

# **STRATEGISING IN AND THROUGH MICRO-PRACTICES AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS: A STRUCTURATIONIST PERSPECTIVE**

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The structurationist perspective offers a pertinent avenue of reflection for renewing knowledge in strategy. By considering strategy as a structure of social activity, the structurationist perspective provides an understanding of how strategy, through the use of rules and resources, is produced and reproduced in the interactions of knowledgeable and reflexive agents. To illustrate this point of view, I present two episodes that demonstrate how ties with clientele are transformed in daily life in a top-of-the-line clothing company undergoing reorganisation. Analysis of these episodes highlights three micro-practices of structuration of strategy: translating the orientation, disciplining the client, and justifying the change. The analysis also demonstrates that strategic activity is, by overcoding, embedded in contexts such as industry and society. The paper ends by outlining the elements of a structurationist perspective of strategising.

Strategic management is mainly interested in macro-level issues related to formulating and implementing strategic plans, thus bypassing a set of processes and organisational practices that are also at the centre of strategic activity. Since the early 1990s however, more and more authors have been trying to describe what "strategising" is by looking more closely at the micro-dynamics, routines, and conversations through which strategies are put into action. The challenge facing researchers who adopt this focus is how to understand the connections between what agents do in their everyday practices and the institutional contexts in which they find themselves. The structurationist perspective can provide a pertinent avenue of reflection regarding this issue.

The theory of structuration proposes an ontology of social structures to examine how strategies are formed in day-to-day life by looking at the production and reproduction of the different contexts of action that shape an enterprise. By considering strategy as a specific structure of social activity, the structurationist perspective provides an understanding of how strategy, through the use of rules and resources, is produced and reproduced in the

interactions of knowledgeable and reflexive agents. In fact, a social structurationist perspective of strategy consists of examining how strategy as a recursive process is constituted in and through daily organisational life and, reciprocally, how strategy is constituted structurally.

This article is based on the idea that the structurationist perspective brings new light to understanding what "strategising" means in daily organisational life. The structurationist perspective is used to demonstrate how this type of activity is embedded in contexts such as industry and society. First, the paper highlights some misleading conceptions on which most knowledge in strategy is based. Second, the theory of structuration is presented in order to set out the premises of a structurationist perspective of strategy. Third, this perspective is illustrated by drawing on ethnographic data. Two episodes of everyday organisational life show how ties with clientele are structured day-to-day in a company that is undergoing a major strategic reorientation. Fourth, analysing these episodes reveals how the actors strategise through micro-practices and social contexts in daily organisational life. Finally, the paper ends by outlining the elements of a structurationist model of strategising.

## **MISCONCEPTIONS IN STRATEGY**

Until now, most approaches in strategy have been based on a reductive conception of the individual and a reified conception of the links that unite the enterprise and its environment. First, the individual is generally envisaged as a top manager who is part of the organisation's dominant coalition. This is a person whose action depends on his or her rational and cognitive capacities. Moreover, the goal of much of the knowledge about strategy is to understand the

behaviour of the enterprise in a given environment. Consequently, the enterprise and the environment are conceptually represented as two distinct, autonomous entities, as if they were themselves agents acting independently of the individuals who compose them. Let us examine these conceptions more closely.

The reductive character of knowledge in strategy is partly due to its being centred on the action of top managers. In both rational and processual approaches, top managers are portrayed as treating individuals who are not part of the dominant coalition as resources, like the enterprise's financial and material resources. The reductive character of knowledge in strategy is also related to the fact that managerial behaviour is principally defined according to the manager's cognitive capacities. Knowledge in strategy implicitly postulates that the formation of strategies results from the more-or-less rational action of top managers who, with the help of statistical and financial information, evaluate the constraints and possibilities offered by the market and take measures to adapt the organisational structures to them. This conception removes the relational or social character of action and reinforces the image of a manager as an omnipotent, all-powerful being (Scherer, 1998).

Such conceptions are reductive in the measure that they mainly focus on the cognitive dimension of the strategist's action. Managers do not behave only according to an abstract rationality--they act, first and foremost, as social agents who are fulfilling their duties to the best of their knowledge and potential (Cunliffe, 2001; Hendry, 2000). Managerial action is not only of a rational order, it is the result of social agents putting into practice what they know and what they are (Whittington, 1996, 2002). These conceptions are also reductive to the extent that they consider the formation of strategies to be solely the result of managerial action. This does not take into account the actions of persons who are not at the top of the

enterprise, but who put strategic decisions into action in daily life and contribute to the success or failure of implementing strategies. We must look beyond explanations that define strategy as a plan, recipe, or configuration to see how strategy formation is empirically based in the concrete actions of managers, but also of all the people who make up an enterprise (Westley, 1990).

Concerning the reified character of knowledge in strategy, this is related to the fact that this knowledge implicitly postulates a theoretical separation between an enterprise and its environment. This conceptual operation makes it possible to represent the formation of strategies as the result of the behaviour of two distinct, autonomous entities. On one hand, the formation of strategies is conceptualised as a disembodied process that is legitimised in the name of the enterprise as a sacrosanct entity whose interests are superior to those of the individuals who make it up. On the other hand, the environment is represented as a fictitious person whose behaviours and characteristics are defined according to the preconceptions of practitioners and researchers. This reified vision of the enterprise and the environment helps to facilitate managerial action. It provides a reference schema with which to simplify the complex reality of these two universes. Moreover, managers can use it to justify their actions as being the result of the enterprise's or the environment's behaviour and not the result of their own decisions. Some authors go further and consider strategic discourse to be one that creates effects of truth and provides security for action (Morgan & Knights, 1991; Knights & Morgan, 1991; Knights, 1992; Kerfoot & Knights, 1993, 1996).

Although the strategic behaviour of the enterprise in a sector of activity can be deduced *a posteriori*, the people making up this enterprise are the ones who put the strategy into action every day (Avenier, 1997). Moreover, managers, in practice, do not encounter the

environment of their enterprise. It does not exist as a distinct and autonomous entity. Day after day, they interact with a large number of individuals of whom some are clients and others are part of the enterprise's different networks (suppliers, members of diverse communities, government representatives, etc.). It is in these everyday encounters that members of an enterprise, regardless of their level in the organisation, strategise or contribute to the formation of the links with the environment.

The reductive conception of the individual and the reified conception of links between the enterprise and its environment are at the centre of the knowledge in strategy that explains the "macro" dimension of their formation. By being limited to this dimension, most knowledge in strategy contributes to reproducing the modernist ideal of the managerial project based on the illusion of certainty and stability, as though everything could be explained with a schema of cause and effect (Franklin, 1998). Although very useful for predicting action in a relatively certain world, this type of explanation does not make it easy to understand action in a world that is turbulent and complex. Here it is less about highlighting regularities that are deduced *a posteriori* than about understanding the practical and constructed character of strategic activity. If implementing flexible managerial modes and increasing added value through quality and participation are desired, then, to be credible, the managerial project and its supporting knowledge must be based on conceptions that take the action of all the individuals into account.

Since the mid-1990s, several works have tried to provide an alternative vision of how strategies take shape in enterprises (Barry & Elmes, 1997; Ford & Ford, 1995; Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1996; Mounoud et al., 2001; Van der Heijden, 1997, etc.). Far from forming a new school or a homogeneous current in strategy, these works are anchored in a similar space

of problems and questionings centred on analysing discourses, routines, and conversations through which strategies are put into action. Despite extreme differences between them, these writings have a common interest in how agents participate in the strategic activity of their enterprise. Although contributing to the emergence of a new current in strategy, these works are confronted with the problem of "micro" approaches, which make it difficult to introduce the context in which the actions being examined take place. In this regard, a perspective that uses the social structuration of strategy offers pertinent avenues for reflection.

## **STRUCTURATION THEORY AND STRATEGY**

Anthony Giddens is without a doubt one of the most prolific and influential authors in social sciences today. The theory of structuration was born of this author's will to go beyond the modernist project of constructing knowledge in the social sciences and to become a part of a fundamental debate on the conceptualisation of links between social structures and action. The primary purpose behind the idea of structuration is that the analyst of social practices be able to apprehend structures from the angle of movement--their historicity--taking into account the way that they are constituted at a specific time and place. In this spirit, the theory of structuration proposes a set of notions that renew the definition of agent and social structure as well as how they are positioned in relation to each other.

