Taking historical embeddedness seriously: Three historical approaches to advance strategy process and practice research

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<th>Journal:</th>
<th>Academy of Management Review</th>
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<tr>
<td>Manuscript ID:</td>
<td>AMR-2014-0172-STFHOS.R2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuscript Type:</td>
<td>Special Research Forum History &amp; Organization Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keywords:</td>
<td>Strategy, Strategy Implementation/ Process, Practice Theory, Discourse Theory</td>
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Abstract:

Despite the proliferation of strategy process and practice research, we lack understanding of the historical embeddedness of strategic processes and practices. In this paper, we present three historical approaches with the potential to remedy this deficiency. First, realist history can contribute to a better understanding of the historical embeddedness of strategic processes; in particular, comparative historical analysis can explicate the historical conditions, mechanisms, and causality in strategic processes. Second, interpretative history can add to our knowledge of the historical embeddedness of strategic practices, and microhistory can specifically help to understand the construction and enactment of these practices in historical contexts. Third, poststructuralist history can elucidate the historical embeddedness of strategic discourses, and genealogy can in particular increase our understanding of the evolution and transformation of strategic discourses and their power effects. Thus, this paper demonstrates how in their specific ways historical approaches and methods can add to our understanding of different forms and variations of strategic processes and practices, the historical construction of organizational strategies, and historically constituted strategic agency.
TAKING HISTORICAL EMBEDDEDNESS SERIOUSLY: THREE HISTORICAL APPROACHES TO ADVANCE STRATEGY PROCESS AND PRACTICE RESEARCH

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Acknowledgements:
We are very grateful for our editor John Hassard and the three anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and guidance throughout this process. We want to thank Martin Friesl, Kalle Pajunen, Anniina Rantakari, Heli Valtonen and Kustaa H.J. Vilkuna for their help when working on the manuscript and David Miller for language revision. We also wish to express our gratitude to colleagues at Aalto University, HEC Paris and the University of Jyväskylä for comments on our earlier versions in research seminars and other occasions. We acknowledge the financial support of the Academy of Finland as part of the “Discourse in strategic management” project and the Foundation for Economic Education.
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Abstract

Despite the proliferation of strategy process and practice research, we lack understanding of the historical embeddedness of strategic processes and practices. In this paper, we present three historical approaches with the potential to remedy this deficiency. First, realist history can contribute to a better understanding of the historical embeddedness of strategic processes; in particular, comparative historical analysis can explicate the historical conditions, mechanisms, and causality in strategic processes. Second, interpretative history can add to our knowledge of the historical embeddedness of strategic practices, and microhistory can specifically help to understand the construction and enactment of these practices in historical contexts. Third, poststructuralist history can elucidate the historical embeddedness of strategic discourses, and genealogy can in particular increase our understanding of the evolution and transformation of strategic discourses and their power effects. Thus, this paper demonstrates how in their specific ways historical approaches and methods can add to our understanding of different forms and variations of strategic processes and practices, the historical construction of organizational strategies, and historically constituted strategic agency.

Keywords: comparative history, discourse, embeddedness, genealogy, microhistory, practice, process, strategy, strategy-as-practice, strategy process
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The very beginning of strategic management research was closely linked with historical analysis (Chandler, 1962, 1977), and later on landmark studies have been based on longitudinal case studies (Burgelman, 1983; Pettigrew, 1985). However, it is fair to say that strategic management research and business, economic and social history have remained largely separate areas of research with few intersections (Ericsson, Melin & Popp, forthcoming; Kahl, Silverman & Cusumano, 2012; Kipping & Üsdiken, 2014; Thomas, Wilson, & Leeds, 2013). Thus, strategic management research, like management research more generally, has lacked historical comprehension and sensitivity (Bucheli & Wadhwa, 2014; Clark & Rowlinson, 2004; Rowlinson, Hassard & Decker, 2014; Kieser, 1994; Zald, 1990). This has hampered our understanding of key issues such as the historical embeddedness of strategic processes and practices: We know little about how historical conditions shape strategic processes or their causal effects, how strategic practices are linked to their socio-historical contexts and enacted in situ, or how strategic discourses are products of historical evolution with implications for what is seen as important or appropriate in the strategy field and profession.

Hence, the purpose of this paper is to explicate how historical research can contribute to our understanding of the historical embeddedness of strategic processes and practices and our conceptions of them. We focus on strategy process and practice research that deals with the forms and dynamics of strategy-making in and around organizations, including intentional strategic decision-making, planning or implementation, and other forms of strategy work processes and practices. Together with more critical analyses, strategy process and practice studies have formed a
vibrant sociologically and organizationally oriented alternative to conventional
perspectives on strategic management (Floyd et al., 2011; Hutzschenreuter &
Kleindienst, 2006; Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Whittington, 2007). However,
understanding of historical embeddedness has remained limited in this body of work,
which has constrained its potential to deepen our grasp of the social, cultural and
sociopolitical nature of strategy-making. While strategy process studies have
emphasized the role of context (Child, 1972; Child & Smith, 1987; Pettigrew, 1987,
2012; Hutzschenreuter & Kleindienst, 2006), its historical underpinnings and
implications are only partially understood. Although strategy-as-practice research has
argued that practices take different forms depending on context, there is a paucity of
knowledge of the historical construction of these practices and their enactment in situ
(Ericsson et al., forthcoming; Whittington, Cailluet & Yakis-Douglas, 2011). While
some critical studies have examined the historically constructed nature of strategic
discourses (Knights & Morgan, 1991; Thomas et al., 2013), there is a need to go
further and examine both the formation and implications of these discourses in
various socio-historical contexts.

By historical embeddedness, we mean the ways in which strategic processes
and practices and our conceptions of them are embedded in socio-historical
environments, and defined by them. We argue for a strong emphasis on historical
embeddedness: One should not merely place processes and practices in context, but
also understand their inherent historical nature and construction. Thus, like Kipping
and Üsdiken (2014) in their overall review of history in management research, we
strive for a ‘history-in-theory’ approach by focusing on how history can be a key part
of our theoretical understanding of strategy rather than serve ‘merely’ as empirical
evidence of context.
We propose and elaborate on three approaches that can be used to add to our understanding of the historical embeddedness of strategic processes, practices, and discourses: realist history, interpretative history, and poststructuralist history. While there are other ways of distinguishing historical traditions and methods (e.g., Rowlinson et al., 2014), we focus on these three as they provide distinctively different onto-epistemological alternatives for examining the historical embeddedness of strategic processes, practices, and discourses. Their philosophical commitments are very different; they are not merely resources in an historian’s toolbox but represent fundamentally different ways to approach and make sense of history. First, we focus on historical realism, which can enhance our understanding of the historical embeddedness of strategic processes. Historical realism is based on a realist onto-epistemological understanding of social reality that aims to reconstruct past events and to provide explanations of historical processes and mechanisms. Historical case studies have played a key role in strategic process research (Burgelman, 1983, 2002a, b; Pettigrew, 1973, 1985), thus bringing context-specific understanding into strategic process research. To provide an example of a useful, but largely untapped method in historical realist analysis, we point to comparative historical analysis, which has become an increasingly popular perspective in economic history and historical sociology (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003). Comparative historical analysis aims at a systematic analysis and comparison of historical events and processes to elucidate patterns and causality in them (Mahoney, 2003). It can help to identify the historical conditions, mechanisms, and causation in strategic processes, and thus contribute especially to strategy process research.

Second, we introduce interpretative history (Collingwood, 1946) as an approach that helps us to understand the historical embeddedness of strategic
practices. Interpretative history emphasizes the role of the historian-researcher in interpreting the importance of historical events in situ (Collingwood, 1946; White, 1975), and by so doing usually reflects a constructionist understanding of social reality. In particular, we focus on microhistory as a useful but largely ignored method in management research (Magnusson & Szijarto, 2013). Through the close analysis of specific events, actions and practices, microhistory seeks to identify larger socio-historical patterns and their characteristics (Ginzburg, 1993; Peltonen, 2001). We argue that it can explicate the historical construction and enactment of strategic practices in context and thus specifically add to strategy-as-practice research.

Third, we present the poststructuralist historical approach as a way to increase understanding of the historical embeddedness of strategic discourses and their implications. Poststructuralist history is based epistemologically on radical constructionism and aims at a deconstruction of historical conceptions and a critical scrutiny of generally held assumptions. In this case, we focus on genealogy (Foucault, 1977) as a methodology that uncovers and problematizes conventionally held assumptions of knowledge and their power effects in strategic discourses. We argue that this method can elucidate the construction of historical truths and subjectivities as well as their implications, and thus add especially to critical studies of strategic management.

Our analysis contributes to theory-building in strategy process and practice research by highlighting the historical embeddedness of strategic processes, practices, and discourses. In particular, it shows how in their specific ways, historical methods can add to our understanding of various forms of strategic processes and practices and the variations in them, the historical construction of organizational strategies, and historically constituted strategic agency. By so doing, this paper helps to theoretically
advance strategy process and practice research as well as research on strategic management more generally. Furthermore, by highlighting the value of specific approaches and methods, it contributes to the discussion of new forms of management and business history (Wadhwani & Bucheli, 2014; DeJong & Higgings, forthcoming; Jones & Zeitlin, 2008).

