

The Field of Strategy: In Search of a Walking Stick

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The question of whether there is an academic field of strategy is important. It is the question that defines the area of strategic management and all the research and teaching that takes place under its name. In this paper we argue that there is a field of strategy, but it is still underdeveloped despite an incredible surge of research in the last twenty years. We believe that most strategy research does not really address the defining issues and that it has become less and less relevant to practising managers. There has been a drift to traditional social science approaches because of the complexity of strategic issues. This has increased confusion among practitioners and academics alike. Despite the fact that practice and theory are not well connected and that strategic management has so far failed to produce the volume of useful results expected by managers, the search for truly useful 'walking sticks' for strategists will succeed, thus, enabling them to combine theory with practice.

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Introduction

After more than twenty years as dedicated researchers in the field of strategy, the authors are wondering if the academic field of strategy really does exist. Excellent and exhaustive reviews by many distinguished academics (e.g., Pettigrew *et al.*, 2002 and various authors in the *European Management Review* – Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 2004, *European Management Journal*) take note of the extreme diversity of the research but shy away from providing a convincing framework to clarify what the field is all about.

At a recent meeting of strategy researchers we posed the question "How should we define the academic field of strategy?" The answers were somewhat tentative, to the surprise of everyone attending, including us. Apparently, we are not even sure if we agree on the same definition of strategy. There is no lack of available definitions. Anyone with any claim to recognition in "the field" has provided one; Andrews (1987) has traditionally been considered one of the more complete definitions.¹

Yet all these definitions remain so vague and so general that they provide little help. Most of the definitions are either descriptive of the strategy-making process or tautological in nature, saying basically that strategy is the set of decisions that makes an organization successful, or strategy is what top managers do. Such a lack of clarity in the basic concept makes the search for meaningful research findings and hence theory construction difficult.

In probing further into definitions of strategy, one is faced with a multiplicity of strategies: some are corporate, others business, still others functionally-related. Each author has a different definition. To compound the problem, each of the functional fields of management has its own strategy arm – marketing strategy, financial strategy, production strategy, and so on, each have their own journals and set of dedicated scholars. This proliferation inevitably leads to the question: "What is strategy anyway?"

The more convincing definitions are also the more troubling for researchers. One manager at a Harvard conference argued that strategy is made up of "messy, unsolved and perhaps undefined problems of importance characterizing business management". Joe Bower, one of the leading Harvard academics, argued (1982) that "the charter of business policy (as strategy was originally known) is to focus on the life and death

issues of central interest to top management. . . to help top management to deal with these issues effectively, profitably, and morally." He went so far as to say that anything that can be made orderly and systematic should be left to the functional areas and considered out of the field of strategy.

The question of whether there is an academic field of strategy is important. In this paper we argue that there is a field of strategy, but it is still underdeveloped despite an incredible surge of research in the last twenty years. We believe that most strategy research does not really address the defining issues. As a result there are serious methodological deficiencies. First, and following on from the basic problem of the definition of strategy, there is no common understanding of the set of theoretical propositions in the field. Authors tend to construct their own propositions without consistency from one study to the next or one author to the next. Second, the understanding of the scope of the field, its phenomena, and its research methods are borrowed crudely from the more established social sciences.

To make our argument, we go first through a historical discussion of the field's knowledge development, describing the approaches that have dominated research, teaching, and practice. We observe that there has been a drift to the traditional social sciences because of the complexity of strategic issues. This has increased confusion among practitioners and academics alike. We argue further that the real challenge is to devise a new approach to theory-building that brings the field of strategy closer to reality. To suggest the nature of such an approach, we go back to the issues that have dominated debates among early general management scholars.

The Nature of Strategic Issues

About thirty years ago, the early courses in strategic management in business schools emphasized the need for coordination among the various activities of the firm and relied upon case studies, often developed at the Harvard Business School, to supply rich descriptions of strategy-related issues. Taking and implementing decisions that required integration across functions and levels was seen as a huge and sometimes elusive challenge. Students were introduced to the challenge early in the MBA program, with the study of a very simple case. The situation of the Harvard case study involving Midway Foods was typical. Midway was a small Chicago firm, with 100 employees. It produced a range of sweets, mostly chocolate bars. The first 'A' case was so simple that most students had a hard time staying interested. In it were described the industry, the firm history, its nature and operations, its purpose and its marketing strategy. The case ended with a short discussion with Kramer, the company president. Most students

wondered what was expected of them in such a simple and general case. Midway was, however, peculiar because of Kramer's expressed concern about defining the business and any decisions being consistent with such a definition.

The students were then exposed to additional information about Midway's management. Progressing to the 'B' case brought new challenges, with the opportunity to acquire a competitor. Should Midway do this? The 'C' case highlighted the different perspectives of the four functional departments. The students discovered that each department had its own mission, operating methods, and operational problems. More important, each functional manager had his own managerial and personal philosophy. The 'D' case was a meeting showing how difficult it was for these managers to work together. Finally the 'E1' and 'E2' cases presented the President, the individual responsible for coordinating a whole that now seemed much more complex than it had seemed at first, facing decisions that could make or break Midway Foods.

Most teachers of strategic management have conducted discussions of the Midway type to expose students to the complexity of top management issues. It is not so much the operations or the marketing or the finances or human resources or power, motivation, leadership, or many other issues, but the combination of all these that make the top management job so intractable, sometimes confusing and always complex.

An academic field of strategy should be capable of providing guidance (which we describe using the metaphor 'walking sticks' for strategy) to the bewildered and shaky students and practitioners facing similar and, more realistically, much more complex issues than those described in Midway Foods. Some guidance has been provided by different concepts of strategy advanced over the last fifty years or so.

Concepts of Strategy

The conceptualization of strategy has taken two broad routes. The first can be called the Holistic approach, an all-embracing concept but one that stays close to reality. The emphasis was on general theories to better understand: (i) the challenges of managing the organization as a whole and (ii) the nature of top management roles and behaviours (see for example [Barnard, 1938](#) and [Selznick, 1957](#)). The second route, more contemporary, can be called the Analytic approach. It has followed traditional scientific methods and approaches characterised by the deconstruction of strategic problems and a focus on identifying specific relationships that are part of broader strategic phenomena (see [Thompson, 1967](#)). With a good understanding of the analytical components of strat-

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