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Making Competitiveness More Meaningful

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Abstract

Policy-makers, politicians and practitioners over the past few years have based the narrative of competitiveness around the idea of 'rebalancing the economy'. This entails viewing competitiveness as a rational process (through the Porterian lens) and identifies strategies from a top-down perspective. However, there is generally a lack of understanding of how competitiveness is practiced from the bottom-up. Therefore, this study adopts a practice-based perspective to investigate competitiveness from a practitioner's standpoint. In this paper, Bourdieu's habitus and reflexivity is used along with Maclean, Harvey and Chia's notion of life history storytelling through the lens of sensemaking and legitimacy. From a constructivist perspective data was analysed using thematic analysis, codes generated and inferences made. The main contribution is that the reflexive practitioners' past experiences shape existing practices and perceptions of competitiveness.

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Introduction

The accepted use of competitiveness is problematic and warrants exploration. People from every walk of life use the term competitiveness as a way of expressing willingness or desire to strive and be successful and it seems to be generally accepted. However, when it comes to firms and strategy practitioners (or policy-makers for example) within the firms environment competitiveness is seen as being a key driver of the economic growth agenda (Gashi and Watkins, 2015, Rogers, 2015). From a management perspective policy issues tend to be related to productivity, efficiency, resources, capabilities, supply chain (to name a few) (Gereffi and Lee, 2012, Barney et al., 2001, Perraton, 2015, Borgo et al., 2013, Hildreth and Bailey, 2013, Wenzel et al., 2016) which are deeply embedded in the resource-based view (Barney, 1991, Barney, 2001, Lieder and Rashid, 2015, Hildreth and Bailey, 2013). This study suggests that by taking a practice-based approach to competitiveness the use of competitiveness can become more meaningful. In other words this study suggests that while relying on the Porterian views of competitiveness (Holtbrügge and Friedmann, 2016, Mulatu, 2016), the extant literature have ignored the practitioner's perspective on competitiveness. As such, this study fills the gap by reviewing the manufacturing practitioner's perception of competitiveness.

Overview of competitiveness

Rebalancing the British economy by focussing on manufacturing (Berry and Hay, 2015, Omstedt, 2016) has been a prime objective of government policy since the 2008 global recession (Martin et al., 2015, Berry and Hay, 2015, Berry, 2015). Manufacturing, as an engine of growth (Leon-Ledesma, 2000, Martin et al., 2014), a critical contributor to productivity, and innovation and trade, has slipped from being the centre of economic growth activities[i] (Berry, 2015, Berry and Hay, 2015, Song, 2015). In his 2010 budget speech George Osborne argued that the economic profession was in broad agreement and in support of a more balanced economy (Osborne, 2014):

> *"A resilient economy is a more balanced economy with more exports, more building, more investment – and more manufacturing too [...] We've got to support our manufacturers if we want to see more growth in our regions."*

To address the economic imbalance (Gardiner et al., 2013, Hildreth and Bailey, 2014), recent governmental policy priorities have been between correcting apparent imbalances between exports and imports, saving and spending, and protecting manufacturing industries (HM Government, 2010). According to the McKinsey Global Institute[1] manufacturing's global share of the GDP is 16%, responsible for 62 million jobs in the year 2000 and 45 million in the year 2010. Manufacturing is regarded as an essential and uniquely powerful economic force across advanced countries and economies (Tassey, 2014, De Propris, 2013). It is perceived to be a source for creating wealth and well-paid jobs (Manyika, 2012, Litan et al., 2013, Fealing, 2012). In the recent decades studies on growth and productivity (Porter, 1986, Porter, 1990, Porter, 1996, Porter, 1998, Krugman, 1994a, Krugman, 1994b, Krugman, 1994c, Martin, 2001, Kitson et al., 2005) have been dominated by discourses that have put

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[1] See *Manufacturing the future: the next era of global growth and innovation*. McKinsey Global Institute, 2012.

Report on the future of manufacturing

the attention on competitiveness to be the intended outcome of macro and meso policy (Gardiner et al., 2013, Martin, 2015, Leaver and Williams, 2014).

The political rhetoric centres the manufacturing sector as the key to economic growth. Competitiveness, in this context, is seen through the discourse of growth (Berry, 2015, Huggins et al., 2013), productivity (Bhasin, 2015, Dunning, 2013), and socio-economic prosperity (Huggins and Thompson, 2010). Dominant to this discourse is the corporatist view of competitiveness, which draws heavily from the popularity of a Porterian view (Mulatu, 2016). Such a view entails viewing competitiveness as a way firms ought to practice and become competitive rather than what practitioners perceive through everyday practices (strategies) according to what 'they' seem fit.