Some authors have already tried using the theory of structuration to renew knowledge in strategy (Sarason, 1995; Kimberly & Bouchiki, 1995; Sydow & Winderler, 1998; Wâcheux, 1999). Thus far, these works have contributed to introducing a constructivist position to the representation of strategy. Nevertheless, the authors continue to focus on the action of

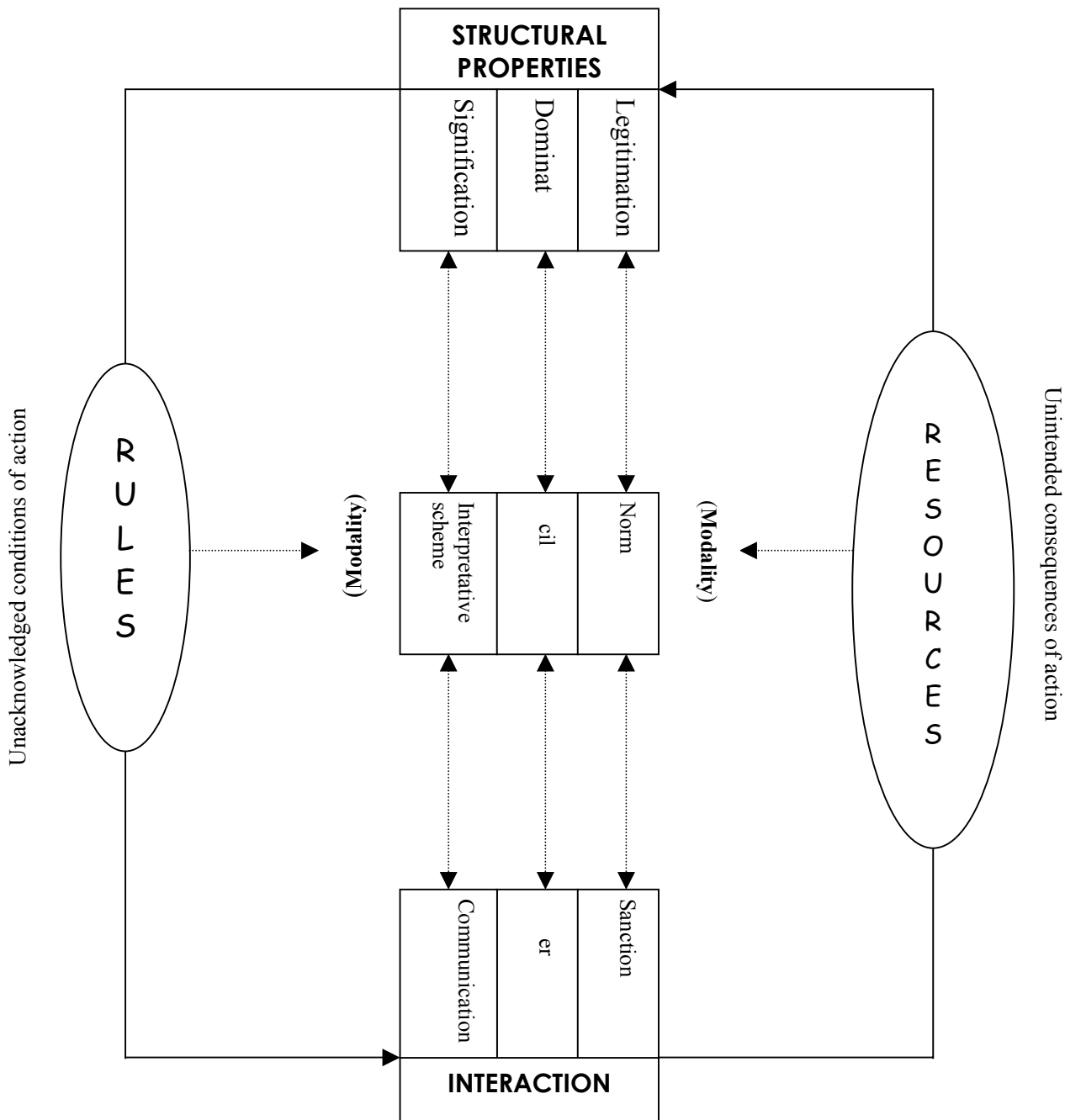
managers and limit analysis of their practices to the organisational context. However, authors who use structuration theory in the field of strategy, as in administrative sciences, need to recognise the capacity of action of all agents and inscribe the practices they are trying to understand in the social logics that transcend the organisational arena in which they occur (Rouleau,1997). These two conditions are fundamental in order to respect the essence of structuration theory

**The Theory of Structuration.** Attempting to reconcile different theoretical worlds in social sciences, the goal of structuration theory is to explain how structures are constituted through action, and reciprocally, how action is structurally constituted. The principal elements of the theory of structuration concern the agents, the structures, and the links that unite them (Diagram 1).

According to Giddens (1984), agents are knowledgeable and reflexive. The actors' knowledgeability corresponds to what they know, formally or informally, in regard to the circumstances of their action or that of others. This competence is expressed in words through the discursive consciousness or in routines through the practical consciousness. Moreover, actors are capable agents who reflexively monitor their action. In other words, they are able to observe and understand what they are doing while they do it. They can theorise about their action and that of others. Beyond the knowledge and reflexive control that every individual exercises in the ordinary course of action, the structuration of social activity is limited by the unconscious motivations of agents, by the unacknowledged conditions of action, and by the unintended consequences of action. Thus, an agent's action can be caught in complex action sequences that belong to other spatio-temporal systems so that the action accomplished is out of the agent's control, revealing the complex interweaving of social systems.

Diagram 1

*ELEMENTS OF STRUCTURATION THEORY*





Structuration theory is constructed around the notion of duality of structure. According to Giddens (1984), social structures both enable and constrain. They are constituted by agents at the same time that the action of the agents is constrained by structures. To account for this dualistic dimension of action, Giddens uses a theoretical distinction between structures and social systems. As relations of transformation, structures are sets of recursively organised rules and resources--properties of communities and collectivities--drawn on by individuals and reconstituted in the course of their action. In a way, they are traces of memory directing the conduct of knowledgeable and reflexive agents. As relations reproduced by the agents, social systems are sets of regularised practices that are situated in time and space and that exhibit different structural properties. The structures and systems do not exist outside the agents; they thus exist only in the instantiation of practices, being both the medium and the result of their interactions. To adopt a structurationist perspective, is to be committed to examining how social systems, through the application of rules and resources, are produced and reproduced in social interactions.

To account for the duality of structure in interaction, Giddens (1984) proposes a three-level model, each level being the result of the interpenetration of semantic, political, and normative dimensions of action. To produce and reproduce the structures, agents use diverse modalities of action in their interactions. The first level is structures and is related to the structural properties of the social systems that both constrain and enable the agents. These properties are signification (semantic rules), domination (unequally distributed resources), and legitimation (evaluative rules). To produce and reproduce these properties, the agents dispose of the means by which to draw upon rules and resources as the interaction takes place. These means, or modalities of interaction, are interpretative schemas (part of agents' stock of knowledge applied recursively in communication), facilities (command over people and resources), and

norms (normative expectations of agents). Social interaction as an encounter situated in a particular time-space involves a form of communication, the exercise of power, and the possibility of a sanction.

As can be seen, the theory of structuration is not one whose goal is to generalise and predict behaviours. Instead, it formulates the principles of an ontology of social practices that allow us to conceive of structures as being part of the agents at the same time that they constrain the agents' actions (Leneveu, 1993). These principles are used as conceptual tools for conceiving diverse objects of study in a different way and participating in the reconstitution of a discipline or specialty (Bryant & Jary, 2001). For example, Orlikowski (1992) uses structuration theory to emphasise the dimensions of duality of technology and the interpretive flexibility of technology. Moreover, by placing the agent at the centre of the theory of structuration, a structurationist study requires the use of a methodological universe that allows us to fully understand what Giddens calls a "form of life". In these conditions, a structurationist study must have an ethnographic moment, although this does not prohibit using other data-collecting techniques to enrich the approach as a whole. In the next lines, I apply the elements of the theory of structuration to strategy.

**Premises of a Social Structurationist Perspective of Strategy.** A social structurationist perspective of strategy consists of examining how strategy is constituted in and through daily socio-organisational life and, reciprocally, how strategy is constituted structurally. I postulate three premises: 1) all agents in an enterprise possess strategic competence; 2) strategy must be conceptualised as a specific social structure; 3) agents use the social rules and resources available to them to produce and reproduce the enterprise's strategy. Table 1 shows the misleading conceptions related to these premises.

**Table 1**  
**Comparative Modes of Theorising Strategy**

	Mainstream perspectives	Social structurationist perspective
Actor	Top managers Voluntary, rational Asocial	All the individuals Knowledgeable and reflexive Social
Enterprise/environment	Totalities viewed as a whole acting as agents Strategy as behaviour of the enterprise	Both are made up of agents and put into action in and through those agents' practices Duality of strategy

*(1) Strategic competence of agents.* Applied to strategy, the thesis of competence of agents--recognition of the knowledgeable and reflexivity of agents--implies that all individuals, with little regard to their position in the organisation, contribute to the formation of strategies and consequently possess "strategic" competence, however minimal it might be. What characterises this specific form of knowledgeable is that it is based on the discursive and practical knowledge that individuals have of their enterprise and of the different partners with whom they interact (clients, suppliers, the State, communities, and others). Moreover, this knowledgeable is related to agents' being able to put their reflexive capacities into action when presenting issues related to the enterprise's future to others. It also comes into play when, in the course of their job, they contribute to recomposing links with the enterprise's partners--with the purpose of making the enterprise more profitable.

