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Understanding Competitiveness through life experiences – A strategy-as-practice approach

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Abstract

Practitioners learn and enact typical ways of thinking, understanding and viewing (interpreting) things in their surroundings (fields). The paper argues that by viewing competitiveness as something done by people and not a deliberate-emergent process has the potential to provide a fresh insight as to why competitive advantage is difficult to attain, maintain and plan. Therefore, it is advocated that the nature of competitiveness be explored through the practice theory lens. It is further suggested that due to the reflexive nature of practice theory, this approach allows investigation of the network of social practices, thus bridging the understanding of how social structures and human agency link together to clarify why people do what they do. In translating Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and reflexivity the research has captured the layered intersubjective and interdependent nature of (12 practitioner interviews) becoming competitive. By doing so, the intimate understanding of the way in which practitioners organise, produce and legitimise competitiveness is captured.

Word count: 5742

Key words: Competitiveness, strategy as practice, practice theory, Bourdieu, habitus, reflexivity

Introduction

Strategy making in the Strategy-as-Practice (SAP) research examine how managers strategize through the daily activities (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Whittington, 1996) they carry out in the workplace. Strategy thus is something that practitioners “do” and rather than something that organizations “have” (Whittington and Cailluet 2008, Feldman and Orlikowski 2011). Furthermore, the SAP research tend to be inclined to accept a discursive line of enquiry (Vaara, Sorsa et al. 2010) and embrace an actor-centric sociological standpoint amongst strategists, firms and the environment. In other words, SAP researchers believe that practitioners shared and accepted ways of doing things is what strategy is, and the practitioners’ subjectivities influence the day-to-day work of strategizing (Whittington, Cailluet et al. 2011). Moreover, it is seen that strategy practitioners’ assume that strategy is embedded in the wider organisational and societal context (Abualqumboz, Reid et al. 2017). Broadly speaking, Vaara and Whittington (2012) emphasise that SAP can be categorised around techniques, tools, and methods used in strategy making (practices) by people (practitioners) who routinely work on a day-to-day basis (praxis). They further go on to highlight that when strategy practitioners practice competitive strategies it is a culmination of realized and intended actions that are manifested in the firm and its environment. Porter (1996) encourages practitioners to gain competitive advantage through practicing activities or actions that differ from rivals or similar activities in different ways. In other words, Porter argues that competitive advantage is gained through ‘strategic positioning’ of different actions and activities. His emphasis is on developing distinctiveness by combining activities in an inimitable way. From Porter’s standpoint seeking a competitive advantage or being competitive relies on internal and external factors such as the resources and competence available to the firm internally and external market forces (Moisio and Paasi 2013). By seeking to understand competitiveness through the SAP lens it allows researchers to track as Henry Mintzberg’s idea of strategy as plan and strategy as pattern (Mintzberg and Waters 1982) in a process of actions (Savolainen 2016). Mintzberg’s went on to specify that strategy is an intended, deliberate, realized, unrealized, emergent stream of actions. In this way “Mintzberg manifested strategy to be realized as deliberate or emergent. Where, it is seen that deliberate strategies indicate how information search or information seeking processes were oriented by intentions that existed previously. Whereas, emergent strategies indicated how patterns in information seeking developed in the absence of intentions, or despite them” (Savolainen, 2016).

From a management perspective, policy issues are related to efficiency and distribution of resources in the supply chain (Gereffi and Lee, 2012). Extant literature on competitiveness is deeply embedded in the resource-based view (e.g. Barney, 1991, Barney, 2001) and remain ambiguous and largely undefined. While relying on the Porterian views of competitiveness, the extant literature has ignored the practitioner's perspective on competitiveness. As such, this paper fills the gap by reviewing the manufacturing practitioner's practices and perception of competitiveness.

