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Taking Goffman Seriously: Developing Strategy-as-Practice

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Abstract

As yet, there has been no systematic exposition of the whole of Goffman's work in its significance for strategy and strategic management. This paper aims to fill this gap by providing a more wide-ranging treatment of Goffman's central ideas that goes beyond some of the more widely circulated core notions, such as frontstage/backstage and facework. The paper focuses on 'performance' and hypothesizes that skilled performance at the interactional level will influence outcomes at organizational level. It can be assumed that these performances will influence the broader diffusion of a practice at field level. Thus, the paper develops the theoretical idea – an idea implicit in Goffman - that for a performance to be *performative, in the first instance* it has to be competent, credible and believable. Under these conditions, it can dominate over and drive out less credible interpretations. This can help to understand the progress, or lack thereof, of organizational change.

Key Words: Goffman; Framing; Performance; Idealization; Presentation of Self; Strategy; Strategy-as-Practice.

“All social reality is precarious ... All societies are constructions in the face of chaos.” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966: 96)

“‘Organisations’ and ‘positions’ are thing-like in their solidity only because they are continuously and repeatedly enacted in a series of micro-situations. They are solid to the extent that they are taken for granted and thus smoothly re-enacted, minute by minute and day after day; but without this process of continual social definition, they cease to exist.” (Collins, 1980: 190)

“Soon it was time for him to take to the podium. Those watching him pace in the gloom behind the stage, his face contorted and his hands clenched, feared disaster. But as the music signaled his entrance into the spotlight, they witnessed a transformation. Within seconds, the crumpled wreck metamorphosed into a colossus. The actor smoothed over the inevitable imperfections of his speech with a wondrously theatrical presentation.” (Bower, 2016: 143)

Introduction

There is increasing recognition that accounting and strategy are two fields of inquiry that should have a more intense debate with each other (Fauré & Rouleau, 2011; Whittington, 2011; Skærbæk & Tryggestad, 2010; Carter et al, 2010; Whittle & Mueller, 2010; Carter & Mueller, 2006). This *Special Issue* is dedicated to strengthening this debate and this paper is making a contribution by discussing Erving Goffman and the relevance of his work for strategy and, in particular *Strategy-as-Practice* (SAP). In 2007, Whittington (2007: 1577) encouraged us to study “strategy ... like any other social practice .. [such as] ... marriage.. law, journalism or war.” In following up this call, we will be looking into Goffman’s oeuvre.

In spite of a good number of edited books dealing with different aspects of Goffman’s work, primarily in the field of sociology (eg Ditton, 1980a; Smith, 2002, 2014; Treviño, 2003), as of now, there is no systematic exposition that would demonstrate the importance of Goffman’s work for the field of *strategy* or *strategic management*, notwithstanding the, somewhat perfunctory, treatment Goffman has received in existing SAP contributions (eg Rasche & Chia, 2009; Whittington, 2006, 2007; Samra-Fredericks, 2003, 2004, 2005; Samra-Fredericks et al, 2008). Disappointingly, the use of Goffmanian theoretical concepts in management and organization studies would appear to be limited to those of ‘face (work)’ (Samra-Fredericks, 2004: 1115, 2005: 815, 828), ‘frontstage / backstage’ (Samra-Fredericks, 2004: 1114, 2005: 815, 828; Grey, 1998: 576), total institutions (Clegg, 2006; Clegg

et al, 2012) and the social self (Creed et al., 2002). In accounting, again there has been some usage of Goffmanian ideas (eg Pentland, 1993; Pentland & Carlile, 1996; Roberts & Scapens, 1985; Neu, 1991; Jeacle, 2008, 2012, 2014), but as yet no systematic exposition of the whole of Goffman's work in its significance for accounting and strategy. This paper aims to fill this gap by providing a more wide-ranging treatment of Goffman's work that goes beyond some of the more widely circulated core notions.

Lofland (1980: 25-26) showed that Goffman followed a 'strategy of metaphor', where a "model is taken as a prototype, various concepts associated with it are specified and this apparatus is then applied to all manner of additional situations in a relatively systematic fashion." Examples include the 'con game', 'cooling the mark out', 'saving face', 'persons seen as ritually sacred objects', 'the theatre', the 'total institution', 'the career', the 'service relationship', the 'game' (ibid, p.26). For example, after describing the actual process of 'cooling the mark out' in a con game¹, Goffman then proceeds to apply it metaphorically whereby he views "the handling of failure as something concerted to be coped with" (ibid, p.27) *in all kinds of additional social situations*. The frontstage-backstage, theatre metaphor is of course the most famous example for this strategy of transferring words and concepts between settings.²

In contrast to many competing sociological theories, including structural-functionalism, institutional theory, or role theory, Goffman (1971/72: 137) critiques a notion that views social control such that the world is divided "into three distinct parts: in one the crime is committed, in the second the infraction is brought to trial, and in the third [...] the punishment is inflicted". According to Goffman, "(t)he scene of the crime, the halls of judgment, and the place of detention are all housed in the same cubicle; furthermore, the complete cycle of crime, apprehension, trial, punishment, and return to society can run its course in two gestures and a glance." (1971/72: 137) Indeed, "whatever cultural and structural pressures determine our lives

¹ The 'mark' is the victim of the con game, 'cooling out' means, after the con has been performed, talking to and comforting the mark by bystanders who are secret associates of the con(wo)man.

² It is worth noting, that Goffman did *not* treat *Strategic Interaction* as such a transferable, metaphorical concept. He used it only in one book publication (Goffman, 1969) in order to analyze the "calculative, gamelike aspects" (1969: x) in interaction that is characterized by a high degree of intentionality and where "each party must make a move" (1969: 127). We will not be drawing much on Goffman's *Strategic Interaction* book as our intention in this paper is to draw on his work more widely in order to show the multi-faceted relevance of his most famous concepts for Strategy.

are often experienced only in and through interaction with others ...” (Hepworth, 1980: 97). It is in interaction that we experience norms or structural constraints.

S-A-P is certainly not oblivious to Goffman’s insights. Indeed, as Whittington, one of the founding figures of S-A-P, argues “Strategy-as-Practice can problematize the performance issue at a more micro level as well. In a Goffmanesque sense, S-A-P can appreciate the *performance* of strategy praxis as an achievement in itself. At stake here is the competence and credibility of individual practitioners in performing their roles, rather than some notion of organizational performance.” (Whittington, 2007: 1583). For example, if a strategy consultant in her presentation comes over as unconvincing, it is unlikely that this performance will make a positive contribution to organizational performance outcomes. By implication, this approach shines the spotlight onto *strategizing*, which means how is strategy *actually performed*? This takes us into the realm of looking at what is done by *specific people*, in *specific locations*, at *specific points in time*: indeed, ‘how is strategy *done in the doings*?’ Thus, “the focus on the noun strategy has shifted toward an interest in the verb strategizing” (Cummings & Daellenbach, 2009: 234). This means that we should take an interest in the actual *praxis as practiced by practitioners*, on the “improvisational struggles of everyday life” (Whittington, 2011: 185). Indeed, a Goffman-inspired perspective does not deny power or hierarchy, but is providing the “grounds for a processual approach to hierarchies as they shape everyday life.” (Rogers, 1980: 28)

Goffman was primarily concerned with a number of core sociological topics (Branaman, 1997: xlvi-xlvii) including the self and performance; encounters; the manipulative / moral aspects of social life; framing. Concomitantly, it has been widely held that Goffman’s “oeuvre lacks self-evident internal coherence. Each of his books is written ... as if none of the others had been.” (Smith, 2006:5) The basis of this criticism is that there is no clear sense of books cumulatively building upon each other; similarly, there is limited cross-referencing between his books. Indeed, “Goffman never re-uses earlier concepts in later works, manifesting a kind of role-distancing from his own previous work.” (Collins, 1980: 175). Whilst superficially it may indeed appear in this way, it would clearly be hard to deny that *performing in the interaction order* is the theme running throughout his work. The remainder of this paper is therefore organized around this core topic, as applied to strategy: what can we say about *strategy-as-performance-in-the-interaction*? The following section is

about ‘Performing Strategy and the Strategizing of Performance’; this is followed by ‘Frontstage, Backstage and the Hidden Transcript’; ‘Footing’; ‘Senior Management Teams’; ‘Consultants’ Performances’; Strategy (and audit) as machine; The self of the Strategist; The Meeting as Performance; ‘Framing the Strategy performance’; followed by ‘Discussion and Conclusion’.