According to a structurationist perspective, strategy is far from solely being the result of top managers' decisions. It is the product of all the agents in the organisation who put it into action on a daily basis. This perspective provides a more complex view of both the action of managers and the actions of the agents around them. They are all knowledgeable, reflexive

agents who put diverse abilities (both practical and discursive) into action during the everyday encounters that occur within the exercise of their duties. Of course, managers have access to more resources with which to influence the future of their enterprise. What is important to understand is how they put these resources to use.

(2) *The duality of strategy.* To understand strategy from the structurationist perspective, I propose considering strategy as a specific structure of social activity that is produced and reproduced in the ordinary course of action. To give account of the enabling and constraining character of strategy, a conceptual distinction is needed between strategy as corporate behaviour and strategic systems as the practices of agents. Strategy as corporate behaviour exists in individuals' minds through their representations and knowledge of recursively organised rules and resources, which they draw upon and reconstitute in the course of their action. As far as strategic systems go, they are formed from a set of regularised practices that are situated in a space-time and aimed at orienting the future of the enterprise in such a way that it stands out from others. Strategy and strategic systems--like social structures and social systems--do not exist outside agents; both are produced and reproduced through regularised practices from which they are constituted daily. In other words, strategy and strategic systems exist only in the instantiation of practices related to the future of the enterprise, being both the medium and the result of the interactions of agents. Adopting a structurationist perspective of strategy consists of examining how strategic systems, through the application of rules and resources, are produced and reproduced in the interactions of competent agents.

Considering the duality of strategy allows the conceptual separation between enterprise and environment to be done away with. By affirming that strategy is produced in the instantiation of practices, conceptions of the enterprise and environment as distinct, autonomous entities

become obsolete. If there is no one to work in an enterprise, there is no enterprise. The notion of environment allows managers to think about the outside world; the resulting actions of their thought reproduce and transform the way they see that environment's characteristics. In itself, the environment does not exist outside the practice of agents. Every day, managers meet people who act as partners of the enterprise. In these daily encounters with people from the outside, managers--like the people they manage--convey their representation of the behaviour of their enterprise and of the issues related to its success and future. It is this representation that they put into action. In their practices, they draw upon this representation of strategy while at the same time adapting it to the context. In this way, it is both the medium and the result of their action. While it limits their manoeuvring room, it enables the agents in the everyday decisions they make to try to reinforce the enterprise's success.

*(3) The social embeddedness of strategy.* Conceiving of strategy as a specific structure of social activity provides the principles of an ontology of strategy. Nevertheless, it must not be forgotten that when, in their practices, individuals participate in the production and reproduction of strategy, they are also behaving as social agents. In their interactions, the agents put into action different repertoires of social belonging (such as gender, class, profession, community, ethnicity, and religion). In other words, the agents' behaviours, whether or not they are strategic, are embedded in social structures. Consequently, strategy and strategic systems must be thought of as being produced and reproduced via social practices. When the agents actualise their enterprise's strategy in their interactions, they necessarily refer to social structures as sets of rules and resources. In other words, while the structural properties of strategic systems are contributing to the production and reproduction of the strategy, the agents are also ensuring the continuity and transformation of the social structures in which economic exchanges are anchored.

In short, the study of the social structuration of strategy is the study of the modes by which strategic systems, situated in time and in space and using rules and resources, are produced and reproduced in and through the interactions of individuals. From a structurationist perspective, strategy does not come about solely as result of top managers' special meetings. As a structure that is produced and reproduced in interactions, it transcends all organisational activities. Actions of a strategic order can be produced during a board meeting where strategy is being discussed, but they can just as easily be produced somewhere else in the organisation. For example, in some enterprises, the sales department is a place where the structuration of strategic activity occurs daily. In other enterprises, the research and development department is where strategic activity is the most intense.

However, not all interactions in everyday life are strategic. To single out the strategic character of an interaction, let us first look at Michael Porter's statements (1994: 423-424) about what strategy is. For this author, strategy--with an ultimate goal to ensure the success of the enterprise--has three generic dimensions. It is a way of guiding the behaviours of the enterprise towards a goal; it is a way of aligning the company with its environment; and it is a way of creating and using a distinctive competence. Thus, an interaction is strategic when the individuals discuss, represent themselves, or act according to issues regarding the future of their enterprise; when the individuals take part in constructing links with the enterprise's partners; and/or when the individuals put into action the strengths and advantages of the enterprise. Such a definition has the merit of doing away with the categories that are traditionally used in the field of strategy, while respecting the generic traits associated with this type of activity. Moreover, such a point of view makes formulation and implementation two intertwined moments of the agents' practices. Let us look at this more closely, using

sequences of interaction drawn from a case I recently studied concerning a company in reorganisation.

## **STRATEGY-IN-ACTION**

To the extent that the structurationist perspective provides a generic model for understanding how a structure is produced and reproduced in interaction, it necessitates using a methodology that lets us see how the agents act and interact. This section draws upon ethnographic data to show strategy-in-action in a company experiencing a strategic reorientation. It provides a glimpse into the research methodology and presents two episodes that illustrate how strategising is done in day-to-day life, and how it is anchored in wider social relations.

**Research Methodology.** The case study looks at the reorganisation of a company that makes and designs top-of-the-line clothing for women. It is a small company with sales of about \$6 million (Canadian) and around 200 employees. The management team made up of 15 people including managers, professionals, and sales representatives. The current company came out of the merger of one of the last remaining Canadian manufacturing companies of fine clothing for women with a small, but highly regarded, design company in Quebec. In the early 1990s, this merger was a way for both enterprises to make the transition from clothing industry to fashion industry. It was expected that the clientele from both companies would grow and that the complementarity of expertise would strengthen the position of all the collections. The owners and the management team involved were convinced that the merger had all the ingredients for success, and yet a few years later, the anticipated results had not materialised. Under pressure from a Quebec funding society that was injecting money into the company,

top management began a strategic planning exercise. Until then, the company's strategy had been based on the reputation, distinction, and quality of its clothing. But faced with strong foreign competition in the high-end clothing industry, this position was difficult to maintain, especially considering that the Canadian clothing industry had never really made its mark in this market niche. In addition, the economic problems of the 1990s were contributing to the erosion of the company's general profitability. The directors of the company decided to make a strategic move to broaden the product line towards the low end and expand distribution. The designer had the competence to revitalise the company's collections and reach out to more clients. In the longer term, there were thoughts of opening other design divisions to turn the company into a "fashion house."

At first, the strategic planning exercise, led by an outside consultant, was expected to last six months. This included developing and implementing the plan, as well as making the necessary adjustments to ensure the company's success. But things did not go as expected. The strategic plan was presented to the employees six months after the exercise began. During these six months, various measures were implemented, though no decisions regarding the company's future had been ratified. First, the company's physical layout was rearranged and the work teams began to be changed around. Then, the green light was given to prepare the first "diffusion" collection, which led to the renewal of one sales team. This marked the beginning of the company's reorientation. Finally, a strategic plan confirming this change in direction was communicated to employees and the media.

This case is particularly interesting for bringing out the social character of strategic activity because the way this company operates is characteristic of how institutional frameworks in the Quebec clothing industry are organised. Traditionally dominated by manufacturing, the



Quebec clothing industry has few design companies. Moreover, certain ethnic groups control this sector of activity, as in the company being examined. The people associated with the manufacturing division are mainly anglophones with Jewish origins, while the design team is made up of francophones with Catholic origins. At the organisational level, there are two opposing logics of sectorial action in the company: the manufacturing division's entrepreneurial logic and the designers' artistic logic.

*Data collection.* The main goal of this exploratory research was to understand how actors strategise in everyday life. The data were gathered during an ethnographic study. The fieldwork stretched out over a period of eighteen months, during which I did a six-month, in-house study of the enterprise. I went to the company three or four days a week so I could participate in the activities surrounding the strategic planning exercise that was taking place. The six-month period corresponded to the time originally forecast to develop and implement the plan. During this time, it was possible to observe the agents at different stages in the preparation of a collection.

The main technique used for collecting the data was participatory observation. Observations were taken at all levels of the organisation: in meetings about the company's reorientation, management meetings, everyday departmental activities, and so forth. At the end of each observation period, notes were transcribed to a logbook for each of the following points: descriptions of the events, follow-up of reorganisation, analysis, and observation points for the next period. Throughout the research stage, semi-structured interviews were carried out with all the actors involved to greater or lesser degrees in managing the company. These interviews, which lasted about an hour and a half each, had three main axes: professional background, reorganisation, and thoughts about the future of the company. Two people in

different hierarchic positions, the company's CEO and the head of customer service, served as key informants during the research stage. Spot interviews were conducted with them at different periods during the research stage. Interviews were also conducted with representatives from the principal financial backers following the period of data collection in the company. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed *verbatim*. The documents consulted were company documents (earlier strategic plans, newspaper articles, selective work reports, etc.). Several industry-related studies (both economic and social) were also consulted. In addition, to better understand the industry's institutional frameworks, various people connected with the clothing sector were also met outside the company, before or after the data collection period.

