

Title: Future Empirical Research into Strategic Thinking: Does Past Research Provide a Definitive Foundation?

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Summary: This paper considers the literature relating to strategic thinking to assess to what extent that literature can be used as a definitive foundation for future research. It explicitly does not aim to provide a definition of strategic thinking. Rather it aims to establish why an attempt to offer such a definition is misguided. Since perhaps the simplest interpretation of strategic thinking is thinking about strategy, the extent to which strategy can be considered a definitive concept is first considered. The literature relating more specifically to strategic thinking is then considered. It is concluded that strategy cannot be considered a definitive concept because the attributes associated with the concept lack clarity and stability. It is further concluded that strategic thinking cannot be considered a definitive concept since the literature fails to provide clear and stable attributes for the concept, or defines strategic thinking in terms of other concepts that are themselves not definitive.

## **Future Empirical Research into Strategic Thinking: Does Past Research Provide a Definitive Foundation?**

### **Abstract**

This paper considers the literature relating to strategic thinking to assess to what extent that literature can be used as a definitive foundation for future research. It explicitly does not aim to provide a definition of strategic thinking. Rather it aims to establish why an attempt to offer such a definition is misguided. Since perhaps the simplest interpretation of strategic thinking is thinking about strategy, the extent to which strategy can be considered a definitive concept is first considered. The literature relating more specifically to strategic thinking is then considered. It is concluded that strategy cannot be considered a definitive concept because the attributes associated with the concept lack clarity and stability. It is further concluded that strategic thinking cannot be considered a definitive concept since the literature fails to provide clear and stable attributes for the concept or defines strategic thinking in terms of other concepts that are themselves not definitive.

## **Introduction**

Claims for the importance of strategic thinking have been made in the strategy literature for two decades. Porter argued that “The need for strategic thinking has never been greater”(1987b:21) and strategic thinking is still considered to be an important challenge facing executives (Bonn 2001; Zabriskie and Huellmnatel 1991; Zahra and O'Neill 1998). However, there is no agreed or definitive concept of strategic thinking in the literature (Bonn 2001; Heracleous 1998; O'Shannassy 2003) and a relative scarcity of robust empirical studies into strategic thinking in practice (Dickson, Farris et al. 2001; Liedtka 1998b). A keyword search of ABI/INFORM Global Business database confirms the increasing interest in strategic thinking relative to strategic planning. Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the outcome of such a search<sup>1</sup> for the use of the terms in the abstract and title fields respectively. Given this interest and the lack of empirical studies, strategic thinking would appear to be an important topic for future research.

Insert figure 1 about here

Insert figure 2 about here

Past research, and extant knowledge from that research, form part of the preunderstanding that guides decisions about what, where, when and whom to study (Gummesson 2000). One aspect of that preunderstanding is the nature of the concepts in the theoretical explanation of the topic. Blumer's (1940; 1954) notion of concepts in social research as either definitive or sensitising are employed to consider to what extent past research into strategic thinking forms a definitive foundation for future research. In research with an empirical dimension, concepts provide a connection between theoretical explanation and empirical data. Definitive concepts have clear attributes, forming the basis for deductive research; sensitising concepts are vaguer, and are suited to inductive research. Thus, this paper considers to what extent concepts associated with strategic thinking have attributes that are clear and stable, and how well those concepts provide a connection between theoretical explanation and empirical data. Since, in perhaps its simplest interpretation, strategic thinking can be considered as thinking about strategy, the extent to which the concept of strategy is definitive is first considered.

### **To what extent is strategy a definitive concept?**

The modern concept of strategy, as applied to organisations, developed in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, although a notion of strategy has been recorded since ancient times (Bracker 1980). The essential characteristics of modern organisational strategy were derived from studies of large American corporations and described in

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<sup>1</sup> Conducted on 4<sup>th</sup> October 2006

the 1960s. These characteristics included: a long-term rather than short-term perspective; a separation of the strategic from the tactical, operational or administrative; an emphasis on rational processes; a mediating role between the organisation and its environment; an attention to rational allocation of resources; and an emphasis on profit as the primary goal of the organisation (Ansoff 1968; Chandler 1962).

However, since that time, the strategy concept has become less tightly defined and alternative conceptualisations have developed. For example, Bracker (1980) outlines the chronological development of the concept and considers some seventeen definitions of strategy as a basis for suggesting an alternative definition. Unfortunately, attempts to resolve confusion over definitions, by combining previous definitions, often adds to the confusion by adding yet another definition (Camerer 1985). To reduce confusion arising from competing definitions Mintzberg (1987) proposes five complementary and interrelated definitions of strategy, and almost two decades after Bracker, strategy formation is conceived from as many as ten different perspectives (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand et al. 1998). As the study of strategy has proceeded, the number of definitions has increased and rather than decreased.