**HISTORY IN STRATEGY PROCESS AND PRACTICE RESEARCH**

In recent years we have seen a proliferation of research on strategic management that shares an interest in the processes and practices of strategic management. In the focus of this analysis is strategy-making, by which we mean all kinds of processes, activities, and practices involved in strategy formation or implementation in and around organizations. This body of work includes strategic process research, strategy-as-practice research as well as more critical, often discursive analysis of strategic management. While these streams of research have distinct roots and characteristics of their own, they share a sociological and organizational orientation in their analysis of strategic phenomena. Furthermore, they are increasingly seen as forming a body of knowledge – as indicated in recent reviews (Floyd et al., 2011; Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Whittington, 2007), in special issues (Balogun et al., 2014), or in calls for them (e.g., a special issue on process and practice research in the *Strategic Management Journal*).

**Strategic Processes**

Strategy scholars have focused attention on the social and organizational processes through which strategies have been realized since the 1970s (Farjoun, 2002; Mintzberg, 1978; Nutt, 1987; Pettigrew 1973, 1992; Van de Ven & Huber, 1990). Interestingly, some of these studies – in particular Pettigrew’s (1973, 1985) detailed analyses of decision-making and Burgelman’s research on strategy-making (1983,
2002a, b) – reflect an historical orientation by virtue of their longitudinal approach. These studies have found that strategies are not always planned or formulated, but evolve from bottom-up initiatives (Burgelman, 1983) or emergent (Mintzberg & Waters, 1982, 1985) processes. According to this view, organizational members participate in strategy-making through a myriad of organizational interactions over time (Bourgeois & Brodwin, 1984; Floyd & Lane, 2000; Wooldridge, Schmidt & Floyd, 2008; Hutzschenreuter & Kleindiest, 2006). Recent contributions have focused on topics such as autonomous strategy work (Mirabeau & Maguire, 2013) and temporality (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013). Inspired by the revived interest in organizational process studies (Langley et al., 2013), we have also seen the emergence of a new stream of more philosophical process research (Chia & Holt, 2006; Rasche & Chia, 2009). This work has been closely linked with strategy-as-practice research and critical perspectives on strategic management to which we will turn next.

Context has played an important part in these studies (for a review, see Hutzschenreuter & Kleindiest, 2006). In particular, Child (1972) has elaborated on outer structuration, Mintzberg (1977) conceptualized strategy-making as an historical process, and Pettigrew explicated the outer context (Pettigrew, 1997, 2012). Nevertheless, it is fair to say that the historical aspects of strategic processes are only partially understood, and thus scholars such as Pajunen (2005) have called for the use of new historical methods to promote historical understanding in this stream of research.

**Strategic Practices**

Closely related to strategic process research, a growing interest in the detailed activities and practices of strategy has led to a proliferation of strategy-as-practice
research (Golsorkhi et al., 2010; Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Johnson, Melin & Whittington, 2006; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). In this view, strategy is seen as situated activity that both shapes and is shaped by its context (Seidl & Whittington, 2014; Whittington, 2006). This stream has focused on the activities and practices engaged in by managers when they strategize or conduct strategy work. A part of this stream of research has explicitly drawn on theories of practice (Orlikowski, 2000; Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, & von Savigny, 2001). For instance, Whittington (2006) and Jarzabkowski (2008) have used Giddens’s structuration theory and Jarzabkowski (2010) has provided an overview of how activity theory can be used in strategy-as-practice research. Recent studies have also drawn from Foucault (Allard-Poési, 2010) and Bourdieu (Gomez, 2010), thus linking strategy-as-practice with critical management studies. In essence, these studies have shown that social practices enable and constrain organizational strategy work (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). These practices include discursive (Balogun et al., 2014) but also sociomaterial practices such as strategy tools (Dameron, Lê and LeBaron, 2015; Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, forthcoming; Kaplan, 2011). By so doing, this stream of research has provided insights into phenomena such as the role and identity of the strategists (Mantere, 2008) and engagement and participation (Mantere & Vaara, 2008). Despite these inputs, this stream of research has also been criticized for an overly empirical focus and even methodological individualism (e.g., Carter, Clegg & Kornberger, 2008).

Context has played an important role in these studies in the sense that case analyses and especially ethnographic methods have gained ground (Golsorkhi et al., 2010). This has resulted in a rich understanding of various forms of strategic practices and strategy-making (Golsorkhi et al., 2010). However, the historical embeddedness of strategic practices has remained poorly understood in this stream of research;
despite a few exceptions (Whittington et al., 2011), history has played a limited role in this stream of research. Hence scholars such as Chia and MacKay (2007) have called for shifting the focus of analysis from individual strategists to the historically and culturally transmitted fields of practice. In a recent paper, Ericson et al. (forthcoming) have in turn proposed ways to include history in strategy-as-practice research, including microhistory, as we will explain later.

**Strategic Discourses**

Related to more general interest in critical management studies, we have seen a stream of critical reflections explicitly or implicitly linked with strategy process and practice research. These studies have often drawn from discourse analysis (Grandy & Mills, 2004; Ezzamel & Willmott, 2008, 2010; Vaara, 2010). In particular, Knights and Morgan’s (1991) genealogical analysis of strategic management has served as a landmark for critical strategy studies as well as processual and practice-based work on discourse, as shown for example in the recent special issue by Balogun et al. (2014) in the *Journal of Management Studies*. There is also more recent critical work that has focused on the role of history in strategy, and a special issue of *Business History* (Carter, 2013) provides examples on how to conduct critically oriented historical strategy research. This includes papers by Kornberger (2013) and Thomas et al. (2013) that we shall return to later.

In all, strategy process and practice research has offered an alternative to the performance-oriented mainstream of strategy research by bringing sociological and organizational insights into the mainstream of strategy research. These studies have emphasized the role of context in various ways. However, with few exceptions, the historical nature and construction of strategic processes and practices has received little attention in this body of work (Carter, 2013; Ericson et al., forthcoming;
Whittington et al., 2011). While longitudinal analysis of processes and detailed micro-level study of practices in context may be seen as characteristics of an historical interest, the fact remains that we know little of the historical embeddedness of strategic processes and practices. Moreover, although the more critical analyses have introduced insights into the historical construction of strategic discourses, this work has remained limited in its scope. This lack of understanding of historical embeddedness is a deficiency per se, and it has also kept this body of work from achieving its full potential with respect to the theoretical understanding of strategic processes and practices and our conceptions of them.

THREE APPROACHES TO HISTORICAL EMBEDDEDNESS

In the following, we elaborate on three onto-epistemologically and methodologically different approaches that can advance our understanding of the historical embeddedness of strategic processes, practices and discourses: realist history, interpretative history and poststructuralist history. Our reasons for focusing on these three are two-fold. First, we wish to present distinct onto-epistemological and methodological alternatives that historical research, not limited to business history, provides for elucidating the embeddedness of strategic processes, practices and discourses. As has been called for, we highlight fruitful intersections rather than offer a comprehensive account of a full range of historical methods (Bucheli & Wadhwani, 2014; Jones & Zeitlin, 2008; Rowlinson et al., 2014). Second, we wish to do this in a way that coheres with the onto-epistemological and methodological discussion in management and organization studies (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Hassard & Cox, 2013; Newton, Deetz & Reed, 2011). For example, in the paradigm model of Hassard & Cox (2013), realist history resonates with structuralism, interpretative history with anti-structuralism, and poststructuralist history with post-structuralism. Presenting and
elaborating on distinct approaches is important for advancing a multifaceted understanding of historical embeddedness that does justice to the alternative epistemological and methodological understandings of organizational phenomena – in our case processes, practices and discourses. Table 1 below summarizes the characteristic features of the three approaches.

Insert Table 1 around here

**Historical Realism and Embeddedness of Strategic Processes**

**Onto-epistemological basis.** Historical realism in general and realist case studies and comparative historical analysis in particular can advance our understanding of the historical embeddedness of strategic processes. Historical realism is an umbrella concept for analyses that aim at reconstruction of past events by using historical sources. Hence, historical realism may include several perspectives and methods of historical analysis. Onto-epistemologically, historical realism means accurate and authentic reconstruction of events and processes from the perspective of an external observer (Steinmetz, 1998). For example, Kuzminski (1979: 329) sees realism as “descriptive accounts [as] self-validating; that is, that their truth-value is manifest in the face of appropriate evidence.” This is the approach often taken in traditional corporate histories (Ericson et al., forthcoming; Rowlinson et al., 2014).