However, the literature on strategy discipline knows very little about how competitiveness actually takes place in the everyday practice of management strategies. The literature on management tends to be prescriptive and put forward theories and concepts on how firms should adapt strategies that lead to become competitive (Whittington, 2002, Aganbegyan et al., 2013, Mulatu, 2016, Zakery and Afrazeh, 2015, Raitu et al., 2015, Salman et al., 2011, Haar, 2014). Mintzberg and Waters (1985) suggests that strategic management is too complex an issue and cannot be defined by brief sentences or paragraphs such as a firm's mission statement or its long and short-range objectives because, according to him, this involves a plan, ploy, pattern, position and perspective (Ibid). The 'practice' approach in the management literatures examines strategy not as something a firm 'has' but something a firm 'does' (Jarzabkowski, 2004, Cooper and Winsor, 2015, McIver et al., 2012) reversing the conventional assumption that strategies are 'what' organisations *have* and instead emphasise strategy as something that people in organisations *do* (Rasche and Chia, 2009, Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006, Mueller, 2015). Hence, the current study is primarily interested in unpacking the real practices (Gorli et al., 2015, Rooney et al., 2015) of people, working in the manufacturing sector (hereafter called manufacturing practitioners) and brings to the surface the actual doing of competitiveness. By doing so, the study presents a fresh way of understanding competitiveness.

This is done (through the dual lens of sensemaking and storytelling) by examining how manufacturing practitioners make sense of, narrativise and legitimate their experiences of building and developing their careers within their field of work. The empirical data is based upon life-history interviews with members of manufacturing practitioners from different organisational backgrounds, who typically have had long, successful careers within the field of power (Bourdieu 1996). This research contributes by identifying and explaining the three processes – locating, meaning-making and becoming – as taken from the stories told by manufacturing practitioners. By doing so, the research contributes to theory by responding to the call for more research on sensemaking processes in narratives (Maclean et al., 2012). Furthermore, the research highlights the significance of storytelling as a method of engaging and sharing experiences of practitioners within a firm specifically or the practitioners' wider community; thus 'becoming' a vehicle for the practitioners' of being competitive.

Storytelling, sensemaking and legitimisation
The role of narratives in qualitative research that aims to respond to an organisational agenda is generally recognised to be that of obtaining a better understanding of organisational phenomena (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1998, Nilsson, 2000, Ma et al., 2008, Carnegie and Napier, 2012). Rhodes and Brown (2005) argue that, in organisational theory, organisational story and storytelling research have been able to produce a rich body of knowledge and have

the potential to increase the organisational knowledge scholarship. This article, by listening to the voices (Czarniawska, 1997, Czarniawska, 2004) of the manufacturing practitioners and narrating their stories, will thus lend primary legitimacy to these voices. Sensemaking is an embodied, rational and intellectual process (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012).

Maclean, Harvey, and Chia (2012) present the notion of life history storytelling by elite actors through the lens of sensemaking processes and becoming, for the purposes of articulating how legitimising is achieved. For Whittle and Mueller (2012), sensemaking is portrayed as a way in which people interpret themselves and the world around them. In this way, meaning-making becomes a mechanism that resonates with Maclean's process of sensemaking. Maclean et al. (2012) explored the relationship of sensemaking processes and used the case of elite bankers' careers, examining how they self-legitimised being a banker, and what actions they carried out in order to 'become' this work identity. Similarly, the current article assumes sensemaking to be a collaborative activity that is used to create, legitimise and sustain (Holt and Macpherson, 2010, Maclean et al., 2012) competitiveness practices. In relation to manufacturing practitioners, sensemaking arguably offers credible insight and narrative rationality (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012) to the accepted story(ies) offered by practitioners in their description of how they became who they are today. In other words, the research examines manufacturing practitioners through the dual lens of sensemaking and storytelling as recounted in life-history interviews. Maclean, Harvey and Chia's (2012) analysis points out, among other things, that sensemaking stories are tied closely to self-legitimisation and have significant organisational implications.

Positioning the sensemaking process

From the range of stories collected, the sensemaking process examines how manufacturing practitioners present themselves within storytelling to legitimise their perception of competitiveness (See Table 1). Most organisational realities are based on narration (Weick, 2012a); in this study, narration will help to crystallise the story of the journey that participants have taken in order to become competitive, which is important to sensemaking as it provides the opportunity to create points of stability within the fluidity of organisational life. The stories the manufacturing practitioner's narrate are helpful towards sensemaking by highlighting how individuals make sense of change: locating the self in time, space and context; making meaning from its connections with the unstable reality; and joining into an amalgamated self in a continuous process of becoming competitive.