Literature Review

SAP researchers hold tightly towards an approach that is explicitly sociological, one that moves beyond methodological individualism (Vaara & Whittington, 2012) and the traditional actor-centric opinions of relations amid strategy practitioners. This emphasis does not recognise that firms are composed of living social actors who have to cope with economic instability and market dynamics (Misztal 2013). An alternative perspective to this is practice theory, which posits that (social) actors also learn and enact typical ways of thinking, understanding and viewing (interpreting) things in their surroundings. Viewing competitiveness strategy from this perspective can, therefore, provide fresh insights as to why competitive advantage is difficult to attain and maintain. Over the past few decades, practice theory (or the practice turn) literature has seen a surge in enquiry within social sciences (de Araújo Wanderley and Cullen 2013, Guérard, Langley et al. 2013, Kitchin and David Howe 2013, Alvesson and Sandberg 2014, Jarzabkowski and Kaplan 2014, Lounsbury and Beckman 2014). However, the practice perspective as a lens can be noted from the seminal works of Wittgenstein (1993) and Heidegger (1962) from the 1950s and early 1960s respectively. According to Vaara and Whittington (2012), numerous scholars have informed the practice approach. For example, philosophers such as Foucault stress that power and knowledge are influenced by ethical practices as an act of becoming (Foucault and Gordon 1980). It is argued that a focus on what practitioners actually do and their shared cognitions in creating a shared meaning shows each other and offer significant learning to organization studies more broadly (Suddaby, Seidl et al. 2013, Seidl and Whittington 2014). Over the past few decades, macro, institutional and resourced-based approaches have dominated the literature on strategy analysis relating to the micro processes and practices of organisational life (Chia 2004). Robert Chia emphasises that the SAP literature has taken up what was started by Mintzberg (1987), Pettigrew (1992) and others, and has contributed some important insights towards the understanding of the organisational and institutional 'nitty-gritty'. However, Chia also argues that the SAP literature has

lacked the detailing of what these micro practices and everyday routines of strategy actually constitute (Chia, 2004).

SAP literature has gained much recognition within the practice literature, focusing on the micro activity-based approaches to understanding strategy (Whittington, Jarzabkowski et al. 2003, Jarzabkowski 2004, Wilson and Jarzabkowski 2004, Jarzabkowski 2005, Whittington 2006, Jarzabkowski, Balogun et al. 2007). SAP helps the advancement of social theories in strategic management (Gherardi and Miele 2018) by providing important insights into methods of practices (strategy-making). SAP also aids the understanding of the flow of activity that takes place in their respective praxis and, more importantly, the role and identity of the practitioner involved in strategy-making activities. Practice theory enables scholars to focus on the ways in which actors (enabled by the wider organisational and social practices) make decisions (Mylan and Southerton 2018). Therefore, providing a distinctive contribution to research on the strategic management process (Vaara and Whittington, 2012) conceptualising how strategy is practised (Parmigiani and Howard-Grenville 2011). Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009) confirm that 'practice' has been widely but inconsistently studied, and encourage the need to connect the practices. For these scholars, practices are things done in organisations such as meetings and workshops (praxis). For example, Jarzabkowski (2014) argues the use of a 'sociological eye' (Whittington 2007) to better the understanding of tools used in strategy work. She further emphasises that sociological eye encourages close attention to tools as they are used in the context of the practitioner.

SAP, responded to strong economic views of policy and macro level strategy of the Keynesian economic idealisation of the 'rational actor' to explain day-to-day processes of decision making (Clegg, Killen et al. 2018) or decision makers (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). Focusing the SAP literature to narrowly take into consideration the problems of the inattention to why individual managers and practitioners do what they do (Suddaby 2010). SAP neglected that individual perceptions are embedded in the socially constructed actor (Hwang and Colyvas 2011) and are a result of a more deeper cognitive interaction between social institutions and the environment the actor practices. SAP turned towards a more processual understanding of organizational activities through an activity-based view that emphasised the doing. The 'practice turn' emphasised on the wider social context that shapes and is shaped by observable activity. The practice turn view was that strategising was an activity based on: 'actors in their micro-situations are not acting in isolation but are drawing upon the regular, socially defined modes of acting that arise from the plural social institutions to which they

belong (Jarzabkowski, Balogun et al. 2007). Moreover, the SAP scholars have institutionalised routines and activities of practitioners transcending organizational boundaries and fields focusing on the daily routines of practitioners such as meetings and the use of tool and techniques and in somewhat using the phrase of toolkit (Jarzabkowski, Giulletti et al. 2009).

