

The Situation of Incommensurability in Strategic Management

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Abstract

The field of strategic management has witnessed a proliferation of theoretical perspectives following two main paradigms. The two camps roughly correspond, on the one hand, to the "classical" and "neo-classical" approaches, and on the other to the "contingency", "post-classical" and "postmodern" approaches. Underpinning these two camps are different conceptions of the theory of the firm and the purpose of theory itself in understanding business strategy, which are difficult and perhaps impossible to reconcile. Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to expose the roots of this interminable argument over theory and proposes a way to escape this situation of incommensurability.

Keywords: Strategic; Management; Philosophy; Incommensurability; Global Markets

1. Strategic Management as a Scientific Field

Inspired by classics like Barnard (1938), Selznick (1957), and Penrose (1959), the founding fathers of strategic management Chandler (1962) and Ansoff (1965) drew from the functionalist view of the firm and its environment (Calori, 1998), and embarked into a quest for probing the true meaning of “business policy”, later baptized “strategy”. At an early stage, research in the field was normative, consisting chiefly of inductive clinical case analyses. This era witnessed the inception of two of the classical schools of strategic management: the design school (Andrews, 1971) and the planning school (Drucker, 1959; Ansoff, 1965), which rest upon theoretical assumptions proper to cybernetics like planning, feedback, and control (Daft & Lengel, 1993; Polley, 1993; French, 2009). The design school sets out to delineate the concept of corporate strategy in a firm as a cybernetic system where strategy is a deliberate conception of the CEO who defines it as a pattern of business goals and plans for the firm to implement (Andrews, 1983; French, 2009). For the Design school, strategy is simple and not formalized (French, 2009). In response, the

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Planning school extended the premises of the Design school with the planned strategy formulation system that produces formal and sophisticated plans that are implementable and controllable (French, 2009).

The simplistic nature of the Design and Planning schools faced heavy criticism by other academic fields, questioning the legitimacy of their scientific testing. In response, the field shifted to a more empirically oriented deductive discipline (Schendel & Hofer, 1979) that led to the formation of two streams. On the one hand, the process stream, formed by other social sciences, centered on strategy determination and formation (Mintzberg et al., 1998). On the other hand, the content research that investigates the economic aspects of strategy, i.e., formulation and outcome following Cartesian rational prescriptive research grounded in economics (Bain, 1956; Porter, 1979).

In parallel, contributions of consulting firms in the 70s corroborated the orthodox content stream with prescriptive frameworks (Mintzberg, 1990; Calori, 1998). In the late 70's and early 80's, the content stream became the focal research magnet, characterized by the Structure-Conduct-Performance paradigm of (IO) and the industry structure as its prime unit of analysis. However, from the 80's onwards, the compass headed towards the firm's internal structure as the research in the field veered towards the Resource-Based View of the firm.

Following the modernist epistemological assumptions, the S-C-P neo-classical paradigm of the content stream viewed firms as physical entities with defined borders and clear structures and regarded individuals as deterministic enterprises (Trist & Bamford, 1951; French, 2009). Therefore, the positioning school, i.e., the third classical school of strategic management, overlooked the emotional and political contexts where organizations operate (Trist & Bamford, 1951; French, 2009). Theoretical developments in economics infused the content stream and invoked irreconcilable views of the firm: industrial organization (IO) and growth theory viewed the firm as an integrated unit; transaction cost economics (TCE) and agency theory viewed it as a nexus of contracts (Narayanan & Zane, 2011). The positioning school, led mostly by the works of Porter (1979, 1980), adopted the view of IO economics to explicate firm performance based on the firm's ability to enter and bargain effectively in an imperfectly competitive market where firms are homogeneous within their respective industries (Narayanan & Zane, 2011).

Meanwhile, growing exogenous factors like regional economic integration forced managers to differentiate activities—to achieve gains from specialization and to maintain close integration in others—to reach economies of scale and focus (Prahalad, 1975). In this context, Wernerfelt presented his doctrine, christened the resource-based view, which anticipated that firm-specific resources embodied best the basis of sustainable competitive advantage when they are costly, rare and non-replicable (1984). Briefly, the resource-based view imported Penrose's theory of growth (1959) to focus on the heterogeneity of firms within the same industry (Narayanan & Zane, 2011). Correspondingly, Rumelt's taxonomy of diversification strategies (1974) as well as the studies of breweries done at Purdue challenged Porter's assumption of firms' homogeneity within industries (Hatten and Schendel

1977). Such findings stimulated the first wave of internal proprietary research in the field leading to a research focus on strategic groups and competitive dynamics.