Multiple, complementary definitions of strategy may be necessary if strategy is conceived as multidimensional and contingent on circumstances (Chaffee 1985; Jenkins and Ambrosini 2002). Different definitions often reflect different research themes deployed to understand strategy phenomenon. Some authors see such diversity as hindering the development of the study of strategy, and have attempted to develop integrative frameworks (Chaffee 1985; Hart 1992; Rajagopalan and Spreitzer 1997). Others consider diversity produces a richer account and gives insights which are valuable to the development of the study of strategy (Mintzberg 1987; Thomas and Pruett 1993).

Conceptual confusion, or conceptual diversity, has not prevented the study of strategy, and fundamental areas of agreement amongst strategy researchers have been suggested (Chaffee 1985; Thomas and Pruett 1993). There appears to be a sufficiently widely accepted conceptualisation of strategy that has sufficient stability to permit it to be studied, discussed and taught, despite a lack of agreement over precise details. To borrow a metaphor from Mintzberg, Ahlstrand et. al. (1998), there is little doubt that the blind men are all feeling the same animal or at least members of the same species.

However, concerns about the assumption of a stable conceptualisation of strategy can be raised because of the different organisational circumstances under which the strategy concept is invoked. These circumstances may relate to whole organisations and include individual businesses (Porter 1980; 1985), organisations with a number of businesses (Porter 1987a), small firms (Ebben and Johnson 2005), international businesses (Yip 1989), and the public sector (Llewellyn and Tappin 2003). Additionally, strategy has lost its connotations of referring to a whole organisation (Hambrick and Fredrickson 2001) and has been appropriated by a number of management disciplines (Barry and Elmes 1997; Lyles 1990). Indeed, the term has found increasing usage not just in management disciplines but in society more widely and is used as a basis for analysing actions in a wide range of contexts (Crow 1989; Knights and Morgan 1990).

An assumption of stability can also be questioned from a temporal perspective. For example, Mintzberg's (1994) critique of strategic planning describes a time when a planning approach was the way in which strategy was both practiced by organisations and conceptualised by researchers. Writing at the same time as Mintzberg, Prahalad and Hamel (1994) argue that both managers and academics doubt the relevance of traditional approaches to strategy, primarily as a result of a number of significant environmental changes, and suggest a re-conceptualisation would have merit. Thus, the object of study, strategy, may change with time, both in terms of how strategy is practised by organisations and conceptualised by researchers.

Changes in the conceptualisation of strategy with time may reflect changing management fashion more than evidence of improvements in organisational effectiveness or attempts to improve organisational effectiveness. To maintain support from stakeholders, managers must engage in rhetoric about managing that has two characteristics (Abrahamson 1996; Barry and Elmes 1997). First, it must be credible by the appearance of rationality in pursuit of organisational goals. Second, it must be appealing by suggesting improvement over previous ways of managing, ideally with an associated characteristic of novelty. Thus, changing conceptualisations of strategy may reflect the changing expectations of what represents rational methods of pursuing organisational goals, and apparent progress in those methods, in the eyes of stakeholders.

Thus, for future research into strategic thinking, the adoption of a definitive conceptualisation of strategy, one that has clear and stable attributes and connects well to empirical data, is problematic for five reasons. First, there are conceptualisations with different characteristics depending on which of a diverse range of organisational circumstances are considered. Second, the clarity of conceptualisations has blurred as a range of management disciplines and wider society has adopted the term. If less precise conceptualisations of strategy are prevalent in organisations, a more precise one may miss important organisational phenomena, but a less precise one may contribute to further blurring of the concept. Third, there are alternative and changing conceptualisations depending on which point in time is considered. These may be attempts to improve organisational effectiveness and may be prompted by organisational dissatisfaction (Mintzberg 1994) or external factors (Prahalad and Hamel 1994). Fourth, any account given by a management practitioner may merely be an attempt at credible and appealing rhetoric. As Mezas and Starbuck (2003) suggest, the use of a terminology by a manager is not necessarily evidence that they understand or employ the concepts involved. Fifth, a given conceptualisation may be a transient one, reflecting a management fashion. The lack of clarity over the concept of strategy has led to notable contributors to the field to ask the fundamental question "What is strategy?" (Porter 1996; Whittington 2001) and to attempts to recover and restate the fundamental features of strategy (Hambrick and Fredrickson 2001).

### **Strategy as practice**

A significant response to what appears to be a continuing difficulty in producing a definitive concept of strategy (Huff 2001) is the recent move to conceptualise strategy as a social practice, with an emphasis on the activities that

people undertake when doing strategy (Whittington 1996). This conceptualisation has led to what has become termed the “strategy as practice” field. That a special edition of the *Journal of Management Studies*, and that the inaugural edition of *European Management Review* were devoted to the topic indicate the significance of this movement. Conceptualising strategy in this way adds two further topics to the existing strategy research agenda concerned with the relationships between strategy and organisational performance (Ketchen, Thomas et al. 1996). First, a concern with the social influences and effects of strategy, and second, how the effectiveness of a manager doing strategy might be improved (Whittington 2004).