Strategy benefits from a practice approach as this departs from other, more traditional approaches and concentrates on understanding why people do what they do (Jarzabkowski 2004, Lee and Boud 2009). This paper abandons the long held view of strategy as a linear process (Sull 2007) on the basis that linear models available to practitioners' (and policy-makers) lack clarity. The linear models have been seen as too simple to be adequate (Kline 1985, Gardner and Ash 2003) in this complex world. As Bourdieu argues, strategy should not be viewed as a top-down process by taking the 'short cut which leads from each signifier to the corresponding signified,' and therefore bypassing practice complexity (Bourdieu 1990). By adopting Bourdieu's practice perspective, this study benefits by exploring the 'many more facts' which are generated from 'a dense network of relationships' which exist within the practice world and influence the way that policy is created and implemented (ibid, p.8).

Furthermore, the competitiveness literature benefits from a practice perspective. The longstanding view of competitiveness is embedded in the economic theory argument of profit maximisation, stakeholder and shareholder interest. The myth that economics is the 'physics of society' (Hatgioannides and Karanassou 2011) dictates that economic theory takes precedence in this context over other social sciences. Scholars have widely debated the existence of a mathematical calculation that could prove the validity of economics as the key to delivering optimum policy solutions (Blendon, Benson et al. 1997). The traditional economic models of public choice are based on market clearance and maximisation theory (Akerlof 1989). In his paper 'The economics of illusion', Akerlof (1989) argues that the agential side of policy is ill-defined and needs debating in the mainstream competitiveness agenda. By bringing the debate in line with the social sciences (anthropology, psychology, and sociology), competitiveness will thus be able to connect to the human society debate and be better understood at the practice level. In other words, to enable public choice to perceive policy constructively, strategy practitioners would benefit from understanding the issues that surround the perception of competitiveness.

Economic analysts and researchers (from the standpoint of technology, labour power, prices and profits) have also contributed to the growing interest in non-economic factors in competitiveness

(Qazi 2016, Qazi, Chinta et al. 2017, Belás, Smrcka et al. 2018, Malmberg and Maskell 2018). Non-economic factors are concerned with social practices contributing to regional dynamism, such as (but not limited to) social and cultural capital. The origins of this can be traced to the works of Putnam (1994) and his systematic study of how institutions develop in order to adapt to their social environment. Porter's work on clusters (1998) also conceptualised the role of non-economic factors in developing regional growth, and contributed considerably to regional competitiveness studies. Putnam was of the view that the recognition of social capital is important and can occur through the 'integration' of sociological traditions. He argued that factors such as 'trust, norms and networks' facilitated cooperation and mutual benefit to society; under these conditions, the dissemination of policy across society would be voluntary and participative (Putnam et al., 1994). Conversely, Bourdieu takes a more critical view of social capital. He views the development of social capital through economic infrastructure and disagrees with Putnam's analogy of friendly negotiation for the benefit of the entire community, emphasizing instead that development is an individual's struggle for power and recognition, not cooperation (Bourdieu 1991). This paper draws specifically on Bourdieu's conceptualization of social capital and the non-economic factors (of habitus), enabling the study to draw attention to the non-market conditions of economic growth and social development.

Methodological approach

The paper is based on 12 semi-structured interviews (see Table 1 for details) within a sample of manufacturing firms in the UK. In order to inform the interviews and help with sampling and accessing appropriate participants, secondary data was collected through: desk research of current and historical journal articles; policy documents from government websites such as the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), Her Majesty's Revenues and Customs (HMRC), the FAME Database and British Library archives, trade associations, various newspapers, and magazine articles. As the paper's aims is to explore how manufacturing practitioners perceive competitiveness through their everyday, the main criteria for the selection of interview participants were as follows: practitioners (in a senior management role) of policy and decision making within manufacturing firms, practitioners within the public sector (quangos, associations, bodies, local authorities etcetera) that are involved in the dissemination of policy. To this context both of these are referred to as 'policy enablers'.

