

**THREE RESPONSES TO THE METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES OF
STUDYING STRATEGISING**

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Abstract

Empirical studies of strategising face contradictory pressures. Ethnographic approaches are attractive, and typically expected. We argue, however, that today's large, multinational, and highly diversified organisational settings require supplementary methods providing more breadth and flexibility. This paper discusses three particularly promising approaches (interactive discussion groups, self-reports, and practitioner-led research) that fit the increasingly disparate research paradigms now being used to understand strategising and other management issues. Each of these approaches is based on the idea that strategising research cannot advance significantly without reconceptualising frequently taken-for-granted assumptions. The paper focuses in particular on the importance of working with organisational members as research partners rather than passive informants.

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INTRODUCTION

Several indicators point to the need for understanding how everyday behaviour in organisations creates strategic choices and consequences (Johnson and Huff, 1998). The resource-based theory of the firm is one important impetus, because it leads to the conclusion that strategic advantage is most often found in embedded, idiosyncratic routines and behaviours (Ambrosini and Bowman, 2001a; Barney, 1995). Another reason to look at the everyday comes from recent empirical work on organisational innovation and situated practice, which suggests that many people are able to describe and theorise about what they do in detail only when they are in the context of their work (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Suchman, 1987). Unfortunately, however, a review of journal articles in the 1990s by Johnson and Bowman (1999) shows that almost all strategic management research is concerned only with macro levels of analysis that do not provide the detail needed to understand strategising practices.

We agree with the authors just cited, and others, that “deep” data gathering around the unique characteristics of organisations, rather than their generic attributes, is needed. At the same time, however, there is a need for research designs that give priority to breadth. In a globalizing world, strategising research must reflect large-scale company activities in many different places simultaneously. Breadth is also required to capture the subtleties of new and more ephemeral organisational forms (Lewin and Koza, 1999).

The growing need for researchers to be close to the phenomena of study, to concentrate on context and detail, and simultaneously to be broad in their scope of study, attending to many

parts of the organisation, clearly creates conflict. This dilemma is exacerbated by a third consideration - the growing number of theoretic alternatives and methodological choices for studying organisations and the increasingly blurred ontological and epistemological boundaries of this work (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Locke, 2001). Fuzzy boundaries provide less clear directions on how data should be collected and interpreted. On the positive side, however, increasing pluralism means that methods can be used in different ways and similar methods may facilitate conversations across theoretic perspectives. These opportunities need more exploration.

The purpose of this paper is to acknowledge the challenge presented by the need for our research to be relevant to a globalising world and survey possible solutions to the depth/breadth/diversity dilemma this creates. This means that the enterprise of research has to change. At one level the solutions appear to be about innovation of methods, but if we pursue to its logical conclusion the argument that issues of depth, breadth, diversity and relevance are inter-linked, then it becomes apparent that we actually need to re-conceive the way we conduct research. In the first part of the paper we argue that the traditional approaches to providing data on micro-processes, primarily through case studies and ethnography, have so far only gone part way to generating the data we need to understand strategising. We therefore develop five criteria for assessing the suitability of other research approaches. In the second part of the paper, we describe three clusters of work that appear to meet these criteria: interactive discussion groups, self-reports and practitioner research. Gathering data in these ways is not new; various methods have been used in other fields, but the methods proposed are rarely used by strategy researchers. After describing work in each area, we acknowledge that all three approaches (like all methods) have weaknesses, but urge their further development.

BUILDING DATA DEPTH, BREADTH AND VARIETY

A Definition of Strategising and its Data Requirements

This special issue is concerned with the “myriad, micro activities that make up strategy and strategising in practice”. The new focus is on individuals and their interactions within groups with a concern for activities and routine processes (Johnson and Bowman, 1999). A substantial part of the strategising agenda is about understanding tacit, deeply embedded, and therefore hard to get at phenomena (Whittington, 2001). In other words, most strategy research has been about ‘know what’, whereas strategising research looks for ‘know how’. Critically, as we have already mentioned, know how is hard to understand away from practice itself (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Seely Brown and Duguid, 2001; Johnson and Huff, 1998).

A strategising agenda also urges researchers to consider whose know how we should try to collect and understand. As the strategy conversation moves beyond intended, formal, macro level processes to consider more micro organisational processes, interaction between top-level interventions and organisational responses from other players becomes important. Strategising implies engagement with lower level managers and non-managerial staff (Balogun, 1998; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1994).

To date, research that encompasses micro, multifaceted phenomena has been complex and time-consuming (Dawson, 1997). Most empirical studies follow a common “recipe.”¹ It is widely accepted, for example, that organisational processes cannot be understood in an acontextual, cross-sectional manner (Bowman, 1988; Chakravarthy and Doz, 1992; Dawson, 1997; Hosking and Anderson, 1992; Lyles, 1990; Mintzberg, 1988; Pettigrew, 1992; Van de Ven, 1992). The case study is the typical approach of processual research (Hinings, 1997), while other studies of

1 . We are using J.C. Spender’s (1989) insightful term for patterns found across similar firms here.

practice tend to favour the ethnographic approach of anthropology (Whittington, 2001). Reports emphasize detailed scene–setting justified by quotes from participants, and the best move from description to more abstract theorising by the researcher (Locke, 2001, p. 117). Only on very rare occasions (see especially Pettigrew et al., 1992) are these multi-site and / or multi-organisational.

There has been little debate about the appropriateness of the traditional approaches used in case and ethnographic studies (such as interviews, participant observation and documentation) for strategising research. We believe the common recipe needs a critical look. Strategising is about studying practitioners within the context of their work, but that context has exceeded our reach using accepted methods. Today’s environment poses problems of scale, scope, speed and complexity even for smaller organisations – longitudinal, real-time methods are needed. Whilst case study approaches and ethnographies can provide this, their well-known drawback is their great cost in researcher time. In large, complicated organisations, the requirements of ethnography, in particular, are very daunting. Alternative longitudinal, real-time means of data collection, that also enable the researcher to be close to the context of the respondent, are needed to make such research more manageable.

