

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF STRATEGIC INTENT

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Key words: Strategic intent; subjectivity; agency; social constructionism; critical management studies, diffusion; coherence; multiplicity

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Abstract

Strategic intent is a useful concept in accounting for purpose and continuity of goals in an organization adapting to internal and external evolutionary pressures. Yet there is a theoretical confusion over the subjectivity of strategic intent, that is, who has strategic intent in an organization. We argue that to realize the promise of strategic intent as a widely diffused phenomenon in organizations, achieving coherence between multiple intents is often the most viable option rather than seeking hegemony for one monolithic intent. We argue that strategic intent can exist as a coherent set of distinct social constructions. Drawing from social constructionism, we explore the processes involved in diffusing intent and building coherence between multiple intents, as well as challenges to intents involved in increasing multiplicity of strategic intents.

Keywords: Strategic intent; subjectivity; agency; social constructionism; critical management studies, diffusion; coherence; multiplicity

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF STRATEGIC INTENT

Introduction

Strategic intent, defined by Hamel and Prahalad (1989) as "...a [sustained] obsession with winning at all levels of the organization", has been brought up as a new solution to the old dilemma concerning whether organizations have strategic choice (Child, 1972), or whether strategies are determined by environmental contingencies (Donaldson, 2001) and/or by bottom-up championing processes (Burgelman, 1983). A common viewpoint seems to be that while organizations need to be sensitive to environmental changes (Miller & Friesen, 1980; Tushman & Romanelli, 1985; Boeker & Goodstein, 1991), and to be able to exploit bottom-up ideas (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992), a generic strategic intent should unite organizational action into a coherent and continuous pattern (Prahalad & Doz, 1987; Hamel & Prahalad, 1989; Noda & Bower, 1996; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000).

Strategic intent was originally created as a concept for a managerial audience (Hamel Prahalad, 1989; 1994; Prahalad & Doz, 1987) but the concept has been taken up in academic discourse of organizational strategy (Burgelman, 1996; Noda & Bower, 1996; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000). The managerial role of strategic intent is to go beyond environment-sensitive strategic planning to represent objectives "for which one cannot plan" (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989). As such, strategic intent represents a proactive mode in strategizing, a symbol of the organization's will about the future, which energizes all organizational levels for a collective purpose (ibid.) Strategic intent reflects the 'corporate context' in which bottom-up business ideas are weighed (Noda & Bower,

1996; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000). It directs the accumulation of necessary competencies (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989), giving the intra-organizational change processes a common target, “something to ‘aim’ for” (Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000, 885). Survival also involves avoiding the negative effects of external shocks. This view aligns with arguments that it is the slow-changing firms that survive and that inertia is functional (Hannan & Freeman, 1977) and guarantees reliability and stability, and is therefore adaptive because environmental selection will favour firms with greater inertia (Hannan & Freeman, 1977, 1984) and stability and continuity (Nelson & Winter 1982, 99-107). This aligns with evidence that young, flexible and small firms are more at risk. Strategic intent is therefore a useful concept in accounting for purpose and continuity of goals in an organization adapting to internal and external evolutionary pressures not for just large multinational corporations, in which context it was originally presented (Prahalad & Doz, 1987; Hamel & Prahalad, 1989), but also for smaller firms.

However, there is a fundamental confusion in the literature over the subjectivity of strategic intent, i.e., who possesses organizational strategic intent. Some authors (e.g., Noda & Bower, 1996; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000) present it as a set of long-term goals, shared by the top management team, while others such as Hamel and Prahalad (1989) ascribe it to “all levels of the organization.” Intent is a psychological concept which is possessed by a conscious actor (Searle, 1983). Organizations are not conscious and cannot possess intent in a strict sense, i.e., organizational intent needs to be possessed by some or all of its members. Speaking of organizational intent runs the risk of obscuring who the actor possessing strategic intent is. Organizations are often pluralistic and

fragmented, which underlines the necessity to be explicit regarding subjectivity when addressing mental phenomena on the organizational level of analysis.

Our goal for this paper is to understand strategic intents as social constructions, governing future-oriented action on different organizational levels. We will first ask ourselves the question: “*what is strategic intent*”, comparing strategic intent with other related management concepts. We will follow up by asking the question “*who has strategic intent*”, enabling us to discuss the subjectivity involved in strategic intent.

Who has strategic intent

Intent, a psychological concept, is held by a conscious subject, capable of forming intentional states, mental states connected to an external reality (Searle, 1983). Intent contains a conviction to achieve a certain state of affairs in the future (Searle, 1983; Bratman, 1999).¹ Intent is not a problem-free concept in theories of agency, as a view of agency, based on intent, can be criticized as being overly rationalistic. Everyday agency consists of a semi-reflexive flow of praxis (Giddens, 1984), in which reasons for actions are often formulated only in retrospect (Weick, 1995). We acknowledge these limits to rationality, yet we argue that such critique is more appropriate for a shorter-term view of organizational agency, such as strategy-as-planning, where all strategically relevant actions are seen as being determined by pre-intended plans (see Mintzberg, 1994, for

¹ Intent is only one form of intentional states. Beliefs and desires are prominent examples of other intentional states, which are intentional, i.e., ‘about the world’.

critique and reorientation). However, strategic intent is a desired future state, so that explicit planning is not possible or even desired (Prahalad & Doz, 1987). There is a lot of room for interpretation and improvisation in determining how that intent is realized.