Table 1: Legitimising through sensemaking

Self-legitimising	Sensemaking process		
	Locating the manufacturer	Meaning-making stories of the manufacturer	Becoming competitive
Accomplishment	Through Struggle	On Courage	Inclined to
Resilience	Through Determination and Persistence	Being committed to the cause	Desiring
Succeeding through abilities	Progression through abilities	Ability and respect amongst others	Being suited to compete
Giving back	Prestige and honour	Kindness towards others	Sharing success

Positioning the Self-Legitimising Process

The field of manufacturing is fluid and dynamic. Individual stories of the manufacturing practitioners must likewise be understood as historical effects of social relations within the field of manufacturing and their shared experience, which then enables sensemaking. The strategies and ways in which practitioners make decisions in their daily routines of work and social life enable one to extract meaning from what people actually do in practice. The practitioners constantly create a sense of their own self and overcome the hurdles that stifle personal development. Sensemaking of the individual thus enables the research to connect the past to the present and beyond, and to explore the position the individuals occupy. It is important here to remember that, while individuals practise manufacturing with a goal, a key element is the formulation and reformation of that goal (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2004), hence establishing self-legitimacy.

The socially constructed nature of success (or failure) underlines the significance of the manufacturing practitioners claim to legitimacy in the current environment, and can be seen through the legitimate actions taken by them within a wider system of social norms and values (Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975). The manufacturing practitioner gains respect, honour and prestige through legitimacy; as Goffman (1959) states, when an individual:

> makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him in the manner that persons of this kind have a right to expect (1959, p.no).

Legitimacy, in the context of the current article, enables the manufacturing practitioners to gain recognition, respect, and the right to hold the position they are in. With regard to this, four thematic categories were identified from the data: accomplishment (ability to succeed despite hardship); resilience (holding steadfast over the years); succeeding through abilities (self-acclaimed skills and capabilities); and giving back (sharing the success with others).

Table 2 shows layout of researcher's thinking through the initial phase of descriptive coding. Two themes emerged from going back and forth between literature review and data sets: sense-making and self-legitimising. The researcher then defined each theme in the table, which assisted the development of a list of keywords (semantic descriptors) that would guide the researcher while digging into the datasets (data-mining) to generate the descriptive codes. Once Table 2 was finalised, the process of coding started. After descriptive codes were developed, the data was analysed through going back and forth between the literature and datasets (analytical coding). For example, sensemaking was analysed and categorised into three categories (Locating the manufacturer, Meaning-making stories, Becoming competitive).

Table 2: Coding structure of Sensemaking

Raw data	Pattern codes	Analytical codes	Descriptive codes
I have seen that they are trying to push manufacturing to sort of bring more specialist like bring textile back instead of relying so much on the imports you know, bring manufacturing back because over the past twenty years we have become more of a service industry, more than a production …	Practical person	Locating the manufacturer	Sensemaking
	White collar social elite		
	Still surviving	Meaning-making stories	
	Joblessness		
	Struggle		
	Networks	Becoming competitive	

Taking an overview from right to left indicates how the coding system was structured. However, taking an overview from left to right indicates how the coding structured was processed. The interview transcripts were read many times locating the pattern codes underlining the text that potentially qualify for a pattern code. Finally, those underlined text were refined until it ended up with a refined list of pattern codes.

Table 3: Coding structure of self-legitimising

Raw data	Pattern code	Analytical codes	Descriptive codes
I knew that statement was flawed so you don't put your hand up and make them look bad, that's the last thing you do. I went to our management, I said under the Treaty of Rome and the Maastricht Treaty, all financial movements of trade and of skills are interchangeable across borders and they cannot be held up. In other words someone from France or Germany, Italy, can come and work in England and providing they have a good command of English and their degree is equal, they can come and get a job here but the General Optical Council told them they couldn't have them, they couldn't bring anybody in and their own legal department, who they're paying a retainer to, said they have a thing where you can't get them in but I knew that was wrong. He wrote me a handwritten letter thanking me because he didn't know you could bring someone in from Italy or France or Germany, an optician, and break the stranglehold the opticians had here. He didn't know that and he's the head of Europe and I'm a zero	Struggle	Accomplishment	Self legitimising
	Support		
	Being committed	Resilience	
	Negotiating		
	Responsible	Succeeding through abilities	
	Authority		
	Capable		
	Looking after concern	Giving back	

Subsequently, inferential relationships amongst codes started to emerge as shown in Table 3. For example, the researcher related the analytical code (Locating the manufacturer) from the descriptive code (Sensemaking) with the analytical code (Accomplishment) from the descriptive code (Self-legitimising) that resulted in a theoretical framework of how the

practitioner legitimises through sensemaking. The patterns that emerged in the form of narratives inductively developed theoretical relationships between the practitioners' environment and reflexivity developing important links in becoming competitive.