*Data analysis.* In total, approximately 1000 pages of observation and *verbatim* data were gathered. These data were analysed in three steps. First, all the observation and interview data were transcribed and codified on cards with different colours: white for actors, green for events related to the reorientation, blue for reflections about the company's future, yellow for management activity, and pink for the clothing process. In the second step, these cards were grouped by similar themes to reveal four domains of strategic activity: merger, sectorial knowledge, product, and sales. These domains are the principal axes from which the events surrounding the strategic change led to the reorganisation of the company. In the third step, different interaction sequences related to the events surrounding the strategic change were reconstructed (e.g., conversations, meetings, and events related to the new collection). In a way, these interaction sequences constitute the "episodes" or the "traces" of strategy-in-action. They are meant to demonstrate how the social structuration of strategic activity takes place in daily life, while at the same time showing the agents' multiple, changing trajectories. From a structurationist point of view, each interaction sequence, no matter how ordinary it

might first appear, carries the complexity of the links between local and global or, for the purposes of this paper, between strategic and social. In other words, the structurationist project wagers that, beyond the agents' play, in each and any sequence of interactions, part of the institutional context can be found. In all, about thirty interaction sequences with actors from different organisational levels were reconstructed and extensively analysed (Table 2).

**Table 2**

Reconstructed episodes according to domain of strategic activity and management level.

<i>Domain of strategic activity</i>	MERGER	SECTORIAL KNOWLEDGE	PRODUCT	SALES
<i>Level of management</i>				
<b>TOP</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Alliance</li> <li>- One project, two visions</li> <li>- Financing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The "Bible"</li> <li>- Plans</li> <li>- Temporal conducts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Clothing as reflection of organisational identity</li> <li>- Widening line towards low end</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rhetorical use of family discourse</li> <li>- Expansion of distribution</li> </ul>
<b>MIDDLE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Integration of "showrooms"</li> <li>- Reorganisation of departments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Consultant</li> <li>- Knowledge of competition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Stories" built around collection</li> <li>- New "diffusion" collection</li> <li>- New production director</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Emotional energy in "act of sales"</li> <li>- New sales representative</li> </ul>
<b>LOW</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Training</li> <li>- Communications committee</li> <li>- Revival of company</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Diagnosis of production</li> <li>- Production times</li> <li>- New technologies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Adjustment of fit</li> <li>- Reduction of fabric stocks</li> <li>- Merchandising</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reorganisation of customer services</li> <li>- New "spirit" of sales</li> </ul>

**Two Strategic Episodes.** In this section, two episodes illustrate how strategy is an activity that is anchored in everyday interaction while at the same time it participates in reproducing larger social structures. The selection of episodes was made according to the objectives of this paper. To support the idea that strategising is not the "chasse-gardée" of top management, the everyday strategic action of people who occupy staff rather than line positions in the company needs to be brought out. This is why the designer of the new "diffusion" collection and the sales representative who was hired to sell it are at the centre of the chosen sequences. These episodes were also chosen to demonstrate how the links between the enterprise and its environment are shaped in the everyday encounters of organisational life. In this regard, the renewal of the ties with the clientele around this strategic change is a pertinent choice of episodes given that it concretely illustrates how the enterprise and its environment are connected through agents in their everyday life.

While the new collection is being prepared, the ties with clients are being renewed in two ways. First, the designer is more or less formally in charge of promoting the new collection to people outside the company. At the same time, a new sales representative has been hired, and her job is to convince clients of the virtues of the new product. The first sequence of interactions features the designer in charge of the new collection and brings out the importance of strategic conversations in renewing ties with the clientele. The second sequence of interactions looks at the strategic interactions of the new sales representative and brings out the importance of reconstructing the "spirit of sales" when a new strategic orientation is being introduced.

*Episode A: Encounter between the designer and a client.*

The head of the new collection is a designer from the generation of Quebecois fashion creators who dominated the industry in the 1980s. His career has essentially followed the growing vogue for designers in the Quebec clothing industry. His success is based largely on his visibility and his accessibility to the fashion media, as well as on the numerous times he has represented the industry at the governmental level. It is common knowledge in the company that he “understands the power of words and knows how to tell a story.” Of course, this is true when he is describing his creations, but with the reorganisation, he regularly finds himself having to explain the changes being made in the company to people from the outside. This is quite a challenge. How can the ties with clientele be modified without affecting the trade image of the company's collections?

Following is an examination of a conversation with a client in which the designer is explaining some of the changes in his ready-to-wear collections. The context of the conversation is as follows. The designer has just left a meeting with representatives from the company's top management team; the meeting was somewhat stormy because the company's future is in up in the air. The designer encounters a client who is examining some pieces from the new collection, and he stops to chat with her. The client is a local artist. Although the company's main clientele is made up of retailers and buyers from Canadian fashion houses, there is also a “private” clientele. Personalities from the world of artists and politicians, or friends of the company's executives sometimes make appointments so they can update their wardrobe at a reasonable price. In return, because they are well known, they ensure the visibility of the company's collections. The designer's face lights up when he sees the client; he slows down and stops a moment to talk to her.

The client is looking at a few pieces from the new collection. After the usual niceties, she takes a garment from the collection and, with a puzzled look, holds it up to the designer to ask about a change in the cut. Without hesitating, and wearing a broad smile, the designer says: *“The way it happened is interesting. We had a marketing consultant and groups were set up to analyse the clients’ wants and all the women said the same thing: it’s pretty, but it’s hard to wear! Then we showed them a few of the pieces from the collection and they said: ‘That is, too,’ and they adored it! So we decided to create a ‘diffusion’ collection that is more practical, and closer to ‘real’ women for the next season. I want as many women as possible feeling beautiful and comfortable when they wear my clothing!”*

Upon this, the client takes up the conversation by giving her approval for the designer’s work. A salesman joins them. During introductions, the conversation turns to the fact that the client and the designer have known each other for a long time. They talk about the first time they met in the 1970s at a concert by the French singer Barbara. They reminisce and hum a few tunes from those days. Before leaving the client, the designer entrusts her to a colleague who introduces himself and tells the client what an effect her presence is having on the enterprise’s employees. The designer leaves them to join the other members of his team. Although he does not say it out loud, it is easy to see that the meeting did not go very well. The designer seems worried.

In his brief commentary, the designer presents the enterprise’s new orientation as though it resulted from a rational, concerted decision made at a specific moment in time. To announce the changes in the enterprise to the client, the designer focuses his discourse on the result of the market studies done by the marketing consultant when the reorganisation began. What is

interesting is that while he refers to the consultation process used by the company, he associates the main motivation for this decision with clients' comments. Thus, while his position is based on knowledge, he strengthens his legitimacy by associating his project with his interlocutor's interests and desires.

Yet it has not been all that simple. The designer has wanted to create a "diffusion" collection for years--since the late 1980s, in fact. With this idea in mind, the company approached the new sales representative a year before she was hired. The negotiations between the designer and the president regarding this idea were so difficult that it was only under pressure from their main financial backers that the idea was finally, but not necessarily unanimously, accepted. The market study mentioned actually had little impact. After a disagreement between the first consultant and the president, another consultant was hired to continue the strategic planning exercise.

Moreover, the designer presents the company's strategic reorientation to the client using a fashion rhetoric that expresses the idea of a voluntary democratisation of the product line ("I want as many women as possible..."). Behind his rhetoric, he is also trying to inspire a desire to wear his clothing for its comfort and beauty. By referring to the possibility that women will feel beautiful when they wear his clothing, the designer is using a subtle form of seduction.

Let us take one last look at the socio-historical context structuring this conversation. The conversation is in French, which is unusual in this company; most communications, particularly at the management level, take place in English. The conversation is between a man and a woman whose husband is well known in the Italian community. Most of the

employees in the company's manufacturing division have an Italian background. Although short, the conversation is representative of the socio-historical frameworks that structure the clothing industry in Montreal. Since World War II, the English-speaking Jewish community has supplied a large part of the industry's capital, principally through manufacturing. Members of the Italian community take on a large part of the manufacturing work, while many of the designers are French-speakers.

*Episode B: Reconstructing the act of sales*

Implementing a new orientation requires changing how the resources and ties that structure the act of sales are arranged between salesperson, product, and potential client. According to Barthes, the act of sales takes place, in a way, through how the product is put on display. To gain control over the buyer's accounting consciousness, the object being sold must be veiled with images, reasons, and meanings through which the spirit of sales is manifested. The newly hired representative is in charge of transforming this spirit by modifying the way the symbolic resources and transactions with the clientele are organised.

Until the company's management decides to modify its orientation, the spirit of sales is product focused. According to the collection and the client, the management team and sales representatives construct diverse stories based on their knowledge of fabrics, the reputation and expertise of the house designer, and so forth, to sell their clothing to retailers. The relation with the client is not the basis for the company's success. So much the better if the relation is good, but it matters little if it is not—the members of the company are convinced that, above all else, it is the product that makes the difference.