Historical realism can also involve an attempt to go beyond this ‘surface’ as in a transcendental understanding of history and social reality. This reflects the philosophical foundations of scientific realism (Bhaskar, 1975; Reed, 2005) in that it focuses attention on structures, processes, and mechanisms. This is often the case in historical sociology and economic history and close to what Rowlinson et al. (2014) call analytically structured business history: “Analytically structured history thus uses analytic constructs […] to search archival sources, enabling the construction of a
narrative of structures and events that may not even have been perceived as such by actors at the time [...] driven by concepts, events, and causation” (Rowlinson et al., 2014). Arguably, most existing historical strategy research follows a realist approach (Ingram, Rao & Silverman, 2012; Kipping & Cailluet, 2010).

**Methodology.** Realist history is often conducted in the form of historical case studies that focus on processes, structures and patterns that are assumed to exist independently of the researcher’s imagination (Kuzminski, 1979; Steinmetz, 1998). Management research and especially business history provide numerous examples of such studies. Ericson et al. (forthcoming) put it as follows: “The emergent discipline of business history is closely related to the development of the case method, according to which strategy is framed as something made through isolated moments of intentional decision making that provide a critical turning point in a chronological narrative flow of events. The narrative leads up to the moment of a strategic decision, ushering in the future, shaped by the strategic decision taken.”

For our purposes, it is important to note that several landmark strategy process studies are essentially realist historical case studies. Pettigrew’s (1973) work on the politics of organizational decision-making provides an early exemplary study in which the historical detail is remarkable. His long-term work on continuity and change in ICI provides another exemplary study (Pettigrew, 1985). These studies have paved the way for theoretical analysis of context and embeddedness (Pettigrew, 1987, 2012). Pettigrew (1997) has also reflected on how to conduct (historically-oriented) process studies. Burgelman offers another key example in his long-term work on Intel (1983, 1994, 2002a, b). His analysis highlights the dynamics of emergent strategy or autonomous strategy work as embedded in specific historical contexts. In particular, Burgelman (2002b) provides an illuminating longitudinal case study where he
compares Intel’s strategy-making under Andy Grove’s leadership with the
c characteristics of the previous period. Based on a combination of interviews and
historical study of corporate documents, the analysis details the differences in
strategy-making in these time periods and also describes their linkages with the
overall organizational and technological changes. On this basis, the analysis explains
how Intel’s strategy moved away from the ‘internal-ecology’ model towards the
‘rational-actor’ model. It also elucidates how the positive environmental feedback
associated with the new strategic orientation created a coevolutionary lock-in that had
a major impact on development of the corporation. Later, Burgelman (2011) has also
offered explicit reflections on the merits and challenges of longitudinal case studies,
calling for deeper historical reflection and more systematic processual analysis.

Furthermore, there are some explicitly historical case studies that illuminate
the dynamics of strategic processes (Kipping & Cailluet, 2010; Rowlinson, 1995). In
particular, Kipping and Cailluet (2010) have examined the interplay of deliberate
versus emergent strategy-making at Alcan between 1928 and 2007. Their analysis
shows how the company gradually moved from emergent to more deliberate strategy-
making, although external forces continued to influence its decisions. Such historical
case studies can thus be used to explicate the dynamics of strategic processes and
especially their contextual embeddedness (Pettigrew, 1987, 1992). They also
exemplify the importance of long-term historical analysis – often based on years of
engagement – and authenticity in such studies.

There are, however, other historical methods such as comparative historical
analysis that can help us to go further in the analysis of historical embeddedness.
Comparative historical analysis has developed in recent years into a vibrant analytical
methodology in history and historical sociology (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003).
In essence, this method takes realist historical case studies further in its more systematic causal analysis and comparison. According to Mahoney and Rueschemeyer (2003), the three identifying issues of historical comparative research are causal relationships, processes over time, and comparisons. As they (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003: 48) put it: “Comparative historical inquiry is […] concerned with explanation and the identification of causal configurations that produce major outcomes of interest […] analyze historical sequences and take seriously the unfolding of processes over time […] engage in systematic and contextualized comparisons of similar and contrasting cases.”

Despite its potential, comparative historical analysis has not yet been fully applied in strategy process research. Pajunen (2005), nevertheless, provides an illuminating reflection and example of what that could entail. He underscores the need to examine strategic actions and decisions systematically to be able to comprehend their strategic impact. This involves comparison across cases to be able to distinguish more general patterns from case-specific idiosyncratic features. This should then lead to an elaboration of the key causal mechanisms at play in these strategic processes.

Pajunen applies it to an analysis of two decline and turnaround cases in the paper and pulp sector in Finland. Based on a detailed historical analysis of key events, he establishes understanding of ‘event causality,’ that is how specific strategic decisions and actions influenced the course of events, and then compares the cases. On this basis, he proposes that in the context of decline, strategic processes involve several causal mechanisms related to signals of poor performance and external reactions.

While almost non-existent in strategy process research, there are, however, examples of comparative historical analysis in adjacent fields (Lamberg et al., 2006; Finkelstein, 2006; Murmann, 2013). In particular, Murmann’s (2013) study of
industrial coevolution illuminates the potential of comparative historical analysis. His analysis focuses on the development of the synthetic dye industry over a 60-year period. Based on a vast amount of systematically collected historical material, the analysis focuses on how the interactions between the company and the research community steered the development of the synthetic dye industry and the companies involved. Essential in the analysis is the condensing of the empirical material into key events and actions and their subsequent comparison across several company cases in five countries. As a result, Murmann identifies three causal mechanisms – exchange of personnel, commercial ties, and lobbying – in determining the coevolutionary trajectory. While the study does not focus on strategy-making, it illuminates how these interactions influenced the strategic decisions of the companies and reveals differences across the companies and countries studied.

**Contribution:** Historical embeddedness of strategic processes. Realist historical research in general and comparative historical analysis in particular can advance our understanding of the historical embeddedness of strategic processes and thus contribute to research on the role of context in strategy process studies (Child, 1972; Hutzschenreuter & Kleindiest, 2006; Pettigrew, 1987). First, comparative historical analysis can highlight the characteristic features of strategic planning and other forms of strategy-making across contexts. Socio-historical or cultural differences in strategic processes have not generated a great deal of interest in strategy process research in spite of calls for analysis of context and embeddedness (Floyd et al., 2011; Hutzschenreuter & Kleindienst, 2006; Pettigrew, 1997, 2012). A comparative historical perspective can significantly broaden the research agenda in this respect. Such analysis involves not only an identification of the general social or organizational dynamics of strategic processes, but an inherent interest in the
differences and variations of these processes across historical time periods and contexts. Such analysis can focus attention on processes that have not been labeled as ‘strategic’ and thus expand our understanding of the forms and variations in strategy-making. This can involve analysis of strategic processes in contexts that have not been characterized by strategic planning as we nowadays tend to see it. For instance, studies of strategy-making before the 1960s are likely to reveal significant differences when compared with those following the spread of strategic planning since the 1960s. Strategic processes also appear to be very different in nature when one compares those in the American or British institutional and cultural contexts – which we know most about – with those in other places in Europe or in Asia in different time periods. This is also the case with different sociopolitical contexts that have received little attention in strategy research; for instance, one could compare strategic planning processes in the West with those in the Eastern Block during the Cold War or with those of American, Chinese and Japanese corporations in various time periods. In addition to highlighting overall differences, such analysis could focus on specific issues such as the relative importance of top-down formal vs. autonomous strategy work (Kipping & Cailluet, 2010; Mirabeau & Maguire, 2013) in different socio-historical contexts.

Second, such analysis can contribute to a better understanding of historical conditions as triggers and determinants of strategic processes. Strategic processes, involving more formal, planned or top-down and especially emergent processes often result from environmental changes. This is evident in the historical case studies referred to above. For example, Burgelman’s studies on Intel’s history reveal that the emphasis on an autonomous (1994) or induced (2002a) mode of strategizing depended on the interplay between the competitive environment and the corporation’s
actions as well as on the actions of the executives in charge. Comparative historical
analysis can further elucidate the interconnectedness of corporate strategic processes
with the broader historical development of the industry and thus contribute to our
understanding of the evolution of strategic processes – which is one of the key issues
in strategy process research (Hutzschenreuter & Kleindienst, 2006). Like Murmann’s
(2013) study, such historical analysis may capture long process cycles with a
beginning and end, and thus enable systematic identification and comparison of the
dynamics of strategic processes. This is essential to be able to understand phenomena
such as path dependency or coevolution or to assess the outcomes of strategic
processes. In particular, careful causal analysis of key events and patterns can clarify
the extent to which corporate strategy-making reflects the more general trends or
changes in the environment (e.g., technological or sociopolitical changes) or the
extent to which corporate strategy-making may create truly novel strategic ideas and
trigger new developments. Thus, such analysis can help to identify turning points in
strategy-making and relate them to broader field-configuring events and processes.