An organizational intent is bound to be *collective* to a degree, because organizations consist of multiple members. The concept is not without precedents in the sociological literature: classical sociologists use the phrase ‘collective consciousness’ (Durkheim, 1964) to indicate a widely shared strategic intent, such as where, in traditional societies, argues Durkheim, the *collective consciousness* entirely subsumes individual consciousness because collective norms are strong and behavior is well-regulated. Durkheim sees individual consciousness, created by the division of labor, emerging as something distinct from and in conflict with collective consciousness. The rapid change in society due to increasing division of labor thus produces a state of confusion with regard to norms, leading eventually to the breakdown of norms regulating social behavior; Durkheim labels this state *anomie*.

If *anomie* is the most likely characteristic of traditional societies becoming modern, when modern organizations become hyper-modern then they create a new form of collective consciousness, a new *gemeinschaft*, in the terms of Tönnies (1974: see Kono and Clegg, 2001). The conditions for creating a new *gemeinschaft* have been implicitly recognized by philosophers and theoretical psychologists when they argue, forcefully, that, for a collective intent to be created, each member of a collective *needs to be able to formulate a conception of the intentions of all other members in the collective* (see, e.g., Tuomela & Miller, 1988; Gilbert, 1989; Bratman, 1999).

Indeed, this criterion makes it extremely difficult to regard strategic intent as a truly collective intent in large organizations: in an organization consisting of hundreds of members, not to mention large multinational corporations, organizational members can only be aware enough of a small group of persons to formulate spontaneously held beliefs about their intentions, due to cognitive and physical barriers. Therefore, if a single strategic intent is presented as 'organizational intent' for a large organization such an ascription is bound to be more or less metaphorical, communicating more a managerial conviction than a true collective intent.

Authors on organizational collective mind (Weick, 1993; Weick & Roberts, 1993) and distributed cognition (Hutchins, 1991) seem to recognize this, because the heedful activities by a collective organizational mind rely on an understanding of the "virtual role set" (Weick, 1993). Members of a multinational corporation are not likely to formulate a very deep understanding on the whole organizational role set. The case examples upon which the theorizing on collective mind is built are small organizational units, such as a fire-fighting team (Weick, 1993), groups of flight deck operators (Weick & Roberts, 1993), an airline cockpit (Hutchins & Klausen, 1998) or the navigation team of a warship (Hutchins, 1990). Indeed, studies of larger and more pluralistic organizational contexts portray strategic intent as a distributed, fragmented and contested concept (Blackler et al, 2000; Jarzabkowski, 2005).

In addition to practical limitations to a truly collective view of strategic intent, discussions of power in organizations, entertained by critical theorists, challenge the view of an organization acting as a subject with a single intent as ideological nonsense. The

social construction of subjects in organizations involves a constant redistribution of power (Foucault, 1980; Hardy & Phillips, 2004), and every dominant subjectivity that is established is resisted (Hardy & Phillips, 2004; Oswick, Putnam & Keenoy, 2004). A similar sentiment is entertained by Berger & Luckmann (1967) who argue that no secondary socialization process is ever complete and is always contested by the individual in question.

We are left with a dilemma: strategic intent may, with some ideological concerns, either exist as a unified, collective intent in organizations small enough to warrant each organizational member's knowledge of their organization's role-set as in Weick's (1993) collective mind, or as a collective intent in a *top management team* of a larger organization (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Pettigrew, Ferlie & McKee, 1992; Denis, Lamothe & Langley, 2001). Yet, strategic intent is also discussed as a feature of large, multinational organizations, such as Canon (Prahalad & Hamel, 1989), Komatsu and Phillips (Prahalad & Doz, 1987) as well as something that concerns all organizational levels – “it is not the cash that fuels the journey to the future, but the emotional and intellectual energy of every employee.” (Hamel & Prahalad, 1994, 127).

Furthermore, and not surprisingly, extant literature on strategic intent is in a state of disarray when the subjectivity issue is addressed (Table 1). Hamel and Prahalad clearly represent a collectivist viewpoint, while many others promote strategic intent as a held only by the top management.