Table 1: Career and position of the participants

S. No.	Pseudonym	Role
1	P-8	Chairman and Managing Director (MD)
2	P-10	Senior Manager
3	P-11	Senior Manager
4	P-14	Production Supervisor
5	P-15	MD and Head of Engineering
6	P-16	Sales / Commercial Director
7	P-17	Project Design Engineer
8	P-18	Owner / Manager / Engineer
9	P-21	Project Engineer / Principal Lecturer
10	P-24	Production Team Leader
11	P-26	Design Engineer
12	P-28	Systems Engineer

To develop the methodology for the study Bourdieu's notion of social capital within the framework of habitus and reflexivity is used along with Maclean, Harvey and Chia's notion of life history storytelling through the lens of sensemaking and legitimacy. By doing so, the paper enables to better understand competitiveness strategy through the discourse and actions induced in independent practitioners' life experiences. The research builds on Bourdieu's habitus framework to examine how practitioners develop and practice reflexivity in their daily lives and suggest that reflexive practice is especially significant to the decisions they make when practicing competitive strategies in their field of work (Qazi 2016). The key concept engaged with here is that a person's social history is important and impacts on his/her future practices. The habitus framework relates social background to practice, where social background is not static but an ongoing social process with local and global aspects. The 'field' in this context may be understood as a structured network of practices and positions related to the practitioner's area of work.

Habitus is an organising principle that works through the body from the intellect and is accumulated over past experiences gained by the person. However, it also affects the future in the sense that it generates an individual's preferences, choices, perspectives, reasoning, and so on. Of relevance to this paper is the notion that the individual's self-interest and opportunistic behaviour, perspective and reasoning can exert significant influence over that individual's competitive strategies and, crucially perception of competitiveness. Figure-1 illustrates this theoretical interplay between habitus and reflexivity, particularly as it relates to practitioners.

By analysing participants' narratives and life trajectories with reference to this interplay between reflexivity and habitus, certain key themes emerged from the interview data that point strongly to the notion that practitioners continuously learn by seizing on the opportunities available to them and by building on their personal capital (or as explained earlier, deliberate strategies lead towards emergent strategies). In the case of this study, the analysis drew on the notation that there was a void in the understanding of what happens in between the deliberate and emergent (phases) of the strategy process. Specifically, three main reflexive practices emerged: the 'absorption', the 'attempt to resolve', and the (combined mode of the two) becoming competitive. In addition, several factors were found to inform each of these; namely: personal capital, embody opportunities, developing personal practice strategies, overcoming hurdles, and learning from hardship. Figure-1 illustrates the interaction between these reflexive practices and the key factors informing them.

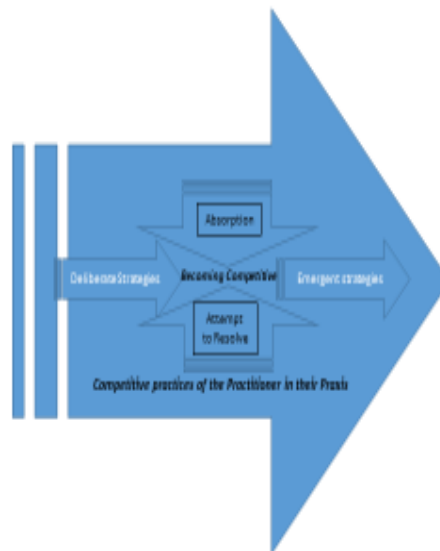


Figure 1 Practitioners' practicing praxis - Becoming competitive (Authors own illustration)

Figure-1 illustrates strategy at work in a practitioners' praxis. The structure sets expectations and provides individuals with a contextual understanding of different situations through their exposure to habitual circumstances in everyday life. By doing so the practitioner is negotiating in the theatre of symbolic struggle (Bourdieu 1990) for status and resources. It was found that not all practitioners are on a level playing field; existing practitioners have a symbolic position and are placed and privileged

in the ranks of practitioners by virtue of having existing status within the field, albeit at different levels. Through reflexive practice, practitioners realising their social predicament seek ways to overcome their habituated circumstances and work towards improving their position and competence. So as to compete and develop competitive strategies the individual practitioner permeates the boundaries of their habitus and try to gain higher-level learning (Maclean, Harvey et al. 2012). Situating reflexivity in relation to capital, field, dispositions and social class the practitioners struggle provides the aspiration to acquire capacity to compete (Maclean et al., 2012) and become competitive practitioners.