Criteria for Selecting Methods for Strategising Research

Even though our own work has tended to fall within an interpretive tradition, we believe that it is possible to identify many methods that accommodate multiple ontological and epistemological positions. We have looked for data gathering tools that can maximise the use of researcher time, but still yield adequate, contextually grounded data. More specifically, we have been interested in finding methods that simultaneously meet the following, potentially contradictory, criteria:

1. **Provides evidence/data that is both broad and deep because it is**
 - Contextual
 - Longitudinal
 - Facilitates comparison across sites
 - Can be collected at multiple organisational levels.
2. **Elicits full and willing commitment from informants because it is**
 - Interesting enough to engage organisational commitment
 - Enjoyable enough to sustain commitment over time.
3. **Makes the most effective use of researcher time because it**
 - Collects,
 - Organises, and
 - Analyses, large and varied amounts of evidence.

We believe that willing commitment from research participants is a key, but often neglected, means for achieving these aims. However, the data depth requirement of strategising research places a heavy burden on participants, and they are unlikely to be involved if the research is not sanctioned and supported by the top of the organisation (see Perlow, 1997). Corporate gatekeepers need to see a tangible organisational benefit resulting from the research if that is to happen. On a more micro level, individual participants also need to feel some personal benefit before they are likely to commit time and thought to a research project. Two additional guidelines seem helpful for engaging both audiences:

4. **Anchors the majority of questions being asked in organisational realities because it**
 - Is sensitive to multiple definitions of critical issues
 - Addresses problems of interest

- Involves organisationally based collaborators.

5. Goes beyond research based feedback to

- Contribute to organisational needs
- Provide informants with personally useful insights.

In short, if an academic researcher wishes the senior managers of an organisation to sanction longitudinal strategising research from multiple sites, provide access to employees as research participants, and sanction their spending time on data gathering and analysis, the research needs to provide something of use and interest to the organisation (Van de Ven, 1992). This is particularly true if the research is to examine something of great sensitivity, such as processes of change, which have a notoriously bad success rate. As Pettigrew observes, “social scientists have no god given right to expect other people’s organisations to be their laboratories” (1997: p. 343).

Equally important, there are strong theoretic arguments for more closely coordinating managers’ agendas and those of management researchers. Knowledge is produced in organisations, not just in universities (Huff, 2000; Tranfield and Starkey, 1998), and it must be studied there. A ‘Mode 1’ (Gibbons et al., 1994) research agenda that grows solely out of conversations with other academics is unlikely to reflect contemporary organisational realities. An agenda that is set with and by managers is more likely to be relevant to the organisation, and thus more likely to develop researcher understanding of micro activities.

This relocation requires that our own research processes become more reflective, and that academic researchers begin to link their ‘theorising’ processes to the ‘strategising’ processes that interest us. Our last criterion for strategising research is not just a one-way commitment to

feedback as a means of improving the likelihood of organisational access. We must find ways to build knowledge reciprocally (Pettigrew, 1990, 1997).

In order to engage in a reciprocal relationship, the researcher will almost certainly need to find forms of assistance or benefits they can offer an organisation; this is not just in return for access during the research it is also a way of more deeply understanding the work of the organisation. The very nature of longitudinal, micro-level research with large amounts of rich, complex data puts researchers in a position to offer on-going research-based feedback, for example (Balogun, 1998), and then build the response into the research project. Another option may be to run workshops, not just on the research findings, but on other topics of interest to the organisation and more general concepts of strategising.

Is Action Research the Answer?

The use of collaboration to strengthen research access, promote data quality, provide something useful to an organisation, and help the research agenda evolve is not new; these principles are particularly central to action research. Action research encourages intervention in the research context. There are, however, several schools of action research (Eden and Huxham, 1996) and each varies in its ability to provide the kind of data needed in strategising research. Some see action research as a form of learning and development for the individual undertaking the research project and for them alone (Reason, 1988, 1994). In this form of research, there is no requirement to frame the research in terms of a wider practical audience. A second approach is to see action research as a form of organisational development. The underlying assumption of this kind of work is that less empowered groups in organisations can become more empowered via researcher intervention (e.g. Chisholm and Elden, 1993). A third possibility, which has more utility in terms of the research we are discussing here, is to view action research as a method

without prescriptive motivations (Eden and Huxham, 1996). Just as case study via in-depth interview is a method, data gathered on the back of organisational activity (not necessarily an intervention) can also be a method.

Almost everyone interested in strategising research knows it is likely to be time-intensive, but the tradition of action research suggests the possibility of simultaneously engaging with a wide range of participants in more than one part of the organisation. The researcher can take on different roles when engaging with and perhaps helping to intervene in an organisation, varying from facilitator to interested bystander (Eden and Huxham, 1996; Huxham and Vangen, 2000). The further insight from this tradition is the recognition of collaboration. Collaboration with those inside the organisation can meet many of our five guidelines for strategising research at a stroke since by their nature, collaborative projects are contextual, and once an insider is engaged, the relationship is often longitudinal. We have come to believe this is essential to moving the strategising agenda forward.

Yet greater, real-time involvement is not a panacea in itself. Many action research projects are disengaged before general conclusions can be reached. Others last for considerable periods of time, and become as time consuming as more passive ethnographic studies, if not even more demanding. Reducing the role of the researcher to a facilitator/bystander, or replacing the outsider with insiders for many research tasks, (Bartunek and Louis, 1996) can greatly reduce researcher time, and enable collection of data across sites and levels. However, the more distant the researcher, the harder it can be to interpret what we have already described as the key methodological issue: the ability to recognise and draw out embedded tacit knowledge across multiple contexts in response to the depth/breadth/diversity methodological gap.

NEW METHODS FOR STRATEGISING RESEARCH

It is important to re-emphasize that collaboration with informants is attractive primarily because of the *nature* of the data required for strategising research. The dilemma we are wrestling with is that, on the one hand, micro processes are context sensitive and embedded in practice, thus difficult for the researcher with little experience in a given context to understand. On the other hand, it is not possible to rely only on conventional ethnographic methods to improve understanding, given the breadth, complexity, and rapid transformation of many organisational environments. Wrestling with this dilemma led us to elevate less frequently used tools of data gathering to get closer to practitioners and their practice. On the basis of our experience, this paper recommends three kinds of data collection methods. Each approach is widely used in other social sciences and professions, but is relatively unfamiliar in strategy-based research. We believe they are particularly applicable to strategising research if they are used as part of a broader research design that uses multiple methods (Huff, 1981).