Table 1. Strategic intent in previous literature

Authors	Definition for intent	Subject in possession of the intent
Prahalad & Doz (1987)	Goal for which one cannot plan, long-term goal, long-term orientation <i>“”Intent” is used here to describe long-term goals and aims, rather than detached plans [...] strategic intent is crucial for a firm to aim for goals for which one cannot plan. It is important to separate that orientation (strategic intent) from strategic planning or strategies. Strategic intent allows for a firm to build layers of competitive advantage painstakingly, to accomplish long-term goals.” (p. 52)</i>	Top management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no mention of employee involvement • “firm action and intent” discussed only in singular form, e.g., “a firm’s strategic intent allows it to think of resources and competitive advantages differently and to deploy them with greater imagination” (p. 52)
Hamel & Prahalad (1989)	Shared obsession to win <i>“Companies that have risen to global leadership [...] began with ambitions that were out of proportion to their resources and capabilities. But they created an obsession with winning at all levels of the organization and then sustained that obsession over the 10- to 20-year quest for global leadership. We term this obsession “strategic intent”.” (p. 64)</i>	All organizational members <i>“It is hard to imagine middle managers, let alone blue-collar employees, waking up each day with the sole thought of creating more shareholder wealth. But mightn’t they feel different, given the challenge to “Beat Benz” – the rallying cry of one Japanese auto producer?” (p. 66)</i>
Hamel & Prahalad (1994)	A dream, an emotion, a distillation of strategy, a goal, a mission <i>“The dream that energizes a company [...] Strategic intent is our term for such an animating dream.” (p. 129)</i> <i>“As the distilled essence of a firm’s strategic architecture, strategic intent also implies a particular point of view about the long-term market or competitive position that a firm hopes to build over the coming decade or so. Hence, it conveys a sense of direction [...] It holds out to employees the promise of exploring new competitive territory. Hence, it conveys a sense of discovery. Strategic intent has an emotional edge to it; it is a goal that employees perceive as inherently worthwhile. Hence, it implies a sense of destiny.”(p. 129)</i>	All organizational members <i>“It is not the cash that fuels the journey to the future, but the emotional and intellectual energy of every employee.” (p. 127)</i> <i>“Strategic intent must be a goal that commands the respect and allegiance of every employee” (p. 133)</i>
Burgelman (1994)	A prophecy, foresight by the CEO <i>“Prahalad and Hamel (1990) have explained the success of companies such as Canon, NEC, and Ericsson in terms of the development of core competence. Their explanation depends to a large extent on strategic intent based on the chief executive officer’s (CEO’s) superior foresight” (p. 25).</i>	CEO <i>“based on the chief executive officer’s” (p.25)</i>

Burgelman & Grove (1996)	<p>Top management decision <i>“Strategic dissonance [mis-alignment between a firm's strategic intent and strategic action], strategic inflection point [the change of one winning strategy into another], and strategic recognition [the capacity of top managers to appreciate the strategic importance of managerial initiatives after they have come about but before unequivocal environmental feedback is available] are the three interrelated key concepts that answer the question of how top management can decide on strategic intent in high-technology industries.” (p. 12)</i></p>	<p>CEO <i>“the strategic intent of the CEO who sets ambitious targets within a 10 to 20 year time horizon,” (p. 8)</i> <i>“Apple Computer's CEO John Sculley was clearly in front of his organization when he pushed the strategy of developing personal digital assistants (PDA) and personally championed the Newton operating system. Sculley's strategic intent stretched beyond Apple's available innovative capabilities and the market's readiness”. (p. 15-16).</i></p>
Hart (1992)	<p>Mission (superior goal) for the organization, <i>“the crafting of a long-term mission for the organization--an articulation of strategic intent ... This mission becomes translated into specific targets, either internal to the organization (e. g., develop capability) or external (e.g., overtake a competitor), which inspire organizational members to higher levels of achievement .. At Komatsu, for example, the mission is "Maru-C"--to encircle Caterpillar, its primary rival.” (p. 337)</i></p>	<p>Multiple organizational members <i>“organizational members” (p.337)</i></p>
Noda & Bower (1996)	<p>Top management viewpoint on business, ‘corporate context’ <i>“Our field-based data provide evidence on (1) the role of ‘corporate contexts’ that reflects top managers’ crude strategic intent in shaping strategic initiatives of business-unit managers [...]” (p. 159).</i></p>	<p>Top management (showing intent in refereeing bottom up ideas) <i>“The top manager’s role in determining strategic context is active, not passive [...] continuous, incremental learning of top managers during business development, and the resulting fine tuning of strategic context shift resource allocation and precede the articulation or change in official statements of the corporate strategy.” (p. 188)</i></p>
Lovas & Ghoshal (2000)	<p>A statement of goals articulated by the top management <i>“By ‘strategic intent’ we mean those long-term goals that reflect the preferred future position of the firm, as articulated by its top management (Prahalad & Doz, 1987).” (p. 884).</i></p>	<p>Top management <i>“as articulated by its top management” (p.884)</i></p>

The incoherence within and between authors on strategic intent over where its subjectivity resides is no great surprise because subjectivity seems to be a contested area in the overall discussion on strategic management. By ‘subjectivity’, we are referring to a conception of who is considered an active agent in the organization, i.e., what agency is emphasized and whose agency is silenced or trivialized, and to which actors the different forms of agency are attributed (see, e.g., Vaara, 2002). The classical conception of strategy is rather managerialist, empowering top managers and silencing others (Shrivastava, 1986; Knights & Morgan, 1991), yet there has been a growing interest in wider involvement of organizational members in strategic concerns (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985; Guth & MacMillan, 1986; Hickson et al., 1986; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990; Hart, 1992; Beer & Eisenstat, 1996; Floyd & Lane, 2000; Mantere, 2005; Kornberger, Carter, and Clegg (forthcoming)).

Those who see the strategic intent as a top team or CEO generated phenomenon tend to assume it can be somehow made collectively shared – a genuine collective consciousness in Durkheim’s terms. Yet there has not been a single account of how this sharing takes place. Indeed, Table 1 indicates differences in ontology – between monolithic intent in the “collective mind” (Weick & Roberts, 1993) and a management tool. Such ontological confusion is also evident in the wide range of definitions given for strategic intent, as the concept is being used to denote a written statement, a range of emotions or emotion-evoking metaphors (dream, obsession, destiny, etc.), as well as the concept ‘goal’, which is more rationalistic in nature.