Competitiveness through sensemaking in action
The range of practitioners in the data set were had long-standing careers in manufacturing and multi-positional roles within the field of power (Bourdieu, 1996). The sensemaking and legitimising process is adapted from the works of Maclean, Harvey and Chia (2012b). Table 4 outlines the ways in which sensemaking and legitimising interact in the context of this study.

Table 4: Sensemaking and self-legitimising

Self-legitimising	Sensemaking process		
	Locating the manufacturer	**Meaning-making stories of the manufacturer**	**Becoming competitive**
Accomplishment	Through struggle	On courage	Inclined to compete
Resilience	Through determination and persistence	Being committed to the cause	Desiring
Succeeding through abilities	Progression through abilities	Ability and respect amongst others	Be suited to compete
Giving Back	Prestige and Honour	Kindness towards others	Sharing success

Meaning-making stories of the manufacturer

The practitioners in the sensemaking process locate their experiences and stories that enable them to understand the reasons why they chose the path of a manufacturer. This dynamic of locating is demonstrated in table 5, which presents an example of one participants'[2] life story of becoming an engineer.

Table 5: Example of sensemaking narrative (participant MP-26)

Born 1957 in a small town [country in Africa]
First professional job in the 1980s in the telecom sector as an exchange technician
Took a break from the job mid-career for further studies and joined the teaching profession
Joined a steel plant in his country as an Instrumentation and Controls Engineer
Moved to the UK in the early 2000s
Joined various computer repairs and servicing firms in supervisory roles
Currently registered for a PhD in Technology Education and running a private business in computer repairs to support himself, his wife and two children

MP-26 was the eldest of five brothers and sisters born to 'illiterate parents'. He recounted that his parents 'had a strong urge to educate their children and that his 'father held engineers in high esteem.' He started his education in a grammar school in his country of origin and funded his own education (secondary school onwards) by making and selling bird cages and go-karts in his neighbourhood. He attributed his success to the fact that he 'had a flair for practicalities […] anything that has to do with repairing.' By locating himself in time, space and social context, this participant was then able to convey how he feels about himself in today's world:

> As a technologist or a technician, you are socially embarrassed when you are talking before a legal student, a lawyer […] they feel they are better. (MP-26)

He indicated that he was able to legitimise this struggle through his choice to do a PhD in technology education, and thus bestow honour and prestige on himself and his family. His reference to lawyers, through which he appropriates a well-known discursive resource, propels him to an epic style of self-narrative, instilling in the mind of the listener the image of the suited, white collar social elite. He further commented that today's living standards and education have taken away the younger generation's pride in being a 'practical person', and feels 'that is why the company cannot find skilled and qualified people to work.' This also

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[2] For Full List of participants and their summary please see appendix-1

reflects on the challenge that the existing manufacturing sector in the UK is facing in terms of skills shortages.

This example evokes certain key points from the literature on sensemaking. Jeong and Brower (2008) suggest that the way in which practitioners cope with sensemaking is developed through the three stages of noticing, interpretation, and action (Weick et al., 2005, Thomas et al., 1993, Weick, 2012b), which vary as a function of the ecological, institutional, and social relational contexts in which they are constructed. Starbuck and Milliken (1988) emphasise that sensemaking refers to comprehending, understanding, explaining, attributing, extrapolating and predicting, where interpretation is the process by which the actor seeks clarification of the presence of something in a way that makes it meaningful to them. In the case of MP-26, for example, his father understood that an engineering career and position meant honour and prestige, influencing MP-26's career development and motivation towards what he perceives as becoming an engineer.

The experiences of individuals have an impact on the meaningfulness the actor makes of a particular situation, culminating in an opinion, belief, or a lesson for others (Maclean et al., 2012). For example, another participant, speaking of the retired chairman and founder of the company she worked for, said the following:

> He had a very scary temper. People were scared of him[…] For instance, when I came to work for him in the nineties … he made me sign an employment contract that meant that every other Saturday I had to work … because that was the way he was brought up and, you know, he ... we clashed. We didn't always get on and I think that's probably why I managed to cope with staying here so long was because I was not a 'yes' woman and I would challenge him, which is probably why he kept me around because I think he probably recognised that I would challenge him, whereas even members of his family wouldn't argue with him. (MP-11)

MP-11's challenging the authority of the chairman gave her a sense of accomplishment because she had the moral courage to stand up for what she believed in, which she felt ultimately helped her gain respect in the eyes of her employer. She further stated that:

> It was a question of principle because his father always made him work at the weekend so he thought that everyone else should have to do that no matter what year it was, 1919 or 1990, so it's that sort ... that's what I mean about old fashioned values.