Third, comparative historical analysis can also elucidate the ‘embedded
agency’ of the strategic actors involved, which is yet another key issue in strategy
process studies (Floyd et al., 2011: 941). By embedded agency, we mean the
historical and contextual influence exercised by top executives or others to impact the
strategies of the organization (Lamberg & Pajunen, 2010). This key issue in strategy
process research has not received the attention it deserves, at least in part because of a
lack of conceptual and methodological tools for contextualization. Pettigrew’s
(Pettigrew, 1987, 2012) and Burgelman’s (1983, 2002a) studies highlight top
managerial agency in key turning points of corporate evolution, and more recent
process studies elaborate on the dynamics related to this agency (Denis et al., 2011;
Mirabeau & Maguire, 2013). Comparative historical analysis provides additional means to elucidate such agency in an explicit manner as in the systematic examination of key decisions, actions, and their consequences in Pajunen (2005) or Murmann (2013). This can also involve explicit counterfactual reasoning, that is, analysis of what would have happened had the top managers or other actors not acted in the way they did (Ferguson, 1997; Tetlock & Belkin, 1996). Although such counterfactual analysis can take many forms, it must be systematic and explicit (Durand & Vaara, 2009). Thus, comparative historical analysis of managers’ actions, decisions and choices can improve our understanding of the extent to which they were indeed ‘strategic’ in the course of the historical evolution of an industry, economy, or society.

Interpretative History and Embeddedness of Strategic Practices

Onto-epistemological basis. The interpretative approach in general and microhistory in particular can advance our understanding of the historical embeddedness of strategic practices by placing strategic actions and associated practices in their historical context. Interpretative history is a broad concept referring to studies that are based on an intensive qualitative examination of historical sources with a focus on understanding the meaning of the events in question (Carr, 1986; Iggers, 2005). Collingwood’s famous concept of ‘re-enactment’ literally means thinking through the thoughts of past actors (Collingwood, 1946). As he explains it, the historian’s “work may begin by discovering the outside of an event, but it can never end there; he must always remember that the event was an action, and that his main task is to think himself into the action, to discern the thought of its agent” (Collingwood, 1946: 142).

Onto-epistemologically, interpretative history may reflect several kinds of

1 Durand and Vaara (2009) provide a template that can be useful in systematic counterfactual analysis in strategy studies. The stages in their model include the identification of critical events, specification of causal processes and mechanisms, and the use of counterfactuals to establish causation.
positions (see e.g., Kuzminski, 1979; White, 1975). However, it is usually based on
some kind of social constructionist or hermeneutic understanding of history. On the
one hand, the focus is on the meaning of specific events or actions for the actors
involved. This makes interpretative history an approach that resonates with studies of
strategic practices in context. On the other hand, interpretative history involves
awareness of the researcher’s constructions of episodes and historical narratives
(Ankersmit, 2013). For example, White (1975) sees all historical research as narrated
and dependent on the writer’s embeddedness in her social and intellectual context.

**Methodology.** Interpretative history is pursued across several fields of contemporary
history research, but is particularly widespread in social and cultural history that in
general seek to understand the meaning of actions in context. The key methodological
characteristic of interpretative historical work is the aim to arrive at an empathetic
understanding of the actions of individuals and the meanings of these actions when
contextualized in a specific setting. While interpretative history may take different
forms, we will focus in the following on microhistory as a particularly fruitful method
to better understand the historical embeddedness of strategic practices.

Microhistory aims to elucidate historical patterns and social structures
(Ginzburg, 1993; Peltonen, 2001) through the close analysis of specific events,
actions or practices. This has been done in a variety of ways in for example historical
micro-analysis (Stewart, 1959) or cultural history (Ginzburg, 1993). Although the
term ‘micro’ implies an empirical focus on the detail, micro-historians emphasize that
they are interested in ‘big’ issues. Joyner (1999) has famously stated that
microhistorians need to ask “large questions in small places.” Magnussen and Szijarto
(2013: 327) explain the essence of contemporary microhistory as follows:
“Microhistory […] pursues the idea that a small unit can reflect a larger whole […] in
the most successful instances the microhistorian’s subject is deconstructed within its own framework; a large range of factors that relate to the subject are examined and analysed.” Microhistory can thus focus on the everyday trivialities, anomalies, and grassroots processes to reveal long-term social dynamics and structures in which the local and temporal activities and practices are embedded (Peltonen, 2001). It is characteristically based on ethnographic-type of data – observation or historical materials revealing authentic experiences – and thus what Rowlinson et al. (2014) label ethnographic history.

Microhistory may take various forms, ranging from intensive synthesis of rich historical data to interpretation of specific instances of historical information. For instance, Stewart’s (1959) classic analysis of the Battle of Gettysburg (“Pickett's Charge: A Microhistory of the Final Attack at Gettysburg, July 3, 1863”) is an early inspirational example of how specific decisions and actions at a particular point in time help to explain the bigger picture. It literally focuses on one day of fighting during the US Civil War, and by analogy it exemplifies the opportunities and challenges of the microhistorical approach for strategy research. The book consists of description and analysis of the actions of General Lee and his Confederate army at Gettysburg. The book is an example of microhistorical workmanship in many respects. It is based on extensive material of oral history accounts, memoirs, diaries, correspondence, and published research. The amount of material allows a detailed, minute-by-minute description of the micro-actions during the day but also embeds these micro-actions in the larger context of the war as well as the cultural contexts that are reflected in the values and shared understandings of the rules of the game. The book thus provides a thick description of strategizing and its contextual embeddedness. In particular, it describes in detail how generals were unaware of the
morale and physical condition of the troops, how brigadiers did not foresee the
actions of neighboring regiments, and how most of them were misinformed about the
enemy’s strengths and operational capabilities.

The more culturalist tradition in microhistory has in turn emphasizes the
historian’s constructions of events and actions. In the classic works by Ginzburg
(1993) and Levi (1991), the starting point was a collection of material that allowed the
microscopic scrutiny of particular processes in a distant past. In this view, the aims of
the microhistorical movement are not only methodological but also theoretical and
political as summarized in an influential book review (Gregory, 1999: 101): “[B]y
dramatically shrinking the arena of investigation, the practitioners of
Alltagsgeschichte [i.e. the German version of microhistory] and microstoria [the
Italian version] questioned the purported teleology of modernizing historical
processes. Their diverse, detailed results suggest that developments such as
industrialization and bureaucratization should be rethought as contingent and uneven.
At the same time, meticulous attention to human interaction on the micro-scale
preserves the agency of ordinary people. Reversing the views of social historians who
saw teleology “on their side,” this vision suggests hope for an undetermined future
insofar as it finds contingency in the past.”

Microhistorical analyses of strategic practices have, however, been lacking. In
a rare exception, Ericsson et al. (forthcoming) argue that its “focus on micro-scale
moments and events” suggests “an obvious affinity with the interest of Strategy as
Practice in the quotidian.” They also exemplify microhistory’s method and potential
with reference to Popp and Holt’s study (2013) of leadership succession strategy at
Wedgwood and Sons in the late 18th century. Interestingly, the whole study is based
on a letter written by founder Josiah Wedgwood to his son Josiah II reflecting upon
the succession of the business. The analysis focuses on the content of the letter, while
at the same time contextualizing it, to illuminate the specificities of the historical
context with its different layers. Hence this study exemplifies how microhistories can
be constructed on the basis of seemingly small pieces of empirical data.

Microhistory may, however, also be based on larger sets of empirical material
that are used in condensed presentations of micro-level activities and practices. This is
the case with recent business histories that reflect a microhistorical way of presenting
the actions of the key persons in context. For instance, Stiles’ (2009) biography of
Cornelius Vanderbilt provides a thick description of the strategizing of the ‘first
tycoon’ in historical context. In particular, the book provides several microhistorical
 illustrations of strategy-making that reveal how Vanderbilt was both enabled and
constrained by the prevailing industrial and organizational practices. Furthermore,
these instances illuminate how Vanderbilt at times broke the rules-of-the-game and
established new strategic practices. Thus, Stiles’s study is a particularly interesting
example of the opportunities of the microhistorical approach as it exemplifies how the
practices of competitive strategy may be studied as part of a multi-faceted historical
analysis.

Simon’s (2011) business history of the Finland-based Kone Corporation in
turn elaborates on the practices of strategy-making in another cultural historical
context: that of the Cold War. The book starts with an illuminating example of
decision-making about an unprecedented acquisition by the Finnish company in
Sweden. This microhistorical episode is described and analyzed in depth, and it
highlights how the key decision-makers were operating in a very specific environment
constituted by Cold War Finland and its political decision-making practices and the
traditions of the family business. The analysis in particular illuminates how the roles
and identities of the actors were linked with these practices.