Performing Strategy and the Strategizing of Performance

Whittington (2007: 1579) correctly highlighted the multitude of meanings of the notion of ‘performance’: he says, that it “might be approached in the conventional terms of a practice’s impact on organizational outcomes (Practice is not indifferent to these); or it might be interpreted as about the skilled performance involved in managing the ‘practice-in-use’ (Jarzabkowski 2004); or, finally, performance could be measured in institutional theory terms, regarding a practice’s own success in achieving widespread diffusion and adoption (Dobbin and Baum 2000).” Our focus is on the second meaning, but it is understood here that the other two meanings are related to the second. Skilled performance at the interactional level will influence outcomes at organizational level. Both of these performances will influence the broader diffusion of a practice. Nevertheless, for us, the point of departure is the performance at the level of an interaction.

It is of central importance for us, because we see the performance as underlying a number of other Goffmanian notions, such as framing, footing, or the interaction ritual. We suggest that we interpret these latter notions around performance in order to emphasize the *praxis* dimension in SAP, which means actually foregrounding the *doing and doings*. Such a focus on doings means *not* to treat situations merely “as local ‘color’ with which to fill out the contours of allegedly ‘larger’, more formal institutions.” (Rawls, 2003: 217) Instead, like Goffman, SAP suggests that we analyse the “nitty-gritty, local routines of practice”, “the unheroic work of ordinary strategic practitioners in their day-to-day routines.” (Whittington, 1996: 732, 734) Like Goffman, SAP wants to develop its sociological eye, its “appetite to uncover the neglected, the unexpected and the unintended.” (Whittington, 2007: 1577)

What then are these techniques underlying our shared social world, i.e. the “techniques by which everyday persons sustain their real social situations” and sustain

a commonly shared “definition of the situation” (1959/71: 247; also 26)?³ The discussion of these techniques in Goffman’s *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959/71) is far from straightforward and introduces sophisticated analytical instruments, including ‘front region’, ‘back region’, ‘dramatic realization’, ‘idealizations’, ‘audience segregation’, ‘make-work’, ‘discrepant roles’ amongst others. Contrary to popular misunderstandings, the argument is *not* that the backstage is *more real* than the frontstage, the argument is *not* that the backstage is the place for the sacred, the frontstage the place for the profane (1961/72: 134): often, it “may not be necessary to decide which is the more real, the fostered impression or the one the performer attempts to prevent the audience from receiving.” (1959/71: 72) The *ontological* question of what is more real recedes into the background and is replaced by the *sociological* question, rooted in pragmatist philosophy, namely ‘under what conditions will certain performances *appear* to us as the *actual thing* – i.e. *not* irony, not play-acting, not impersonation?’ Indeed, Goffman is concerned with the techniques that bring about a shared, *believable* social world that *we have in common*. In this endeavor he joins Schutz, Thomas, and James. Indeed, he asks “(u)nder what circumstances do we think things are real?” (Burns, 1992: 247); “... ‘real’, as James suggested, consists of that understanding of what is going on that drives out, that “dominates”, all other understandings.” (Goffman, 1974/86: 85) What is often left unsaid in Goffman is that for a performance to be *performative*, in MacKenzie’s (2009) sense of the term, *in the first instance* it has to be competent, credible and believable. If it is believable, it can dominate over and drive out less credible interpretations.

Some of Goffman’s work can be interpreted as answering this very question: how do people in social situations maintain a shared sense that what they experience *is the real thing*, an event to be taken *at face value*, i.e. to be taken for what it *claims to be*, and not a prank, an imposter or a rehearsal: “... ‘real’, as James suggested, consists of that understanding of what is going on that drives out, that “dominates”, all other understandings.” (Goffman, 1974/86: 85) Indeed, “(w)hen an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the

³ In *Encounters*, he phrased it such that “the local scene establishes what the individual will mainly be ..” (p.134).

consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be.” (1959/71: 28)

This includes, importantly, that a performance claim is credible and not delusional or that a strategy presentation is given by competent employees and that the diagnosis and the prescribed tools *actually* work: for example, where a bank’s CEO, Chairman and Finance Director put on a performance to ‘sell’ a share rights issue, this performance needs to be done with confidence, skill and panache, even, or especially, if the actual situation, which will be discussed on the backstage, gives rise to worries⁴. These are *reality claims* of *strategy performances*. Competence at the interactional level precedes and is one of the conditions for its subsequent *performativity*: where even the presentation is weak, the performative cycle stumbles at the first hurdle.

As we said earlier, the ‘straight’ performances are predicated on them being seen as the *real thing*: not irony, not fake, not a test-run. The *Strategy-as-Practice* perspective has utilized Goffman’s theatre metaphor, in emphasizing the importance of the ‘spell’ and ‘bringing off’ a performance: “(t)he practice perspective appreciates the quasi-theatrical quality of this performance, in which the proper playing of allotted roles ensures smooth progress, but the smallest slip can break the spell and bring everything crashing to a halt (De Certeau 1984; Goffman 1959). Bringing off a strategy away day or board-meeting is achievement enough, regardless of whether connections can ultimately be traced to organizational outcomes. The practice perspective finds plenty of significance in the bare performance of praxis.” (Whittington, 2006: 628)

It is obvious in this quote that *Strategy-as-Practice* draws on Goffman in order to emphasize *process*, *situation* and *actuality*, rather than *outcome*: each situation, which is *sustained as real* is significant *irrespective* of demonstrating causal links to narrowly defined outcomes - the latter being a favorite pre-occupation of much mainstream strategy research. However, there are other places where S-A-P seems to depart from such a Goffmanian-inspired understanding of practice, such as when Whittington (2011: 184) declares that practice theory “resists the seductive ironies of unintended consequences or strategic emergence.” This is perhaps a contestable

⁴ The case of Royal Bank of Scotland would come to mind here and will be discussed later in the paper.

assertion, as the foregrounding of unintended consequences and emergence would appear to us as *the very point* of a sociologically grounded approach to strategy.

Strategists, through strategy practices and strategy praxis, need to sustain the *reality* of what they do, importantly, the claim that strategy techniques are *not snake oil* but are *actually effective*. Performativity of strategy practices starts with the presentation. Behind the fact that “strategy itself was seeping into every corner of the world economy” (Kiechel, 2010: 256) lies the promise that strategy and Strategic Management, are *effective*, can improve an organization’s performance and thus competitiveness. A group of strategy consultants presenting to the Management Board need to sustain the reality that they are not a bunch of clowns, but a group of knowledgeable, trustworthy and effective professionals who act with high standards of integrity and competence and that what they have to sell *actually works*.