With collective subjectivity, the key question to be addressed is how strategic intent is

diffused in an organization, i.e., how a written statement such as the slogan of a Japanese automobile manufacturer to “beat Benz” (Prahalad & Doz, 1987), or the statement “we want to become the favored partner of the world’s leading hearing clinics, by excelling at both technological leadership and the development of customized solutions to the most demanding segments of the market” of a hearing aid manufacturer (Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000), is transformed from text on paper into the intent of an organizational subject. Many accounts suggest that this diffusion begins at the top of the organization, while some suggest may as well be bottom-up, as in the case of Burgelman’s (1983) transformation of Intel from a memory company to a processor company.

In this paper, we wish to explore the possibility that an organizational strategic intent might portray some of the collectivity that Hamel and Prahalad suggest. Our solution is that while strategic intent can seldom fulfill the criteria of a single collective intent, it can be regarded as a set of social constructions that cohere with each other. Social constructions can be shared between groups of various sizes within the organization without the strict criterion of organizational members having to have beliefs about each others’ intentions or knowledge about each others’ role sets. While social constructions may not explain action at the same level as collective intents might, they certainly affect and regulate action through socialization of individuals (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).

What is strategic intent

Based on the idea that individual intent is a mental state logically connected to the achieving of a desired future state of affairs, we define strategic intent as *a set of social*

constructions, governing future-oriented agency.

In the field of management, there exist a number of concepts which are used by members to discuss future-oriented behavior, most relevant of these being goals, strategies and visions. It is noteworthy that these concepts have been developed and used in the extant literature within an often exclusively managerialist paradigm.

Goals state what is to be achieved and when results are to be accomplished, and although they do not state how the results are to be achieved they should be achievable (Quinn, 1995, 5). Strategic intent is different from goal in being superordinate to it (Hart, 1992, 337), long term or very long term (Prahalad & Doz, 1987, 52; Hamel & Prahalad, 1989, 64; Hart, 1992, 337; Burgelman & Grove, 1996, 8), uncertain in its achievability (Burgelman & Grove, 1996, 8, 15-16), linked to core competences (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990) and of high significance. Both goals and strategic intent are prospective (Burgelman & Grove, 1996, 25) and inspirational (Hart, 1992, 337).

A *strategy* is the pattern or plan that integrates an organization's major goals (Quinn, 1995, 5), or actions (Mintzberg, 1978). Strategic intent differs from strategy in that strategy is more often described in rationalist and analytical terms (Noda & Bower, 1996, 159) whereas strategic intent is viewed as emotion-based. Strategic intent is imaginative (Prahalad & Doz, 1987), a "dream that energizes a company" (Hamel & Prahalad, 1994, 129), challenging (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989, 66), a source of energy (Hamel & Prahalad, 1994, 127) and obsessive (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989, 64). Strategic intent also differs from strategy and strategic planning in being unplannable, i.e., being generic and long-term (Prahalad & Doz, 1987, 52). Strategy and strategic intent are similar in both being

prospective, directional (Hamel & Prahalad, 1994, 129) and integrative (Aram, 1989).

A *vision* is defined as a set of desired goals and activities (Gardner & Avolio, 1998, 38). It has connotations of encouraging strong corporate values in the strategy process (Conger & Kanungo, 1987) and so is similar to strategic intent in its emotional effects. Moreover, like strategic intent, it goes beyond mere planning and strategy – by challenging organizational members to go beyond the status quo – and it offers long-term direction (Nonaka, 1988). Strategic intent differs from vision because it is a process – it involves “painstaking” building of “competitive advantage” (Prahalad & Doz, 1987, 52) – a gradual accumulation of strength, whereas vision is more like a target or an end state, being introduced by visionary leaders. The most striking difference between visions and strategic intents is the degree of collectivity, as many authors describe a strategic intent as a phenomenon diffused at multiple organizational levels (see Table 1 below), while a vision is more clearly a top management leadership tool (Kotter, 1995), often ascribed to a single visionary leader (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985).

We are now in a position to explicate our definition of strategic intent further. Strategic intent is a set of social constructions, governing future-oriented behavior, which is (1) superordinate to a goal; (2) long term or very long term; (3) uncertain in its achievability; (4) linked to core competences; (5) of high significance; (6) prospective; (7) inspirational; (8) directional; (9) integrative; and (10) a process.

The social construction of strategic intent

What are the key processes in social construction? We follow Searle (1995) in identifying

three key elements of social construction: the human imposition of function, collective intentionality, and constitutive rules of the form X counts as Y in context C. First, social construction arises in relation to imposition of functionality. For example, the ‘social fact’ (Searle, 1995) that strategic intent is superordinate to goals is a joint result of organizational mechanisms which impose a function on strategic intent, because organizations allocate resources using the criterion that goals are supportive of the strategic intent (e.g., Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000).

Second, in order for strategic intent to be socially constructed, there must be a shared element to it, i.e. collective intentionality – a sense of “we know what our strategic intent is”. As we have noted earlier, strategic intent as a social construction is collective to a degree. However, we have also challenged the notion of strategic intent as a monolithic collective intent encompassing the organization. As we define strategic intent as a set of social constructions, collective intentionality exists as “pockets” around the organization.

Third, social construction requires that there are constitutive rules which identify particular contexts where X counts as Y, such as “refer to strategic intent when we are making strategic decisions”. Although this leaves vague what is meant by ‘strategic’, as long as there is some shared agreement about this, the rule which relates a context to an action is constitutive of socially constructed reality. These three properties of social construction all play their part in socially constructing strategic intent.