However, it is not immediately apparent which activities constitute doing strategy, under what circumstances, and the details of those activities, particularly at the micro level of managerial activity (Johnson, Melin et al. 2003). Even what constitutes micro in this context is not clear (Wilson and Jarzabkowski 2004). Doing strategy might involve various activities, including engaging in organisational routines, attending meetings, preparing reports, making presentations, attending away-days, gathering data, analysing data and completing forms; although these visible behaviours might only be the manifestation of practice rather than practice itself (Chia 2004). Further, doing strategy may involve different types of activities in different parts of an organisation. For example, more inductive activities at the periphery of the organisation, i.e. subsidiaries or business units, and more deductive activities at the centre, i.e. corporate headquarters (Regnér 2003). If strategy is conceptualised as a social practice occurring in an organisational field (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) then the scope of research is widened to include activities occurring within an organisation, outside an organisation, and across organisational boundaries. If, as Whittington (2006:621) suggests, doing strategy may involve activities as diverse as “formal board meetings” and “informal conversations”, then the strategy researcher is presented with a significant challenge in identifying the relevant activities on which to focus.

Similarly, when adopting a strategy as practice conceptualisation, what is not immediately apparent is who is, or is not, involved in doing strategy. For example, in a study of strategy practices in three UK universities, Jarzabkowski (2003) justifies a focus on the top management team by arguing that they are key because of hierarchy, power and control of resources, but acknowledges that they are not the only strategic actors. Thus, within a single organisation, strategic actors may include not only the senior management team but also middle managers, strategic planners and other members of the organisation (Balogun, Huff et al. 2003; Whittington 2006). Taking the organisational field perspective, strategic actors can be potentially drawn from that organisational field. By definition, the organisational field will contain not just a single organisation but also similar organisations, consultancy firms, academic institutions, financial institutions, management media, management gurus, state institutions and pressure groups (Hendry 2000; Whittington, Jarzabkowski et al. 2003). Conceptualising strategy as a social practice, rather than a phenomenon associated with a single organisation, increases the potential number of strategic actors and hence presents a significant challenge in identifying the relevant actors on which to focus.

In addition, how the micro level activities of doing strategy influence more macro level phenomena, both organisational and supra-organisational, and how these macro level phenomena are interpreted or constructed at the individual level are

significant research questions (Wilson and Jarzabkowski 2004). Of particular interest is the relationship between managerial activities and strategic outcomes, since, while numerous factors may influence organisational and institutional practices, it is reasonable to suggest that those activities that produce effective strategic outcomes are likely to exert influence that is more significant. However, while managers may be involved in activities, the extent to which those activities impact on strategic outcomes, what those outcomes are, and how that influence comes about, has been little researched (Johnson, Melin et al. 2003). This represents a significant research challenge, since the link between managerial activities and organisational level outcomes will be obscured by environmental, intermediating and moderating factors, not least of which are rationalisation and dubious attribution of success and failure by managers (Knights and Morgan 1990; Wagner and Gooding 1997). Further, while some outcomes may be intended, in the sense that pursuit of these outcomes act as a guide to managerial activity, other outcomes may be emergent, in the sense that they are the unanticipated consequences of managerial activity. Indeed, the relationships between managerial intentions, managerial activities and organisational outcomes may be so complex as to be essentially unknowable in the sense of establishing patterns of cause and effect (Stacey 1993; 1995). Thus, while the study of managers doing strategy is of greater value if the detail of such study is understood in its wider context (Balogun, Huff et al. 2003; Knights 1992) how these activities relate to that wider context has been little researched and is poorly understood.

Thus, whilst conceptualising strategy as a social practice promises a valuable contribution to the study of strategy, for example by enabling the integration of alternative perspectives on strategic decision making (Hendry 2000) or circumventing the well established process – content divide in the subject (Johnson, Melin et al. 2003; Ketchen, Thomas et al. 1996) it also presents three significant research challenges. First, if activities as diverse as “formal board meetings” and “informal conversations” (Whittington 2006:621), and numerous other activities, across an organisational field, constitute doing strategy, then the researcher is faced with difficult decisions regarding which activities to study, and may finish up studying management in some general sense rather than strategy in particular. Second, if those involved in doing strategy (strategists, strategy practitioners or strategic actors depending on the terminology used) may be drawn from various parts of an organisation, and from the wider organisational field, then the researcher is faced with difficult decisions regarding whom to study other than all organization actors, which is clearly impractical. Presented with the impossibility of studying every activity performed by every member of an organisational field, the researcher might be guided by prioritising those that are associated with strategic outcomes. This leads to the third challenge. The difficulty in establishing an association between the activities of doing strategy and strategic outcomes, which themselves are not clearly defined. It may be possible for strategic actors to engage in the activities of doing strategy and produce no outcomes or outcomes that are not strategic. Associations that are established might be, to some extent, an artefact of choices made by the researcher about which people and activities to study. In choosing which activities to study, a researcher has already presumed, to some extent, which activities will influence strategic outcomes. Clearly, a researcher will not find associations between strategic outcomes and those activities they chose not to study. In essence, the challenges are: whom do I study; doing what activities; and how do I know which are of strategic significance? However, there is to some extent a general acceptance that, in terms of influencing

strategic outcomes, some organisational actors are more significant than others (for example the Chief Executive), and some activities are more significant than others (for example a declared change in organisational strategy). Thus, the strategy as practice perspective, although valuable, does not provide a conceptualisation of strategy that is definitive.