The spirit of sales that results from this leads to a relation of submissiveness between the company's representatives and the retailers. To tempt and convince the retailer, the images representing the garment are embedded in interaction codes that lead subtly to a relation of domination. When members of the company presents an article of clothing to someone from the outside, they present themselves as experts in order to subtly exercise authority over the client. One way this subordination is made possible is by putting into action gender-related interaction codes. For example, when the exchanges take place between women—which is often the case—they take the form of “mother-daughter” relations or “big sister-little sister” relations. Like a mother or older sister who "knows what is best" for her daughter or younger sister, the sales representative acts as if her expertise lets her know what is good for the client.

In addition, the members of the company can use a set of discursive and material symbols to strengthen their presentation of the collections. During sales season, clients are received at the showroom in order that everything take place on the sales personnel's territory. Among other techniques, the sales representatives have a "gift" for subtly mentioning to the first retailers they meet that being received at the beginning of the sales season is a privilege. This manner of presenting the product when the client first arrives contributes to setting up a spirit of sales that both symbolises and contributes to reinforcing the distinctiveness and high-quality of the collection being sold. All of this justifies the internal belief that the company is at the top of its sector of activity (“the top of the top”).

During the strategic change in direction, the company's new orientation becomes tangible when a new sales representative is hired. The new representative believes that, "to sell a collection, you have to give it a soul." Throughout the preparation of the collection, the new representative devotes herself to constructing the message to be transmitted when the

collection is introduced. First, by keeping in close contact with the designer and his assistant, she learns how to talk about the collection. Every day, she enriches her vocabulary with expressions used regularly by the designer to describe how he wants the collection to be a reflection of himself (e.g., "a look that is closer to everyday reality," "a no-compromise collection at a low price," etc.) These expressions are hardly insignificant. While they provide information on the designer's vision of his collection, they also allow the new representative to select the aspects she should focus on when interpreting the collection for clients, shareholders, or anyone else outside the company.

Then, before introducing the collection, the sales representative looks for ways to recreate in the showroom the mood of the collection. She uses music and lights to "communicate the collection's message and awaken the dream in others." She even recreates her own image based on the message that she wants to send. Although she does not usually wear the collections that she offers, this time she intends to modify her image to project the image of the woman who is targeted by the collection. Finally, the new representative must compose the written presentation for the collection. Fashion poetics is itself a rhetorical exercise that is central to the success or failure of the collection. She uses a rhetorical model that focuses away from contrasts by giving greater power to simplicity and subtle details--the little touches that make fashion. This fashion rhetoric is based on the necessarily practical aspect of more affordable clothing.

Contrary to her colleagues, this sales representative is used to selling a middle-of-the-line product. The spirit of sales that drives her is more client-based. She says, "*I like my clients. For me, whatever has to do with the client is fundamental. It takes people who smile and*

*listen to the client. It's like 'money in the cash register.' We're in a situation where we have to give to the client before receiving. We have to give something more; everything has to be done to show them that our collection is plays a role in their success. I've been pushing for my clients for ten years now and they know that I'm going to keep doing it. I know my clients—they don't call customer service for a 'repeat'—they call me—I'm the one who goes in the back to find what they want. That's the kind of relation I've established with my clients.”*

While preparing for the new collection, she contacts each of her clients to announce her new position and tell them about the new collection. Each client contacted is given a customised explanation regarding the new job and the collection being prepared. Every time the story is told, it takes on a different colour and form, based on the sales representative's tacit knowledge of her clients. In addition, while the new collection is being prepared, the sales representative regularly contacts a few privileged retailers to get what she calls a “feel for the market,” in other words, information that will guide the many choices that must be made in preparing the new collection.

Overall, the new sales representative's relations with her clients are based on mutual recognition. Both one and the other codetermine the relation they have. This is because the relations are based on services provided by the sales representative. For example, transactions between the sales representative and clients resemble an encounter in which everything takes place as though it were a matter of making a deal “man-to-man” or of being accomplices because they are “woman-to-woman.” Thus, the salesperson-client relation that is put into action by the new sales representative is very different from the one that has historically been

preferred by her colleagues. She considers the act of sales to be a way of crowning the client, rather than a way to make herself “queen” of the company.

## **ANALYSIS OF EPISODES**

These episodes present sequences of interactions that illustrate how strategy is essentially a recursive process that is constituted in and through everyday organisational life. On one hand, they show how the agents use their competence as knowledgeable and reflexive actors in the structuration of strategies. On the other hand, they make it possible to understand how actors in strategising refer not only to the structure of the strategy, but also to the rules and resources of more encompassing systems such as social structures.

**Micro-Practices of Strategising.** The "diffusion" collection contributes to making tangible the company's change in direction. But when this change is presented to the clients, they must be convinced of its pertinence. The interaction sequences described demonstrate how the designer and the new sales representative use their competence as knowledgeable and reflexive actors to renew their ties with the clientele. In their interactions, both these agents put three micro-practices of strategising into action: translating, disciplining, and justifying.

*Translating.* As shown in the episodes described above, one part of strategic action is based on the actors' capacity to translate the strategic orientation of their enterprise to outsiders. The

act of translating consists of simultaneously choosing the elements that convey the meaning of the message and using terms from the other person's language to transmit that meaning. Thus, translating the company's strategy means drawing from the agent's available interpretative schemas to communicate a message. To do this, the agent who is translating does away with certain dimensions of the reality according to his or her position as actor. This is accomplished by simultaneously translating and reconstructing the message to be transmitted according to the perception that the agent has of the other person. The agent carries out this translation by drawing from his or her stock of knowledge to understand the meaning of the situation and reflexively evaluate the consequences of even the most ordinary words and gestures.

The conversation between the designer and the client is a good example of how the micro-practice of translation operates. Remember that the designer does not present the entire strategic process that is going on in the company. Nor does he refer to the fact that he had already tried to make lower-end collections in the past. Instead, he chooses to present the decision to prepare a new collection as resulting from a specific event, the market study. In addition, he translates the company's new orientation with fashion rhetoric, putting himself in the client's register while at the same time participating in reproducing his own image *vis-à-vis* the outside. The new representative also brings translation micro-practices into play when she calls each of her clients in turn to tell them about her new position. In this way, she personalises the company's new orientation and turns it into a challenge in her own career. She also uses different words and ways to present the situation to each client. She does this by calling upon her knowledge of her clients, knowledge that she has acquired over the course of her ten-years' experience in the industry.

The translation capacity is reinforced by the actors' discursive skills. They both articulate their ideas well and have extensive vocabularies. They have a great capacity, which is more or less conscious, to modify the language games they use according to their preconceptions of others. They use their discursive skills every day to translate the issues confronting the company. It must be understood, though, that this capacity to translate is not, and never can be, total. The perfect discourse does not exist. However, some agents are more skilled than others in getting a feeling of the situation and using their knowledge and reflexive capacities to create a daring combination of elements that insinuates the flash of something else in a way that charms, captivates, or changes the position of their interlocutor.

*Disciplining.* The interaction sequences also point out the need to enhance the recursive character of encounters with clients. In other words, fostering a habit in a client involves disciplining that client. This is one of the things the designer is trying to do when he subtly attempts to make the client want to wear the clothes he creates. Disciplining the client can be likened to bringing the company's positioning into play. The actors have two ways to do this in their interactions: modify how the resources are arranged and/or transform the way they enter into a relation with a client.

The episode describing what the new representative does while the collection is being prepared is a good illustration of the micro-practice of disciplining. Within the organisation, she works on transforming the message to be transmitted. Her sales experience has shown her the importance of constructing a symbolic message that reflects the essence of the collection and gives it a soul. When she meets clients, this message, or everything that symbolically surrounds the clothing, is what she is selling. By choosing words that go with the clothing,

creating a special mood in the showroom, and wearing clothing from the collection, the sales representative constructs a set of symbolic micro-dynamics to convince the client to buy that clothing. At the same time, the sales representative is showing the client how she should sell the clothing in her own boutique.

While the "diffusion" collection is being prepared, the new representative also works on transforming ties with the clientele. She meets with her best clients to show them how she is reconstructing the new message that is to be transmitted. In addition, she has a sales philosophy that is hinged on building collaborative relations with clients. This more egalitarian-type relation is closer to the spirit of the new collection. When she puts her relations with the company's clients into action, she is modifying the form of power relations in order to convince a larger number of clients to buy the collection. Building more egalitarian relations with clients is a way of making those clients responsible for the orders they submit, thereby relieving the company, in part, of problems related to sales in boutiques.

The environment is put into action when an actor from the company meets someone from the outside; the resulting interaction assumes a particular form. It helps model the interactions that follow and establish each person's manoeuvring room. For example, when a sales representative meets a new client, one form of relation is enacted. The form of relation serves as a reference point, a guide for understanding what the relation with the other person will be. The sales representative uses these reference points to reword the message with which she sells an article of clothing. Although meeting clients during sales season is a sequence that is replayed many times over, it is never simply the repetition of a symbolic construction that is frozen in time. Each time the sequence takes place, one person, socially situated in relation to

another person, formulates the message anew so that certain of its elements are exaggerated in an attempt to convince the other person.