The hegemonic model of social construction: Diffusing a TMT intent into a monolithic intent

We argue that to assume that the diffusion of a strategic intent held by the subject constituted by a top management team as a *monolithic* intent, i.e., an intent shared by all members of an organization as a single subject, is to view that social construction process as one-dimensional and one which is unlikely to succeed. To assume that it will succeed is to believe that strategic intent is a metaphor used by top management teams to support their claim that they represent the organization. That claim is contradicted by evidence that organizational performance and strategy implementation depend on the involvement and engagement of other members. The notion that the joint effort of multiple stakeholders in strategy implementation is needed to assure strategy implementation seems to be quite widespread (e.g. Weick, 1987; 1995; Guth & MacMillan, 1986; Prahalad & Hamel, 1990; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992; Hart, 1992; Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1994; Kaplan & Norton, 1996; Beer & Eisenstat, 2000).

Diagrammatically, we can represent this as a movement according to Lukes' (1974) three-dimensional power, in which a structurally superordinate consciousness captures and colonizes the consciousness of subordinates so that its strategic intent stretches to the boundaries of the organization and not just the boundaries of the top management team (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. The hegemonic model of strategic intent

Such an improbable model seems to be what Hamel and Prahalad (1994, see Table 1) are suggesting: that the CEO says “Beat Benz” and the employees all follow that directive. Strategic intent cannot encompass larger organizations, because in order to form conceptions about each others’ intentions and roles, organizational members need information regarding what other organizational members are doing. In a large organization this is close to impossible. Collective intent can encompass small organizational units in which “heedful interrelation” (Weick & Roberts, 1993) is possible through individuals’ knowledge of the organizational role-set (Weick, 1993). Weick & Roberts (1993, 358) suggest that heedfulness is based on “close relationships [which] enact a single transactive memory system, complete with differentiated responsibility for remembering different portions of common experience. People know the locations rather than the details of common events and rely on one another to contribute missing details that cue their own retrieval”. While close relationships may exist within small groups, we argue that connections beyond such groups tend to be linked by more formal means. In large organizations this is not likely to happen due to the vastness and complexity of the role-set. Weick & Roberts (1993) tend to concentrate on one to one relationships between different small groups or individuals, for example, men in the tower instruct incoming and exiting pilots (Weick & Roberts, 1993, 362), and the petty officer ties the plane down while senior officers decide on ordnance (Weick & Roberts, 1993, 364) are both examples of the need for one to one interaction between pairs of groups. The largest group Weick & Roberts (1993, 363) refer to is 28 people involved in landing (“recovering”) a plane. Moreover, monolithic intent flies in the face of the many critiques that have been made of ‘dominant ideology’ in the context of power debates (see Clegg,

1989).

The first possible solution in escaping the problem of monolithic intent is to treat the diffusion issue as irrelevant. As proposed by some authors (Noda & Bower, 1996; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000, see Table 1), an executive board could constitute the organizationally plural subject and as such embody organizational strategic intent. The solution would be to treat the diffusion issue as non-important, or to treat it as a mechanistic implementation problem, along the lines of “structure follows strategy”. This would mean that only the top management team is to be regarded as a collective subject, while all other organizational members will be treated as objects.

We argue that while the top management team is often instrumental in formulating expressions of strategic intent, treating other organizational members as objects may have serious repercussions for at least commitment and control. Hart (1992) has argued that a form of strategy process that regards individuals as “sheep” is likely to result in worse performance than processes in which organizational members are “active players”. Such a view supports evidence that, for example, middle managers will be centrally involved in the determination of strategic context as part of a political process of identifying the content of new fields of business development (Burgelman, 1983). Guth and MacMillan (1986), as well as Westley (1990) have shown that middle managers who are left out of strategy processes are likely to be inefficient in implementation, or may even sabotage implementation efforts.

In addition to commitment issues, most organizations are too large and complex for control by prescription to be completely successful, and so top managers rely on

lower-level managers' practices of self-regulation to achieve control and coordinated action (Ashford & Tsui, 1991, 252). The more self-determining managers' actions are, the more they must collaborate with others and in order to do this they will learn to perceive the needs and goals of the various organizational stakeholders, a key to successful implementation (Beer & Eisenstat, 1996, 598). Such capabilities are a key to managerial effectiveness (Kenny & Zaccaro, 1983). Managerial discretion, when enabling managers to set their own reachable goals, reinforces a sense of self-efficacy (Bandura & Schunk, 1981) as well as enabling managers to voice doubts about what they see as unworkable policies (Beer & Eisenstat, 1996, 598).

The pluralist model: Multiple intents and coherence

If we regard the diffusion issue as relevant, we need to acknowledge that the social construction process involved in the diffusion of strategic intent breeds multiplicity. By multiplicity, we refer to a notion that strategic intent, while it often starts out as a singular intent, formulated by the top management team, is reinvented as plural intents as it is diffused among lower-level managers and operative employees (Rogers, 1995). Although diffusion involves encoding and enactment, it is only completed when replication (repeated adaptation of scripts to settings) occurs e.g. "Beat Benz" is enacted as patterns of behaviour calculated to maximise engineering quality in Production and as flawless organization in Logistics. An extension of enactment so that some sort of collective intent is diffused occurs when scripted behaviour exists. However, the enactment of an intent in diffusion also involves interpretation which transforms the intent into a local context.