This swing required a discipline capable of unravelling the inner structural logic and functioning of the firm. Seemingly, organizational economics with its transaction costs economics (Williamson, 1985) and agency theory (Coase, 1937) helped scholars invoke firms as a set of transactions (Narayanan & Zane, 2011). Scholars, herein, imported transaction cost economics theory, for its unit of analysis is inter-organizational transactions through which it attempts to explain the boundaries of the firm, and thus its level of vertical integration (Williamson 1975). Scholars also imported agency theory, for it assumes separation of ownership and control, and hence presents the individual contract as its unit of analysis (Fama & Jensen 1983; Jensen & Meckling, 1976).

Despite the incompatible views of the firm that rule the rivalry between the positioning school and the resource-based view, this latter's assumptions are firmly grounded in the linear modernist paradigm, although it might seem that this neo-classical school made a 180-degree turn from the classical positioning school (French, 2009). In fact, in Wernerfelt's words (1984), the resource-based view is product/market driven as it posits that a firm infers its resources after it specifies its commitments to its products' lines and markets. This assumption falls closer to the positioning school, especially if corroborated with Porter's work (1991) in which he traces back competitive advantage to resources. Further, the resource-based view suggests that competitive advantage results from a unique bundle of resources that dictates how the firm should view the opportunities and threats of the environment (Valentin, 2001; French, 2009). This assumption seems in line with one of the classical schools: the design school with its SWOT framework (French, 2009).

Similarly, the linear normative reasoning of the classical schools infused the Contingency school, i.e., the second neo-classical school of strategic management, that refutes the one best way of the classical schools (Chaffee, 1985; French, 2009). Based on the contingency theory, scholars advanced that organization structure and strategy hinges upon contextual circumstances rather than the classical theory of firm structure (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967; Thompson, 1967; Hofer, 1975). In this vein, the contingency school challenged the application of Porter's generic strategies and argued that contingency theories can tap better into the roots of competitive advantage (Donaldson, 1995).

Moreover, two post-classical schools challenged the linear sequential model of development of the classical schools (Van De Ven, 1992; French, 2009). Their rationale is that strategy, contrary to the view of the classical schools, encompasses everything a company does and transcends Porter's chain of causality (Porter, 1997; French, 2009). The following question by Mintzberg mirrors the epistemological critique from a Modernist or Post-Modernist perspective that characterizes the learning and emergent schools (French, 2009): "What is wrong in seeing strategy in everything a company does or consists of?" and "Why must there be any such chain of causality at all, let alone having to run in one direction?" (Mintzberg et al., 1998, p. 119).

Both the emergent and learning schools ventured that the classical schools fell prey to sequential rationality, which is irrelevant as both individuals and organizations can only achieve bounded rationality (Simon, 1957; Cyert & March, 1963). According to their thesis, at the individual level, cognitive constraints limit managers' ability to draw a comprehensive model of the world, whereas at the organizational level, strategic assumptions engender a politically motivated behavior among actors, resulting in a 'muddling through' process (Lindblom, 1963). Such assumptions form the rationale whereby strategy emerges from an 'organized anarchy' (Cohen et al., 1972). Along with the planning school, both the emergent and the learning school enriched the process research body of literature, although neither the formal planning nor the power behavioral paradigm presented a normative or descriptive model for a successful strategy formulation (Hax & Majluf, 1988).

The process research stream ranges from the rational formal synoptic model, proper to both the design and planning school, to the emergent incremental model favored by the emergent learning tradition. According to the former, strategy formulation is a deliberate and linear process where ends are specified first and explicitly articulated, followed by means ripe for implementation through detailed attention to objectives, programs, and specific operational plans (Mintzberg, 1990). The latter, though, perceives strategy formation as an adaptive, incremental learning process, where ends and means are intertwined (Fredrickson & Mitchell, 1984), implicit, broad, and non-quantified (Quinn, 1980).