A notion that might provide a framework for answering these research challenges is that of the strategic (or strategising) episode. A strategic episode has been taken to mean a reflexive opportunity during which routine processes and structures are suspended, for example during a strategy workshop (Hendry and Seidl 2003). Such episodes have a structure of three phases. The first phase is initiation, during which the established hierarchy and normal communication routines are suspended. Second, conduct of the episode, during which a sequence of communications is undertaken and structured in some non-typical way. Finally, termination, determined by the achievement of a goal or by time-limitation, at which point normal routines are reinstated. Clearly, this assumes that there are essentially two types of organisational routines. The strategic routines present in strategic episodes, which involve questioning and reflecting on organisational routines, are labelled as reflexive. The ongoing operational routines by which the continuity of the organisation is maintained are labelled as non-reflexive. While this concept of a strategic episode may be a useful framework for the study of circumscribed events, such as workshops, its wider application to the study of strategy is problematic. First, it is not clear what distinguishes a strategic episode from a different type of episode. For example, it is not clear what would categorise some “weekly pub lunches.” (Hendry and Seidl 2003:188) as strategic episodes and others as not. Second, the dichotomy between operational routines and strategic routines may be unrealistic, particularly empirically, and the classification problematic. A monthly management meeting may contain communications undertaken in a non-typical way (tabling reports, making presentations, etc) and contain communications that are non-reflexive (e.g. how much have we manufactured this month?) and reflexive (e.g. do we have the correct type of manufacturing equipment?). Hence, it would not be clear whether to classify the meeting as part of the operational management of the organisation or a strategic episode. Third, the dichotomy between operational routines and strategic routines potentially underestimates the role that operational routines play in strategy (Eden and Ackermann 2000).

An alternative conceptualisation of a strategic episode is suggested by Maitlis and Lawrence (2003) who argue that the mobilisation of organizational politics and discourse, towards the production of a specific strategic object, signify a strategic episode. Four distinct, but interrelated, and not necessarily sequential, stages are proposed: engaging with and taking positions on the issue; defining the concept; assigning responsibility and accountability; and constructing the strategic object. Although the authors develop their concept of a strategic episode from a longitudinal field study of a British symphony orchestra, their criteria for circumscribing a strategic episode are not clear. One of these criteria relates to what counts as a strategic object. While an artistic strategy for the orchestra is classed a strategic object, a strategic framework and a view of “... where the Orchestra should be in the medium term” (Maitlis and Lawrence 2003:120) are not; what is not clear is by what criteria the distinction is made. A second criterion relates to identifying when one strategic episode ends and another one begins. In this paper, the strategic episode

concerns the development of an artistic strategy over a period of approximately two years. However, what is not clear is which, if any, of the away-days and meetings over that period could also be classified as strategic episodes, and again, by what criteria the distinction is made.

Thus, while the concept of a strategic episode may provide a useful focus for studying the relationships between those doing strategy, the activities they undertake and strategic outcomes, the empirical application of the concept may prove difficult. In particular, there are difficulties in circumscribing a strategic episode and developing criteria to make distinctions between strategic episodes and other phenomena. The extent of this difficulty is perhaps illustrated by the application of the concept of an episode by Eden and Huxham (2001) in their research into organisational collaboration. Despite having a relatively specific focus for the research and a more precise definition of an episode than is the case for strategic episodes, they find that circumscribing an episode is still difficult. The situation is perhaps analogous to organisational decision making where, what appears to be a relatively straightforward concept, a decision, is, after three decades of research, still contested (Cohen, March et al. 1972; Hendry 2000; Langley, Mintzberg et al. 1995; Laroche 1995). Hence, the concept of a strategic episode is perhaps more appropriate where there is an explicit consideration of an issue and less appropriate where studying strategy based on habitual routines and templates (Mintzberg and Waters 1985; Quinn 1978; Wilson and Jarzabkowski 2004).