Discussing the data

The interview transcripts were coded and analysed with the help of NVIVO 12. The analysis started by reading through interviews' transcribed text highlighting relevant areas of interest. The second round of coding aggregated the various codes that emerged from the first round resulting in Table 2 below. Three themes emerged with five sub-themes.

This paper was an attempt to theorise and seek connections between the emerging narratives like practices of practitioners' and their perspective of becoming and being competitive. With that in mind, and given the fact that the nature of this research is exploratory and descriptive, the analysis method of choice for this paper was thematic analysis. This choice is underlined by the fact that the study of competitiveness as a phenomenon requires the interpretation of the meaning and understanding of the words of practitioners of competitiveness themselves, in order to understand the rationale behind how competitive policies are translated to practice.

Table 2: Thematic analysis of "Becoming a competitive practitioner"

1 Absorption - reflexivity	
1.1 Personal capital	I used to be a very keen golfer [...] I came up with the idea of doing a county-wide book explaining how to play each golf hole on each course and we got most of Hertfordshire done and my local club said, well, you've got all these pictures of the golf course now, can you make us some signs. So, I got someone to make signs for them and I went back with the price and they said that's too expensive, can you sell advertising. So, we started selling advertising and the sign company that was making these things went bust so I started making them myself and that's how I got into making signs, and I've been doing it ever since 1989. P-15
1.2 Embody opportunity	I bought this [referring to the premises where the interview was conducted]. Then slowly, slowly there came the stage of what business I'm going to start up on because obviously at this time we were running the grocery store and repairing this as well [...] I bought a few machines

	later to do the steelwork, so one or two guys were very kind in the community and they encouraged me. They said I need my shutter putting in ... no, no, you can do it ... and I started up. P-18
2 Attempt to resolve - reflexivity	
2.1 Overcoming hurdles	I was just looking for a Masters opportunity and then the calls for University of [name] came up. It was manufacturing engineering and systems management so that bring me to [name of city] back in 2002. I did my masters in manufacturing for one year and then after that I got an opportunity to work for a ... as a trainee engineer in a company for six months. There I learned different Lean tools and basically built up from there. I found it quite challenging in a sense that ... generally speaking the Lean principles it's a big tool kit. You are coming across all different sort of scenarios and all different sort of problems and each ... every problem is not going to be the same all the time and so that lead me into a bit more into the Lean manufacturing or manufacturing management side and then I got this opportunity for this KTP associate as a fresh graduate and it all starts from there. P-14
2.2 Learning from Hardship	My dad had no job so he set up his own business ... but he went out of business. He ran his own business for like 20 years but about 15 years in, somebody else ... he did a big job like £250 grand which was a lot of money in them days, and the guy just didn't pay. He went—he built a machine or something and the guy went off again to [name of a country] ... same destination, different person and that finished it off. So I swore I'm not going into business for myself because I saw the devastating effect it had on my family and my father and still to this day, because my parents like, you know, had a huge house and they had to give the money to the bank and, you know, they've got problems still stemming from that issue. So it informed my view about what I wanted to do [...] And that's why I came to work in a university, there's a little bit of a degree of security there amongst other things. P-21
3 Combined – Becoming competitive	
3.1 Personal practice strategies of reflexivity	Yes! We do have all the policies but we also have the ability to put the line through them and say that it doesn't apply in this case [...] I am not a Christian in any way, form or fashion, but I do believe the Lord's prayer has a lot of good things for the people to live by 'doers should be done unto' or whatever the wording is ... and 'respect' that's one of the other things that I get personally very angry about ... If one employee is not showing the other employee 'respect' regardless' of whether they are the boss, or they are the cleaner or they are two equal people, that I feel very strongly about ... you know at the end of the day everyone's coming here to do the job and whether you are the cleaner or not, you all have your part to play in the jigsaw. As you touched on earlier, if everyone is pulling together, chances are it will all happen. P-8