**Contribution: Historical embeddedness of strategic practices.** Interpretative historical research in general and microhistory in particular can add to our understanding of the historical embeddedness of strategic practices and thus contribute especially to strategy-as-practice research. First, microhistory can help us to better comprehend the historical nature of strategic practices. This can add to our understanding of what is general or typical in strategic practices in particular historical settings. Following the tradition of research on social practices, strategy-as-practice research has focused on both the apparent and deeper-level practices and their implications. While these studies have placed practices in context, they have rarely elaborated on the historical aspects of these practices (Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Whittington et al., 2011). It is, however, important to highlight the multifaceted nature of these practices and compare how practices may differ from one historical time period and socio-cultural context to another. For example, strategic planning had been practiced long before the label of ‘strategic planning’ became widespread (Whittington et al., 2011). Similarly, the ways in which managers strategize have certainly changed over time; compare for example decision-making in the early 1900s with the post-WWII or Cold War eras or the distributed work practices offered by the new technologies in contemporary organizations. In future research, it would be interesting to focus not only on the most apparent practices, but also examine controversial or ‘illegitimate’ practices, including for example empire-building, gender discrimination or nepotism, and how they are defined across socio-historical contexts as exemplified by Stiles (2009) or Simon (2011). By ‘zooming in and out,’ microhistory can thus add to our understanding of forms or strategic practices and uncover ‘layers’ of embeddedness.
Second, microhistory explicates the actions of managers and how they make sense of strategic issues in specific socio-historical settings. Thus it can highlight how strategic practices are enacted or how actors make use of them in concrete instances of strategizing or strategy work. This can involve close analysis of episodes of strategy-making work as in Stiles (2009) or Simon (2011). This kind of analysis helps to place particular events or episodes in their wider social, cultural and sociopolitical contexts and thus extend the scope of strategy-as-practice research. For instance, although strategy meetings and workshops have received special attention in strategy-as-practice research (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008; Johnson et al., 2010), we do not know how such meetings and workshops and their functions or rituals have changed over time – and thus about the ways in which managers and other organizational members are enabled or constrained by the practices of particular settings. Furthermore, microhistorical analysis can elucidate the use of strategy tools in context (Dameron et al., 2015; Kaplan, 2011; Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, forthcoming). For instance, Kaplan (2011) has demonstrated the central role of PowerPoint in strategy-making in that it focuses attention on specific issues and not others and favors specific actors and not others. However, various tools and technologies have been used in different ways in specific time periods, which is another key issue that microhistory could highlight. This kind of analysis can also help us to understand how managers and other actors may go against prevailing practices, break the rules-of-the-game, or invent new ones – thus highlighting their embedded agency.

Third, interpretative history in general and microhistory in particular can increase our understanding of the roles and identities of the strategists and how they are adopted and constructed in different historical settings. In addition to highlighting the role of top managers, such analysis can also help us to comprehend the actions of
middle managers in different socio-historical contexts and thus add to the discussion of the roles and identities of the strategists (Mantere, 2008; Wooldridge et al., 2008). Furthermore, interpretative historical analysis can help us to better understand how prevailing practices enable or impede engagement or participation of non-managerial actors (Mantere & Vaara, 2008).

Poststructuralist History and Embeddedness of Strategic Discourses

Onto-epistemological basis. Poststructuralist history in general and genealogy in particular can advance our understanding of the historical embeddedness of strategic discourses as well as their truth and power effects. Poststructuralist history focuses on the construction of historical understanding that is then deconstructed in analyses that are often critical in spirit (Rowlinson & Hassard, 2014). This approach can take different forms, and it is not only pursued by historians but also by philosophers and social scientists of a poststructuralist orientation.

Onto-epistemologically, poststructuralist history is based on radical constructionism and is closely connected to poststructuralism and postmodernism in the social sciences (Flynn, 2005), including organization studies (Hassard, 1994; Hassard & Cox, 2013). In poststructuralism, the key notion is that of discourse, which is usually understood as the fundamental element in the social construction of reality. Accordingly, poststructuralism focuses on uncovering dominant discourses and their implications on social reality and especially power. Unlike historical realism or interpretative history, poststructuralist analysis problematizes and deconstructs prevailing historical narratives (Durepos & Mills, 2012). This also means an emphasis on reflexivity in terms of how researchers themselves portray and present historical material and interpretations, resulting in ways of reporting that may be characterized by criticality and irony.
Methodology. Methodologically, poststructuralist history can take several forms. In business history, Lipartito and Sicilia (2004) have outlined a poststructuralist approach that questions the predominance of economic perspectives that has led to a limited understanding of the corporation as a socio-political actor. In a similar spirit, Rowlinson and Hassard (2014) present deconstruction and narrative deconstruction and reconstruction as methods for culturally oriented business history. Durepos and Mills (2012) in turn call for historiography informed by Actor Network Theory.

In the following, we concentrate on genealogy as a particularly fruitful methodology to analyze the historical embeddedness of strategic discourses and their power effects. Genealogy focuses on the historical evolution of concepts and discourses, and it is mainly associated with Foucauldian discourse analysis (1977). However, genealogical discourse analysis may also include other historically-oriented forms of critical discourse analysis or combinations thereof (Anaïs, 2013; Wodak, 2001). Genealogy includes the use of historiographical methods, but in a very specific manner. Central to this method is the idea of ‘archaeology,’ which Foucault initially developed in “The Order of Things” (Foucault, 1973) and “Archeology of Knowledge” (1972). In essence, archaeology means historiographical analysis of knowledge that is not based on the primacy of the knowing subject, but where knowledge in itself is constructed in discourses. Whereas archaeology helps to focus on and compare the discourses of specific time periods, it does not as such explain shifts from one period to another, for which purpose Foucault developed his ‘genealogical’ view in the landmark book “Discipline and Punish” (Foucault, 1977).

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2 Genealogy originates from the philosophical work of Nietzsche, from which Foucault drew his inspiration (1994). At times, Foucauldian discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis, especially Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2003), are seen as epistemologically distinctively different alternatives. However, like Anaïs (2013) or Wodak (2001), we argue that forms of critical discourse analysis build on Foucault’s work and specifically advance our empirical understanding of discursive phenomena such as interdiscursivity or recontextualization.
The key idea in genealogy is that the discursive and other practices as we observe them have evolved over time in the course of history on the basis of existing practices and transformations in them. In this view, discourses play a central role in the social construction of reality; they “systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972: 49). A key point in genealogical analysis is therefore to examine the prevailing discourses of specific time periods and to elaborate on their implications for subjectivity and power (Foucault, 1994). Thus, although the development of practices is path-dependent, it also involves ‘accidentalities’ as new ideas may emerge and transform prevailing practices, often with far less deliberation or intentionality than we tend to attribute to human and social action (Poster, 1982). In all this, critical reflection upon the dominant historical constructions and their implications for the subjectivities of actors and the power relations between them is essential. In fact, Foucault (1994) provocatively saw genealogy as ‘anti-history’ when reflecting upon Nietzsche’s contributions that problematized prevailing historical constructions.

Genealogical methods have been used in different areas and disciplines extensively, and this is also the case with management and organization studies (Hassard & Rowlinson, 2002; McKinlay & Starkey, 1998). Foucauldian genealogy has been applied in the critical stream of strategy and process studies. In particular, Knights and Morgan’s (1991) genealogical study tracks down the emergence of strategic management discourse and helps us to understand how it developed in the post-war era mainly in the US and thereafter gained ground globally. Economic growth and the development of multinational corporations created a need to manage increasingly complex organizations, and strategic discourse emerged as an answer to this demand. This coincided with the development of business schools, leading to the
emergence of strategic management as a discipline and field of research. Not least
because of the promise of control inherent in strategic discourse, it has thereafter been
spread to all kinds of organizational and cultural contexts. The analysis of Knights
and Morgan (1991) helps us not only to understand this development, but also its
implications. In particular, their analysis highlights the power effects of this
discourse, which include the following: “(a) It provides managers with a
rationalization of their successes and failures; (b) It sustains and enhances the
prerogatives of management and negates alternative perspectives on organizations; (c)
It generates a sense of security for managers; (d) It reflects and sustains a strong sense
of gendered masculinity for male management; (e) It demonstrates managerial
rationality to colleagues, customers, competitors, government and significant others in
the environment; (f) It facilitates and legitimates the exercise of power; (g) It
constitutes the subjectivity of organizational members as particular categories of
persons who secure their sense of reality through engaging in this discourse and
practice” (Knights & Morgan, 1991: 262-263).

Others have followed this path and complemented Knights and Morgan’s
(1991) analysis. For example, Kornberger (2013) provides an insightful analysis of
von Clausewitz’s work on strategy and its power effects in Foucauldian spirit. This
account focuses both on the initial text and how it has been subsequently interpreted
among strategy scholars. This reveals quite distinctive ways in which proper
strategizing and being a strategist are constructed. Thomas et al. (2013) in turn
provide a critical discursive analysis of the history of the academic discipline of
strategic management. They examine the ways in which ‘histories’ of this field
construct what is seen as ‘strategic’ or relevant for strategic management. They
maintain that central in these representations is the tendency to reconstruct the field as
progressing in a teleological fashion and to distinguish it from other fields in order to emphasize the importance of strategic management over other forms of management or organizing.