In summary, for future research into strategic thinking, the classification of strategy as a definitive concept would appear to be inappropriate since it lacks the necessary clarity, stability and connection to empirical data. The attributes associated with the strategy concept differ with different parts of an organisation and with different types of organisations. Attributes also change with time, either because of attempts to improve organisational effectiveness or management fashion. The connection to empirical data is also uncertain because of the potential obfuscating role of managerial rhetoric and the risk of imposing a more precise definition of the concept than is prevalent in organisations, so called “procrustean science” (Gummesson 2000). More recent developments in a conceptualisation of strategy as practice are, as yet, indefinite about what activities constitutes doing strategy, who is involved in doing strategy, the relationship to strategic outcomes, and the precise nature of relevant empirical data. However, these comments refer to the topic of strategy and focusing more narrowly on strategic thinking may provide concepts that are more definitive.

### **To what extent is strategic thinking a definitive concept?**

Certainly, for some authors the term ‘strategic thinking’ is, apparently, unproblematic and they do not define the term, presumably assuming the reader has a clear understanding. For example the concept of strategic thinking has been invoked, without any definition, in relation to: the application of force-field analysis for problem solving (Ajmal 1985); as an essential way to improve business competitiveness (Altier 1991); recommending a Business and Information Analysis Function (Millett and Leppanen 1991); applying decision modelling techniques (Reagan-Circincione, Schuman et al. 1991); a two year project to make more effective

use of information systems (Finlay and Marples 1998); external drivers of change (Aggarwal 1999); studying the interpretation of industry recipes (Ostergren and Huemer 1999); recommending quantitative guidelines to simplify management practice (West and Wolek 1999); or drawing conclusions about the skills needs of managers (Watson and McCracken 2002).

Other authors imply what the term strategic thinking means rather than providing an explicit definition. In some instances, this is by stating what strategic thinking is not rather than what it is. While defining a concept in terms of what it is not is an improvement over not defining it at all, it is not as useful as defining a concept as what it is. For example strategic thinking is not: business planning (Aggarwal 1999); strategic planning (Harari 1995); operational thinking (Bates and Dillard Jr 1993); mechanistic (Howard 1989); nor routine thinking (Schoemaker 1995). In other instances, the implication appears to be that strategic thinking is thinking about strategy, usually associated with a particular approach to strategy. For example: an approach to strategy based on analysis, planning and implementation (Mason 1986); finding areas for business growth by understanding customers, markets and competitors (Millett 1988); coming up with long-term objectives by a three stage process involving thinking about mission, analysis and direction (Morissey 1990); applying Sun Tzu's ideas of military strategy to contemporary business (Chen 1994; Low and Tan 1995); thinking about purpose, uniqueness and values (Harari 1995); thinking about scenarios (Schoemaker 1995); in applying strategic management tools to international development (Goldsmith 1996); or creating the future (Franklin 2001).

Strategic thinking is also described in terms of its relationship to strategic planning, but this relationship is open to different interpretations (Heracleous 1998; Wilson 1994; 1998). In one expression of the relationship, strategic planning is of primary importance, and the role of strategic thinking is to *inform and improve a strategic planning process* (Bates and Dillard Jr 1993; Easterby-Smith and Davies 1983; Steiner, Kunin et al. 1983; Zabriskie and Huellmnatel 1991). In a different expression of the relationship, strategic thinking is of primary importance (Bonn 2001) and is *supported by strategic planning*, either by providing data for strategic thinking (Mintzberg 1994) or by providing the opportunities for strategic thinking (Porter 1987b). More recent interpretations of the relationship propose a balanced reciprocal relationship between strategic planning and strategic thinking, in which both *contribute to strategic management* (Graetz 2002; Heracleous 1998; Liedtka 1998a; O'Shannassy 2003).

A more explicit conceptualisation of strategic thinking is presented where strategic thinking is considered to be *thinking with a particular structure*. Weber (1984) discusses strategic thinking in relation to *uncertainty about objectives and actions to meet those objectives*. He presents a structure for thinking involving assessment of the situation, analysis of the problem and synthesis of considerations about how to solve the problem. Eden (1990) describes a Strategic Options Development and Analysis project that is structured in terms of *thinking about issues, goals, and actions*. Klayman and Schoemaker (1993) propose strategic thinking as a way of *thinking about the future that involves a knowledge base, a problem representation, and linkages between these two*.

The most common way of conceptualising strategic thinking in the literature is as thinking that has particular characteristics. Strategic thinking has been associated with characteristics that could be broadly classified as *analytic* (O'Shannassy 2003; Stumpf 1989), with characteristics that could be broadly classified as *creative* (Howard 1989; Mintzberg 1994; Nadler 1994; Pellegrino and Carbo 2001) and with both analytic and creative characteristics (Hussey 2001; Millett 1988; O'Shannassy 2003; Porter 1987b; Weber 1984). It has also been associated with characteristics that could be broadly classified as *systemic* (Reagan-Circincione, Schuman et al. 1991) including: *reflecting on taken for granted assumptions* (Eden 1990); double loop learning involving *challenging existing assumptions* (Heracleous 1998); *understanding complex positive and negative feedback processes* that generate higher order effects (Dickson, Farris et al. 2001); and the *meta-analysis of rationalities* used in strategic decision making (Singer 1996; 1997). A summary of characteristics associated with strategic thinking and citing authors is shown in Table 1.