This conveys the ways in which meaning-making is transmitted generationally, as the company's founder, according to this participant, was reproducing the same 'story' as his father. These stories and the values associated with them can be seen, from the findings, to impact upon practitioners' perceptions of competitiveness. For example, one participant who was a retired technician at a major High Street spectacles manufacturer based in the North West of England, recounted the fate of the workers at his former company once the company was no longer competitive:

> In the mid-80s, […] the retail sector fleeced the manufacturing to profit up because it's been run badly, and eventually they shut it. The manufacturing

> paid but the retail didn't […] and shut the company down, but it's the workforce that lost their jobs. (MP-27)

MP-27 realised that competitiveness meant job losses because of poor manufacturing processes. These processes, which may also be seen as internal resources and capabilities, are difficult to sustain and are temporal (D'Aveni et al., 2010). They are also less empirically verifiable as they are part of the social capital the firm employs, and depend on interpersonal relationships between team members and various agents in business interactions (Reed et al., 2006). These interpersonal relationships thus endow the practitioners with legitimacy in the firm that then helps them endure competitiveness. The primary message conveyed here is that, in order to be meaningfully competitive, firms must aim towards more than financial gain alone. MP-11's courage to speak up and MP-27's meaning-making of competitiveness show that manufacturing practitioners in this study not only make meaning for themselves, but notably also for others within their companies and beyond.

Another example can be taken from MP-2, a garment manufacturer located in the North West of England. The participant's firm had equipment that was more than 40 years old, which MP-2 justified in terms of efficiency and cost effectiveness:

> We are still running machines from the 1960s and 1970s … we can still make a very good garment from the old machines that we have got.

This firm is a family owned business that had invested in their plant and equipment in the 1970s, and has been using this ever since. The strategy behind their investment became clear when MP-2 said that they were 'still surviving'. The current market for garment manufacturers in the UK is highly competitive, with much competition coming from low cost countries such as Turkey (Oz, 2002). Strategists such as the garment manufacturer and first-tier supplier of components (to name a few) at firm level have no other choice but to follow mainstream best practices and endeavour to deal with the challenges and opportunities that come their way (Ernst and Kieser, 2002, Lipartito, 1995).

These challenges that are faced by the manufacturer then create tensions and challenges for decision makers within the firm (Whitley, 2006, Castells, 2011). This was found to be the case in this study, with certain key variables affecting competitiveness strategies. One of these variables was size – larger firms tended to compete in a complex and dynamic way, and to be effective users of their internal resources and capabilities. For example, when MP-19 was asked about how his firm managed resources and capabilities, he said that it had close ties with universities and was consistently involved in Research & Development and finding new and innovative ways to manage processes. This echoes the literature suggesting that large firms have a number of 'core competencies' which fundamentally underpin their dynamic competitiveness by embedding activities such as innovation and Research & Development repetitively over a long period of time (Prahalad and Hamel, 1993) in order to exploit rent and maximise profitability. In contrast, smaller firms in this study tended not to be as structured as larger firms in practising well-established (best practice) processes. Yet, small firms, such as MP-2 (with all the competition that it faces from overseas) are 'still surviving'. The existence of limited resources available to the firm internally, and no help from the external environment, have driven a certain type of practice of behaviour when it comes to managing the firm. In contrast, the larger firms that have a pool of resources available to them are more likely to manage the firm by way of a structured approach.

Bourdieu (1992) believed that when a person's habitus matches the field in which they have evolved, they make sense of the situation and react instantaneously. The practice perspective enables us to understand the nature of field in the context of this study. The practitioners continuously develop social relationships through their respective networks by continuously practising and learning within their working environment (Suchman, 1987); this working environment is their field. Each field then has an impact on both strategy and the agents exerting their power (via strategy) for the purpose of achieving mutual interest that is acceptable to that specific field (stakeholders). However, all fields differ from each other, and would not necessarily involve similar practices to other fields (i.e. competitors). Considering this dynamic and how it varies from one firm to another reflects on the way in which firms generate different kinds of resources (capital) that are then used as a basis to negotiate their social positions. The following section uses this idea to reflect on how manufacturers see their firms as becoming competitive.