The performance needs to convince companies *not* to believe the argument that “(s)trategy’, as it is sold by consulting firms, is essentially a pipe dream. Why? Because you can sit in a boardroom and plot all you’d like, but once the game has started, it’s pretty much improvisation from that point forth.” (McDonald, 2014: 112) Once the audience believes that strategy consulting is a pipe dream, the game is up and the consulting session is effectively over; the consultants can pack up and go home. Indeed, strategy consultants who present to a company board need to foster the impression that it is here where the company strategy is actually being designed from – even if the reality comes closer to Mintzberg’s notion of an *emergent* and *organizationally dispersed* strategy process. Again, if strategy consultants want to credibly furnish the “corner office with analytic tools to justify any decisions about those businesses...” (Kiechel, 2010: 259) affected by these decisions, then these tools need to *be seen as convincing*.

Frontstage, Backstage and the Hidden Transcript

Emergent and unintended consequences partly come about, partially unnoticed, because certain acts of resistance, of game-playing, of diversions first have a life on the backstage before they get performed on the frontstage: for example, if workers on a construction site (Clegg, 1975) have agreed in their ‘hidden transcript’ (Scott, 1990) to perform an unofficial ‘go-slow’, on the public transcript a credible performance might need to be delivered that they are *working-as-normal*. In the latter

case, the impression fostered is as important as the actual 'work' accomplished - or *not* accomplished in this scenario. Open resistance might come as a surprise only *if* the hidden transcript went unnoticed.

S-A-P could study either frontstage or backstage or, ideally, both: they are different realities, neither of which should be declared as more *real* or as less *real*. Both frontstage and backstage performances can best be studied in way of *as-it-happens*, via ethnographic, non-participant observation for example, rather than via retrospective interviews. Indeed, S-A-P is willing to study how "people 'make do' in everyday life, negotiating the constraints handed down to them through a constant stream of tricks, stratagems and manoeuvres." (Whittington, 2006: 615; de Certeau, 1984). In the case of 'pure' performances, no audience means no performance - such as in orchestra, scripted drama, ballet performances or strategy talk. In the case of 'impure' performances, managers will simply go about their daily work, or workers work on a construction site or actors engaging in a rehearsal; here, performers are to some degree *unconcerned* about their audience (Goffman, 1974/86: 125-6; Smith, 2006: 61; Clegg, 1975).

Thus, it seems plausible to argue that both the 'powerful' in society and the 'powerless' equally have incentives, or good reasons, to treat frontstage and backstage differently. Few have expressed this relationship with greater insight or intelligence than James C Scott (1990) in his *'Domination and the Arts of Resistance'*: "The offstage transcript of elites is, like its counterpart among subordinates, derivative: it consists in those gestures and words that inflect, contradict, or confirm what appears in the public transcript." (Scott, 1990: 10) Thus, both hidden and public transcripts should be treated as relevant in their own right. In order to study them, but especially to properly study the *more evasive hidden transcript*, in-depth ethnographic methods need to be employed: " .. it is remarkable what can come from straight and simple observation, with no agenda other than letting reality hit you in the face." (Mintzberg, 2009: 7) This is especially consequential for strategy research where too often, the public transcript is treated as the *only relevant* reality.

If, say, the project team discussing strategy in a meeting is the public transcript, what people actually think, their hidden transcript, can be discerned, for example, by (inadvertently) listening into their conversation during a coffee break (Whittle, Mueller & Mangan, 2009). Comparing frontstage and backstage can be highly enlightening in order to understand the progress, or lack thereof, of

organizational change. Indeed, ‘audience segregation’ (Goffman, 1967: 108), when people say different things to different audiences, needs to be studied more systematically as part of wanting to understand organizational change.⁵ In any case, even when it comes to “‘personal’ matters and ‘personal’ relationships – with what an individual is ‘really’ like underneath it all when he relaxes and breaks through to those in his presence” (Goffman, 1961/1972: 134), it is still open to sociological analysis. The pointless attempt to define the personal as truly authentic and thus ‘sacred’ and keep it free from the eye of the sociologist, is for Goffman both ‘vulgar’ and ‘touching’ (ibid.).

Footing

In order to study aspects of performance, the concept of ‘footing’ (Goffman, 1981b; Mueller & Whittle, 2011; Sorsa et al, 2014) can be helpful: footing refers to the technique, not necessarily conscious, where a speaker only animates what she says, thus essentially speaks on behalf of someone else, who *as author* wrote the words, and/or *as principal* represents the position or values on whose behalf the animator speaks. ‘In our last board meeting, the CEO has made it clear that he wants this change. Sorry to be the bearer of bad news’ would be an example where a change agent employs footing as part of a strategic change effort (Whittle & Mueller, 2008). Footing is a way for the speaker to position herself in a meeting, in a certain way, a positioning which is relevant for the course of the interaction. Where the author and/or principal are endowed with sufficient authority, the animator might be more likely to succeed in bringing about change.

There can be interesting combinations and variations and an instructive example is worth giving from the first Blair government: Alistair Campbell, Blair’s Director of Communications, (author) would write articles and speeches, that would be printed in the name of or delivered by Tony Blair (animator) and they purely generated interest insofar as they spoke on behalf of, expressing the values and policies of, the principal, Tony Blair (Rawnsley, 2001: 377). On the rare occasions that a statement was written by Tony Blair himself, experts like the Sun’s editor, David Yelland, “could tell it was Blair’s own work, rather than the hand of Campbell, because ‘it isn’t as well-written as usual’.” (Rawnsley, 2001: 378) It would appear

⁵ There are complications in that each backstage, analytically speaking, has its own frontstage and another backstage – ad infinitum.

that the author Campbell was better in expressing the views of the principal, Blair, than the author Blair.

Footing is important for analyzing certain strategic organizational change scenarios. Often, agents on the ground will invoke others as relevant for motivating the change effort: either in their capacity as authors, i.e. people who have written the words. Or in their role as principals, i.e. people who want this change to happen.

Senior Management teams

CEOs know, just like senior strategy consultants know, “that a single note off key can disrupt the tone of an entire performance.” (Goffman, 1959/71: 60) Indeed, “(w)e must be prepared to see that the impression of reality fostered by a performance is a delicate, fragile thing that can be shattered by very minor mishaps.” (Goffman, 1959/71: 63) One such off note can mean that the audience, financial analysts and investment advisers say, conclude that the performer is not really the ‘proper’ CEO, but a temporary stand-in, someone who covers so that the ‘real’ CEO can be appointed. When the former *Lehman Brothers* CEO, Dick Fuld, in his early days as CEO, gave a “terrible presentation”, he was advised by a senior McKinsey consultant that “he’d better hire a speech coach.” (McDonald, 2014: 230) After doubts had surfaced about RBS’ capital position, the four most senior RBS executives (CEO, Chairman, Finance director, Director of the Global Banking & Markets division) were facing a group of investment analysts in April 2008, in the run-up to their planned rights issue. It was consequential that their “performances were even less convincing than those of 28 February.” (Fraser, 2014: 6371 [kindle])