Insert table 1 about here

The literature that offers no definition or implies a definition by describing an approach to strategy cannot be described as providing a definitive foundation for future research into strategic thinking. Similarly, to adopt a definition of strategic thinking implied by a particular approach to strategy requires acceptance of that approach, and as discussed above the conceptualisation of strategy itself is not definitive. One approach to overcoming the lack of an agreed or definitive conceptualisation of strategic thinking would be to give precedence to certain literature based on justified criteria. One criterion for precedence might be how widely cited the literature is by academic sources, essentially privileging academic conceptualisations. However, the concepts in published academic literature may be highly abstract, in contrast to the concrete world which is to be studied (Mezias and Starbuck 2003) and hence it may be difficult to connect theory to empirical data. Alternatively, literature from practitioner-oriented journals might be given precedence on the basis that it would connect better to the world of practice, essentially privileging practitioner conceptualisations. However, the research methodologies employed in practitioner-oriented literature are rarely fully described and so may not be robust, which calls into question the reliability and validity of what is published. A final criterion might be how frequently a particular conceptualisation occurs in the literature, indicating its influence. The most frequent conceptualisation of strategic thinking in the literature is as a way of thinking with certain characteristics and hence warrants further consideration.

Giving precedence to literature that defines strategic thinking in terms of thinking with particular characteristics produces a tighter conceptualisation, but not one that could be described as definitive in Blumer's (1940; 1954) terms. Table 1 contains some twenty characteristics, each cited by differing numbers of authors, from which a definition of strategic thinking could be derived. There are over one million possible combinations of these characteristics. What is not evident is on what criteria to include or exclude specific characteristics from a definition of strategic thinking. An instinctive response to include the most frequently cited characteristics still requires a justification of how frequently a characteristic needs to be cited in order to be included. An indication of the difficulty in justifying certain characteristics as

central to strategic thinking is provided by Figure 3, which maps the connections between the different characteristics in Table 1.

Insert figure 3 about here

Perhaps more importantly, using characteristics to define strategic thinking does not necessarily make the concept more definitive. Labels attached to characteristics such as creative, synthetic, holistic or intuitive do not represent definitive concepts themselves. Thus, in using these labels, the indefinite concept of strategic thinking is defined in terms of a number of other indefinite concepts. Further, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the same label for a characteristic, used by different authors, has the same meaning because there is a doubtful connection to empirical data.

This doubtful connection to empirical data is illustrated by the deficiencies in published empirical research into strategic thinking in practice. For example, Linkow (1999) proposes a set of characteristics for strategic thinking from a study of twenty gifted strategic thinkers, but provides few methodological details. Attempts to obtain further details by contacting the author have proved unsuccessful. Crouch and Basch (1997) apply content analysis to the journals of managers to identify what the managers thought about when thinking about strategic purpose, but the managers were MBA students involved in a management simulation rather than involved in management practice. Ostergren and Huemer (1999) present a case study of three organisations, and analyse data from semi-structured interviews to show how managers' thinking changed in response to internationalisation, but they do not provide a definition of strategic thinking. Thus, there is a relative scarcity of robust empirical studies into strategic thinking in practice (Dickson, Farris et al. 2001; Liedtka 1998b).

A number of empirical studies into managerial cognition are more robust and could lay claim to be research into strategic thinking. For example, studies into: managerial cognition regarding competitive conditions in an industry (Porac, Thomas et al. 1989); managerial cognition relating to strategic groups (Reger and Huff 1993); the relationship between the cognitive complexity of Chief Executive Officers and the scope of the organisation (Calori, Johnson et al. 1994); the relationship between managerial cognition and organisational performance (Jenkins and Johnson 1997); and changes in cognition in relation to environmental changes (Hodgkinson 1997) would all intuitively appear to concern strategic thinking. However, to accept these studies as research into strategic thinking would require the adoption of a conceptualisation of strategy, and as discussed previously, it is inappropriate to classify strategy as a definitive concept. Hence, the significant research into managerial and organisational cognition is of questionable value in helping to develop a definitive conceptualisation of strategic thinking.

## **Conclusion**

Strategic thinking would appear to be a topic of interest and importance, and hence worthy of future research. It is appropriate that future research into strategic thinking assess the foundation provided by past research and the resulting extant

knowledge. By employing Blumer's (1940; 1954) notion of definitive and sensitising concepts this paper has attempted to assess that foundation. In particular, to what extent relevant concepts are definitive, that is, connect well to empirical data and have attributes that are clear and stable.