*Justifying.* When an actor puts the company's strategy into action during an interaction with someone from the outside, the presentation is inevitably underpinned by certain justifications. The actor's translation of the strategy provides leads for their interlocutors to evaluate the company's conduct and decide whether or not this orientation is good for them. To satisfactorily meet the other person's expectations, the agent must use judgement and skill in his or her discursive rationalisation to ensure the ontological security and trust of the other person.

In the conversation between the designer and the client, the designer provides two sources for evaluating the legitimacy of producing a new "diffusion" collection. First, by mentioning the marketing consultant, he justifies the company's reorientation by referring to a form of authoritative knowledge. The fact that the source of knowledge in question is from outside the company lends an image of neutrality to the decision to create a new collection. The designer then presents this decision as being made, first and foremost, in answer to clients' wishes. Moreover, the instant he encounters the client, the designer switches from a look of annoyance to a smile. Through fashion rhetoric, he transmits the emotional energy behind his whole design project while exercising a form of seduction on his client.

By working closely with the designer as she constructs the message she wants the collection to transmit to her clients, the sales representative internalises the economic reasons behind the



new collection and the fashion rhetoric to go along with it. In addition, each of her gestures and words is imbued with a clear and transparent client philosophy anchored in her sales experience with middle-of-the-line clothing. Used reflexively to recompose the message regarding the new collection, this stock of knowledge allows her to radiate an emotional energy designed to reassure the client and motivate her to buy the products.

Overall, the vision presented to their interlocutors by the designer and the new representative is positive. The emotional energy radiated by these two people captivates their interlocutors and fosters a feeling of security and trust in them. When they interact with outsiders, both operate multiple translations while preserving their integrity *vis-à-vis* themselves and others. This is because the translation they make of the situation corresponds to their personalities, so the vision of the facts that they present is natural and transparent. Embedded in their consciousness to divulge or dissimulate elements of a situation, this self-transparency allows the people with whom they interact to judge whether or not they are trustworthy.

In short, these micro-practices have to do with the possibility for the agents to change the future of their enterprise by exercising their capacity of action. The goal of these micro-practices is to convince and master the other person. In the episodes presented this means controlling the client. Closely intertwined during the course of action, these micro-practices refer to the fundamental dimensions of interaction in the theory of structuration: "translating" is related to the semantic dimension; "disciplining" to the political dimension; and "justifying" to the normative dimension.

Putting these three micro-practices into action constitutes exercising what could be called the actors' strategic competence. This has to do with their capacity to translate the company's strategic orientation, to control the client, and to justify the strategy. It should be noted that an individual cannot be strategically competent in every interaction. In general, the individual is more effective in certain kinds of encounters. This is notably the case for the designer, who enjoys a high level of credibility with the media and members of the fashion community, although his credibility is sometimes challenged inside the company. Moreover, because a large part of strategic competence is based on what is left unsaid, as well as on how others are approached, it is intrinsic to personality and, consequently, can never be more than partial.

**Strategising through Social Contexts.** The micro-practices of structuration of strategy in the agents' everyday activities are not solely the result of the agents' personal skills and abilities. These micro-practices are carried out when agents, in their interactions, draw upon the resources and rules that are available to them. These resources and rules embed the action of strategising in contexts such as industry and society, which in turn are produced and reproduced in the strategic interactions of agents.

When we watch the actors in action, the organisational resources that they use constitute the most apparent elements of context. Resources are the tangible means that actors use to position themselves in the structures, and if need be, to transform those structures. In the conversation between the designer and his client, few organisational resources are put into action. The reconstructed episode is short. Nevertheless, when the designer entrusts his client to the head of customer services, he is relying on authoritative resources. In so doing, he inscribes his interaction in the forms of hierarchic co-ordination that are characteristic of the

company. In the episode concerning the new sales representative, her actions are aimed in particular at modifying the arrangement of the company's allocative resources. The new representative uses the company's material resources (office, telephone, money, etc., to reach clients) and symbolic resources (spending time with the designer to understand his story and adapt it to the new concept) in order to transform the routines surrounding the "diffusion" collection.

Beyond the use they make of resources, in the course of their interactions, agents put into action the rules they have at their disposal. In management, rules are generally conceived of as being formal prescriptions for establishing the parameters of a game. Yet, the rules involved in reproducing the different forms of social activities are of a different nature. They are not all codified as laws, and a number of them are more or less explicitly formulated. Because of this, rules take on a wide variety of forms that vary through time. Moreover, they contribute to actualising the structural properties of social systems (i.e., signification, domination, legitimation). In the interaction sequences examined, the actors put the industry rules and social rules into action by referring to their experience and the tacit knowledge they have of those rules.

When the designer uses fashion rhetoric and the new representative composes a new message around the "diffusion" collection, each one of them is putting an industry rule into action. The clothing to be sold is generally accompanied by a message creating a desire in the client to buy it. In creating a particular meaning around the clothing, agents actualise signification as a structural property. Both the designer and the sales representative are very familiar with the characteristics of the different product lines in the clothing industry. Without directly

mentioning the idea of organising the new collection around a mid-range product line, they do directly target its principal attributes in their discourse. This classification constitutes a form of domination to the extent that, through categorising client behaviours, one group (the designer and sales representative) exercises their capacity of action over another (the clients). By categorising their product in relation to specific clienteles, the industry people try to orient buyer behaviour. The existence of a private clientele is also an industry rule in high-end companies. It allows them to give the collections visibility and acts as a form of legitimation for the public.

The two reconstructed sequences of interactions also show that strategic activity in action cannot be dissociated from the social rules that are brought into play every day through language. Let us take another look at the episode of the conversation between the designer and the client. First, the language used and the evocation of common cultural references express the actors' social belonging as francophone Quebecers. This characteristic is meaningful in the context of this sale. In the enterprise, the official language used is English. By referring to their French backgrounds, they affirm their distinctive identity. Given that the designer is known as one of the pillars of Quebec fashion, this nationalistic reference is part of the scenario surrounding his collection. Second, the fashion rhetoric that the designer constructs during the conversation brings a form of seduction into play. His comments, aimed at legitimising the new collection, indirectly allude to a man's view of a woman's appearance. Concerning the new sales representative, she organises her relations with clients around her experience of gender rules. By symbolically playing the mother or the older sister in their relations, the representatives try to ensure their control over of the client. Contrary to her

colleagues, the new sales representative tries to modify the symbolic form of the interactions with the clientele by relying on more egalitarian relations of gender.

As demonstrated in the interactions examined, the putting into action of the organisational resources at the disposal of the actors cannot be done independently of that of the rules coming from wider systems such as industry and society. The rules that the agents use in their interactions constitute reference points, guides for understanding the reality. Individuals draw from a common pool of experience in order to produce and reproduce social relations. For example, while rules of ethnicity are embedded in "us and them" relations on which groups base their social identity, gender rules are based on the experience of diverse "parent-child" relations that may be established with a family unit, and so on. Agents reflexively put their common experience of the world into action in their everyday activities whether they are strategising or not, and they do it without necessarily rationalising what they are doing on a conscious level.

The interrelation between the use of resources and of rules is based on a mechanism of "overcoding" that, according to Sfez (1984), is intrinsic to conversation. Thus, in order to announce a new orientation to a client or to express a point of view to a colleague, the system of organisational communication not only allows, but requires, recourse to referents from systems other than the one from which the message is constructed. Beyond the garment that is being described or the opinion that is being transmitted, recourse to other rules from different contexts is part of the conversation. In any interaction, an agents are called upon to act according to their belonging to diverse contexts (as a member of an ethnic group, a profession, a class, etc.). Integrated in agents' subjective categories, traces of these social

belongings provide information that the agent uses reflexively. This amalgam of a finished set of information related to an organisation's resources (e.g., technical, financial, and symbolic data about the clothing to be sold) with other elements of semi-finished (e.g., industry) or unfinished (e.g., society) systems is what makes openness and language games possible in the interactions. The openness and language games contribute to the complexity of the representations that agents have of the strategy and at the same time ensure the idiosyncratic nature of their conduct.