Where presentations by senior executives, who are expected to be very competent as far as presenting is concerned, show any form of weakness, an audience is tempted to interpret this as a strong *indication* that ‘things are not quite right’. Steve Jobs knew this only too well: “Jobs himself rehearsed the presentations dozen of times so that each relaxed statement would come off just right.” (Lashinsky, 2012: 124) Again, Goffman (1974/86: 132-3) recognized that even relaxed spontaneity can be the result of planning and rehearsal: “the informal chatter a popular singer may offer between songs is likely to be scripted, yet is clearly received as outside the song frame, thus unofficial, informal, directly communicated.” And: “To give a radio talk

that will sound genuinely informal, spontaneous, and relaxed, the speaker may have to design his script with painstaking care, testing one phrase after another, in order to follow the content, language, rhythm, and pace of everyday talk.” (1959/71: 42) Rawnsley (2001: 180) provides an instructive example from the first Blair government where during a Foreign Office crisis involving Sierra Leone, “Blair delivered an apparently extempore, but actually carefully rehearsed, interpretation of what had happened.” This can easily be imagined during the talk of a strategy consultant. The relaxed, seemingly spontaneous aspect of the delivery enhances our respect for the competence of the performer: in this sense, we are *actually* being *misled*. But this form of small-scale dishonesty is part of the structure of our everyday world: these deceptions ensure that ‘performances’ are more effective than they would otherwise be.

On the other hand, where a CEO is *too spontaneous* and ‘loses it’, skilled observers will interpret the incompetent performance and may want to read behind the curtain: after Enron CEO Jeff Skilling had, live on air, called a hedge fund manager an “asshole”, another hedge fund manager “was in hysterics ..[and] was more convinced than ever that Enron was hiding serious problems.” (McLean & Elkind, 2013: 326) Here, *too much* and *inappropriate* spontaneity in a way gave the ‘game away’. Spontaneity, just like authenticity, needs to be performed competently and skillfully. Indeed, the inability to perform as expected will make the audience draw certain conclusions about what is happening behind the scenes. A ‘maliciously offensive act’ (Goffman, 1963: 218) will make witnesses interpret the offender to be “alienated from the gathering and its rulings” (ibid p.219) – an unusual scenario in the case of a CEO and an investment analysts conference call⁶. Thus, spontaneity and authenticity need to be performed competently and appropriate to the social situation, otherwise it may well become counter-productive.

Consultants’ Performances

As Whittington (2007: 1579) rightly pointed out, “in more than twenty six years, the *Strategic Management Journal* has attended amply to top management teams, and increasingly to middle managers, but published not a single article on

⁶ In the Skilling case, the recipient of the abuse was a short seller of Enron stock.

strategy consultants.” In contrast, one of the central insights and arguments of S-A-P is the point that consulting firms are both *producers and consumers* of strategy discourse (Whittington et al, 2003: 399) and therefore deserving of our attention.

Goffman (1959/71) discussed the specific methods and processes, which are employed in order to create an overall sense that something is real, credible, serious, competent, rather than say a test-run or a prank. This argument was taken up by SAP: “(a)t the personal level, there is a dramaturgical sense of performance, as in Goffman’s (1959) presentation of self in everyday life and the carrying off of praxis. What does it take for consultants, planners or managers simply to perform their parts as credible strategists?” (Whittington, 2007: 1580) In Goffman’s (1959/71: 36) words, “many service occupations offer their clients a performance that is illuminated with dramatic expressions of cleanliness, modernity, competence, and integrity.” Indeed, “the individual constantly acts to provide information that he is of sound character and reasonable competency.” (1971/72: 198) Performing competence is not a form of deception, it is simply a different form of creating, or producing, reality – different in method, but not in principle from a medical doctor, who reassures patients of her competence by displaying her medical school diplomas on the wall in her practice. Both competency and sound character have to be performed – they cannot be conveyed via direct communication, as saying ‘trust me, I am competent’ or ‘trust me, I am honest’ is likely to be counter-productive.

All organizational leaders, on a continuous basis, need to perform idealizations, i.e. performing officially accredited values; indeed, this applies to political leaders⁷, leaders of professional services firms (PSFs), and corporate leaders equally. Specific techniques can be employed in order to sustain these idealizations and consultants have played an important role in this process: “(t)here is little doubt that McKinsey has made the corporate world more efficient, more rational, more objective, and more fact based.” (McDonald, 2014: 8) What McDonald confidently asserts as a *fact* is *in fact* highly contested. What we can say is that PSFs have played a central part in *propagating* the *idealizations* of rationality, objectivity, factuality and efficiency. It is a core part of PSFs’ *projected external identity* to suggest that they are upholding societal / professional values. Naturally, the methods, tools and practices

⁷ A nice illustration in Laws (2016: 199): “Nick Clegg spelled out that while, as a liberal, he was of course determined to defend press freedoms, his basic view was that Lord Justice Leveson’s recommendations should be implemented unless they were quite clearly disproportionate.”

involved in performing and projecting a desired reality will be different between professions. Whilst accountants draw on a shared audit knowledge base to make their reality more objective and idealized (Pentland, 1993), strategy consultants use diagrams, 2x2 matrices and quantification to achieve the same aim (Carter & Mueller, 2006): "(w)hen an individual presents himself to others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so in fact, than does his behavior as a whole." (1959/71:45)

Equipped with these sermons, or discursively constructed idealizations, strategists, with their considerable positive symbolic capital are in a position where they can give an 'official imprint', i.e. give advice at the highest level, speak confidently, adjudicate authoritatively and thus have substantial influence on organizational change (Mueller & Carter, 2005a,b; Fincham, 2012: 421). Strategists can confidently demand that certain techniques are used in order to study competitiveness and, failure to do so, would be an indication of a lack of objectivity. Undoubtedly, the declining influence of many professions mentioned by Goffman has had its mirror image in the rising influence of both the strategist at the apex of organizations as well as strategy consultants (Kiechel, 2010). Strategists are under strong expectations that they perform, again and again, at the highest level of presentational ability; indeed, a "certain bureaucratization of the spirit is expected so that we can be relied upon to give a perfectly homogenous performance at every appointed time." (Goffman, 1959/71: 64)⁸ Guru speakers seem to achieve such homogenous, routinized high-level performances. In 'guru talk', audience laughter and applause "contribute to a sense of cohesion and intimacy, which might make audiences more receptive to the gurus' recommendations." (Greatbatch & Clark, 2003: 1538) Again, certain techniques included as part of the presentation ensure that the message appears more convincing in the eyes of the audience.

McKinsey is the world's most pre-eminent strategy consultancy company: how was it *made* into this? Its third and long-time Managing Director, Marvin Bower, who ran the firm from 1950 to 1967, advocated inventing the '*McKinsey persona*', a confident, discreet consultant, who always prioritized the firm over personal glory (McDonald, 2014: 42). For example, in order to be credible as strategists, protagonists

⁸ Goffman does not reference Max Weber here but Weber's (1904/1992) similar formulation of viewing rational-legal bureaucracy as the rational spirit's organizational manifestation is worth mentioning here.

may need to speak with substantial confidence, use Powerpoint as a tool, and use a 2x2 matrix as a method of communication (Kaplan, 2011). ‘Carrying it off’ may require certain quite superficial methods to be employed, methods that *sustain* impressions of a *credible strategist* communicating here (Clark, 1995): “(i)f you were an airline passenger, and the pilot came aboard the plane and he wore shorts and a flaming scarf, would you have the same confidence as you did when he came on with his four stripes on the shoulder? Basically, the dress code all has to do with what you want to do, when you want to build confidence and an identity.” (Marvin Bower, cited in: McDonald, 2014: 48) Indeed, the airline pilot metaphor resonates closely with Whittington’s (1993: 25) point that strategy consultancy can equip managers with “comforting rituals, managerial security blankets in a hostile world.”