Since perhaps the simplest interpretation of strategic thinking is thinking about strategy, if the concept of strategy was definitive then that might provide a definitive foundation for future research into strategic thinking. However, the classification of strategy as a definitive concept would appear to be inappropriate since it lacks the necessary clarity, stability and connection to empirical data. The attributes associated with the strategy concept differ with different parts of an organisation and with different types of organisations. Attributes also change with time, either because of attempts to improve organisational effectiveness or management fashion. The connection to empirical data is also uncertain because of the potential obfuscating role of managerial rhetoric and the risk of imposing a more precise definition of the concept than is prevalent in organisations, so called "procrustean science" (Gummesson 2000). More recent developments in a conceptualisation of strategy as practice are, as yet, indefinite about what activities constitutes doing strategy, who is involved in doing strategy, the relationship to strategic outcomes, and the precise nature of relevant empirical data.

The literature relating more specifically to strategic thinking also fails to provide a definitive foundation for future research. Portions of this literature fail to define strategic thinking, imply a definition or define strategic thinking in relation to strategic planning. Clearly, these portions of the literature do not provide the clear and stable attributes necessary for a definitive concept. A substantial portion of the literature defines strategic thinking in terms of associated characteristics. However, there is little consistency between authors regarding how many characteristics and which characteristics are included in the conceptualisation of strategic thinking. Further, the characteristics referred to in the literature are themselves not definitive and are essentially labels that lack a connection to empirical data.

Given there is an established body of knowledge concerning strategy, but that this is not definitive with regard to strategic thinking, then neither highly deductive theory testing, nor highly inductive theory generation would appear appropriate directions for future research. Rather, future research is likely to be more worthwhile by developing theory via an ongoing process of juxtaposing the empirical and conceptual worlds (Dubois and Gadde 2002) and hence gaining insight from data without neglecting previous research (Denis, Lamothe et al. 2001).

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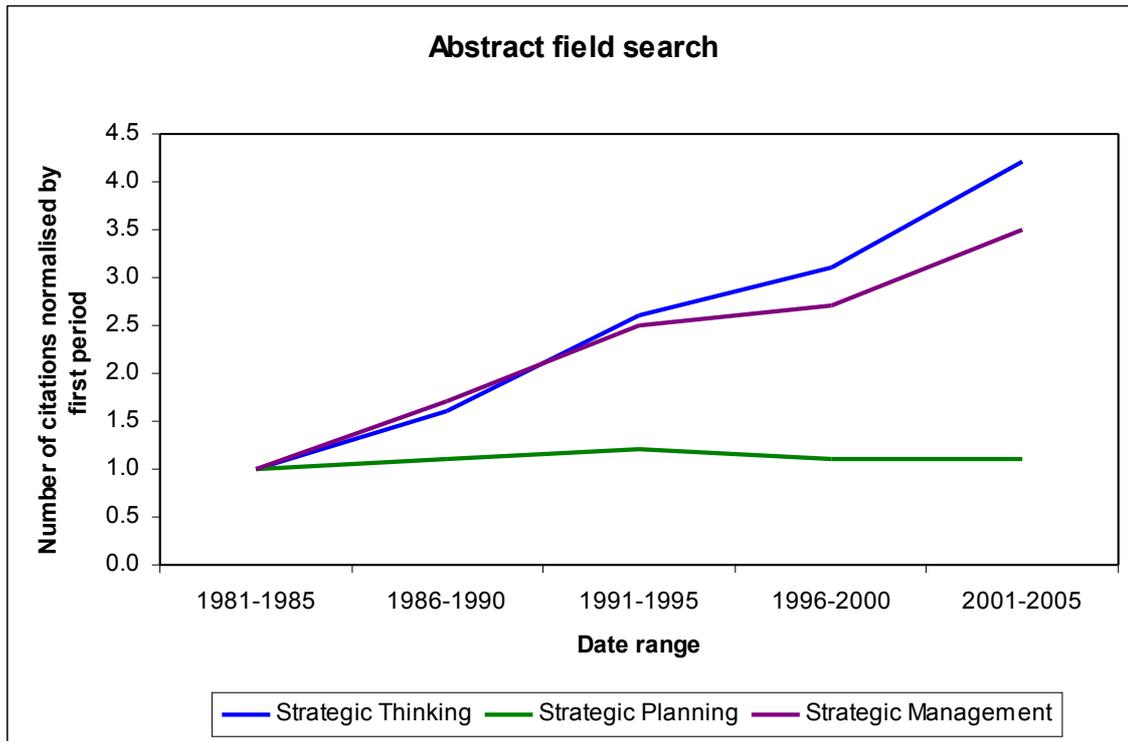
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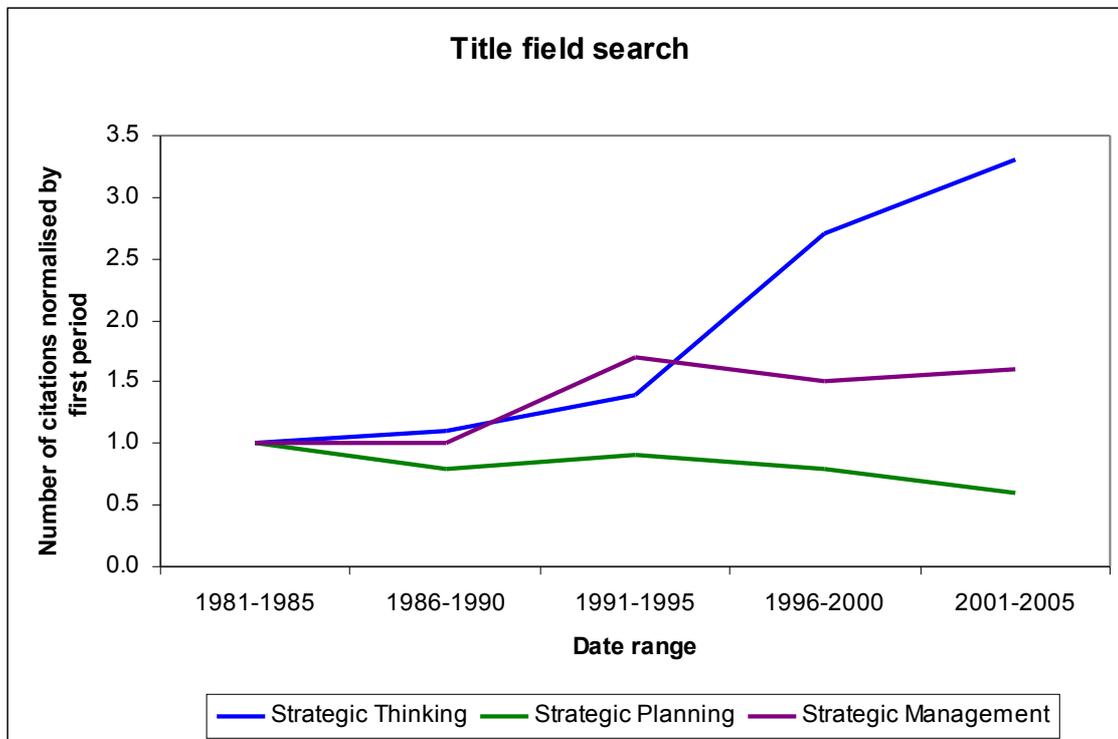
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**Figure 1 Normalised results for abstract field search**