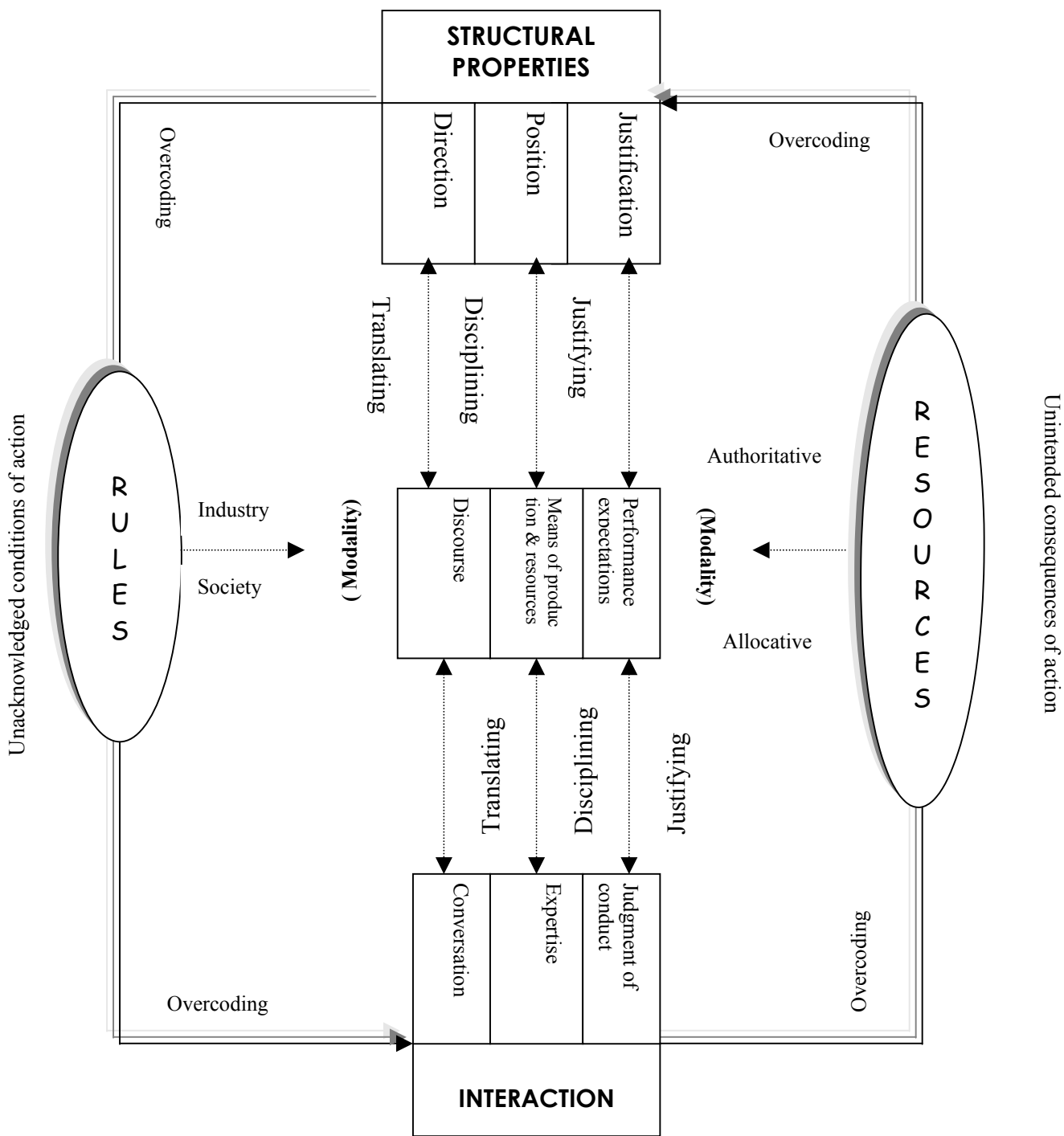
In the course of interactions, the agents' use of organisational resources and rules coming from different social systems forms a complex medium of control in which the micro-practices of strategising are pervasively embedded. Agents, in strategising, refer not only to the structure of strategy but also to the rules of more encompassing social systems. As a specific structure of activity, strategy is embedded in social structures as a result of reflexive overcoding that agents put into action. By strategising, actors recursively produce and reproduce the rules of the industry and social rules to which they belong. These rules are the medium and the outcome of strategic interaction. Thus, to strategise is also to participate in the production and reproduction of more extensive social systems.

## **A SOCIAL STRUCTURATIONIST PERSPECTIVE OF STRATEGISING**

Drawing on analyses of the episodes, this section intends to articulate the elements of a social structurationist perspective of strategising, representing strategy as a specific structure of social activity. Following structurationist reasoning, strategy is both a virtual representation and a set of regularised practices situated in a particular space-time (Diagram 2).

Diagram 2

**ELEMENTS OF A SOCIAL STRUCTURATIONIST PERSPECTIVE OF STRATEGISING**



On one hand, individuals put their representation of the enterprise's strategy into action through their knowledge of the rules of the industry and the organisation's resources. On the other hand, individuals reflexively transform and adjust their representation of strategy. As shown in the interaction sequences presented, strategy and strategic systems cannot be dissociated in practice; they exist in the instantiation of everyday encounters. Putting strategy into action as a structure of activity involves three levels: strategy, modalities, and interaction.

The representations agents have of the enterprise's strategy stem from the existence of intrinsic properties of strategy as a structure of activity. All strategy is the combined result of the enterprise's orientation statement, the explanation of its positioning in regard to competitors, and the justifications that are acceptable to the organisation's members and partners. First, a strategy provides an orientation, a guideline regarding the hopes for the enterprise's future. This gives meaning to action; it is a source of signification for the agents. Second, this direction can be explained by the economic need to improve the enterprise's competitive position. Formulating the enterprise's position for the following few years constitutes an attempt to control the uncertain and to dominate the competition. Finally, to add credibility, this exercise in positioning is based on justifications aimed at making the enterprise's behaviour socially acceptable. In this sense, the statement of a strategy for the enterprise is also an exercise in legitimation.

In the case of the company being examined, the structural properties of the strategy take the following forms. The project behind the planning exercise is an attempt to integrate a



manufacturing company with a design company in order that both may survive the transition from clothing industry to fashion industry. In the long term, the hope is to unite several designers around the manufacturer and thus create a "fashion house." In terms of positioning, it is a question of modifying the line of products downwards. The reflection behind repositioning the company is based on a representation of the product-market state that makes this strategic change in the product line necessary. Strong foreign competition in high-quality clothing and the economic difficulties of the 1990s are two factors that have made expanding the clientele necessary. This direction is legitimate in the eyes of the actors outside the company because the company unites two divisions, both leaders in the industry, that are trying to avoid bankruptcy.

What has just been described is the company's strategy as a structure of representations. Remember that this does not exist outside the action of agents. These representations are put into action at the moment of the interaction when the agents are: discussing, representing themselves, or acting according to issues related to the future of their company; participating in building links with the company's partners; and putting the company's strengths and advantages into action. As shown in the episodes presented, strategic interaction takes shape through the conversations that people from the company have among themselves or with outsiders, in which they are formally or informally telling about the changes to come. In so doing, they frequently use their expertise, that is to say part of their common knowledge of industry rules and the organisation's resources. At the same time, they try to strengthen the trust and ontological security of the people to whom they are speaking in order to convince them that they are doing the right thing.

The agents use the modalities of structuration at their disposal to actualise their representation of the company's strategy in their interactions. Management's strategic discourse, whether written or spoken, is an important element of these modalities. This may include strategic plans, communication mechanisms for transmitting the strategy internally, and public relations mechanisms for agents from outside the enterprise. In the case examined, the consultant is responsible for articulating the strategic discourse that, six months later, takes shape as a plan. The agents also have access to means of production and material and symbolic resources surrounding the product. In their everyday activities, they use these means and resources to transform their arrangements in the enterprise in order to make the change concrete or delay it. This is why the new sales representative is trying to adapt the way in which the product is presented and sold to reflect the company's new orientation. Moreover, the agents can use their knowledge about the expectations of various partners of the company to guide their conduct. Each partner expects a certain form of performance from the company which, in the end, is likely to reinforce his own success. These performance expectations are important modalities of structuration of action. When the sales representative tries to "get a feeling of the market," this is the modality of structuration that she is putting into action.

Beyond what is in the minds of the individuals (the strategy) and what they have at their disposal to change things (the modalities), strategy as such is carried out in the concrete action of persons (the interaction). Interactions are where the strategy's dimensions, indeed its fundamental properties, are expressed. In conversations among themselves or with outsiders, the agents use sequences that are more or less reconstructed from the formal strategic discourses at their disposal. This is how they translate the enterprise's strategic orientation. At the same time, in their conversations, the individuals rely on language games that draw on

their expertise while emphasising part of the resources involved in the change. In this way, they provide a more-or-less rational explanation that is ultimately aimed at convincing and disciplining the person to whom they are speaking. The way this explanation is presented also serves to justify the firm's strategy and to respond to the performance expectations of outside agents. The set of micro-practices of structuration that the agents put into action in their interactions ensures the liaison between the modalities of structuration and the strategy.

However, it must be kept in mind that the moment of the strategy's reproduction is also the moment of its production--of its renewal. For example, using part of the official discourses in turn contributes to modifying the direction of the change, that is to say the representation of the strategy. By using their expertise to justify the strategy, agents also contribute to defining and adjusting the representation of the strategy that is conveyed and used in the agents' everyday activities.

Moreover, the reproduction and production of strategy cannot be dissociated from the agents' capacity to call on their multiple collective belongings. The conversation between the designer and his client brings into play social relations of ethnicity and gender. The actors use the social context to produce and reproduce the company's strategy through the rules and resources available to them. The liaison between strategy as structure and wider social systems results from a process of overcoding that is intrinsic to conversation. In her relations with clients, the new representative brings into play symbolic codes related to gender relations. These codes contribute to the putting into action of the micro-practices of structuration of the strategy. It is in this sense that to strategise is to participate in the production and the reproduction of encompassing social structures. By strategising, agents

recursively produce and reproduce the rules of industry structures and social structures to which they belong. These rules are the medium and the outcome of strategic interaction.