Interactive Discussion Groups

A great deal of strategising takes place in ‘communities of practice’ whose activity and knowledge is better seen as a property of the group and its interactions than as individual phenomena (Langfield-Smith, 1992). While there has been a useful broadening of focus from the individual leader to the top management team in strategy research, relatively little is done to collect detail at this level of analysis, (for one exception see Ambrosini and Bowman, 2001b). Even less has been done to understand collectively shared knowledge beyond the top management team.

The term ‘interactive discussion group’ covers a board spectrum of dialogue-based group level data gathering techniques that might be helpful in this regard. Those using group-based data

collecting methods typically draw together individuals whose opinions, values, attitudes, beliefs, and memories are likely to be rich in relation to the phenomenon of research interest. The careful selection of participants is meant to lead to sophisticated queries from within the group. The academic perspective remains important, but interaction within the group will hopefully lead to queries and insights that exceed what academic can achieve alone.

Discussion methods can be placed along a continuum according to the depth at which the researcher wishes to explore informant understanding of a research question. At one extreme is the *group interview*. Here, individual opinions are sought in a group environment to speed data collection, but also so that shared insider reflections can serve as memory triggers. The emphasis is on collecting and codifying dispersed knowledge.

At the other end of the continuum, groups can be designed in an *encounter group* format. In this highly experiential format individuals are encouraged to construct or re-construct cognitions (attitudes, beliefs, values, emotions) that are typically repressed. While insight at this depth is highly desirable, issues of expert facilitation put techniques such as encounter groups out of the reach of most management researchers. Consequently, our recommendations focus on engaging with groups more at the interview-based end of the spectrum, though we do describe an interview method explicitly designed to uncover knowledge and emotion that may be difficult to express directly.

The great attraction of the group format is that it is a less time demanding approach to data collection than observation and/or individual interviews (Morgan, 1988). The researcher can collect data from informants at multiple sites without having highly detailed local knowledge, because the participants bring that knowledge. Critically, the researcher creates the space and

possibility for informed insiders to ask questions of each other. Discussion groups may not elicit the depth of information from individual respondents that can be achieved with one-to-one interviews, though it also has been argued that more detailed data may emerge (Edwards and Talbot, 1999). Even if the data are not as rich, however, the compensating advantage of discussion groups is that ‘the inherent group dynamics tend to yield insights that ordinarily are not obtainable from individual interviews’ (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1991: 52).

In discussion groups, interaction within the group is used to generate data as opposed to interaction between researcher and participant. Group discussion enables participants to explore what *they* think is pertinent and generate insights grounded in *their*, not the researchers', understanding (Alexander, 2000). The interviewer is typically a moderator, and there is often less structure than with individual interviews, because structure can impede group dynamics (Crabtree et al., 1993). Ideally, individuals spark off each other during much of the data gathering process, rather than responding to a pre-determined set of questions (Blackburn and Stokes, 2000).

Individual verbalisations within a group tend to act as memory triggers for other group members (Hinsz, 1990; Larson and Christensen, 1993), which broadens the scope of information (both tacit and conscious) elicited (Edwards and Middleton, 1986; Edwards, Potter and Middleton, 1992). Often, there is also a catalytic effect within groups in terms of memory recall - a snowball effect (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). Group members ideally challenge one another's contributions; they notice inconsistencies that an interviewer working one-to-one with an interviewee is less likely to notice.

The situated practice literature (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Suchman, 1987; Seely Brown and

Duguid, 2001) suggests that participants are likely to find it hard to explain what they do outside of practice, thus direct questions may not work. Interacting with other practitioners may be the next best thing. Facilitators often rely on techniques such as storytelling and critical incident analysis to get participants into discussions that elicit desired data. The story telling tradition in particular has been strongly associated with the exploration of practice-based tacit knowledge (Orr, 1996; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Cook and Yanow, 1993).

It must be recognised that discussion groups can also suppress individual contributions. Although we discuss method weaknesses in more detail later in the paper, it is important to note that researchers/moderators must establish strong ground rules that discourage domination by the few. Blackburn and Stokes (2000) helpfully suggest that the level of openness achieved in focus groups also may be due to a shift in power between the researched and the researcher – participants are among their peers and the researcher is reduced to a minority. By implication, and well supported by experience, the utility of useful discussion groups ultimately depends on the development of group norms supporting openness and the substantive objectives of the inquiry process.

Given moderator/group control, and good will on the part of participants, groups can become an important means of data collection. They are most helpful in a longitudinal research design, where the confidence of individual contributors can grow as they become accustomed to the other members of the group and the discussion group format. The participants themselves are then more likely to shape the direction of the enquiry. Hartley et al. (1997) provide a good example of such longitudinal work in their investigation into the role of internal change agents. Questions from within the group probed issues such as the challenges faced in the formulation and implementation of change, what facilitated and obstructed the work, solutions tried and the

outcomes achieved, and so on.

When interactive discussion groups move in a direction determined by participants, participation in a discussion group can boost informant commitment to the research process. Whilst there are obviously problems in ensuring continuity of group membership, busy practitioners who benefit from the opportunity to examine and improve their own practice tend to commit their time to process (Ely, 2001).

Types of Interactive Discussion Groups

A simple, relatively structured form of facilitated discussion is known as the *nominal group technique* (Delbecq et al., 1975). Whilst typically a problem solving method, nominal groups can be used to focus on research purposes as well. The rules of participation are designed to maximise the inputs of individuals, and limit potential problems of group discussion (including deferral to high status members, domination by the most opinionated, and collapse into tangential subtopics). Data gathering focuses on a specific question, posed at the outset. Contributions are collected in round-robin fashion, followed by anonymous voting. Tabulation suggests areas of agreement. Clarification or elaboration can be achieved in successive rounds of discussion and voting.