Similarly, for the CEO or the strategy consultant to hold an MBA from a top business school, can provide the perception of such a ‘security blanket’ (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Gioia & Corley, 2002): indeed, it can function as a *credential*, thus *indirectly* communicating certain messages to prospective and actual clients: “(c)oincident with the rise of strategy and a driving force behind it, an ever-greater share of MBAs from elite institutions has been hired by consulting outfits.” (Kiechel, 2010: 275) For McKinsey in the 1950s and 1960s, the surest way to elite status was “to act as if you already were elite.” (McDonald, 2014: 94) The MBA was the equivalent for the strategy ‘profession’, what the CA credential was for the accounting profession; indeed, McKinsey wanted to be considered a proper profession by the top companies (ibid 128-9). Because consulting is a service that is consumed at the same time as it is produced, “(i)n the end, impressions can be all that matter.” (ibid 168)

The latter can of course mean different things for different companies and different contexts. For example, given that trust includes competence and integrity, neither of which are easy to display, how can a consulting firm convince its clients that it can indeed be *trusted* (Clark, 1995)? “ ... (U)nlike other professions- law, medicine- consulting was obviously built on pretense, where dress, manners, and language were meant to present some notion of capability that wasn’t there to see on a diploma.” (McDonald, 2014: 51) Consultants, as we know, at some point added the ‘diploma’ to the list, in that an MBA from a top U.S. or European business school would be a required qualification for a strategy consultant, just like a CA qualification

is for an accountant.⁹ But in addition to *possessing* an MBA, an MBA also needs to be *performed*, needs to be displayed via confidence, competence, and ability to talk well. All professions need to be performed, and idealizations, namely performing “officially accredited values of the society” (Goffman, 1959/71: 35), are integral to these performances.

Presumably, without having read Goffman, top strategy consultancies still seemed to know that an audience can “pounce on trifling flaws as a sign that the whole show is false ...” (Goffman, 1959/71: 59). When strategy consultants teams work with client teams on implementation aspects of the strategic advice provided, a crucial test is still ‘Who will make the final presentation?’ – indeed, “when push comes to shove, the McKinsey director will be at the board doing a presentation” unlike some of their competitors (Kiechel, 2010: 182). Top strategy consultancies seem to understand that strategy as an *elite* product is partly, or largely, about getting the presentation and language of strategy absolutely right (Carter et al, 2008: 83; Carter & Mueller, 2002): indeed, “strategies .. on the whole .. came from business elites and top management teams trained in the most elite business schools.” (Clegg et al., 2011: 35) The elite character of the strategists shows through in their typically superb presentations.

Thus, strategy consultants would know that the professional “*etiquette* is a body of ritual which grows up informally to preserve, before the clients, the common front of the profession.” (E Hughes, cited in Goffman, 1959/71: 95) And strategy consultancies would probably also acknowledge that “those who work backstage will achieve technical standards while those who work in the front region will achieve expressive ones.” (Goffman, 1959/71: 126) A different way of putting this is to say that top talent works on a number of projects, applying their knowledge, “while fresh-faced Harvard graduates carry on the legwork.” (McDonald, 2014: 88) The perpetuation of a professional culture requires that both non-visible aspects, such as knowledge, and visible aspects, such as speech, dress code and manners, are part of routinized, recursive practices. A similar point was made for Goldman Sachs’ culture: “Partners were always looking to see whether an intern had the makings of a ‘culture

⁹ Why do accountants not resent the image of being dull and grey? Jeacle (2008: 1298) reminds us that “(p)rofessional credibility is inherent in the accounting stereotype. The beancounter may be dull and dreary but she/he is also regarded as a safe and trustworthy custodian of business assets.”

carrier', Goldman-speak for someone who is able to deal with clients and colleagues in a way that preserves the firm's reputation ... ” (Smith, 2012: Ch.1). Indeed, “managers have to be able to (b)ring off their actions as being in accord with the strategic objectives of the organization that employs them.” (Clegg et al., 2011: 28) Strategy cannot exist only in the strategic plan, it has to be enacted and any enactment is a performance for a *specific audience* carried out in *specific situations*.

For a range of professions, including doctors, lawyers, accountants, auditors we might use relatively superficial, but *visible*, characteristics as fairly reliable *indicators* that an *ethical and competent* professional is at work here (Goffman, 1959/71: 36). In some occupations, “prizefighters, surgeons, violinists, and policemen are cases in point” (Goffman, 1959/71: 41), an especially dramatic performance might help in “vividly conveying the qualities and attributes claimed ...” (ibid). How indeed can service occupations display, i.e. make “visible”, to audiences the substantial “invisible costs” (Goffman, 1959/71: 42) that they have incurred in the past, often in the *background*, and which need to be incurred in order to provide the service that is visible in the *foreground*? Those organizations, such as Goldman Sachs or McKinsey, for which corporate culture can be a decisive strategic asset (Mueller, 1996), are keen to display a certain *front*, which allows the audience to draw positive conclusions about the *backstage* which is not visible to the audience, say its values, principles, educational competencies and higher purposes. Critical realists tell us “of something called ‘legitimacy’, and of ‘values’, floating somewhere in a conceptual sky beyond the heads of real people in ordinary situations.” (Collins, 2004: 103) What we instead want to know is how these abstractions are enacted in concrete, “live” situations.

Organizations as “effective machines”

Goffman (1961/1991: 73) has described organizations as “effective machines for producing a few officially avowed and socially approved ends.” Pentland (1993: 620) has provided this brilliant description of the work of auditors: “To society at large, the sanctity of the audit ritual is largely taken for granted, presupposed as a shared cultural resource. And therein lies the myth: as long as the audit machines are working, we can all be comfortable with the numbers.” We can replace ‘audit’ with ‘strategy’, and it is just as insightful. Auditors, investment banks, strategy

consultancies: as long as the rituals and performances on the front stage are convincing, we trust the machines operating in the background and we trust the numbers that are produced in the process. Other performances on the frontage include philanthropic activities by investment banks: in the case of Goldman philanthropy, these are the *Goldman Sachs Foundation*, endowed with USD200m and the *Goldman Sachs Relief Fund and Outreach*, created in response to September 11, 2001 (Mandis, 2013: 234). Such activities create a “sense of higher purpose” (p.238) pursued by the firm, and can create a sense that a premium culture operates in the background, that this firm is like a charity or other value based organisation, about much more than money.

Often, there are more or less blatant contradictions “between what the institution does and what its officials must say it does, [and this] forms the basic context of the staff’s daily activity.” (Goffman, 1961/1991: 73) This distinction between official ends and actual practice, the ‘underlife’ of the organization, influenced Mintzberg’s (1987) seminal argument about the 5Ps of Strategy, especially the notion of *strategy-as-pattern*: “(s)streams of behavior could be isolated and strategies identified as patterns or consistencies in such streams.” (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985: 257) From this, Mintzberg developed the highly influential concept of an *emergent* strategy which needs to be seen as often more important than the officially avowed (i.e. deliberate) strategy. All kinds of unofficial, but sociologically highly important, activities shape this process of emergence.