Still others such as Ezzamel and Willmott (2008, 2010), Rasche and Chia (2009), and Hardy and Thomas (2014) have used Foucauldian discourse analysis in studying organizational strategy-making, though the genealogical historical aspects of their analyses have been less important than their explicit reflections on the power effects of strategic discourse in context. Thus, the potential of genealogical analysis has not been fully realized in strategy process and practice research (see also Allard-Poési, 2010).

**Contribution: Historical embeddedness of strategic discourses and their power effects.** We thus argue that future research can go further in poststructuralist analysis of strategic discourses and their power effects and thus contribute especially to critical analyses of strategic management. First, although the studies mentioned above have highlighted important aspects of the historical evolution of strategic management, for example Thomas et al. (2013) have stated that we have only begun to understand the historical canonization and institutionalization of strategic management as a discipline. We maintain that the focus should not only be on what is explicitly called ‘strategic management’ but also on other strategic discourses in other contexts. Thus, future research should examine the dominant discourses of specific historical contexts and periods that have been left with little attention when focusing on the western conceptions of ‘strategic planning’ or ‘strategic management.’ Furthermore, future research can specifically highlight the historically produced interdiscursivity of strategic management discourses, that is, how discourses are interlinked in context (Vaara, 2010). In addition to the linkage to post-war corporate development – as
highlighted by Knights and Morgan (1991) – or its militaristic origins – as explained
by Kornberger (2013), there are other discursive aspects of contemporary strategic
management that deserve special attention. These include its post- and neocolonial
aspects, which have received little explicit recognition (Prasad, 2003). For instance,
we can view strategic discourse as part of a neocolonial globalization project linked
with Americanization (Djelic, 1998). As Knights and Morgan (1991) have showed in
their genealogical analysis, the historically constructed American influence is central
in contemporary strategic management discourses. Future research could go further
by elucidating how this is shown in discourses about planning, participation,
reporting, or corporate governance and variations and nuances in these discourses. We
thus maintain that future genealogical research can go beyond the classic analysis of
Knights and Morgan (1991) in elaborating on the various interdiscursive aspects of
strategic management and their implications in different socio-historical contexts.

Second, genealogical analysis can also be applied to better understand the
recontextualizations or translations of strategic discourses in various socio-historical
contexts (see also Vaara, 2010). This is a key aspect of embeddedness that has
received little attention in previous research. Careful discourse analysis can help us to
understand for example how strategic management has spread to public sector
organizations such as universities, hospitals, schools, kindergartens, and been linked
with specific traditions of bureaucracy or professionalism in various socio-historical
settings. Specific inter-discursive combinations and their tensions are particularly
interesting objects of study – both historically and for comprehension of
contemporary power and ideological struggles.

Third, genealogical analysis can specifically highlight the truth effects of
strategic discourses – or ‘strategic truths.’ Thus, it can help us to understand the
institutionalization of particular forms of knowledge, dominant logics in them as well
as fads and fashions in strategic management (Abrahamson, 1991, 1996). This is not a
trivial matter, but a key aspect in the development of the body of knowledge of
strategic management – with respect to what we regard as proper knowledge. As
shown by Thomas et al. (2013), such analysis can span both academic and more
popular forms of knowledge, including critical reflection on their ideological
underpinnings and power effects.

Fourth, genealogy is especially suitable for the analysis of the subjectivities
constructed for strategic actors (Knights & Morgan, 1991), which helps to advance
our understanding of strategy as a profession. In a rare analysis of the evolution of the
strategy profession, Whittington et al. (2011) argue that strategy is a ‘precarious
profession’ that is subject to shifts in societal and organizational power. They
maintain that this precariousness has increased over time with more open forms of
strategy-making, transparency, and inclusion gaining ground. On this basis, they call
for more research on this topic. Genealogical analysis of the development of strategic
discourses can be seen as a particularly suitable method for this purpose as it helps to
elucidate how prevailing discourses of strategy-making and strategic management
more generally construct structures of rights and obligations for various actors, thus
defining and redefining who can be seen as strategy professionals or allowed to
engage in strategy-making and on what terms. A part of all this is how specific
companies and managers may emerge as exemplars and heroes to be followed by
others (Paroutis, McKeown & Collinson, 2013).

Fifth, related to the previous point, genealogical analysis can help us to better
understand various forms of engagement and participation in organizational strategy-
making (Mantere & Vaara, 2008). In addition to elaborating on the roles and identities
of various actors as discussed above in the case of microhistory, genealogical analysis can elucidate how specific actors may in particular organizations become strategists – and how this may be facilitated or impeded. In addition to highlighting the subjectivities and power relations of top and middle managers, such analysis can focus on non-managerial decision-makers and add to our knowledge of the various forms and dynamics of engagement, participation, and resistance (Ezzamel & Willmott, 2008, 2010). Genealogical analysis for instance allows one to see resistance as a productive force, which is an issue that has received very little attention in prior research. This is the case although for example creative dialogue may require alternative viewpoints or autonomous strategy-making stem from resistance to prevailing strategies (Dick & Collings, 2015; Laine & Vaara, 2007). Genealogical studies could elaborate on the multiple ways in which participation is discursively constructed in various socio-historically embedded discourses, thus extending the research agenda in strategy-making.

Sixth, and finally, Foucauldian genealogical analysis is often seen ‘merely’ as textual analysis that does not connect with material reality. This, however, is a misunderstanding as in this method the discursive practices may be closely linked with sociomaterial practices. This is clear in Foucault’s original work and for instance in CDA-type of discourse analysis (Vaara, 2010). Thus, genealogical analysis can also extend our understanding of how strategy tools and other sociomaterial practices have shaped strategy-making over time (Dameron et al., 2015; Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, forthcoming; Wright et al., 2013). While current literature on sociomateriality has already helped us to understand how specific tools may enable or constrain human actors, genealogical analysis can add to this knowledge by illuminating the role of strategy tools in strategic discourses. For instance, it would be important to examine
how specific strategy tools have been developed, used, and become institutionalized in different socio-historical contexts. It would also be interesting to study the ways in which the tools themselves have been key parts in constituting strategic truths and fashions or shaping the evolution of the strategy profession. For example, five-year planning, the BCG matrix or Porter’s five forces have undoubtedly had a crucial role in the development of strategic management as a field and profession. Moreover, ‘open strategy’ or the ‘massification’ of strategy (Whittington et al., 2011; Whittington, 2015) would not been possible without technologies enabling widespread information gathering and participation.

HISTORICAL EMBEDDEDNESS AS A BASIS FOR HISTORICALLY INFORMED STRATEGY PROCESS AND PRACTICE RESEARCH

The three approaches and the associated methods reviewed above explain how historical analysis can advance our understanding of historical embeddedness in strategy process and practice research. In the following, we discuss the need for methodological alternatives and taking their onto-epistemological commitments seriously, elaborate on key aspects of historical embeddedness and their implications for theory development in strategy process and practice studies, and finally reflect upon the application of historical methods with an example.

Methodological Alternatives and Onto-epistemological Commitments

We have presented realist history, interpretative history, and poststructuralist history as distinctive approaches and offered specific methods to uncover aspects of historical embeddedness. We underscore that these approaches are based on fundamentally different ontological assumptions and epistemological commitments that reflect different paradigms in management and organization research (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Hassard & Cox, 2013; Newton et al., 2011; Tsoukas & Chia, 2011). These three
approaches by and large cohere with those in Hassard & Cox’s (2013) recent paradigm model that is based on Burrell & Morgan’s (1979) initial work. Like them, we emphasize the importance of making analytical distinctions between traditions when developing theorizations of processes, practices and discourses in historical context – even if they can inform each other or might even be combined in specific studies (Hassard, 1991). Thus, the three historical approaches that we elaborate on should not merely be seen as part of a toolkit of historical methods without consideration of what they stand for.

More specifically, these approaches reflect fundamentally different assumptions about key aspects of historical analysis (Kipping & Üsdiken, 2014; Rowlinson et al., 2014; Wadhwani & Bucheli, 2014) of which truth, temporality, and narrative representation are central for our purposes. In realist history, the intention is to present strategic processes and events as accurately and authentically as possible and to uncover underlying causal mechanisms. In interpretative history, the focus is on the reconstruction and re-enactment of strategy-making and associated contextual practices in situ. In contrast, the objective in poststructuralist history is to problematize historical truths about strategic management and to focus on their implications (Kuukkanen, 2015). In fact, poststructuralist history may be used to criticize conventional realist historical analysis.

As to temporality, realist history sees time primarily as chronological as the focus is on dynamic strategic processes and their causal mechanisms; the time horizon is usually relatively long especially in comparative historical analysis. Interpretative history concentrates on time in situ and the construction of meaning for the actors involved in strategy-making; this may involve constructions of the past, present and future as part of the strategy-making of the moment in historical context.
Poststructuralist history in turn focuses on spatio-temporal reconstructions and deconstructions where the present implications can only be understood by unraveling the historical evolution of the strategic discourses (Jordheim, 2014).