There may be only one written statement of intent for the organization, but in diffusion,

strategic intent is bound to be broken down into separate intents held by multiple subjects, because the strategic intent will be interpreted differently by different groups, who ‘reinvent’ it (Rogers, 1995, 36), and are more able to act as plural subjects due to their smaller sizes and clearer task structures. In their study of the role of schemas in organizational change, Labianca, Gray & Brass (2000, 237) observed that “All organization members may not share organizational schemas” and that “divergence” of schemas occurred during the period of organizational change. Balogun & Johnson (2004) also found evidence that individual schemas of the organization change when the organization itself changes. Assuming that most people take notice of the organizational changes that most closely affect themselves, the extent that different individuals and groups experience organizational change will vary. This gives rise to the existence of a number of variants of the strategic intent.

The risk involved is *fragmentation* – a situation similar to that which Mintzberg and Waters (1985) call ‘unconnected strategies’. It is a situation that does not do the job intended for strategic intent because, as noted in our definition, strategic intent is integrative, i.e., it should unify agency across the organization. It comprises fragmented and disconnected consciousnesses, as depicted in Figure 2.

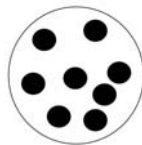


Figure 2. Fragmented strategic intent

To account for whether diffusion is successful in larger organizations where intent multiplicity is the only viable option, we will employ the concept *intent coherence*. We call the option where coherence exists between the intents *connected* strategic intents, continuing to use the language of both Mintzberg and Waters (1985), as well as Weick and Roberts (1993) (see Figure 3).

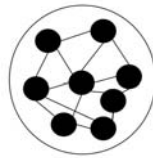


Figure 3. Connected strategic intents

Coherence occurs when there is sufficient overlap of scripts to provide a guide to diffusion, e.g., “Beat Benz” is so short and memorable that it enables all members to encode (learning a behavioural pattern) the aspiration easily. Coherence has important implications for the success of strategy in general. Pettigrew, Ferlie & McKee (1992, 276-298) identified “quality and coherence of policy” as an important factor in successful strategic change. These views accord with those of Nath and Sudharshan (1994) who defined strategy coherence as the consistency of strategic choices across business and functional levels of strategy. These studies suggest that some of the advantages of coherence are that coherent strategy is communicable (Pettigrew, Ferlie & McKee, 1992: 21), it is observable in strategic choices (Nath & Sudharshan, 1994) and it enables understanding by placing experiences into a recognisable pattern (Mintzberg, 1978) which enables retrospective sensemaking (Weick, 1995). However, this view of strategy coherence is retrospective and rules out a prospective time orientation, essential for

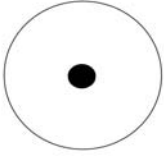

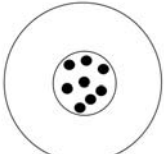
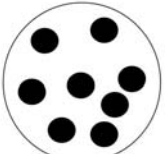
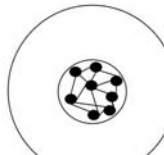
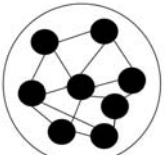
strategic intent. Therefore, we need to regard intent coherence as more than policy coherence, as something that concerns future action as much as past action. Indeed, the very notion of intent is about future actions. Future actions have action consequences, and it is the likely compatibility of those consequences which defines the coherence of strategic intent.

Six subjectivity configurations of strategic intent

We have discussed three concepts essential to the social construction of strategic intent in organizations: diffusion, multiplicity and coherence between multiple intents. The three concepts can be used to illustrate six possible subjectivity configurations of strategic intent for an organization (Table 2). Literature on strategic intent, as illustrated in Table 1, has treated the subjectivity of strategic intent as either a top management team phenomenon, or a phenomenon touching a wide array of organizational members. We have expressed this dichotomy as a level of diffusion; ‘high diffusion’ means many or all organizational members, whereas ‘low diffusion’ means the top management team. By ‘high coherence’, we mean no major contradictions between intents, whereas by ‘low coherence’, we mean major contradictions between strategic intents.

We have adopted the term “configuration” from Mintzberg’s (1980) discussion of structural configurations. As Mintzberg (ibid.) notes, there are discrete structural states in which an organization can exist; thus, we argue that subjectivity of intent may exist in various configurations.

Table 2. Subjectivity configurations of strategic intent

Multiplicity	Coherence	Low Diffusion	High diffusion
Single	Low	N/A ² TMT strategic intent	N/A Monolithic strategic intent
	High		
Multiple	Low	Fragmented TMT 	Fragmented strategic intents 
	High	Corporate portfolio 	Connected strategic intents 

TMT strategic intent, in Table 2, denotes a situation, in which the top management team of an organization constitutes a "collective consciousness", and organizational subjectivity and agency are only attributed to the top management. If multiplicity is increased without diffusion and/or coherence increasing, the top management team intent

² Low coherence, i.e., contradictions can only exist between multiple intents. This is derived from logic, where a contradiction may only exist between multiple statements.

is fragmented into competing strategic intents, as *Fragmented TMT* in Table 2. These are generated by different top team members socially constructing opposed views of strategy (Weick, 1979; Smircich & Stubbart, 1985). Opposed views are more likely when multiple, potentially divergent strategic activities are pursued concurrently (Denis, Langley & Cazale, 1996; Middleton-Stone and Brush, 1996; Denis, Lamothe & Langley, 2001). The building of strategic consensus within the top team is therefore generally accepted as one of the first steps in the strategy formation process (West & Schwenk, 1996) which is a prerequisite for successful implementation (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992, 27).

