

## Theory of strategy - strategy as theory

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The components of strategy are: description, analysis, vision. Each component is part of a process leading to the development of a new strategy, which may be further action or another attempt at description, analysis or visioning. Strategy is a process but this process does not exist without movement. Strategy can only be ‘observed’ in action or in the thinking about action – the strategy is found in description, analysis and vision. This strategy needs to be understood as an ongoing unending process of thinking and action, of theory and practice – as praxis. As a process strategy begins and ends where researchers decide is appropriate. Both the beginning and the ending may be reasoned decisions or situations imposed by events. The beginning or entry point for research may be marked by a question and the end of a research project may be where the research stops. The research may stop when the money runs out or when answers are found for the research question. The ‘end’ of a research project may be set out as the discovery of something new as new facts or theory, but the strategic process does not also end with such claim. The research may stop but the process continues.

Strategy is dialectical – a dance of two steps forward and, at times, one step back

**Description** offers a convenient entry point for research. As the process is a continuous process, the first problem confronted by a researcher is where to break into the process. The place where the investigation begins must be specific to the problem at hand and yet general enough to encompass the whole of the problem as it is conceived. One place to start is with a description of events, context or history, which may then be recounted as a story, hypothesis, question, or simply data. The description offers one or two steps forward in this dialectical dance.

**Analysis**, the next step in the strategy involves exploring, testing, examining, and critiquing the description. The story, assumptions, abstractions or hypothesis (which make up the description) are closely examined and analysed. Analysis is traditionally thought of as a key part of positivist inquiry as it is seen as involving taking things like the description apart and putting it all back together; the description of where and what, then can serve as an explanation of how or why. As Suzanne Langer notes:

The ‘technique’, or treatment of a problem begins with its first expression as a question. The way a question is asked limits and disposes the ways in which any answer to it - right or wrong – may be given. ... In our questions lie our principles of analysis and our answers may express whatever those analysis are able to yield. [Langer, 1951 #299, at 15].

The analysis is the next step in the dialectical dance – but it may be a step forward to a rethinking and vision or a step back to more description. If the analysis is found to be deficient, the process may be involve a return to description.

**Vision** is the next and perhaps most mysterious part of the process. Vision can be understood as ‘re-thinking’ but it requires imagination. And imagination, here, can be understood as the joining of

perception with sensation - as reasoned experience. Of course, a call to the imagination also involves desire for something more - as an irrational demand for something different than what went before. The concern that vision is irrational can be related to history of the idea of the imagination. David Hume, a torch bearer for the empirical tradition, argued that imagination was the faculty of the mind which linked the inner world of understanding with the outer world of experience. Both worlds were quite separate in this view, as the inner world was available only as sensation and the outer world was available only through our senses as perception. Thus for Hume we could never really 'know' the world, which suggests that the vision required by strategy would be irrational. However, Immanuel Kant, who credited Hume with waking him from his dogmatic slumbers, argued that experience with reason provided knowledge – which was reasoned. But whether rational or irrational, both Kant and Hume, believed the human capacity to imagine to be essential: [Warnock, 1994 #494, at 6].

In this theory of strategy, a vision ensures a place in the strategic process where experience (realizing the external world through the senses) and reflection (thinking about the experience) is joined with description and analysis to become practical reason. Vision links description and analysis with thoughts about what next. As practical reason, vision also emerges as judgment about what should be. At one level the vision is what a social theorist, Howard Becker, refers to as letting “the case define the concept” [Becker, 1998 #408, at 123]. At another level the vision is about “establishing principles (or values) and setting goals” [Bunch, 1986 #272]. And arguably, fact and value meet such envisioned principle.

The task of developing a ‘vision’ requires a good description – an understanding of the data or a clear idea of the researcher’s problem as well as a good analysis of this information: [Strauss, 1998 #402, at 8]; [Bunch, 1986 #272]. Developing a vision involves pushing the process beyond description and analysis through imagining what might be. In this way, both description and analysis can be seen as providing the elements for a vision much as a survey and plans prepare the way for a construction project. But the vision may also require conversation and debate. The vision may not represent individual conception. This shared vision may represent a logical step, prompted by deductive or inductive reasoning or it may be abduction - the intelligent guessing required by science: [Joas, 1996 #441, at 134]. The vision may also involve – the sense of movement through thesis and antithesis. Vision may also simply be an awareness of the unfolding of events. The insights generated by the data, when allowed ‘speak for themselves’ and inform existing understandings may then lead on to a sense of what next. And this ‘what next’, this new understanding may then be expressed as a theory which may be said to be grounded in this data. And this is a vision drawing on the imagination as data never says what is, only what is not. At the same time, this vision may not be anything new. It may simply be a commitment, as David Harvey suggests, to follow, the investigation simply to see where it goes - to answers or to dead ends: [Harvey, 1996 #167, at 68]. A sense of progress may appear in the movement from description to analysis and from there to vision. When vision seems clear, maybe as a synthesis of description and analysis, a certain strategy may then seem obvious. This strategy may be either the end of one process or the beginning of another. But if the process ends, it may not be because the strategy offered the right answer, but because there is a sense that the strategy was good enough to move on.

As part of the dialectical dance, vision provides the swoops and turns – the flash of the ballroom tango –

the unfolding of into action.

***With vision strategy*** seems to move beyond thinking to doing. The strategy may even appear as a plan setting out what needs to be done - next. But in this doing, the process begins again.