As to historical narratives, realist history usually involves representation that aims at generalizations in terms of temporal causal patterns, interpretative history at re-enactment of past actions and practices in situ, and poststructuralism at critical deconstruction of such narratives. The narrative representations in each of these approaches may thus look very different, which should also be reflected in the writing of these analyses (Kuukkanen, 2012; Zagorin, 1999). In all, elucidating these differences is important as it helps to specify the alternative ways of conducting historically informed strategy process and practice research – as has recently been called for in management history more generally (Bucheli & Wadhwani, 2014; DeJong & Higgins, forthcoming; Rowlinson et al., 2014).

Facets of Historical Embeddedness and Implications for Theory-Building

We have argued that historical embeddedness involves three facets that can be analyzed and understood with specific historical approaches and methods: the historical embeddedness of strategic processes, strategic practices, and strategic discourses. In the spirit of the Special Topic Forum, we have highlighted particular intersections of historical approaches and streams of strategy process and practice studies. As elaborated in the previous sections, this analysis of historical embeddedness helps to provide new answers to existing research questions and to pose new ones. In particular, it adds to our understanding of at least three fundamental issues in strategic management: forms of strategic processes and practices, construction of organizational strategies, and strategic agency.

First and foremost, analysis of historical embeddedness advances our
understanding of how forms of strategic processes and practices differ across socio-historical settings and their implications for strategy-making. Overall, an historical perspective can broaden the scope of strategy process and practice research; what is ‘strategic’ does not have to be limited to what is nowadays explicitly called ‘strategic’ and can encompass various kinds of strategic processes and practices. Furthermore, historical analysis helps to open up the time horizon: It is not only the contemporary cases and phenomena that deserve scholarly attention, but also those that have taken place earlier or even in the distant past. Examining the embeddedness of strategic processes highlights the close connection between organizational strategy-making and broader historical conditions and industrial and technological changes. Here comparative historical analysis can play a major role in uncovering long-term processes as well as in explicit comparison between cases. Analysis of the embeddedness of strategic practices can in turn elucidate the historical specificity of key practices in different social, cultural and sociopolitical settings – including practices that may not be perceived as ‘strategic’ – as highlighted by microhistory. Focus on the historical embeddedness of strategic discourses in turn contributes to our understanding of the various ways in which prevailing societal discourses or zeitgeist allow for specific forms of strategy-making to develop and at times change, with implications for the development of the field and profession (Whittington et al., 2011).

Second, analysis of historical embeddedness adds to our understanding of the construction of organizational strategies or their emergence in context. Emergence is a key issue in strategic process research (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985; Mirabeau & Maguire, 2013), and analysis of the embeddedness of strategic processes can add to existing research by showing how strategies emerge in and through historical
processes. Analysis of the embeddedness of strategic practices can in turn explain how specific strategies are constructed in situ in relation to various practices that enable or constrain strategy-making (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Finally, analysis of the embeddedness of historical discourses highlights how conceptions of strategies and strategy-making are reproduced and transformed over time as well as their implications.

Third, agency is a key issue in social studies more generally, but we focus here on strategic agency, i.e., the ability of managers or other organizational actors to influence the strategic processes or trajectories of an organization. Conventionally, strategy research has treated this question almost as a non-issue as strategic managers have been viewed as actors that can and should control organizations via strategic decision-making. Research on strategic processes and practices has, however, provided understanding of how this agency is enabled or constrained by the prevailing context (Floyd et al., 2011; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). The historical analysis we call for adds to this understanding by highlighting how strategic agency is conditioned by historically embedded processes and how historically embedded practices enable or constrain this agency in a given historical period or point in time. Furthermore, analysis of the historically embedded discourses contributes to our understanding of the subject positions that are constructed for managers and other actors (Knights & Morgan, 1991), and future research can go further in elucidating how conceptions of ‘strategists’ are constructed in a particular socio-historical setting and what these constructions imply for issues such as participation or resistance in strategy-making.

**Application of Historical Methods**

These approaches involve specific methods, and we have highlighted those with the potential to uncover particular facets of historical embeddedness. While strategy
process studies have already made use of naturalistic historical case studies, we offer comparative historical analysis as a method for going further into the historically embedded processes and causal mechanisms involved. Although strategy practice research has frequently used interpretative case studies and ethnographic methods (Samra-Fredericks, 2003, 2010), historical analyses have been rare (Ericson et al., forthcoming; Whittington et al., 2011). We have suggested microhistory as a particularly fruitful method not least because microhistory is close to historical ethnography (Rowlinson et al., 2014) and thus appears as the natural extension of ethnographically-oriented strategy-as-practice research (Jarzabkowski, Bednarek & Spee, 2014; Vesa & Vaara, 2014). Though scholars have already used methods such as genealogy in critical analyses of strategic processes and practices (Knights & Morgan, 1991), we have offered ideas for taking such analyses further in order to highlight how strategic phenomena are discursively constructed and to explain their implications both at the field and organizational level.

Thus, we call for specific applications of historical analysis depending on the research context and questions at hand. It is also important to note that the typical research designs and the ways of analyzing historical data may differ significantly. For comparative historical analysis, longitudinal case comparisons would usually be a key part of the research design. For microhistory, the focus is usually on specific cases and episodes in them. Genealogy can then be used to analyze discursive phenomena at the field level or across cases, but it may also be applied to examine individual cases.

Each of these methods can thus highlight particular aspects of strategy-making in historical context. Burgelman’s (1983, 1994, 2002a, b) research on Intel – which we referred to in the previous sections – serves as an illuminative example. Although
a great deal is already known about strategy-making in Intel, historical analysis can
significantly add to our understanding of the embedded of strategic processes and
practices. As to realist history, Burgelman’s (1983, 2002b) work already provides
insights into the processes and mechanisms of strategy-making. In particular, it
highlights how the strategic processes under Andy Grove (‘microprocessor company,’
‘vector model’) differed from those of the previous period (‘memory company,’
‘ecological model’). However, a comparative historical analysis could juxtapose
Intel’s case with other companies in the US, Japan or Taiwan in both eras and
specifically highlight how Intel’s decisions differed from those of its direct or indirect
competitors (see e.g., Wu, Hung & Lin, 2006). This would elucidate the ‘strategic
nature’ of specific decisions as well as provide possibilities for contrasting
counterfactual scenarios, i.e., reflecting upon what Intel’s development could have
been without specific key decisions such as investing in microprocessors or in RISC
technology or delays in moving into networks. It is through such comparative
historical contextualization that we can also better understand the strategic agency of
the key managers such as Moore or Grove at such turning points – in contrast to
strategic actions in other contexts and eras.

Microhistory would then be able to ‘dig deep’ into the strategic actions and
practices of strategy-making in situ. While Burgelman’s work has provided us with
detailed understanding of the dynamics of strategy-making, less is known about
episodes of strategy-making in their historical context. Burgelman’s book (2002a)
does offer some insights into Andy Grove’s character and style, but top
management’s activities and practices are not described and analyzed in situ. Yet, it
would be important to understand how the top managers met, what tools and
frameworks they used, and how they involved or did not involve others – and how
this changed in Intel over time. In addition, it would be interesting to learn more about the practices of upper middle managers and how they approached strategy-making, especially given their key role in autonomous strategy-making, which eventually turned Intel into a microprocessor corporation. As discussed above, such microhistorical analysis can concentrate on important events, even turning points, but it can also focus on the more ‘mundane’ strategy work. The latter may be especially useful in bettering our understanding of the crucial role of middle managers in Intel’s history. Like historical analysis more generally, historical study of this kind should place activities and practices in their socio-historical context. For instance, it seems that the strategy-making practices of Intel reflect what has been characteristic of high tech companies in Silicon Valley and the prevailing financial and other control practices and popular ways of organizing strategy work in American corporations. A closer look into the Intel case also suggests that the ability to act as strategists was closely related to technological competence on the one hand and the ability to master strategic planning practices on the other. The Intel case appears to tell us that the former skills were more important in the first part of the company’s history whereas the latter skills became more accentuated later on. It is through such historical analysis that we can also better understand the roles and identities of the key managers as well as their agency in terms of being enabled and constrained by the context-specific practices.

Finally, genealogy can help to understand yet other aspects of Intel’s strategy-making. In general, the way in which strategies have been made sense of at Intel is related to the dominant discourses. One of the key questions is to which extent Intel’s case – and the way it is narrated – relates to the dominant strategic truths or fashions. Like that of many companies, Intel’s strategy-making apparently reflects the key
wisdoms or zeitgeist of the specific time periods. Intel also served as an example for others as its top managers (especially Grove in the 1990s) received great media attention – not unlike Bill Gates or Steve Jobs later on. Thus, poststructuralist analysis helps to understand how Intel’s case is part of more popular as well as academic discourses constructing the strategy profession. In addition to the heroification of top managers, it illuminates how and under what terms others were able to emerge as key strategists. It is interesting to note that the actions of middle managers as strategists were widely approved and recognized only after they had successfully paved the way to the strategic reorientation of Intel and been legitimated in Grove’s period. A closer look at Intel could also help us better understand seemingly counterintuitive phenomena such as how middle management’s resistance contributes to strategy-making – as it did in terms of ‘autonomous’ strategy work. Finally, genealogical analysis of Intel – as many other cases – may also explicitly criticize prevailing ways of making sense of strategy-making, including elements such as western ethnocentrism, financial preoccupation, gendered orientation, or accentuated individualism.