Corporate portfolio in Table 2 shows that while the consensus building may result in a unified TMT intent, the result may also be coherence within a portfolio of different intents within the TMT. Discussion on corporate portfolio strategies often denotes a situation where the TMT members, responsible for different businesses, formulate strategic intents that, while being different in orientation, support each other. Here, multiplicity has increased without diffusion increasing, while maintaining coherence. This has been discussed in the literature as alignment or integration (Hedberg & Jonnson, 1977, 90) or alignment (Nath & Sudharshan, 1994), or the extent to which the functional strategy supports the desired competitive advantage (Hayes & Whellwright, 1984).

We have argued that *monolithic strategic intent* is impossible for larger organizations. Multiplicity has to be allowed, as the strategic intent is reinvented throughout a large organization. If diffusion increases with increased multiplicity, without coherence being maintained, the organization is in a state of *Fragmented strategic intents*, in Table 2.

Such fragmentation is recognized as a fact of life in the decision-making literature (see, e.g., Cohen, March & Olsen, 1972). As such, while fragmented intents may exist in many organizations, the notion of strategic intent in the literature (Table 2) does not seem to fit well with such a state.

If coherence is achieved in tandem with increased multiplicity in the diffusion of strategic intent throughout the organization, then as shown in Table 2 there is the state of *Connected strategic intents*. This is a state in which there are multiple subjects holding different intents regarding the future, but there is little or no contradiction between them. Weick and Roberts (1993) theorize that through such connections, ‘heedfulness in action’ may be built between multiple collective minds.

We argue that in large organizations sharing the spirit of Hamel and Prahalad (1994) in the creation of strategic intent, where all organizational levels share the obsession, the most viable model of the diffusion of strategic intent will be the configuration of connected intents.

The social construction of coherence, multiplicity and diffusion

We suggest that Searle’s (1995) theory about the construction of social facts offers further insights into how the three dimensions of strategic intent, namely coherence, multiplicity and diffusion, are socially constructed. Searle (1995) defined constitutive rules which identify particular contexts C where X counts as Y. Searle uses his theory to illustrate how social facts are constructed out of ‘brute physical facts’ in various contexts. For instance, a village wall may be built to shelter against external threats and keep

livestock within. In time, the ‘brute physical’ wall (X) may crumble away, but the social fact of a village border (Y) retains its symbolic meaning in the context (C) of the villagers (Searle, 1995).

In terms of strategic intent, it is possible to create a new social fact out of an already established social fact. An established organizational identity or multiple identities may act as examples of such social construction, and show us through example how diffusion, coherence and multiplicity are constructed. Table 3 shows how in the context of a certain departmental function, organizational identity may count as strategic intent. For instance, in the context of the strategy function of an organization (where strong direction and purpose are valued) a central, distinctive and enduring unitary organizational identity, as well as collective intentionality as in the statement “we always refuse to fund projects which are outside our focus” may count as coherence of strategic intent. Using shared identity as a basis for strategic intent is therefore a relevant way of socially constructing coherence.

However, in the context of the market intelligence function (where there is sensitivity to several market segments, opportunities and threats) the notion of multiple identities may be a more relevant basis for strategic intent. Multiple organizational identities, as well as statements of collective intentionality such as “within our focus we tolerate several distinct types of projects” counts as multiplicity of strategic intent. This is one way in which multiplicity is socially constructed.

The internal communication function is a context where diffusion is socially constructed. Its purpose is one of enabling people and collectives to become connected within the

organization. It seeks to establish links between personal and organizational identities, for instance by communicating engaging statements of strategic intent such as ‘Beat Benz’. When such statements become statements of collective intentionality for individuals, in the manner of “we are ambitious to be the leader in our industry, we seek to ‘Beat Benz’, and I am an ambitious person”, they act as bridges between the individual and the collective. This is one way in which diffusion is socially constructed.

Table 3. The social construction of strategic intent by imposing it on established identity

Departmental Function	Organizational identity used to promote strategic intent	A sample statement of collective intentionality	Key dimension of strategic intent
Strategy	Unitary organizational identity	“we always refuse to fund projects which are outside our focus”	Coherent
Market intelligence	Multiple organizational identities	“we are interested in this market because it is new and different”	Multiple
Internal communication	How personal and organizational identities are linked	“we have an ambition to be the leader in our industry and I am an ambitious person”	Diffused

Discussion and conclusion

In the Introduction, we set ourselves two tasks: determining what strategic intent is and who has it. We have given an account of strategic intent as a set of social constructions, governing future-oriented agency. We have answered the question of who possesses intent by presenting six subjectivity configurations (Table 1). Previous literature on strategic intent, as illustrated in Table 1, has only acknowledged two configurations, the TMT intent and the monolithic intent. We have shown that monolithic intent is rarely a

viable option for an organization due to cognitive and physical limitations as the organizational size increases to exceed that of a psychological group. Monolithic intent is also highly insensitive to considerations of power and resistance in the creation of subjectivities. We have presented the configuration of connected intents, multiple intents made coherent by their interconnection, as a more viable option to discuss a widely diffused intent.