In sum, the content school, rooted in the Cartesian rationalism, developed from neo-classical economics, and followed a linear and normative knowledge production that requires evidence for accepting truth, divides issues into parts to better probe them, infuses a sequential order of thoughts, and emphasizes comprehensiveness to reach equilibrium (Calori, 1998; French, 2009). This method, thus, seemed governed by the philosophical assumptions of the positivist or post-positivist paradigms (Booth, 1998), which places it in the empirical-analytical cluster of scientific knowledge production (Habermas, 1972; Booth, 1998), the functionalist paradigm (Burrell & Morgan, 1993; French, 2009), or the modernist paradigm (Parker, 2002; French, 2009). The production of knowledge in the Cartesian rationalism belonged to the intellect and resulted from two activities: deduction and intuition that emanates from reason (Descartes, 1628; Calori, 1998). Faithful to Descartes, the content school rejected intuition related to senses, for senses are misleading, belong to the body, and are not the result of an intellectual action (Calori, 1998).

Conversely, the processual organizational descriptive research, rooted in organizational theories (Quinn, 1980; Mintzberg, 1976) viewed intuition as part of a complex thought process that is subject to human emotions (Mintzberg, 1994). Although marginalized at first, this heretical research established the process stream centered on strategy determination and formation and promoted learning as an essential element to strategy formation (Mintzberg et al., 1998). The focus of this stream on interpreting managerial cognition and improving the understanding of all participants in the strategy formation process seems in line with the constructivist philosophical paradigm (Chaffee, 1985; Johnson, 1987). This, in turn, classifies the knowledge production of the process stream as Historical-Hermeneutic (Habermas,

1972; Booth, 1998), and grants it a place under the interpretive paradigm (Burrell & Morgan, 1993) rooted in German idealism, where intuition is superior to data (French, 2009). Finally, the nascent research emphasizing critical and postmodernist assumptions (e.g., Shrivastava, 1986; Knights & Morgan, 1991) falls into the critical science production of knowledge (Habermas, 1972; Booth, 1998). Following Horkheimer (1982), this new trend criticizes the social reality of strategic management based on defined norms and calls for social change (French, 2009).

2. Theoretical Pluralism and Incommensurability

Strategic management is a complex field with a profusion of enquiries (Brondoni, 2015; Cairo, 2007; Lambin, 2002) to explore from a multiplicity of paradigms, although the (IO) positioning school, with its determinist and functionalist process of knowledge production seems to have held sway and emerged as the dominant paradigm in the literature (Hermann, 2005; Booth, 1998). Unlike organization studies gripped by what could be referred to as paradigm wars (Booth, 1998), the strategic management field enjoyed a state of affairs that one might describe as a “resounding silence” (Whipp, 1996: 269), for ontological and epistemological differences across different streams appear weak (Booth, 1998). However, a normative view of strategic management pictures it as research that seeks to offer relevant solutions to management (Scherer, 1998; Booth, 1998). This would behoove the strategic management field to merge heterogeneous forms of knowledge into a unified one, which in turn raises the issue of incommensurability of knowledge generated in light of the content-process cleavage (Scherer, 1998; Booth, 1998). In contrast, Dan Schendel, the founding father of the strategic management society, ascertains that strategic management is a multidisciplinary field that will be in a situation of incommensurability and reject the ruling of one paradigm (1994).

Before proceeding further, I shall shed some light upon the term incommensurability that became part of the terminology of the philosophy of science in the sixties when Kuhn argued that scientific breakthroughs are often made when scholars challenge established rationality (Scherer & Steinmann, 1999). Thenceforth, the concept of rationality became subject to ongoing debates yielding a myriad of suggestions that announced the death of a universal concept of rationality and attempted to ground theories in their respective bases for reasoning (Mittelstrass, 1985; Scherer & Steinmann, 1999). Unfortunately, a deductive reasoning necessitates the questioning of grounds of the basis for reasoning that uncovers a new one, which lands the “Munchausen-trilemma” that posits that knowledge can at best be corroborated, rather than grounded for such an attempt ends in an infinite regress (Popper 1963; Scherer & Steinmann, 1999). This new reality leads scholars to recourse to the paradigm level to solve the issue of incommensurability and ground theories in the references of rationality of their respective paradigms (Mittelstrass, 1985; Scherer & Steinmann, 1999). Later, they recognize that incommensurability occurs also on the meta-level of the scientific paradigm for paradigmatic references cannot be validated, hence they, along with their theories, are incommensurable with

one another (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Scherer, 1999). In such a situation, scholars should find a meta-meta-level to reconcile the incommensurability at the meta-level of paradigm (Scherer, 1998). Unfortunately, such a level of reference is yet to be found for every frame of reference is questionable and leads to a higher-level frame, which in turn plunges into an endless reasoning process of circular arguments (Scherer, 1998).