A key motif among participants relevant to becoming competitive was 'initiative'. For example, MP-17, when asked what competitiveness meant to him, replied that this signified primarily pricing and cost, and further commented that:

> Initiative […] America is a great place to learn about competitiveness, I think the word competitiveness is from there! If you go there, you'll see lots of different types of businesses and they are all like 'how can I reduce something by a pound – a dollar and get the order?'

As participants' perceptions here demonstrate, there exists a rich diversity of views regarding what 'being competitive' and 'competitiveness' mean. This also reflects on the way in which firms have re-evaluated their business strategies to address the notion of competitiveness, particularly in relation to threats faced by emerging low-cost suppliers (Zammuto and O'Connor, 1992, Piercy, 2012) adopting innovations that make rivals' positions obsolete (Conner, 1991). One response to this has been firms diversifying into other areas such as trading, distribution, services, etcetera reflecting the dynamic changes in the role of the manufacturer.

Competitiveness through self-legitimising
Participants' interview narratives exhibit an ongoing desire to legitimise their chosen profession, with an overlapping and instilling of the sensemaking process. This explores traces of each of the four modes of legitimacy-seeking identified through which manufacturing practitioners cast themselves as competitive: – accomplishment, resilience, succeeding through abilities, and giving back.

The owner and manager of a small manufacturing unit in the South of England, MP-15, explained how he chose manufacturing as a career:

> I've always been very good with my hands… I've been in the building trade, I've done all sorts of things and if there's a job needs doing at home, I'll go and do it … I hate paying anyone to do anything … It's not because I'm tight.

MP-15 says that he inherited his handyman skills from his father, who was also in the building trade until he retired. Starting his own manufacturing firm emerged from an opportunity when a friend asked him to undertake a small printing job. From this modest

beginning, MP-15 began his manufacturing firm in the early 1980s, which has since then grown at a steady pace and reflects on the mode of accomplishment.

Locating the sense of 'accomplishment' the participants have achieved through the struggles they have had to face from early childhood also demonstrated their reasoning for choosing manufacturing as a career. Often, this was inspired by their parents' potentially difficult lives: 'my father was actually in the army' (MP-9); 'he worked on a farm as a prisoner of war' (MP-12); and 'when my father was 17-18, one of his friends said oh yeah there are loads of jobs down at the docks in Belfast' (PE-2). These examples indicate the struggle the participants' parents had to endure and the possible sensemaking and legitimised actions of the practitioners towards their position on being competitive (in their view).

Other participants took a different view, legitimising their accomplishment in terms of a good work-life balance. For example, MP-15, the owner of a manufacturing firm, employed only one other member of staff on a regular basis, and daughter on a seasonal basis. Supported by his wife (and business partner in the firm), the three of them were able to generate a turnover of just under half a million pounds per annum. While automation was not the only key to their strategic mix, they had a marketing strategy that defied the traditional norms of best practices applied by their competitors. However, MP-15 and MP-16 (his wife) were not keen on growing the business further and preferred anonymity as a strategy for being competitive. They described what success means to them in the following terms:

> We've got a flat in [name of town], so that could always be our base, or we've got the little house down south and we could go there, maybe buy somewhere abroad and just keep some money in the bank, maybe sell the business if it doesn't pan out.

This comment indicates that they are more focused on enjoying their lifestyle than nurturing ambitions in relation to the business that can be related to the government's growth plan for the manufacturing sector. This example indicates that a small business owner's objectives may not be simply to grow and maximise profit, but are influenced by the society in which the owner lives (Casey, 1995, Lindgren and Packendorff, 2010, Manjunatha, 2014). In other words, MP-15 and MP-16, are prejudiced by the culture (Bourdieu, 1984) they live in and want to have a good work-life balance. Indeed, their perceptions of the work life balance and attitude to competitiveness suggest that profit maximisation and an upwards growth trajectory is not always the goal of businesses (Spence, 2000, Queen, 2015). Spence (2000) suggests that small firm owners are more concerned with areas such as social responsibility towards society at large, and tend more to manage their firm's expectations based on their immediate and own purpose (Suominen and Mantere, 2010, Hanna and Jackson, 2015).