A better-known form of facilitated discussion is the less structured *focus group*, which is often used to unearth personal views and experiences (Blackburn and Stokes, 2000). There are many books written about this data collection method (see, for example, Bloor et al., 2000; Greenbaum, 2000; Morgan, 1993, 1997a and 1997b; Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). It is very popular in market research, but also recommended in social science research (Blumer, 1969), and in professional areas such as nursing and other medical specialities (Villarruel et al., 2001;

Kennelly and Bowling, 2001; Meuser and Marwit, 2001; Thompson et al., 2001). Ely (2001) explored pain management practices among paediatric nurses with nurses attending from 1 to 6 focus groups over a 10 week period. She not only gathered data for her research, but also enabled participants to collectively consider how they could improve practices, an important motivation from those who attended. In the public policy arena, Alexander (2000) used longitudinal focus groups to investigate adaptive strategies of non-profit human service organisations. Attendees included executive directors, associate directors and program staff.

Focus groups have been used in managerial research to collect data in several one-off interventions (see Whittington, 2001; Heneman et al., 2000; Vyakarnam et al., 1997). In addition, Blackburn and Stokes (2000) conducted focus groups with SME business owners every 6 months to examine their experiences and issues. The design was intended to build rapport between participants and researchers through time, leading to a freer discussion.

As with the nominal group technique, focus groups are particularly useful for collecting conscious knowledge, and Morgan and Krueger claim that “the interaction in focus groups often creates a cueing phenomenon that has the potential for extracting more information than other methods” (1993: p. 17). The transcripts of focus groups can be analysed for thematic content, perhaps using computer programs like Atlas and NUD.IST.

Mapping groups provide a third example of group-based discussion, one that is more widely used in strategy research. In these groups, discussion is structured using one of several different cognitive mapping techniques (Eden and Ackermann, 1998; Huff and Jenkins, 2001; Laukkanen, 1998; Ambrosini and Bowman, 2001a and 2001b). Individuals’ ideas, opinions and beliefs are represented as discrete items, often using post-it notes on a wall chart, or data boxes in a

mapping software such as Decision Explorer or Group Explorer (Eden and Ackermann, 1998). The memory jogging advantages noted for focus groups apply, but the added advantage of a mapping group is the possibility of moving from individual maps to aggregate ones, capturing more complex data in the process. For example, many mapping methods represent causality. Portions of a map can be isolated for additional, more specific debate and elaboration.

Mapping groups can be an interventionist tool to aid the strategising process (see, for example, Eden and Ackermann, 1998), a research tool (Langfield-Smith, 1992), and sometimes both. Johnson and Johnson (2001) describe work done with senior management teams as part of a consulting assignment across sub-divisions of a major multi-national organisation. The managers were asked to reflect upon micro, everyday competencies that in their view delivered success. The data were used to discuss differences and similarities in the sub-divisions at the corporate level. As researchers Johnson and Johnson also reflected on the difficulties of facilitating such groups, and coming to reliable conclusions about the resources of an organisation.

Visual representation of an individual's thinking allows participants to make explicit to themselves connections that may have been tacit and taken for granted, or been intuitive (Huff and Jenkins, 2001). For example, Ambrosini and Bowman (2001b) report on a one-day mapping session with senior managers to gain insights into the tacit routines that the managers felt underpinned their success. Ambrosini (2001) reports that some managers were genuinely surprised about some of the factors they mapped, suggesting that the discussion led to details unlikely to be found through straightforward interview, or perhaps even observation.

Other techniques can also be used to help elicit, structure and record informant's knowledge in a discussion group format. For example, researchers may use artefacts as memory prompts (similar to a market researcher using product logos to gather opinion) or projective techniques (for example, colours and shapes to represent feelings towards organisational phenomenon) or brainstorming to aid verbalisation. Doyle and Sims (2001) have developed a method they call '*cognitive sculpting*,' which offers participants purposefully collected objects that have been found useful in helping individuals and groups create new representations of a phenomenon.

Self-Report Methods

The second family of data collection mechanisms we suggest allows informants to provide data without the presence of a researcher. These collection mechanisms can be placed on a continuum from *structured questionnaires* to *unstructured diaries* in which respondents choose their own feedback topics. A well-known example of the former is Louis's (1980) longitudinal study of the organisational entry experiences of new managers, which relied on periodic reports via semi-structured questionnaires. Participants found the subject so important that continued involvement was quite high, which suggests that straightforward data designs are sometimes effective.

At the other end of the continuum, we are particularly interested in diaries, which might be thought of as highly unstructured questionnaires. However, data gathering via diaries tends to be very different in intent. Diaries are more personal (Burgess, 1984; Denzin, 1989). They are documents that potentially enable the researcher to "gain an intimate view of organisations, relationships, and events, from the perspective of one who has experienced them him- or herself" (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, p. 7). Participants record events, thoughts, incidents and so on that appear important to them (Allport, 1942), close to the time they happen, but at convenient times

(Denzin, 1989). As such, they are more likely to reveal theory in use as opposed to espoused theory (Argyris and Schön, 1978).

Diaries are an established means of collecting data with a proven track record in medical studies and sociology (see, for example, Burgess, 1984); however, there is little written guidance for their use, in contrast to the many publications devoted to different kinds of discussion groups. Diaries have occasionally been used in management research. For example, Buchanan and Boddy (1992) used a simple description of the type of information required to elicit free-format audio diaries over a 2-week period that produced a detailed account of change managers' experiences of managing change. Schilit (1987) used diaries to get middle managers to record the frequency, nature and outcome of interactions with their supervisors on strategic decisions for 2 months. Balogun (1998) used written, semi-structured diaries based on five questions to track the progress of change implementation for 9 months from the perspective of middle managers. Weiss et al. (1999) asked managerial workers to maintain diaries to capture their mood state at specific time intervals during the day. The data were compared with measures of job satisfaction, beliefs about the job, measures of dispositional happiness, and affect intensity.