**CONCLUSION**

In this paper, we have presented three historical approaches that can be pursued to deepen our understanding of the historical embeddedness of strategic processes and practices: realist history, interpretative history, and poststructuralist history. In the spirit of the Special Topic Forum, we have thus provided ideas and suggestions for a ‘creative synthesis’ of strategy process and practice research and historical analysis. Like Kipping and Üsdiken (2014) and Rowlinson et al. (2014), we maintain that it is important not to view history as a mere temporal variable or historical analysis as the sheer use of archival data. Instead, we have highlighted the potential of alternative
forms of historical analysis to further develop our theoretical understanding of the
historical embeddedness of strategic processes and practices and conceptions of them.

By offering a multifaceted view of historical embeddedness, our analysis
contributes to theory-building in strategy process and practice research (Floyd et al.,
2011; Hutzschenreuter & Kleindienst, 2006; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). In
particular, we have pointed to specific intersections of historical approaches and
strategy process and practice research: Realist history in general and comparative
historical analysis in particular can elucidate our understanding of the historical
embeddedness of strategic processes, including historical conditions as triggers and
determinants of strategic processes, historical mechanisms and causality in strategic
processes, and comparison of patterns and characteristics of strategic processes across
historical contexts, thus contributing especially to our understanding of context in
strategic process research (Hutzschenreuter & Kleindienst, 2006; Pettigrew, 1987).
Interpretative history in general and microhistory in particular can add to our
knowledge of the historical embeddedness of strategic practices, involving the
historical nature and construction of strategic practices and the enactment of strategic
practices in historical contexts, contributing specifically to strategy-as-practice
research, which has lacked understanding of historical embeddedness (Ericson et al,
forthcoming, Whittington et al., 2011). Poststructuralist history in general and
genealogy in particular can in turn contribute to our understanding of the historical
embeddedness of strategic discourses by dealing with questions such as the historical
production of strategic truths and fashions and the historical construction of subject
positions, thus advancing especially critical research on strategic management
(Ezzamel & Willmott, 2010; Knights & Morgan, 1991; Thomas et al., 2013). In all,
these approaches and methods, in their specific ways, shed light on key issues such as
the forms of strategic processes and practices across socio-historical contexts, the 
historical construction of organizational strategies, and historically constituted 
strategic agency.

We maintain that by so doing our analysis can also advance historically 
informative strategic management research more generally. Although research on 
strategic management has from its inception included historical analyses (Chandler, 
1962, 1977), the historical connection was at least partially lost when strategic 
management research developed into a separate discipline (Ericson, forthcoming; 
Kahl et al., 2012, Thomas et al., 2013). Thus, strategy scholars across the field have 
called for an integration of historical methods and theories into contemporary research 
on strategic management (Ingram et al., 2012; Kahl et al., 2012; Whittington et al., 
2011). By focusing on the key issue of historical embeddedness in strategy process 
and practice research, we have elucidated the importance and usefulness of historical 
analysis and thus attempted to respond in part to this call. We also maintain that the 
points about historical embeddedness may, with due caution, benefit other areas of 
strategic management and even process and practice-based management and 
organization studies more generally. For instance, the resource based view (Priem & 
Butler, 2001) or research on dynamic capabilities (Augier & Teece, 2006) may be 
enriched by analysis of the historical embeddedness of resources or capabilities. 
Research on strategic and organizational change can benefit from a deeper 
understanding of historical embeddedness in terms of the process dynamics and 
causality in them (Jacobides, 2005; Teece, Pisano & Shuen, 1997), including topics 
such as path dependency (Schreyogg & Sydow, 2011). Such analysis may also inform 
new forms of process analysis (Langley et al., 2013). Finally, analysis of the historical 
embeddedness of strategic discourses might also be extended to other topics and
areas.

Our analysis can also help to advance historical research and especially business history. Calls have recently been made for more integration of business history with management research (Bucheli & Wadhani, 2014; Kipping & Üsdiken, 2014; Leblebici, 2014; Rowlinson et al., 2014; O’Sullivan & Graham, 2010), and we have attempted to do just that in the case of strategy process and practice research. Following the example of others (Rowlinson et al., 2014), we have underscored that this should involve an historiographical understanding of the onto-epistemological basis of different historical approaches. Business historians have argued for the need to develop new methods (Wadhani & Bucheli, 2014; DeJong & Higgings, forthcoming; Jones & Zeitlin, 2008). In this spirit, we have pointed to the potential of largely under-utilized methods such as comparative historical analysis, microhistory, and genealogy.

Finally, this analysis has limitations that warrant attention. Although our analysis indicates a specific resonance between realist history and strategy process research, interpretative history with strategy-as-practice studies, and poststructuralist history with a critical analysis of strategic phenomena and knowledge, these approaches and methods can also be applied in other intersections. For instance, realist comparative analysis may benefit strategy-as-practice research, microhistory combined with poststructuralist analysis, or genealogy used to elucidate the historical embeddedness of strategic practices. With due caution, these epistemologically different approaches might even be combined (Hassard, 1991). We have focused on specific historical approaches and methods, but there are many others that strategy scholars can benefit from (see e.g., Jones & Zeitlin, 2008; O’Sullivan & Graham, 2010). Strategy scholars can also otherwise learn from historical analysis and
historiographical reflection. This is especially the case with source criticism, i.e., a critical perspective on any specific source of evidence, and authenticity, i.e., an effort to place cases, facts and findings as much as possible in their original historical context. There are also new opportunities for historical analysis that are linked with the digitalization of archives and web-based analysis methods. These trends make historical data more accessible and are thus likely to support historically informed strategy research. In all, we have argued for taking historical embeddedness seriously in strategy process and practice research and hope that this analysis can also inspire historically oriented strategic management research more generally.
REFERENCES


Taking historical embeddedness seriously


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| Realist history | Historical realism: usually reflects scientific realism, although other types of positions also exist | Focus on accurate and authentic representation of historical events and processes | Historical case study: Baseline method in historical analysis, especially business history | Historical embeddedness of strategic processes: Comparison of patterns and characteristics of strategic processes across historical contexts; Historical conditions as triggers and determinants of strategic processes; Historical mechanisms and causality in strategic processes; Historically embedded agency of strategic actors | What are the patterns and dynamics of strategic processes in different socio-historical contexts? What is the relative importance of top-down formal and autonomous strategy work in different socio-historical contexts? How do different historical conditions impact the evolution of strategic processes? How do broader environmental changes influence the content and processes of strategy-making? How do corporate managers emerge as strategic agents and what are truly strategic decisions in given time periods? |

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### Interpreting History

**Social constructionism and interpretative traditions in history**
- Focus on actions and meaning;
- Reflexive understanding of historians’ own narratives of significant historical events and processes.

**Microhistory**
- Roots in cultural and social history;
- Focus on micro-level historical events, actions and practices;
- Historical ‘zooming in and out’ to better understand the ‘bigger picture’

**Historical embeddedness of strategic practices**
- Historical construction of strategic practices;
- Enactment of strategic practices in historical contexts;
- Historically constructed roles and identities for strategic actors.

**To which extent and how are strategic practices products of their historical time periods?**
- How have strategic practices and tools of strategy-making changed over time?
- How do episodes of strategy work reflect various layers of contextual embeddedness?
- How are managers and other organizational actors enabled or constrained by the prevailing practices such as strategy tools?
- How can prevailing practices be transformed in specific socio-historical contexts?
- How are the roles and identities of the strategists constructed and enacted in specific contexts?
Taking historical embeddedness seriously

| Poststructuralist history | Radical social constructionism and poststructuralism | Problematization of historical truths; Deconstruction of historical representations; Criticality as a general methodological feature | Genealogy: Focus on the historical evolution of specific discourses and their truth effects; Can involve ‘anti-historical’ stances; Emphasis on the power effects of discourses, but may also focus on the accidentalities and transformations in them; Can involve ironic representations | Historical embeddedness of strategic discourses: Historical construction of strategic discourses and their inter-discursive features; Recontextualization of strategic discourses; Historical production of strategic truths and fashions; Historical construction of subject positions and the strategy profession; Construction of forms of engagement, participation and resistance; Sociomateriality as a key part of strategic discourses | What are the historically produced interdiscursive features of strategic discourses and how do they differ from one context to another? How are strategic discourses recontextualized in particular socio-historical settings and with what power effects? How are strategic truths and fashions constructed? How has strategy as a profession been constructed and with what implications? Are conceptions of engagement, participation and resistance dependent on the socio-historical context and how? What is the role of strategy tools in strategic discourses? |
Taking historical embeddedness seriously

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