Absorption – reflexivity

From analysing the life stories of the interview participant's absorption came up as a strong theme of reflexivity, specifically, from how they had made the journey to becoming practitioners. As a sub-theme of the absorption 'personal capital is seen as the journey taken by interview participants to accumulate, over time, personal capital (economic, social, cultural and symbolic). As the practitioner intermittently gained experience and their careers progressed, such resources tend to grow. In Table-2, P-15, the son of a builder from Hertfordshire, tells how he became a manufacturer of signs while writing a book on how to play golf across the UK. His local club, seeing that he had collected many details and pictures of golf courses, asked him if he could provide them with signage. Using his existing connections, he first outsourced the sign but quickly saw that there was a gap in the market that he could exploit, and started manufacturing signs himself. He currently runs a profitable business that has a niche in health and safety signs, and competes with only a handful of other UK manufacturers. His approach, reflexively, was to use his social capital to his advantage and learn the intricate details

of sign making. This move increased his cultural capital, and brought him precious contacts (social capital) and reputation advantage (symbolic capital).

The thoughtful use of non-economic forms of capital – cultural, social and symbolic – emerged through all the interviews, with certain degrees of difference. With regard to cultural capital, participants reflexively sought out people who could be their ‘gatekeeper’ for entering into the manufacturing field and learning the skills required to become a practitioner. P-11, for example, identified a friend as a connection whom she used to enter the field: “I knew the girl who was doing the job before me and she was emigrating to Florida and she knew I had some design skills ... and I sort of fit ... slightly fit the profile of the person that [name of the company] would be looking to replace her with, and so I thought, well, I was doing lots of different freelance work at the time and I thought I’ll give it a go”.

In the form of personal capital, P-11 had a varied career before joining her existing employer. In her previous employment she lacked organisational skills and thought it had an implication on her performance with her existing employer. P-11 shared her experience of lacking in ‘organisational skills’ and how this impacted on her ability to keep up with the workload: “No, it’s just that you have to make sure that you could keep an organised mind and I think I learned that from him [her manager, the chairman of the firm]. He always wrote things down in a very methodical way ... me being sort of an arty type, I was all over the place, you know, but I learned that lists of things to do today ... you feel good ticking those off and I learned that from him”.

P-21 established enduring and valuable ties with employees in the firm in which he started his career as a manufacturer. He recognised the importance of accruing social capital with his peers, with whom he had to deliver improvement projects on the factory floor, commenting that: “If you look at some of these improvement projects, a lot of the time we spent winning support from people, the actual idea was a very small part of it. The rest of it’s kind of like convincing people, collecting data, running pilots, you know, assume you get it right and all that kind of stuff so it was a big part of that environment I was working in”.

Symbolic capital, expressed through honorary awards, titles and appointments, is acquired reflexively by combining the recognition for major achievements with a reputation for selflessness (Bourdieu, 1996). P-23, for example, advanced within the field of power while training to be a chartered accountant with one of the big four accountancy firms. Eventually promoted to Associate Director, P-

23 draws out the power he needed to negotiate through the various activities he undertook outside of his work in order to progress in his career, such as the charity he chairs, as Deputy President of a trade association, and as committee member of a government agency. All this, he concluded, raised his profile beyond being a businessman alone: “So to me, selling in this context is more about building that rapport very quickly and then being able to, on the back of that, build a relationship”. Thus the fundamental dynamic here is one of ‘trust’ and relationships; i.e. social capital wielded in order to accrue symbolic and economic capital.

Reflexivity enables the individual practitioner to possibly increase their chances in a competitive way. The notion of ‘embody opportunities’ was a theme that emerged throughout the interviews. In table-2, the case study of P-18 shows how he ended up becoming a manufacturer. Coming from a working class family background, he came to the UK when he was in his teenage years. His decision to better his life by immigrating to the UK reflects the confidence he had in his personal capital and also his willingness to embrace opportunities in order to improve his life. In reflexive terms, his decision reflects his capacity to think reflexively about the future. For the majority of the participants interviewed, however, opportunity seeking did not always translate to business creation but to more straightforward opportunities for career development in established companies. This was the case for P-27, who opted for a more stable career option by building on the skills he had developed in another country. He began working in the UK within the IT sector and has recently enrolled in a PhD programme to enhance his job prospects. Opportunity seeking is also seen among newcomers. For example, P-17, an aerospace design engineer from an upper-middle-class background, emphasised that in careers ‘you make your own luck’ by recognising a ‘break’ and what you are really good at: “I wanted to be a diplomat because it was a very fascinating role, working in international diplomacy. I applied to the Foreign Office in my second year of university and they said you should try the civil service, which I wasn’t interested in, so I then applied to join the Royal Navy as a fighter pilot but my eyesight let me down”.