In contrast to the predominant theories of the 1950s, including Parsonian structural-functionalism, and the conflict theories of Dahrendorf and Coser, Goffman studied the *underlife* of organization, the perennially fragile nature of micro order. Clegg (2006) and Jenkins (2008) draw primarily on *Asylums* in order to make their, somewhat implausible, case that one can use Goffman in order to understand power. Yes, perhaps in the same way that one can use a sieve in order to catch water.¹⁰ We agree with Giddens (1988) that Goffman was not overly keen to “analyse the interaction of the powerful – at least, in circumstances in which that power is being exercised.” (ibid 274) It was only in a footnote that Goffman (1971/72: 337FN) asked

¹⁰ Goffman (1961/91: 16-17) includes a number of organizations in his typology of total institutions where ‘inmates’ are not typically (even though sometimes they might be) held against their will, including ships, boarding schools, abbeys, monasteries, convents, cloisters, servants (in servants quarters). Clegg (2006) and Clegg et al (2008) ignore this in order to sustain their implausible interpretation of total institutions.

the question “How come persons in authority have been so overwhelmingly successful in conning those beneath them into keeping the hell out of their offices?”¹¹ In another rare instance, Goffman referred to the “social arrangements enjoyed by those with institutional authority - priests, psychiatrists, school teachers, police, generals, government leaders, parents, males, whites, nationals, media operators and all the other well-placed persons who are in a position to give official imprimatur to versions of reality.” (Goffman, 1967: 17) But these are isolated instances and there is no systematic development of a theory of power or authority.

Goffman makes no significant contribution to the theorization of power – but that should not be held against him. He has, however, greatly enriched our understanding of how organizations, audit and strategy function as performing machines and the role of ceremonies (and so on) in upholding such functionality.

The Self of the Strategist

Goffman (1959/71: 57) approvingly cites William James’ dictum that “he has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinion he cares.” Goffman (1959/71: 244-5) defines the social self as the ‘*character*’ who “is a product of a scene that comes off ... The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited.” The theatre metaphor in these sentences is indicated by ‘dramatic’, ‘scene’, ‘presented’. As far as self-as-character is concerned, “each self, occurs within the confines of an institutional system, whether a social establishment such as a mental hospital or a complex of personal and professional relationships [...] The self in this sense is not a property of the person to whom it is attributed, but dwells rather in the pattern of social control that is exerted in connection with the person by himself and those around him.” (Goffman, 1961/91: 168) Indeed, “his social face ... is only on loan to him from society ...” (Goffman, 1967: 10). In these sentences, Goffman basically puts forward a social construction perspective on the self, building on writers such as William James, Charles Horton

¹¹ Gamson (1985: 605-6) provides an illuminating discussion of this.

Cooley¹² and George H Mead. For them, the self is essentially a social product, residing in “the special mutuality of immediate social interaction.” (Goffman, 1963: 16)

Secondly, the individual can be viewed as a *psychobiological entity*, with a capacity to learn, with fantasies and dreams, anxiety and dread, i.e. with psychobiological characteristics and with features of physical continuity. Whilst the social character is a *fleeting* self, the psychobiological self is a *continuous* self: the latter comes close to our common sense, everyday understanding of our self, where we hold each other accountable for inconsistencies (“That’s different from what you said a few days ago ...”), and dramatic changes (“you have changed a lot since I last saw you”). A continuous, fairly stable self is central to our everyday concept of the self and often leads to suspicions vis-à-vis those ‘performers’, who are seen as talking or behaving very differently in different social settings. In his 1971 book, *Relations in Public*, Goffman restated it by distinguishing between ‘personal identity’ and ‘social identity’, whereby the latter stands for “the broad social categories [...] to which an individual can belong and be seen as belonging: age-grade, sex, class, regiment, and so forth. By ‘personal identity’ I mean the unique organic continuity imputed to each individual ...” (1971/72: 227).

In *Asylums*, Goffman (1961/1991: 117-156) coined the term ‘moral career’, one attraction of which was that it allowed the researcher “to move back and forth between the personal and the public” (119). Upon entry into the asylum, the patient typically experiences “abandonment, disloyalty, and embitterment” (125) vis-à-vis family and friends on the ‘outside’, which we could also call the career of the self: “Given the stage that any person has reached in a career, one typically finds that he constructs an image of his life course – past, present, and future – which selects, abstracts, and distorts in such a way as to provide him with a view of himself that he can usefully expound in current situations.” (Goffman, 1961/1991: 139)

In summary, what we can take from Goffman is that the self of the strategist is a social creation and social construction that provides certain managers, and strategy consultants, with an identity that they would not have had at different times or in different contexts. For strategists to be able to “construct their subjectivities through the exciting discourse of strategy ...” (Clegg et al, 2004: 26), constitutes them as

¹² See Smith (2006: 413) for how Goffman draws on Cooley.

strategists, both internally and externally: with regard to the latter, it provided status and prestige, especially in the context of globalisation, neoliberalism and managerialism from the late 1980s onwards. It equips the strategist with a distinct ‘persona’ that includes a distinct vocabulary, a performed competence, social prestige and the discursive right to adjudicate on matters of competition and competitiveness.

The Meeting as Performance

At the theoretical level, the role of various types of face-to-face encounters is readily acknowledged: Whittington (2006: 619) argued that strategy praxis takes place in episodes such as management retreats, consulting interventions, presentations, team briefings, projects, simple talk and board meetings. Thus, somewhat paradoxically, even though meetings are the main locations where strategies are proposed, debated, modified, contested, agreed upon, and argued over, they have not attracted corresponding empirical work from strategy researchers (Kwon, Clarke & Wodak, 2014 is an exception). This is regrettable and needs rectifying.

Goffman devoted a whole book plus sections in his other books to the analysis of *encounters*. An encounter or a focused gathering involves “a single visual and cognitive focus of attention; a mutual and preferential openness to verbal communication; a heightened mutual relevance of acts; an eye-to-eye ecological huddle that maximizes each participant’s opportunity to perceive the other participants’ monitoring of him” (Goffman, 1961/1972: 17-18). “Some social occasions, a funeral, [or a meeting, the Author] for example, have a fairly sharp beginning and end, and fairly strict limits on attendance and tolerated activities.” (1963: 18-19) Beginning and end are “usually marked by some ceremony or ritual expression” (Goffman, 1985: 607-8), what we might call ‘temporal brackets’. Also worth noting is that “(t)he encounter is a field of interpersonal tension, discrepancy and disruption.” (Lofland, 1980: 36) One can mention a whole range of examples of encounters – a long chapter is devoted to “fun in games” (Goffman’s (1961/1972: 15-72) for example - but one encounter that is of special interest to the strategy and management literature is the project or management team *meeting*. The meeting is also of special interests to ethnographers and anthropologists who have treated it as a distinct social setting (Schwartzman, 1989) with special significance. It is typically

bracketed by ritualistic openings and closings. At RBS, under Fred Goodwin's leadership, for example, regular morning meetings would "become a wearing litany of problems, game-playing and blame-dodging." (Martin, 2014: 177) Of course, each meeting being a frontstage would then have a backstage, where each game played, each blame-allocation accomplished, would have a corresponding backstage interaction where victims might converse in confidence about their separate, or joint, suffering.