Our contribution can be viewed as a *critical* one, exploring an integrated view of subjectivity of organizational strategy (see Kornberger et al forthcoming; Carter, Clegg, Hogan, & Kornberger 2003) and of organizational identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985). We see the development of a widespread strategic intent as crucial to successful strategy implementation, yet at the same time as a difficult task which invokes multiple organizational identities. Uncritical discussion of organizations as collective minds very easily leads to managerialism; the ‘we’ of a top management team is to be regarded as the only viable ‘we’ in the organization, with no polyphony (Knights & Morgan, 1991; Hazen, 1993; Barry & Elmes, 1997; Vaara, 2002). Strategy is certainly no stranger to managerialism, since it is often presented as the ‘voice of reason’ for which there can be no real alternative, resulting in the naturalization of managerial interests (Shrivastava, 1986; Knights & Morgan, 1991; Whipp, 1996; Lilley, 2001).

The original promise of strategic intent is *practical*, as intent can provide purpose and continuity of goals in an organization adapting to internal and external pressures. We have sought to show that monolithic intent (Figure 1) will simply not work, and that the configuration of connected intents (Figure 3) is the best possible solution of widely

diffused strategic intent in larger organizations.

Suggestions for further research

We suggest two main future directions for this research. The view of strategic intent as a set of social constructions could be enriched by linking it to two related discussions, i.e., discussions concerning organizational institutions and identity.

Authors such as Hamel and Prahalad (1989) as well as Prahalad and Doz (1987) have argued that strategic intent should remain stable during long periods of time. Strategic intent involves “direction, discovery and destiny” (Hamel & Prahalad, 1994). Strategic intent means that a firm will “aim for goals for which one cannot plan.” (Prahalad & Doz, 1987: 52). Burgelman’s (1983) discussion of the transformation of Intel from a memory company to a processor company is also an example of how the established institution of a strategic intent is transformed only through a long, arduous process.

Institutional theory supports such a premise of slow transformation because institutions also change slowly (see, e.g., Scott, 2001). According to Barley and Tolbert (1997), institutions are born out of action through the creation of scripts which are often highly routinized and tacit. Such scripts are altered very slowly. As there have been recent attempts to bridge institutional theory and discourse (Phillips, Lawrence & Hardy, 2005), strategic intents as intraorganizational institutions (Elsbach, 2002) offers a fruitful topic. For example, Phillips, Lawrence & Hardy (2005) have argued that the coherence of a text helps its institutionalisation. This raises the further question of the effects of multiplicity and diffusion on institutionalisation. We would speculate that multiplicity and diffusion

respectively hinder and help institutionalisation.

Strategic intent would seem to be a double-edged sword – on the one hand it needs to be stable enough to act as a ‘guiding beacon’ in the tumultuous adaptive processes emerging both from within the organization and from its environment (Noda & Bower, 1996; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000); yet on the other hand, it should not be rigid enough to drag the organization into its death when radical transformation is called for. In the institutional literature, the ‘fixity of institutions’ is also acknowledged as an open question (Dacin, 1997; Scott, 2001: 109).

The stability of strategic intent can also be maintained by linking the strategic intent with organizational *identity* as we indicated in Table 3. We see our suggested configuration of connected intents, multiple intents made coherent by their interconnection, as having important similarities with the notion of aggregation of multiple identities (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Aggregation of multiple identities occurs when multiple identities are kept separate but are linked together by some schematic framework.

However, an important additional element in our model is that we have given a method by which aggregation of multiple identities can be enacted. Diffusion and multiplicity of strategic intents tells us much about what subjectivity (TMT, several groups or whole organization) claims the right to answer the question: “who we are as an organization”.

What integrates strategic intent with organizational identity is that they are, with a future- and past-orientation respectively, long term and slow to change. This is important because our current models of agency are unable to resolve conflicts between time

orientations. For example, absent from Emirbeyer and Mische's (1998) model of agency is any discussion of conflicts between the dictates of different temporal modes of enactment of agency. A previously held intention, decided as in one's long term interests, may now be forgotten in favour of a short term advantage. This is the "self command problem" (Schelling, 1984), modeled as an interpersonal prisoner's dilemma arising from "weakness of will" (Elster, 1985), which the "planner" representing the firm's long term interests (Thaler & Shefrin, 1981) must attempt to control. Selznick (1957: 143) sees this weakness as an "irresponsible form of leadership" and as "the pursuit of immediate short run advantages in a way inadequately controlled by considerations of principle and ultimate consequences". In developing his institutional theory of organizations, Selznick also referred to the role of personal identity. It is by renouncing their freedom of action to decide on a case-by-case basis and instead committing their future behaviour to some specified principles that individuals and organizations achieve their distinctive identities (Selznick, 1957), a point reiterated by Kogut & Zander (1996).

A further key question to be explored is the preferable *amount* of multiplicity in different organizational contexts, i.e., how much strategic intent can cohere within a specific organizational context? Multiplicity has advantages especially when the ability to appeal to different stakeholders is critical due to resource scarcity or when strategic flexibility is necessary because several scenarios are possible (Pratt and Foreman, 2000). We have argued that the key is to retain coherence between multiple intents. But how much diffuse intent can an organization be expected to handle coherently? What explains differences between organizations? For instance, is it that organizations on the edge of chaos (Brown

& Eisenhardt, 1997) can deal with more multiplicity and less coherence?

For these reasons we suggest that future research should seek to study whether organizations in environments particularly subject to conflicts between short term opportunities and long term advantage derive greater business performance benefit from strategic intent than organizations in environments where these conflicts are not present, and where short term and long term actions are not in conflict.

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