**Figure 1 Normalised results for title field search**



**Table 1 Characteristics of strategic thinking and citing authors**

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Citing Authors</b>	<b>Number of Citations</b>
Creative	(Bates and Dillard Jr 1993; Bonn 2001; 2005; Goldsmith 1996; Graetz 2002; Heracleous 1998; Liedtka 1998a; Mintzberg 1994; O'Shannassy 2003)	9
Vision of the future	(Bonn 2001; 2005; Howard 1989; Liedtka 1998a; Linkow 1999; Mintzberg 1994; Stumpf 1989)	7
Holistic	(Bonn 2001; Liedtka 1998a; Linkow 1999; Mintzberg 1994; Singer 1996; 1997; Steiner, Kunin et al. 1983)	7
Complex or systems thinking	(Bonn 2001; 2005; Dickson, Farris et al. 2001; Liedtka 1998a; Linkow 1999; Reagan-Circincione, Schuman et al. 1991; Stumpf 1989)	7
Longer time perspective	(Easterby-Smith and Davies 1983; Howard 1989; Reagan-Circincione, Schuman et al. 1991; Steiner, Kunin et al. 1983; Stumpf 1989)	5
Questioning taken for granted assumptions	(Bonn 2001; Eden 1990; Heracleous 1998; Howard 1989; Linkow 1999)	5
Divergent	(Goldsmith 1996; Graetz 2002; Heracleous 1998; O'Shannassy 2003)	4
Synthetic	(Graetz 2002; Heracleous 1998; Mintzberg 1994; O'Shannassy 2003)	4
Broader context	(Bonn 2001; Easterby-Smith and Davies 1983; Goldsmith 1996)	3
Intuitive	(Bates and Dillard Jr 1993; Graetz 2002; Mintzberg 1994)	3
Connecting past, present and future	(Liedtka 1998a; Linkow 1999; O'Shannassy 2003)	3
Rational and analytical	(Linkow 1999; O'Shannassy 2003; Stumpf 1989)	3
Problem solving	(Bonn 2005; O'Shannassy 2003; Stumpf 1989)	3

Intent focussed	(Liedtka 1998a; Steiner, Kunin et al. 1983)	2
Abstract or conceptual	(Bates and Dillard Jr 1993; Stumpf 1989)	2
Tolerant of risk or ambiguity	(Bates and Dillard Jr 1993; Stumpf 1989)	2
Curious, experimental or exploratory	(Howard 1989; Liedtka 1998a)	2
Active in shaping circumstances	(Easterby-Smith and Davies 1983)	1
Focusing on most significant forces	(Steiner, Kunin et al. 1983)	1
Involving values	(Linkow 1999)	1

**Figure 3 Mapping of characteristics of strategic thinking from Table 1**