Embodying opportunities strongly emphasises the need for reflexive practice to increase the practitioner’s competence of formulating strategy. This narrative reflected strongly throughout the themes. Reflexivity takes part on behalf of the participant, for example P-17, P-18 and P-27 all realised that opportunities can sometimes take unexpected forms that may contain concealed potential for self-enhancement, and they were open and able to embrace these.

Attempt to resolve – reflexivity

'Attempt to resolve' was the second main mode of reflexivity that emerged from analysing the life stories of the interview participants in terms of how they had made the journey to becoming practitioners through the reflexive lens. The key factors informing this were 'overcoming hurdles' and 'learning from hardship', Interview data revealed that reflexivity enables practitioners to see the big picture and the possibilities available to them in their field. In table-2, the case study of P-14 illustrates this. P-14 came from a lower middle class family that had basic education. His act of being the first to go to university was, in itself, overcoming the education ceiling present in his family, followed by the subsequent challenge of traveling to the UK for further life improvement. Such action strategies may be directed at overcoming constraints and hurdles. His frustration at being stuck in the same situation as his family was what prompted him to kick-start his career. He was acutely aware of how his parents and family perceived him, and sought to impress them by studying at university and getting a job first in his country of origin, and then by moving to the UK. These competencies that P-14 demonstrated, especially when viewed through the lens of Figure-2, suggest that reflexivity, when invoked, was a powerful tool for overcoming the hurdles that constrained and influenced his habitus. By influencing action strategies, learned through educating himself and acquiring reflexivity, P-14 was able to defy convention and elevate his family from being lower to middle class, winning him much pride and respect within his family and community (symbolic capital). A similar finding emerges from the interview with P-26 in Table 3, where he narrates his struggle with his initial career path to eventually becoming a practitioner producing spectacles/frames for a large multinational engineering firm:

Table 3: Example of reflexivity in practice (P-26)

<p>I was a motor mechanic, an apprentice, but I soon realised I was covered in mud and oil and rubbish every day, it wasn't consistent with having a good lifestyle and the financial remuneration wasn't right ... So when I left this garage, the filthy job, I went to the youth employment as it was called in those days and they said [...] do you have a good eye and eye coordination? Do you have a good eye for shapes? I said, yeah, I'm quite artistic, at school I could sculpt better than the art teacher [...] I was arty to say the least. So they said would you like to make optical frames, handmade ones, and I thought I'd love to do that, it appealed to me ... I got the job and found myself making spectacles.</p>

Like this account, most of the interviews in this study dwelled on difficult times. Having strategies devised to progress careers formed a consistent theme across participants' narration of their life struggles, representing defining moments and, irrespective of background, being informative in explaining how reflexive behaviours are formed and deployed. Reflexivity enables the practitioner to

continuously improve their position within the field by learning to overcome their deficiencies. In table-3, the case study of P-21 illustrates this. Although this respondent came from a middle class, educated family, during his youth he was witness to much hardship and struggle within his family to keep a roof over their heads. The experiences his parents had to endure somewhat 'informed his opinion' on a career choice. He narrated how his father used to work in a firm and then was able to become the MD of the firm, but then lost his job when the firm went bankrupt. This deeply affected P-21, as he stated: "So I swore I'm not going into business for myself because I saw the devastating affect it had on my family and my father, and still to this day". While reflexive practices might be evident earlier among newcomers, demanding encounters in business arising from field dynamics and contingencies invoked reflexive capabilities for P-21. Similarly, other participants related formative events during their early life and careers – moments of significance when they entered unaccustomed territory, experienced a sense of displacement, and sought to keep a clear head to achieve a good outcome.