What is clear is that a substantial amount of strategy work or strategizing gets accomplished in meetings. In light of the substantial effort expended "by Goffman to study face-to-face interaction as a naturally bounded analytically coherent field" (Psathas, 1980: 69), we argue that Goffman-inspired SAP research would clearly prioritize the study of real-time interaction in meetings in a naturalistic fashion. In her detailed ethnographic work in organizational meetings, Samra-Fredericks (2003, 2004, 2005) and, more recently Whittle et al. (2015; Whittle et al. 2014; Mueller et al, 2013) and Kwon et al (2014) have established that a substantial amount of actual strategizing work happens in organizational meetings. Where the strategy research agenda could be pushed further is by also studying instances of related backstage interaction.¹³

Goffman's work has been influential in shaping debates in the mobilization and social movements literature. Here is not the place to review this literature beyond some cursory suggestions how Goffman's work can inform insights for ideas on mobilization of (strategic) change (or resistance) in organisations. Gamson (1985) showed how micromobilisation is dependent on Goffmanian concerns such as face-to-face encounters: "Micromobilization [...] is the study of how face-to-face encounters affect long term efforts to bring about social change through the mobilization of resources for collective action." (Gamson, 1985: 607) There are a number of important points being made here: firstly, micro action can cumulatively lead to, or bring about, meso action or change, which can have macro effects, for example, in terms of political regime change, or more importantly for our purposes, strategic organizational change. By implication, and methodologically speaking, we should

¹³ Samra-Fredericks has, following on from Anne Rawls (1989:152), criticized Goffman for not using "detailed data necessary to see the constitutive components of conversational and social settings and the sequential regularities of talk" (Samra-Fredericks, 2010: 2147). Goffman's methodology is a running sore that has invited countless instances of critique (eg Collins, 1980: 173) and it was behind the (in)famous split between Goffman and Sacks in the 1960s.

study in some detail micro-level interactions, if we want to have a good understanding of meso-level change.

What are the implications for strategic organisational change? The implications are three-fold: strategic organisational change can only come about if there are concrete actions in specific situations that aim to bring about change; macro change is what appears in acts of retrospective sensemaking to the observer, but for the contemporaneous agent, their sensemaking is shaped by the concerns of the concrete encounter that is taking place here-and-now. A number of sociologists have shown the futility wanting to explain concrete instances of behaviour with reference to abstract, long-term goals. Rather than simply diagnosing structural shifts at the macro level, one can study the specific encounters at the micro level that cumulatively build these shifts, gradually and incrementally (Ranson et al, 1980). We will take up this point in the conclusions.

Performing Framing – Framing the Performance

Goffman's notion of frame has been highly influential across a whole range of disciplines¹⁴, including sociology, linguistics, anthropology, social movement theory (Snow et al., 1986; Zald, 1996; Benford, 1997; Benford & Snow, 2000), media studies (Tuchman, 1978; D'Angelo, 2002; Johnson-Cartee, 2004), management (Ranson et al., 1980: 5; Neale & Bazerman, 1985; Fiss & Zajac, 2006), negotiation (Dewulf et al, 2009) and (discursive) leadership (Fairhurst & Saar, 1996; Fairhurst, 2010). In the context of the strategic organizational change literature, reference to Goffman's framing concept has been made "as a way of fostering understanding and creating legitimacy for a change." (Cornelissen, Holt & Zundel, 2011: 2) Kaplan's (2008: 730) paper aims to "illuminate the dynamics of strategy making within an organization to reveal the micromechanisms by which frames and politics interrelate." Dewulf et al (2009: 158) draw on Goffman (1974, 1981) in order to develop their perspective of 'interactional framing'. In his influential 'Talking politics', Gamson (1992) explains: "like a picture frame, a frame directs our attention to what is relevant; like a window frame, it determines our perspectives while limiting our view of the world; like the frame of a house, it is an invisible infrastructure that holds together different rooms and gives shape to the edifices of meaning." (as summarized in Creed et al., 2002: 481)

¹⁴ For the purposes of writing this section, we were conscious of a recent effort in summarizing the debate in Management and Organization Studies (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014).

In his 1974 *Frame Analysis*, Goffman marks the break with his previous work with the, for him momentous, statement “The first issue is not interaction but frame.” (Goffman, 1974/1986: 127) He points to “the basic frameworks of understanding available in our society for making sense out of events” (Goffman, 1974/1986: 10), which include seeing it as ‘what is really going on’, or “a joke, or a dream, or an accident, or a mistake, or a misunderstanding, or a deception, or a theatrical performance, and so forth.” (Goffman, 1974/1986: 10) In the final chapter of this book, he says that “(a)ctivities such as stage plays, planned con operations, experiments, and rehearsals, once begun, tend to foreclose other frame possibilities and require sustaining a definition of the situation in the face of diversions.” (Goffman, 1974/1986: 499)

Furthermore, a strip of activity can be made sense of within a primary framework or it can be made sense of via *keying* or *fabrication* (Goffman, 1974/1986: Ch.3-4). *Keyings* are variations: “the key, I refer here to the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else. The process of transcription can be called keying.” (Goffman, 1974/1986: 43-44) Activities that are being *keyed* receive a *different* meaning in that *keying*: examples of keyings include make-believe, contest, ceremonies, technical redos including rehearsals, practicings, and mock exercises, and regroundings¹⁵ (Goffman, 1974/1986: Ch.3; Burns, 1992: 255-6). Thus, we have primary frameworks, as *untransformed* activity, and we have key(ing)s and fabrications as *transformed* activities (Smith, 2006: 58).¹⁶ “When the key in question is that of play, we tend to refer to the less transformed counterpart as “serious” activity; as will be seen, however, not all serious activity is unkeyed, and not all untransformed activity can be called serious.” (Goffman, 1974/1986: 46) Both here and in other places (Goffman, 1974/1986: 5, 564), Goffman seems keen to go beyond Schutz’s (1962: 208-228; 1967/32: 44, 69, 97) somewhat simplistic notion of the ‘natural attitude’. Schutz had conceptualized the natural attitude as a unitary phenomenon, rooted in the “world of everyday life’ in which one has direct

¹⁵ A regrounding is, for example, when for the camera, a prime minister serves burgers to guests on a barbecue

¹⁶ Keying has not been taken up much in the literature and transformed activities are often simply referred to as ‘reframed’.

experience of one's fellow men, the world in which I assume that you are seeing the same table I am seeing." (1967/32: 105) This shared world is the world of mundane reason, of everyday reality where different accounts need to be accounted for (Pollner, 2010).

In contrast, Goffman was aware that when we make sense of something in everyday life within a primary framework, this may already be a complicated mixture of something 'ordinary' and, say an impersonation of a movie, i.e. a keying. In this sense, Goffman is moving away from phenomenology's unproblematic access to our *natural attitude* and, arguably he is preparing the path for post-structuralist ideas: "Since the 'actual' is always already framed as the 'real' and in such a way that makes keying and fabrication probable, the kind of rereading suggested by Goffman's writings is a matter of grasping simulations in terms of each other, as if a typology of simulations were possible." (Clough, 1992: 108-9) By foreshadowing some of Baudrillard's later and more far-reaching arguments, for Goffman (1974/1986: 564) "the everyday is not a special domain to be placed in contrast to the others, but merely another realm." In the everyday, I can perceive behaviour as everyday, or as a prank, an impersonation, play-acting and so on. Here, Goffman moves away from a more simplistic, phenomenological analysis, which is still present in sentences like "In the world of real everyday activity, the individual can predict some natural events with a fair amount of certainty, but interpersonal outcomes are necessarily more problematic" (Goffman, 1974/1986: 133).