The evolution of strategic management generated a profusion of concepts and frameworks in face of which managers feel bewildered as each stream directs their attention to a different interpretation of the firm and its environment and hence propose a different strategy to go about it (Scherer, 1998). Despite the risk of irrelevance theory pluralism might infuse (Pfeffer, 1993; Hambrick, 1994), scholars seem to call for new paradigms and further expansion (Prahalad & Hamel, 1994; Smircich & Stubbart, 1985) except for some voices best captured by the following statement by Gilbert et al. (1988:2): "... The profusion of strategy models has become a source of confusion for executives and researchers, while many in the research community seem disinterested in finding remedies for this problem. ...Professors from leading business schools offer seminars in which they will proclaim the true meaning of strategy, which each has their own different version it."

In essence, theory pluralism might be in itself constructive if there exists a system of reference that favors a theoretical approach over another (Pfeffer, 1993; Scherer, 1998). If otherwise pluralism might engender incommensurability, and hence become a problem (Scherer, 1998). For instance, let us assume X and Y are two systems of orientation or worldviews (Lueken, 1991; Scherer, 1998). For X and Y to be incommensurable, they must be so according to a higher-level system of orientation, that we shall refer to as a system of reference Z that elucidates the canons of comparison (Lueken, 1991; Scherer, 1998). As a corollary, a situation of incommensurability arises following a tripartite relationship, whereby X is incommensurable with Y given the standard of comparison of Z (Scherer, 1998). For X and Y to be incommensurable, they must meet three criteria: a) they should be different worldviews; b) they must be rivals relative to an approach or an explanation of an issue that annuls their co-occurrence; and c) they should not enjoy an accepted system of reference against which they are pragmatically evaluated (Lueken, 1991; Scherer, 1998). Put differently, should there be any accepted standard of comparison, the incommensurability of X and Y is irrelevant, although the pluralism criterion is met (Scherer, 1998). Following this reasoning, one might concede theoretical pluralism in strategic management, but can conclude that incommensurability in strategic management is at best weak, particularly for the competing inside-out resource-based view and the outside-in positioning school.

3. Incommensurability: The Way Ahead

The debate over theory pluralism and incommensurability is more entrenched in organization theory where ensued controversies took the form of paradigm wars (Jackson & Carter, 1993). In comparison, there exists a paucity of similar debates

over incommensurability among strategic management scholars, which can be due to the dominance of the functionalist paradigm over the Strategic Management Society and the Strategic Management Journal. Therefore, one must first dwell on the different stances of organization theory aficionados relative to incommensurability before one could ponder over how to handle incommensurability in strategic management.

The foregoing literature on incommensurability in organization theory reveals no consensual solution and uncovers an infinite regress of arguments drawing from dogmatism or relativism (Albert, 1985). With that said, the following stances could synthesize the controversies over incommensurability in organization studies: back-to-basics, isolationist, anything-goes, and multi-paradigm (Reed, 1992; Scherer & Dowling, 1995; Scherer & Steinmann, 1997; Scherer, 1998).

Back-to-Basics: This perspective offers no rational treatment of incommensurability and empowers the hegemony of the functionalist paradigm (Scherer, 1998; Scherer & Steinman, 1999). Proponents of this perspective call for a swing back to contingency theory, which they perceive as the originator of organization theory, and gauge a theory is valid if it stands the test of empirical hypothesis (Donaldson, 1996; Pfeffer 1993; McKelvey, 1997). Following this rationale, power and control of scientific gatekeepers supplants scientific justification and ensures the integration of fragmented frameworks and harmony of the scientific discipline (Pfeffer, 1993). The dogmatic nature of back-to-basics viewpoint ignited sharp opposition and apprehension of a plethora of scholars who lamented and rejected the concentration of power in the hands of self-proclaimed elite that steers the field according to their common view of reality (Cannella & Paetzold, 1994; Perrow, 1994; Van Maanen, 1995, Scherer, 1998).