These examples suggest that diaries are potentially useful in real-time research when there is need to track events through time. A higher frequency of data collection is possible than with interviews or group discussions, which reduces the likelihood of forgotten events or experiences (Denzin, 1989). Although the level of data required from diarists can vary, experience has shown that diarists can record required data speedily, at their own convenience. However, the very act of writing is time consuming and conscious editing of the written word can lead to a more sanitised and clipped account of the phenomena of interest. An alternative is dictation into a hand held recording device, which may allow for greater spontaneity. It is often easier to dictate

comments immediately after a relevant event occurs, between other responsibilities, when something is remembered, or when an insight occurs. The audio format is likely to encourage more openness, directness and self-expression, and perhaps allow for more emotive observations than written records. An e-mail option also tends to be more informal, and greatly decreases data transcription time and expense for the researcher. Furthermore, technology is widening data collection options. Voice recognition software is now available that enables direct dictation. Though currently expensive for widespread use, its accessibility will undoubtedly improve.

From the researcher's point of view, the main strength of diaries lies in their ability to collect large amounts of real-time information from a wide group of respondents through time – particularly when it is necessary to capture reflections and perceptions either frequently or after unpredictably occurring events. In medicine, for example, patients have been asked to record information at specific times of day, or after an illness episode. Self-reports also tend to be less time consuming for the researcher in terms of data collection, since this occurs in the researcher's absence (see Perlow, 1999), though the effort required to co-ordinate, manage and follow-up on a large number of respondents should not be underestimated.

The demands of the method on participants may be reduced if contributions are submitted electronically. Some participants will find self-reflection so useful that dairies are self-sustaining (Edwards and Talbot, 1999), many others are unlikely to continue recording without evidence that the information they provide is being put to good use. To sustain commitment, data gathering via self-report also may need to be combined with other methods, such as discussion groups or interviews.

Types of Diaries

Diaries can take different forms. Denzin (1989) talks of *life-history* data collection as a diary technique. These diaries are intimate journals that capture an individual's reflections about life and experiences and how he or she feels about the things they perceive and do, or have done. *Memoirs* suggest a more objective account of a subject's life. They tend to be more impersonal, and can be useful for recording observations of others. At the other end of the continuum, a *log* is a very depersonalised, record of events, which can be highly formatted. The intimate journal is suitable for tracking research participants' perceptions of their organisation and events. A log is useful for understanding things like contact networks, and even a desk diary or calendar can be a useful source of data.

It would be wrong to suppose that an intimate journal in management research needs to be as comprehensive as an individual's personal diary, since research-oriented diarists are likely to be prompted to record impressions of only certain types of events or issues as the examples given above show. Diaries also can be used to capture more quantitative data. Clark et al. (1988) collected daily quantitative information for 4 weeks on work tasks. Schilit (1987) trained his diarists to code diary data into 14 categories and 44 types of strategic decisions. Perlow (1997 and 1999) was not specifically conducting strategising research (she was looking at how people use their time at work), but she got a group of software engineers to track their activities for a few days only by asking them to wear a digital watch that beeped on the hour. They then wrote down everything they had done since the last prompt.

Practitioner Research

The third family of data gathering techniques we recommend involve data gathering by informants who are researchers. They define the problems of interest, and actively collect data

from their own practice, rather than just observing or reflecting on practice. This activity may be facilitated by an outside researcher, or carried out by practitioners independently. The approach is particularly attractive as a vehicle for strategising research among reflective practitioners.

Research by practitioners can be placed on a continuum from relatively *informal learning groups* with no formal outputs to *focused individual and group projects* reported in formal publication. Data gathering supports knowledge development through the production process itself, and through comparison with other participants' issues and learning (Hartley et al., 1997). These outcomes can provide an incentive for organisation members to engage in research, although it is almost inevitably more time consuming than the other two approaches we have discussed. Practitioner research is also of potential interest to practitioners because it can lead to organisational change (Preskill and Torres, 1999).

The mechanisms used to collect practitioner generated data include those we have already discussed. Logs, diaries and other records are often found useful for individual self-reflection. Group meetings can be used to explore and share individual insights. The advantages of these methods will not be repeated here. However, practitioner based research has used these mechanisms in interesting and unique ways. In their research into the practices of internal change agents, for example, Hartley et al. (1997) used whole day learning laboratories, supplemented by individually maintained diaries. Reflections between group meetings also can be carried out by e-mail (Dubetz and Turley, 2001) or in on-line discussion groups. In real time, teacher-researchers often observe each other at work. Individuals bring pieces of their work to group meetings, or show examples of how they work in situ via tape recordings (Reason, 1999a). Facilitated self-reflection also is used routinely in counselling or psychotherapy, where counsellors bring tapes of their own work to one-on-one or group supervision sessions (see

Mearns and Thorne, 2001). Quantitative techniques are also useful, and may not require sophisticated analysis. Charts summarizing numerical data, chi square tests, regression and other statistical tools can be informative, and are used by an increasingly broad group of practitioners.

Types of Practitioner Research

Empirical research on the learning organisation (Easterby-Smith et al., 1999) suggests various methodologies for encouraging practitioner driven research projects. For example, Dixon (1999) reports on a series of *forums* she helped co-ordinate for six museums. An initial two-day 'planning forum' brought representatives from each museum together to plan a subsequent three-day 'learning forum.' This target event "brought together teams from each participating museum for three days to learn from and with each other. The insights acquired at the Learning Forum were to be taken back to participating organisations and applied. Following the Learning Forum, interaction among participants was facilitated by a variety of means including electronic conferencing and exchange visits" (1999, p. 116). At least one member of each team then met in a two day 'reflection forum' that considered the lessons learned in the preceding months within their organisation.

Preskill and Torres (1999) have sponsored a more specific, and potentially more critical, form of participant research. *Evaluative inquiry*, as they describe it, moves evaluation from a product orientation to a more holistic, integrative assessment of an individual, group or organisation. In their consulting work, the authors support 'systemic enquiry' into questions like: 'Should this programme be continued?' or 'Should more or less resources be allocated to this product's development?' These questions are answered using enquiry processes such as asking questions, reflection, challenging values, beliefs and assumptions, dialogue, analysis of data and action planning (1999, p. 95).