Becoming competitive - combined mode of reflexivity

In the development of personal tactics, the dynamics of learning, knowing and practising unite, revealing the participants as 'ordinary theorists' in the sense suggested by Calori (2000, as quoted in Maclean et al., 2012). Here, the two modes of reflexivity combine to enable practitioners to develop and implement action strategies as the practitioner reflects on him/herself. Reflexivity enables the practitioner to develop the capabilities (skills) strategies of practitioners, thus arguably increasing the competitiveness of the firm. The case study of P-8 (see table-2), the MD and chairman of a large timber products manufacturing firm, provides an example of this. At the manufacturing firm in which P-8 was the MD, the researcher had the opportunity to interview seven other members. P-10 and P-8 were in the same firm. P-10 (Table 4), discussing the MD's action strategy, stated that the company had all the policies and procedures in place for the smooth and efficient running of the business, but that the MD knew when to draw the line under a policy in favour of the client. P-10 said while praising the business ethos:

Table 4: Example of Reflexivity - Personal Strategy (P-10)

Although the company obviously had its own interest ... it was very customer orientated ... that again came from [name of the MD], he would make decisions about ... he would sacrifice efficiency in the interest of the customer, if he felt that for example the customer had ... a poor deal then he would take the remedy on to the company if you like to put that right, he would ... I've known occasions when we have made [product] to a customer's design ... and he has contacted the customer ... the salesman has contacted the customer and suggested improvements that 'we' could make at 'our' own cost, because he felt that it would be a better gate for the customer rather than ... even though it was made to his requirement we could suggest improvement ... if you like... there is a clear understanding of what was right ... and ... there was again no conflict of people, people were rewarded at that stage, people on production were on piece work, so their interest was in line again... if they were making good money the company was making good money... and ... everybody understood what was expected and what was good behaviour and what was bad behaviour, what the next step was ... if you like ... in any set of circumstances. It was a ... sufficiently small and integrated team, people knew what to do rather than discuss possible ways forward ... if you like ... the outcomes, the methodology was clear and the outcomes were agreed.

Similar confirmatory narratives and others evoked during the interviews, such as that of 'drawing the line under the policy', stand as shorthand for behaviours that their authors perceive as crucial to their businesses competitiveness and success. These were first learned reflexively, then practised and refined until dispositional indications of their reflexive practice and personal beliefs were able to emerge.

Conclusion

The interface between deliberate strategies and emergent strategies shapes practitioners' perception of competitiveness. It is seen that their own competitive building journeys (absorption and attempt to resolve) helps them shape their strategic understanding of competitiveness and has an influence on what they are today. The lens of habitus enabled an understanding to emergent ways in which practitioners thought, felt and acted which then guide them (Wacquant 2005) towards becoming competitive. The manifestations of strategy shaped the practitioners' perception of competitiveness. Practitioners past experiences, as understood through the reflexive lens used in the analysis (absorption and attempt to resolve) have shaped their current practices and perceptions of competitive strategies.

Habitus as a framework examined how practitioners developed and practised reflexivity in their everyday lives, suggesting that reflexive practice is important to them in their perception of competitiveness. The reflexive lens, in relation to the nature of the capital and field of practice, provides a newer perspective and understanding of how practitioners understand and practice competitive strategy. Drawing on the themes that emerged through the life stories of practitioners, it can be argued that reflexivity takes on two major modes, and a third that combines them: 'absorption' and 'attempt to resolve' modes. Practitioners were found constantly deliberating efforts to gain and absorb personal capital (economic, cultural, social and symbolic) through embodying opportunities within their field of practice. Reflexivity enabled them to 'attempt to resolve' the situations posed by the field, and overcome hurdles and hardships during the course of life which in turn shapes their understanding of competitiveness and being competitive. These modes enable the practitioner to develop personal practice strategies that can then lead them to be competitive in their own way and figure out the 'rules of the game'; progressively replacing the initial habitus-related advantages (Maclean et al., 2011). Practitioners brought with them their notions and expectations of what it means to be a practitioner, reflecting the values, beliefs and dispositions of their relatives and close social groups. Practitioners struggle to control the level of uncertainty over their future actions thus became the primary factor informing their drive to be competitive. It also opens up further opportunities for studies of competitiveness at the practice level. There is scope to build upon SAP work on discourse, resistance and political dynamics to shed light on the competitive framework and its implications for practitioners. In this way, the methodology and the research agenda can facilitate dialogue between SAP researchers on the broader concept of competitiveness and deepen the understanding.

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