Considering strategy as a specific social structure assumes that strategic activity is acknowledged to be the result of the practices of knowledgeable and reflexive actors. The episodes presented clearly demonstrate that when they strategise, agents are not necessarily using the analytical categories of the discipline as defined by practitioners and researchers. They use the language and categories that come from their everyday practices. The action of strategising is first and foremost founded in the practical consciousness of agents. Accepting this statement, of course, does not prevent us from considering agents to have recourse to traditional strategic models of planning and positioning to represent the world. Nor does it compromise the possibility that diverse configurations can be found to explain *a posteriori* the "pattern" of the actions and decisions that reflect the behaviours of the enterprise. From a structurationist perspective, what needs to be understood is that, in the course of their everyday interactions, agents contribute to producing and reproducing the strategic structure of their enterprise. Consequently, each time agents, whether or not part of management, refer to the formal language of strategy during an interaction, they are making social use of it. In other words, the agents use it first and foremost to give a signification to their discourse, to ensure a form of control over the other person, and finally, to legitimise their practices.

Moreover, inscribing the strategic activity in a set of larger socio-organisational frameworks is what makes the conversations and strategic interactions possible, at the same time that it constrains them. Strategy as structure cannot be isolated from the other social structures surrounding it. Environment does not exist in itself. It is composed of multiple social

structures that agents put into action during their everyday activities. As noted in the episodes that were presented, agents use their common knowledge of industry rules and the rules related to their social groups in order to create meaning for, convince, and reassure their interlocutors. In this way, they contribute to the production and reproduction of these larger structures. Such a representation explains in part why similar enterprises in similar environments can present strategic behaviours that are quite different. Furthermore, it provides leads to help explain the failure of strategic plans that, according to conventional models, have all the ingredients for success.

To the extent that the structurationist perspective proposes new reference points for thinking of action and reflecting on links with the environment, it provides a way to participate in the renewal of thought in strategic management. According to this perspective, each strategic interaction is unique in its composition and is a function of both the competence of agents and the context which is produced and reproduced in and through the interaction. This perspective provides a theoretical anchoring that makes it possible to articulate both the unity of strategy formulation and its break-up when the strategy is put into practice. It does not prohibit taking conventional models of strategic action into consideration; in fact, it acknowledges the importance of strategy as a plan, a positioning, a pattern, and so forth. Nevertheless, this acknowledgement is linked to the way in which agents use these elements to strategise, that is, to actualise the structural properties of the enterprise's strategic systems. In this way, the structurationist perspective allows links to be made between strategy viewed as an *a posteriori* rationalisation of corporate behaviour and the everyday organisational practices that constitute that strategy. Overall, the structurationist perspective promotes reflection on

action, in other words, on the ways in which agents elaborate intervention models and put them into action.

## **Conclusion**

The objective of this article was to demonstrate that the structurationist perspective provides a pertinent avenue of reflection for contributing to the renewal of thought in strategic management. Until now, the field of strategy has been based on two misleading conceptions. On one hand, most researchers associate strategic action with the action of top managers, and on the other hand, they make a theoretical separation between the enterprise and its environment. To try to resolve this problem, I relied on the theory of structuration. By considering strategy to be a structure of social activity, this theory makes it possible to understand how strategy, through the use of rules and resources, is produced and reproduced in the interactions of knowledgeable and reflexive agents.

To illustrate how the structurationist perspective can be used, two episodes were chosen from a case study of strategic change in a high-quality clothing company. These episodes dealt with the renewal of ties with the clientele to show how strategy formation is brought into play during everyday encounters. The first episode highlighted a conversation between the designer and a client, while the second described the new sales representative's contribution to the preparation of the "diffusion" collection.

These episodes demonstrate how agents strategise in and through micro-practices and social contexts. First, they strategise in their everyday interactions by putting into action three micro-practices: translating, disciplining, and justifying. Putting these three micro-practices into action constitutes exercising what might be called the strategic competence of agents. This has to do with their capacity to translate the enterprise's strategic orientation, to control the client, and to justify this orientation. Next, exercising this competence cannot be dissociated from the agents' capacity to use context and to call upon their multiple collective belongings. As a specific structure of activity, strategy is embedded in social structures. Thanks to a process of overcoding that is reflexively put into action, agents use context in the way they strategise. When they strategise, the agents recursively produce and reproduce the rules of the industry's structures and the rules of the social structures to which they belong. These rules are the medium and the outcome of strategic interaction.

After analysing these episodes, certain questions may be raised about how to use the structurationist perspective. I chose to take two episodes to show how non-management agents strategise in daily life by using rules and resources that belong to much wider systems. Of course, these two episodes by themselves cannot explain the entire strategic reality of the company concerned. It would have been necessary to reconstruct all thirty episodes, which was not possible for the purposes of this article. Such an approach would have allowed us to see that managers strategise in daily life in the same way that the actors in the chosen episodes do. When managers define the orientation of the enterprise or meet with the company's external partners, they reflexively put their competence as social agents into action. However, they generally have access to more resources and larger modalities of structuration. Reconstructing all thirty episodes would also have allowed the political and

organisational processes that can be found at an intermediary level of analysis to be brought to light. However, the objective of this text was to focus on the set of links between the micro and macro levels of strategy formation. Reconstructing all the episodes would also have made it possible to analyse the notions of unintended consequences of action and unacknowledged conditions of action. This would have made it possible to explain the constructed character of strategy and the fact that, although individuals control their action, they do not control the result of what they begin.

The structurationist point of view is still new in strategy. Continued reflection and empirical studies are needed. Nevertheless, it is a form of analysis that, as I attempted to demonstrate in this paper, is likely to participate in the renewal of knowledge in strategy insofar as it suggests interesting avenues of thought about both the macro and micro levels of strategic action at the same time. Such a project involves a certain number of issues that are at once theoretical, practical, and methodological.

Theoretically, the use of the structurationist perspective revives the challenge of constructing knowledge from multiple theoretical anchorings. The theory of structuration provides a meta-language for understanding different collective phenomena. It must be used in connection with specific knowledge of the areas of study concerned. Conceiving strategy as a specific social structure necessitates integrating into the analyses knowledge from various schools of thought in strategy, and even in organisational theory. To understand the representations of strategy that agents convey, a certain understanding of strategy as a plan, as a policy, and as a process of imitation is needed. To understand how the agents reproduce these representations in the instantiation of their practices, it is also necessary to have an idea of the micro



approaches in strategy regarding conversation, knowledge management, and the notion of social capital. Moreover, processual approaches provide important reference points for understanding what characterises the modalities of structuration of strategic activity. Finally, how agents strategise in everyday life cannot be understood without integrating knowledge from industrial economics and sociology in order to have a more in-depth comprehension of the industry rules.

In regard to interventions, the structurationist perspective requires the conception of the practitioner's role to be renewed. This perspective invites the consultant to promote a mode of intervention that is based on argumentation rather than on prescription. The role of the practitioner consists then of encouraging dialogue and conversation between people from the enterprise so they may define and appropriate a strategic discourse likely to increase the reflexive control of their actions. In this context, the practitioner's role is to provide different discursive mechanisms likely to foster exchanges and to translate the result of these conversations with outsiders. From this point of view, convincing managers to understand the make-up of their enterprise's "strategic structure" (e.g., by using Diagram 2) and to reflect on their actions following the structurationist model may favour the emergence of a critical look at action and improve the managers' reflexivity. One reason this is possible is because the structurationist schema allows us to integrate knowledge related to planning, positioning, and so forth with less tangible knowledge related to behaviour.

The structurationist perspective suggests that both consultants and managers accord importance to the specific locations in which the links between the enterprise and the environment are brought into play; more often than not, these are the intermediary

organisational positions (e.g., consultation, sales). With an understanding of what is going on in these places, it is possible to grasp the general dynamic of the strategic activity in an enterprise, that is to say the way in which the positioning of the enterprise is carried out in day-to-day life. Finally, such a perspective assumes that special attention be given to the way agents exercise their social competences with the goal of fostering the development of personal and relational skills likely to improve the putting into action of this competence.

On a methodological level, the structurationist perspective poses a number of challenges to researchers in strategy. One of these challenges is the need to use techniques and methods that provide access to both the discursive and practical consciousness of the agents. In this regard, the ethnographic approach is certainly the methodological anchorage most likely to meet this requirement. Yet, the ethnographic approach is time-consuming. It works for the structurationist perspective to the extent that the researcher is able to bring to light the elements of structure in ordinary action; if not, the ethnographic approach can easily lead to the collection and analysis of a series of anecdotes. Consequently, researchers must use other methodological worlds that allow them to know the workings and the nature of the context of the action in order to be able to see how the agents produce and reproduce this context. The agents are able to say what they are doing and why they are doing it, but they do not necessarily discursively rationalise what is going on in their practical consciousness. And yet, using context in strategic activity takes place at the level of practical consciousness. Other approaches, including the historical approach, the study of documents, the analysis of statistical data, conversational analysis, and the sequential analysis of routines are techniques could be used to enrich the ethnographic approach.

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