Individual research projects involve similar activities, often around more specific questions. We single them out as a separate form of inquiry of interest to researchers on organisational micro processes of strategising because they can generate published, publicly available research reports. Although we are not aware of publication forums for practitioner research in management, they are well established in areas such as teaching and various medical specialities such as nursing. Because this work is so individual, it is impossible to summarise. Some examples from the teaching profession can be found in the electronic journal *Networks*.

DISCUSSION

The beginning of this paper suggests five criteria for judging data gathering methods that might bridge the depth/breadth/diversity research gap. In aggregate, the three collaborative research approaches outlined appear to meet these criteria. They do not assume that the academic researcher is the expert, or even the interpretive conduit; they instead ask organisational members to be more active shapers of the research endeavour. These data gathering methods are not without weaknesses, however, and they raise issues about the type of knowledge developed in collaborative research. In this final section of the paper we consider these issues in more detail.

Methodological Weaknesses

Overall, practitioner involvement requires academic researchers and organisational participants to be very open. The focus at the micro level is likely to require an individual to acknowledge their strengths and inadequacies in front of others, and also to examine others' strengths and weaknesses. Ethical as well as practical issues are raised by these activities, that also affect the nature of the data gathered. Confidentiality guidelines and ethical guidelines need to be agreed,

but this is still difficult territory. Table 1 highlights some of the issues involved in a summary description of the three methods we are proposing for strategising research.

Insert Table 1 about here

Facilitated discussion groups

There are two major issues concerning the use of groups to gather data that need particular attention – facilitation skills and the dynamics of group settings. We believe that discussion groups often require skilled facilitation for rigorous and responsible data collecting. Facilitation is an art in itself (Johnson and Johnson, 2001). When working with groups, researchers may be required to make multiple process interventions. If they are not skilled in spotting a problem early, or do not know how to handle emerging group dynamics, their influence attempts within the group are likely to fail.

This may not be a bad thing, as we have already discussed, but it is important to note that just as the group environment can release information, it can also bound and obscure it. The many dysfunctional aspects of group interaction include polarisation (Moscovici and Zavalloni, 1969), loafing (Williams et al., 1979), and groupthink (Janis, 1982). Other widely recognised problems include hierarchical dominance, ego dominance, self-congratulation, and concern about counter actions and retribution (from other group members or from those outside the group who hear second hand reports).

Another problem with discussion groups is that without skilled facilitation it can be hard to get participants to move beyond the obvious and access the more tacit, contextually specific information of interest to strategising researchers. Mapping techniques may be helpful in this regard, though they are rarely used to capture more emotional aspects of understanding. The

physical artefact does help participants to explore connections, and relate it to the understanding of others. It can be saved and used to expand on the same themes at later sessions or communicate with others. Software programs simplify data collection and analysis. Some programs, such as Decision Explorer and Group Explorer, also enable mapping in real time, which can help strategising research be much more dynamic.

A particularly important issue in group-based research of all kinds is the selection of appropriate and willing participants. Selecting participants from different parts of the organisation can make groupthink less likely, and reduce concerns about retribution, spreading harmful gossip or contagion. Selecting participants in lateral relationships can also reduce hierarchy effects, though perhaps raising other competitive issues. Making clear the purpose of the group and making no promises that cannot be kept should help reduce disappointments about outcomes of a research project.

Concerns about distinguishing ‘fact’ from ‘fiction’ can be harder to resolve. First, one person’s fact is often perceived by others as fiction; and individuals themselves often change their minds about the boundaries they perceive. Different interpretations of fact have to be accepted as an inevitable part of organising and assessing the ‘honesty’ and accuracy of what is recorded is an issue that ultimately must be resolved with reference to the ontological position taken by the researcher. On the other hand, deliberate untruth misrepresentation is a long-standing issue in qualitative research, and interesting data in itself. Ideally, group members provide balance and are better than an outsider at spotting deliberate distortion, withholding of information, and other behaviour. Multiple meetings also can be helpful. It is difficult to deliberately maintain fictions over time in a group setting.

Self Report Methods

The nature of data collected via self report raise similar issues of facilitation and assessment. “Diary interviews” (Burgess, 1984) and focus group meetings (Balogun, 1998) can be used to clarify the content of the diaries (see Perlow 1997 and 1999; Balogun, 1998). They can be face-to-face, but short telephone interviews are often sufficient. Focus groups may be more time efficient, and may be more productive if diarists collectively reflect on the data they have provided. As described under interactive discussion groups, forum for collective analysis may also maintain diarists’ interest in the research.

Researcher contact and facilitation may be especially necessary to identify those who are uncomfortable with their role, or reluctant to give full information. For particularly long pieces of research, individual interviews to understand each participant’s background and context shortly after the start of the research is likely to be useful. They are a good way for the researcher to establish contact and build a relationship with diarists, while periodic interviews help spot changes in this baseline picture.

If data collected from individuals are to be seen in some form by more senior managers within the organisation, then guarantees of anonymity are typically given to encourage frankness. Even so, the potential distortion of hierarchical relations has to be considered. Efforts should be made to separate attempts at advocacy, or attempts to distort data to serve a participant’s own self-interests, from the inevitable limitations of data generated from any specific standpoint. Again, interviews may help, and careful selection of diarists to get overlapping data inputs is important. Diarists who do not discuss events that other diarists from similar parts of the organisation mention should be noted. Those who consistently present events in a unique way also warrant

attention. Non-overlapping data provide clues as to the need to dig deeper, but it is interesting to reflect on problem solving research that suggests an outlier can be a particularly insightful contributor (Brown, Cochran & Dalkey 1968).