The drive for legitimacy was also made by participants through their accounts of 'resilience', bestowing their legitimacy as resolute in the face of organisational instability. Practitioners outlined a range of practical lessons learned from 'determination and persistence' and being committed throughout their cause (career/profession). A key lesson was that of trust, and learning ways of ensuring and negotiating that with clients, as well as mitigating the situation when that trust was broken. For example, start-up companies such as that of MP-3 had to start trusting their clients from early on as they had to supply products on credit terms. As this participant stated:

> You have to go with that instinct and see if everything is running smoothly (MP-3)

In MP-3's case, trusting his instincts was a key tool in establishing that goodwill and trust level. This is also significant at the level of the firm itself, as 'trust' as a form of social capital is a key resource within the network of firms (Brown et al., 1997) and influences people's beliefs that their decisions are to be respected within the field (Memili et al., 2015, Stanley and McDowell, 2014, Gagné et al., 2014). This 'trust' takes time to develop, with the notion of reciprocity being key (Schuller et al., 2000), but is not well defined in economic theory (Dasgupta, 2000). This reciprocity dictates that both firms are obligated to abide by the relational trust (Ibid). Hence, social capital can be seen as both a foundation and a consequence of good relationships in business deals; it is not only the trust between two contracting parties, but also operates internally within the firm and stakeholders across the organisation, whose support is needed to ensure that resources are allocated to the transaction at hand.

Participants also learned the value of 'being committed' in order to develop stronger ties amongst the workforce. When interviewing participants from the firm that made timber products, based in the South East of England, participants recounted having learned the importance of high quality social relationships amongst the stakeholders of the firm within the firm itself. The Managing Director (MD) showed this through his ability to be flexible in his firms' policy and procedures, and stated:

> 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' (MP-8).

The internal power dynamics here, i.e. that staff are given the freedom to implement what they deem best, conveys that this firm is able to utilise its knowledge capital in maximising available resources and competencies.

When making decisions, whether these are internal concerning an employee's job responsibility, or external, such as a client's request for a certain product with certain specifications, the people in MP-8's team have the common sense and sufficient autonomy to override any rigid company policy and reach a better and wiser decision to satisfy the client. As another respondent, MP-11 the marketing manager, commented: "it's [the firm] got people that are almost like the guardians of the business.'

Legitimising through the 'abilities' of the staff to act autonomously reflected the sensemaking process of the employees to make decisions based on the authority that the firm had bestowed upon them; for example, MP-25 discussed his autonomy to make decisions in the factory he worked in, saying that: 'we're told what we need on a daily basis (daily targets) and it's up to us to get them targets out the door.'

While firms have structures and layers of responsibility built into their manuals to increase their productivity and meet targets, the people doing the job are the ones who actually make these procedures succeed and generate results for the firm. This, in other words, reflects on a firm's ability to utilise its dynamic capabilities to gain competitiveness, where dynamic capabilities form a process that an actor adopts to allow the firm to generate returns by doing things differently, and hence gain a competitive advantage (Blyler and Coff, 2003). The

position of the actor within the firm is itself mediated by virtue of membership in social networks and the power they have amongst them, i.e. their social and symbolic capital.

The legitimacy seeking recounted by practitioners also demonstrates how different forms of capital have the capacity to influence actions (Bourdieu, 1991), through: varying degrees and forms of knowledge (cultural capital); symbolic capital such as honour and prestige; economic capital (the control over assets); and social capital (connections). Arguably, competitiveness for most firms should not be seen as a challenge but as an issue that can be legitimised through efficient management (Ceptureanu, 2015, Bhattacharya et al., 2015) under conditions of rapid technological, social and economic change. Respondents MP-15 and M-16 discussed the ways in which their firms were 'suited to compete' while conveying (through the sensemaking process) the competitive edge of their firm to be contained in the combination of product, pricing, quality and service. As they succinctly put it, the value and aspirations they shared in the firm's growth was noted in their statement when they referenced their method of competitiveness by saying: 'anybody can become a sign maker … (we stay competitive by) not being greedy.' Both respondents (MP-15 and MP-16) are competing in a mature market and have developed a niche product, maintaining its competitiveness by staying 'anonymous'. By keeping their costs down and, according to them, not marketing their product aggressively, they have developed a strategy to stay competitive.

Reflecting on the fourth mode of legitimacy – 'giving back' – there were frequent instances of this mentioned by participants. For example, MP-15 and MP-16, manufacturing firm owners, have a disabled son living with them at home and aim to achieve a good work-life balance that would also enable them to look after their son, rather than to maximise the profit of their firm. In other words, 'giving back' to their family (as well as a good work-life balance for themselves) are the key factors mitigating their attitude towards their firm's competitiveness, rather than the need to grow and be profitable *per se*. In addition, the employees 'desiring' the firm to succeed felt that they owed a lot to the firm, and were dedicated and devoted to the betterment of the firm as they knew that the firm also looked after their concerns.

