In terms of cohesion what is of interest is the linking of clauses and the links which can be made between words within those clauses. Porter opens his text with a number of short sentences, with no conjunctions which suggests a very self-assured message about which the author has no doubts. The repetition of 'competition' and 'competitive' links the sentences together into a paragraph which positions competitive strategy as the basis of business success in an environment, which Porter implies, is hostile. The implication is that hero managers need only take up the sword of competitive strategy, as supplied by Porter himself, to slay the dragon of competitive forces.

Moving on to consider text structure, Fairclough's final textual element, and one closely related to cohesion, one also finds interesting material in *Competitive Advantage*, particularly in terms of how the text ends. Unlike most texts which end with some summary and evaluation of the thesis presented, Porter ends his text without drawing together the whole into a neat finale or reflection on his ideas. Instead, the text ends rather abruptly on the theme of 'attacking an industry leader'. One might interpret this as a stylistic error, but given Porter's obvious ability to write clearly and engagingly it might be more plausible to see this as a deliberate 'strategy'. The text ends with action rather than reflection to the fore; an unwritten injunction to managers to take action, using the analytical instruments Porter has furnished them with. This once again re-emphasises the importance of intertextuality between discursive practices

Conclusion -The Value of Discourse Analysis

In this 'text' I have proposed that the ideological content of strategic management should be a focus for critique and that Fairclough's work on critical discourse analysis represents an appropriate analytical framework for this purpose. I have also defined some of the structures, discursive practices and texts which should be the subject matter of this analysis, provided some brief examples of such analysis and proposed some questions which researchers may seek answers to. In bringing the 'text' to an end it seems fitting to reflect on it (especially having criticized Porter for not doing so in *Competitive Advantage*) and to consider how it may be interpreted and used to extend the critique of strategic management discourse.

Given the breadth and depth of analysis covered in Fairclough's framework I feel that I must justify why it is worth making an effort to progress research along these lines, because clearly such an effort is beyond the capabilities of a single researcher and would have to be carried out as a collective process. The collective I have in mind are the community of organizational analysts concerned with developing an understanding of organizational life and fostering conditions within which our experience of that life can be improved. This suggests that this project would not be the work of the current community of 'strategy' academics few of who would be selfless (or daft) enough to take part in a project which seeks to expose the nuts and bolts of their work so as to undo them.

So, why is this research effort worthwhile? Firstly, because the ideological features of strategy have not been fully explored before, particularly in terms of the intertextuality of the discourses involved in the wider order of discourse. Work has been done which will contribute to this project, but it remains to be drawn together into the coherent whole offered by Fairclough's framework. The discursive aspects of the process also need further research, particularly through empirical study of academic, consultant and practitioner discursive practices and their intertextual links

Secondly, the effort is worthwhile because the discourse under scrutiny has been a lasting aspect of organizational life, this of course, contributing to its ideological strength. Strategic management is not a passing fad, nor does it seem to be a discourse that will be readily overtaken by some alternative, in the way in which Computer Integrated Manufacturing appeared to be superseded by TQM, and TQM was in turn superseded by BPR. What is apparent about the strategy discourse is its longevity and the tendency of contributors to absorb discursive resources into the order of discourse without that order being superseded. Hence, strategic management has been characterized by discourses of long term planning, incrementalism, learning, competitive positioning and core competences, which, in spite of clear contradictions and inconsistencies, have been accommodated within the overall order of discourse. So it seems well worth exploring how this has been achieved, and we can be fairly secure about the discourse surviving long enough to be researched without the output of that research becoming redundant. Even if we cannot be certain that the strategic management discourse will endure, we can be certain that it would be replaced by some alternative discourse, that would likely derive in part from the strategy discourse. So a third reason for this research approach lies in the possibilities it presents to uncover enduring aspects of ideology in organizational discourses and perhaps to predict how the discourse will be overtaken by some alternative.

Finally, the research is worthwhile for the contribution it may make to praxis, particularly in its potential to inform the practice of non-strategists who may acquire discursive resources to create a dialogic form of organization (Alvesson & Willmott 1995). The acquisition of communicative competence called for by Shrivastava (1986) and echoed by Alvesson and Willmott (1995) is certainly important, but it is also necessary to undermine the ideology of the strategy discourse by revealing more fully how the discourse works. Otherwise one may find the newly acquired competence being contained by an established and strongly ideological discourse, and undermined by structural impediments to dialogue.

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