Another issue relates to the quality and relevance of data provided. Diaries, like other data collection methods are subject to the GIGO phenomenon – garbage in, garbage out. Just as the skill with discussion groups is facilitation, the skill with collecting data from diaries lies with the briefing of participants. Whatever the epistemic and ontological perspective of the researcher, diarists need to be briefed very clearly as to what sort of things to take note of. In strategising research, with its emphasis on dynamics, the brief is likely to be refined as the research progresses. Even if the researcher does not wish to specify categories, some guidance often must be given to reduce anxiety. However, existing research suggests that diarists can be briefed and trained to provide a variety of data inputs (see Schilit (1987) and Weiss et al. (1999), discussed above).

Practitioner Research

Since practitioner research relies heavily on self-reflection, and often uses interactive discussion groups, all the comments previously made apply equally here. The skills required to facilitate discussion groups as part of practitioner research are demanding but fruitful (Reason and Heron, 1995; Reason, 1999b). Potential problems include the need for participants to develop critical self-reflection, and the possibility that some may find examining what they do uncomfortable and emotionally distressing.

There are significant issues of training involved. Academic researchers take many courses that help them identify tractable problems, design research, analyse initial results and carry out

additional projects. They typically serve an apprenticeship with a more senior scholar before carrying out projects of their own. This process has to be streamlined for practitioner researchers, and adapted to their purposes, but it cannot be ignored if creditable work is to be done.

It is also important to highlight ethical issues. University research provides initial guidelines in this regard, based on considerable experience. Methods that were once adopted with enthusiasm are sometimes rejected later. (As an extreme case, consider the electric shocks administered by participants to each other in psychology labs not so long ago.) In fact, a wide range of issues, not only ethical but social, political and economic, must be considered by researchers. These implications of research have new twists when insiders and outsiders collaborate.

The Nature of Knowledge

A collaborative research agenda inevitably contains some incommensurate goals, and puts the academic researcher under pressure to pursue what interests practitioners at the potential expense of the research agenda. Ultimately, both parties are responsible for ensuring that the development of knowledge remains the focal point. Eden and Huxham (1996) detail a series of issues academic researchers need to address to ensure that collaborative research still delivers robust research data. These issues include an intent to inform other contexts with theory development as an explicit concern, a focus on theory building, developing a clear audit trail of the data exploration *and* cycles of researcher reflection, and a concern for issues of external validity. In short, collaboration does not excuse a lack of attention to validity in research design.

The methods we have described are just the beginning of a set of tools that need to be developed and tested. For one thing, researchers will still be working with relatively small numbers of

organisations and participants using the data gathering methods we have discussed. Nonetheless, the move toward larger numbers means that issues of generalisation have to be dealt with. Here we are more likely to be concerned with what Mitchell (1987) terms 'analytical induction', based on the validity of data analysis rather than the question of data representativeness. The aim is to find what he calls 'theoretical defensible regularities'. Yin (1994) similarly talks of 'analytic generalisation' when attempting to generalise the findings of qualitative research.

Re-conceiving Research

Table 2 summarises some assumptions of traditional research that we believe need to be challenged if research on strategising is to move forward in the way we believe it must. One of the key changes we have been arguing for is collaboration with organisational members. This collaboration is an alliance in which the benefits, contribution, and level of participation of each side needs to be agreed upon. Some organisational collaborators may be sponsors of the research rather than direct participants (see, for example, Gratton et al., 1999), but these sponsors still need to provide access to suitable research informants who are willing and able to actively participate in the project itself.

Insert Table 2 about here

If we are to work with people at the sites that interest us as equal partners, we need to take seriously the admonitions that no research approach is inherently inferior or superior (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), and different ontological assumptions are likely to be appropriate for different stages of inquiry (Weick, 1995, 35-36). In our experience, these are difficult ideas to remember in the course of research, and they require reconsidering taken-for-granted assumptions.

For example, when writing about insider / outsider team research, Bartunek and Louis (1996) point out that there are particular up front stages that require attention if a mixed research team is to function well. These include building the research team by selecting and negotiating the involvement of appropriate organisational participants, and developing a working relationship among the team. Like any team, on-going development activities may be required, such as periodic reviews about the way the team is working together and how individual members feel about their contributions. This creates a management overhead for all participants. It also raises the issue of the types of skills required for research.

Table 2 also notes that collaborative relationships involve potentially complex issues about ownership of data. Researchers tend to expect ownership of data – for a start, some or most data is held in the researcher’s database to which the organisation hosting the research probably has no access. Normally there is also a contract that allows a researcher to publish findings, although there may be imposed time frames, with the identity of the organisation concealed, and a restriction on sensitive information. But when collaborative knowledge creation is the agenda, the organisation and individual participants will have as many rights as the researcher. Co-ownership may restrict freedom of data use.

Another issue involves outputs. Academics will want a scholarly contribution as an outcome, but strategising research may require working on outputs that are of less interest to academics. Organisational collaborators are likely to be more interested in a practical series of outcomes or actions, and possibly dissemination in practitioner journals. Beyond individual outcomes, organisations are likely to want some type of practical recommendations from collaborative research in addition to any *quid pro quo* that has been offered during the lifetime of the research project.

Researchers have typically assumed they have a duty to publish and disseminate their findings. The essence of academic work is to engage in scholarly debate with other academics. Co-ownership may strike at the heart of what researchers see as their fundamental freedom to interpret and disseminate data in a way they see fit. It gives participants more say in the entire course of research. Can researchers adopt any interpretation they choose? To what extent can collaborators block particular inferences they disagree with, dislike, or want to suppress because they feel it presents them in a bad light? Do organisational participants understand the publishing game and its importance to the researcher? These are all uncomfortable questions that should not be hidden in an overly simplistic notion of co-authorship and contractual relationships. They have been addressed in many action research projects and ethnographic studies where but must now be addressed in a broader context, with specific reference to a strategising agenda.

CONCLUSION

The study of micro processes is an important outgrowth of evolving theories about organisations and their management. This paper explores what we see as inevitable – a similar evolution in research methodology. In the last few decades, the number of academic research projects focused on organisational activity has increased dramatically, while the time pressures on organisations, and the performance standards they are expected to meet, have also radically increased. As a result of both trends, our research populations are less and less willing to be involved with managerial research on the basis of altruism alone, while we are less and less confident in the insights gained via more superficial research methods methods. But if we are to move beyond archival data and limited questionnaires to gather the kind of in-depth information on strategising discussed in this paper, we must ask much more of ourselves and our colleagues

in organisations.