Isolationist: promulgated by Burrell and Morgan's (1979) 2*2 matrix, this perspective emanates from a desire to limit the functionalist hegemony in organization studies and safeguard theoretical pluralism through a separate evolution of social paradigms that are incommensurable and irreconcilable (Scherer, 1998). According to their thesis, Burrell and Morgan (1979) suggest scholars can choose and comply with the directives of one paradigm, out of four mutually exclusive ones, and contribute to its growth (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Jackson & Carter, 1993). Paradigm isolationism treats paradigm selection as a choice of faith or belief that excludes inter-paradigmatic integration, and hence accepts the insolvability of incommensurability that emanates from the firm commitment to the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the objective/subjective dimension and regulatory/radical change (Scherer, 1993; Jackson & carter, 1991).

Anything-goes: the advocates of this standpoint exhibit a relativistic view of paradigm pluralism and incommensurability (Scherer, 1998). For them, any paradigm choice is good, and no one is entitled to criticize it against any standards (Morgan, 1983; Reed, 1992; Scherer, 1998). By so doing, this perspective might fall prey to power by also accepting activities that contradict reasoning, which in turn might endanger science or flourish the functionalist paradigm (Feyerabend, 1987; Reed, 1992). The relativistic assumptions, herein, are central to the contributions of Kuhn (1970) best exemplified by the following statement: "...Most of the puzzles

of normal science are directly presented by nature, and all involve nature indirectly. Though different solutions have been received as valid at different times, nature cannot be forced into an arbitrary set of conceptual boxes” (Kuhn, 1970:263). Following this argument, Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) functionalist paradigm governs what Kuhn (1970) refer to as normal science that will eventually be overthrown by the winner among the other three paradigms of Burrell and Morgan (1979), which together form the revolutionary science in Kuhn’s (1970) thesis (Jackson & Crater, 1991).

Multi-paradigm: this position emerges as the less of two evils or an intermediate between the relativism of Anything-goes and dogmatism of Backs-to-basics (Scherer & Dowling, 1995; Scherer, 1998). Ostensibly, there seems to be a consensus among scholars of strategic management (Foss, 1996; Rumelt, Schendel, & Teece, 1994; Spender, 1992) and organization theory (Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Grimes & Rood, 1995; Hassard, 1991; Schultz & Hatch, 1996) around theory pluralism. This latter accepts the situation of incommensurability (Gioia & Pitre, 1990), and yet rejects isolationism and preach for dialogue across paradigms as it is crucial for knowledge accumulation (Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Parker & McHugh, 1991). This argument, though appealing, considers the sum of different paradigms better than a single paradigm and fails to notice that such a combination represents the entirety of lacunas in each paradigm, which in turn yields a sum worse than its separate perspectives (Scherer, 1998). In addition, there exists little justification of what paradigms to integrate and how to address reconcilability of incommensurable perspectives, which leaves a lot of room for subjectivity and lesser guidelines for reasoning (Scherer, 1998).

Thus far, it becomes evident that all attempts to proffer ways to go about the situation of incommensurability are either decisionistic or power-induced derived because of an understating of rationality constructed from deductive reasoning (Lueken, 1991; Scherer & Steinmann, 1999). Accordingly, reasoning is the practice of logical deduction relative to a set of standards or rules (Scherer & Steinmann, 1999). However, when scholars question these standards, what ensues is an impending ad infinitum regress of arguments because rather than focusing argumentation on the purpose of consensus, academics orient it to the set of rules that define reasoning (Scherer & Steinmann, 1999).

This rationale is entrenched in the aforementioned three-way relationship that dictates the situation of incommensurability: X is incommensurable with Y relative to a system of reference Z (Scherer, 1998). In this regard, Incommensurability is in the eyes of the observer rather than the participant, which according to Lueken (1991) should shift to a two-way relationship involving solely the participants (Beck, 1975; Lueken, 1992; Scherer & Dowling, 1995; Scherer & Steinmann, 1999). It is worth mentioning, thus, that strategic management scholars should turn to the German methodical constructivism of the Erlangen school where Lueken (1991) found inspiration to conceive his argument (Kamlah & Lorenzen, 1973, Lorenzen, 1987). Similarly, strategic management scholars shall view argumentation as a symbolic action that rejects deductive reasoning and infer insights from free agreements to direct consensus (Lueken, 1991; Scherer & Steinmann, 1999).

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