Conclusion

By exploring the actual micro-practices of manufacturing practitioners, the research has been able to uncover the underlying unconscious dispositions that provide consistency to the actions of competitiveness practitioners. More precisely the study has situated knowledge in the social context, drawing out the dimensions of competitiveness as perceived by these practitioners. This was done by capturing of knowledge of the practitioner through the linking of reflexivity with sensemaking and self-legitimising. By doing so, the research responds to the call by Maclean, Harvey and Chia (2012) for further research on sensemaking in narratives.

Through the method of storytelling, the research has engaged with manufacturing practitioners and has captured their accounts of how they became manufacturers. The research claims that becoming a manufacturer initially and then becoming a competitive manufacturer must be contextualised through the sensemaking process of locating, meaning-making and becoming. The economically biased rational, self-interested individual only interested in personal rewards is not a good enough explanation to explain how practitioners perceive competitiveness. The stories expressed by the manufacturing practitioners depict the becoming of a more complete human being that is seen to be sincere and authentic (Bourdieu,

1997) and selfless. The manufacturing practitioner shares his or her accumulated success with others and is motivated by other non-materialistic rewards such as prestige and honour, kindness to others and sharing success.

Appendix 1: Summary of participants

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Code name	Role in sector	Type of firm	Business Location (England or UK-wide)	Role
DS-1	Education	Large Institution / Nationwide	North East	Curriculum Development
DS-2	LEP	Large Institution / Regional	North West	Head of Strategy
DS-3	LEP	Large Institution / Regional	North West	Head of Strategy
DS-4	Education	Large Institution / Regional	North West	Operations Team
DS-5	University	Large Institution / Regional	North West	Operations Team
DS-6	University	Large Institution / Regional	North West	Operations Team
DS-7	University	Large Institution / Regional	North West	Operations Team
DS-8	Association	Large Institution / Regional	North West	Operations Team
PE-1	Regional Development Company	Large Company	North West	Manager Business Development
PE-2	Manufacturing Association	Large / Nationwide	North West	Business Development
PE-3	Farming Products Association	Small Nationwide Association	UK-wide	Business Development
PE-4	LEP	Regional Advisory	North West	Head of Strategy
PE-5	LEP	Regional Advisory	North Wales	Head of strategy
MP-1	Farming Infrastructure	Small Regional Company	North East	Project Engineer

Code name	Role in sector	Type of firm	Business Location (England or UK-wide)	Role
	Manufacturer			
MP-2	Manufacturer of Garments	Small Regional Company	North West	Owner / Manager / Admin
MP-3	Paper Products Manufacturer	Small Company	Midlands	Owner / Manager / Business Development
MP-4	Farming Product Manufacturer	Small Company	North East	Business Development
MP-5	Pharmaceutical Manufacturer	SME Company	North West	Research & Development
MP-6	Precision Tools Manufacturer	Large Global Company	UK-wide	Business Development
MP-7	Manufacturer of Residential and Commercial Fencing Systems Globally	SME / Family Owned Business	South East	General Manager & Director of Operations
MP-8	Manufacturer of Residential and Commercial Fencing Systems Globally	SME / Family Owned Business	South East	Chairman and Managing Director
MP-9				Senior Manager
MP-10				Senior Manager
MP-11				Senior Manager
MP-12				Production Team Leader
MP-13				Production Supervisor
MP-14				Production Manager
MP-15	Manufacturer of Safety Signs Worldwide	SME / Family Owned Business	Midlands	Managing Director and Head of Engineering
MP-16				Sales / Commercial Director
MP-17	Aerospace	Freelance Consultant	North West	Project Design Engineer
MP-18	Manufacturer of Shutters for Shops	Small Regional (NW / NE) Company	North West	Owner / Manager / Engineer
MP-19	Aerospace	Large Global Company	South	Project Engineer
MP-20	Aerospace / Education	Large Global Company	Midlands	Project Engineer
MP-21	Pharmaceutical and Automotive Parts Manufacturer / Education	Large Global Company / University	North East	Project Engineer / Principal Lecturer

Code name	Role in sector	Type of firm	Business Location (England or UK-wide)	Role
MP-22	Advanced Manufacturing Firm / Education	Large Global Company / University	North West	Project Engineer / Senior Lecturer
MP-23	Auditing / Alternative investment Market	Large Global Company	North East	Director
MP-24	Automotive Parts Manufacturer	Large Global Company	North West	Team Leader Production
MP-25	General Supplier to Manufacturers	Large Nationwide Company	North West	Business development / Sales
MP-26	Optical Frames Manufacturer	Large Nationwide Company	North West	Design Engineer
MP-27	IT Systems Manufacturer	Large Nationwide Company	South	Systems Engineer
MP-28	Chemicals Manufacturer	Large Global Company	North East	Technical Business Development
Total Number of Participants: 41				

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