The argument in this paper is that the need for organisationally-based insight is so strong that we must re-conceive our basic identities as researchers. The academic's outsider perspective cannot provide adequate insight into strategising as a fluid, ongoing, micro level activity. If we want to move management research into the fast paced, competitive arena of the 21st century, we have to generate more research topics from within the organisation. The complications of our research sites mean that individual researchers, even groups of researchers, cannot count on gaining an insider's perspective on their own.

The standards of traditional case studies and ethnographies have been useful, but the tools we rely on for data gathering have to be extended and reconceived to fit a changing world. By re-conception we do not mean sacrificing rigour. Rather, we mean adopting a new set of expectations and assumptions. In order to do excellent and insightful research, researchers need to be project managers, skilled negotiators, trainers, co-workers and collaborators as well as writers, methodologists, analysts and theorists. The broader implication of the observation that know how is embedded in context and practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) is the need for new research tools. Our argument in sum is that the logic of strategising requires that we transform ourselves as researchers.

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Table 1: Comparison of Data Collection Methods

	Interactive Discussion Groups	Self Report	Practitioner Research
Uses	Can be used for tracking events and incidents, but better for examining individual and common meaning systems. Also good for probing common issues in more depth, especially if multiple meetings are scheduled. Less good than diaries at tracking issues requiring flexible or frequent capture of data.	Useful for tracking events and incidents in real time. Better than groups or research reports at capturing interactions, stories, gossip and the individual impact of organisational phenomena.	Useful for surfacing topics that affect practice, and data that practitioners expect to be useful. Reveals practitioner understanding of their own working patterns, processes, methods, reactions, interactions, successes, failures, etc.
Types of Data Provided	More varied than diaries. Meetings can be voice or video recorded. Group interactions can be analysed. Diagrams, flipcharts, notes and any other material from group sessions can be captured as data sources. Specialised software programmes can capture causal maps and more generally analyse verbal data.	Qualitative observations of events, including experiential data (feelings, observations, reactions, emotions) can be captured on a variety of media (manual and electronic). Informants can code data, and supply supplementary data, including statistical data.	Highly varied. Both qualitative and quantitative increasingly, research reports are published as a method of communicating with other practitioners.
Frequency and Type of Data Collected	Much lower frequency than diaries, but much more than practitioner studies. In most settings, groups can only meet periodically, perhaps once a week, more likely once a month or less in longitudinal projects. Group meetings can be supplemented by one-off groups to take soundings in other parts of the organisation. The length of sessions can vary, from a period of an hour to a multi-day off site session on topics highly related to organisational interests. In addition to interest, data collected depends on (1) the complexity of issues studied, (2) the	Flexible – can be specified by researcher or left to choice of informant. There are trade-offs. If frequency of reporting is low (for example, once a month), diarists may forget things or post-rationalise more. A very high frequency, such as daily, is likely to be too time consuming. An alternative is to set certain time periods at which diary entries must be forwarded to the researcher, but it is up to the diarists to decide whether to take notes daily, as and when things occur,	Flexible, but determined primarily by perceived need of informants. Qualitative studies are also likely. Individual logs may include not just written reports but also diagrams, tapes or videos of events involving the informants, correspondence, and so on.

	availability of group members, (3) whether the group is a one-off or an ongoing collective, and (4) the skill of the facilitator to access information quickly and maintain interest.	all at once, or any combination of the options. Reports can be prompted in response to certain events, at specified time intervals during the day, etc. E-mail increases the utility of this method.	
Weaknesses	Need for strong facilitation skills if open contribution and genuine depth of data from all participants is to be achieved, and participants are to move beyond the obvious. Issues connected with group dynamics such as status, fears of retribution power and dominance must be addressed. Complexity of data produced can be difficult to analyse. Individual versus overlapping opinions can be hard to identify. Hard to transcribe multi-voice settings. Poor recall of participants about events between focus groups unless groups enhanced by maintenance of between session logs or pre-session reports.	Depth and detail may be lacking. Informants may not be open and honest. Informants may be uncomfortable with role. Inadequate participant briefing may lead to inadequate data. Need for something such as intermittent discussion groups between informants to maintain interest. Can get vast amounts of non-relevant data. Self observation can affect how the past is remembered, and how future actions overtake.	Issues raised for discussion groups and diaries. In addition: Requires capacity for <i>critical</i> self reflection on part of informants. Need for participants to like working together and to trust each other. Time required for training in research methods and to carry out research. Understanding of (and agreement with) ethical concerns.

Table 2: Re-conceiving Strategising Research

	Traditional Assumptions	New Assumptions
Relationship with Participants	Often distant and detached	Informants as collaborators in data collection, analysis, and report. Outside researcher as coach to encourage and develop self-reflection. Insiders as coach to encourage more subtle observation and understanding by researchers.
Skills Level	Researcher as hero – traditional research skills	Multiple skills required. Traditional research training augmented by facilitation skills, team development skills, consultancy skills (e.g. interpersonal, political). Client facing skills important.
Feedback	Often minimal, typically at end of study	Often significant, of varying forms, and often provided in progress. Aim is to offer an organisation something in return for access in addition to research feedback.
Relationship with site organisation	Typically arms length and contractual	Alliance or consortium
Who sets research question	Researcher	Researcher with organisational collaborators who have similar, or parallel but compatible, agendas.
Data Collection principles	Best cases first	Best cases last to exploit learning curve
How Data Collected	Participant observation, interviews and secondary sources	Self report and self directed methods dominate, supported by more traditional ethnography, and unobtrusive methods.
Who Collects Data	Outside researcher	Insiders more than outsiders
Who Analyses Data	Researcher	Joint effort, although many different forms. Each group may analyse data separately and compare findings, one group may analyse and interpret data and the other critique, or it may be a joint effort.
Use of IT	Focused on analysis	Integral to data gathering as well as analysis, and enabling analysis in progress
Writing	Researcher	Co-authorship