By using Bateson, James and Schutz as points of departure, Goffman moves towards a highly complex, sophisticated and layered framing analysis, where even the primary framework might already be *not serious*. Instead of using the stage as a metaphor, and the language of the stage "a rhetoric", "a manoeuvre" (Goffman, 1959/71: 246), in *Frame Analysis* Goffman (1974/1986) clarifies that there are complicated variations: for example, just like an actor on stage will often speak aloud his intentions so that the audience can follow him, sometimes an agent in everyday life will do this "most evidently when an individual finds he must do something that might be misconstrued as blameworthy by strangers ..." (ibid 564). Voicing your intention can sometimes be understood as the everyday actor keying the actor on stage - which again is a keying of the primary framework, the agent *actually* doing what the actor on stage is *kind of* doing.

A strategy report, or a strategy presentation is therefore a piece of communication that is designed in a particular way, but perhaps more importantly, sometimes significantly *reframes* certain events. Language, specialised vocabulary, format conventions, presentational conventions are employed as part of an effort to frame reality in a certain, different way: typically, a strategy report would suggest that the environment is analysable and knowable, partly by employing strategy tools, techniques and strategy language. Strategy is a distinct *discourse* (Knights & Morgan, 1991), which means that reality is framed differently from a, say operational or financial, frame: “(t)he language of strategy provides a map for the future and the ability to construct problems that it then seeks to solve. Strategy, therefore, has the capacity to create problems: it does not simply respond to pre-existing problems.” (Clegg et al, 2004: 27) Strategy is a way to frame reality and by framing it a certain way, its protagonists can earn a place at the top table of corporate or organizational decision-making.

It was part of strategy’s project to move to the top table, by arguing that by applying a strategy frame, reality can be analysed and understood better, with positive consequences for the company concerned. Framing reality with tools, techniques and 2x2 matrices is based on a claim to superior mastery or understanding of the competitive environment: for example, McKinsey Germany’s CEO “credits McKinsey’s nine-box matrix with getting the Firm in the door at Siemens in 1974 ...” (Kiechel, 2010: 259). Which types of framing are superior compared to alternatives is subject to discursive contestation and does not follow directly from the presumed quality of the tools and techniques employed: Porter (1996) outlined in great detail why and how strategy is different from ‘operational effectiveness’. Indeed, Porter argues that *strategy* is different from a whole range of management tools, such as ‘benchmarking’, ‘total quality management’, ‘time-based competition’, ‘business process reengineering’, and change management. These management tools are concerned with increasing operational effectiveness, but they are not *strategy*.

We could re-phrase Porter’s argument along the lines of him arguing that a strategy *frame* is different from an *operational effectiveness* frame, which means that (a) our criteria of evaluation are different, (b) our language is different, and (c) our time horizon is probably different. If we want to understand what happened in the strategy field, say in the 1990s, we could argue that after decades of loosening the notion of strategy, with more people occupying the strategy space, coming from

change management, or from HRM amongst others, one of the world's leading thinkers on strategy decided to draw analytical boundaries, thus *restricting* the conceptual space of strategy, making it more exclusive (again). Speaking strategically and with authority was again to become a preserve for strategy consultants and strategy academics and not a free-for-all. Framing can thus be a status move, a move that carves out a space that is defined by closure, namely "exclusion [i.e.] power being directed downward." (Murphy, 1986: 24). Certain groups should be prevented from using the strategy discourse, as unrestricted use clearly devalued strategy.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our point of departure was our dissatisfaction with the existing reception and usage of Goffmanian insights in the Strategy field, in particular by the Strategy-as-Practice community. We argued for a re-orientation of S-A-P to focus (again) on the actual *praxis* as *practiced* by *practitioners*; to take the question '*how is it done in the doings?*' more *seriously* and more *literally*. We argued that foregrounding *praxis*, the '*as-it-happens*', needs to be central for any Strategy-as-Practice endeavor. For this purpose we have analyzed some core Goffman concerns, conceiving of "everyday life [as] made up of a series of sometimes subtle pressures to which we adjust with varying degrees of enthusiasm" (Hepworth, 1980: 81). For this purpose, we have provided empirical illustrations and possibilities for a future strategy research agenda.

Over the last twenty years, it is fair to say that 'strategy' has become all-pervasive and all public sector organisations, including universities, need to have a fully-developed strategy (Carter et al, 2008). Starting with the first Blair government in 1997, it was becoming obvious that in today's world, also political parties entering government need to have a *strategy* (Rawnsley, 2001: 117, 159). What we can take from Goffman is the crucial role of performance based on idealizations. If applied to the current leaders or 'high priests of society', such as CEOs and prestigious strategy consultancies, we can argue that by performing convincingly, they can adjudicate on policy and strategic matters of highest importance (Mueller & Carter, 2005). Indeed, "(s)trategy is supposed to lead an organization through changes and shifts to secure its future growth and sustainable success, and it has become the master concept with which to address CEOs of contemporary organizations and their senior managers. Its talismanic importance can hardly be overstated." (Carter et al, 2008: 83)

If the as-it-happens is central to understanding strategizing, then we need to focus on *practices*, or *praxis*, depending upon one's definitions, rather than the interpretation of practices or what, supposedly, guides practices, namely normative orders, values, institutions or structural constraints. Rawls correctly says that "(p)ractices are things people do that other people can see, hear, smell, taste, and touch them doing." (Rawls, 2003: 245) Against Rawls, the S-A-P perspective introduces a rather implausible distinction at this point, in that it wants to distinguish *practices* from *praxis* (Whittington, 2006). Drawing on Reckwitz (2002), Whittington (2006: 619) informs us that " 'practices' will refer to shared routines of behavior, including traditions, norms and procedures for thinking, acting and using 'things' [...]. By contrast, the Greek word 'praxis' refers to actual activity, what people do in practice." Five years later, Whittington explains that SAP has a "commitment to shared practices, rules and norms. Practice theory is about practices, just as it says on the tin. As widespread practices in contemporary advanced societies, accounting or strategizing always express larger, more enduring structures than just the activity observed in a particular moment." (Whittington, 2011: 184)

In way of critique, this definition displays an unfortunate reification of the term 'practice(s)', as it removes the condition of co-presence as a defining feature of a practice. Goffman certainly acknowledges the importance of norms (eg 1971/72: 124-134) or social control (1971/72: 135-37), but they are *norms-in-action* or *control-in-action*. One can observe the effect of these norms-in-action by observing and analyzing *concrete performances*. They are not entities that exist somewhere in a society's secret vault. Structures are not practices in a Goffmanian sense; smelling, tasting and touching normally requires co-presence. By again foregrounding norms, this version of practice theory loses a substantial part of the impetus that motivated many anti-Parsonian social theorists, including Goffman, Garfinkel and Becker, who all wanted sociology to focus on *happenings*, or perhaps *norms-in-action*. If norms are practices then in what sense is SAP about 'what actually happens'? Norms do not actually *happen* in any ordinary meaning of the latter word and they are clearly a fairly abstract, 2nd order sociological concept that has little use in everyday life. Few children, upon reaching the age of ten, will be given a long list of societal norms by their parents and asked to remember them. A similar point can be made for the notion of tradition: what does this notion actually explain given every day many traditions are disregarded and we would struggle to actually give a list of 'relevant' and widely

accepted traditions? Do we really gain much by calling norms practices and introducing a new term called *praxis* reserved specifically *for situations* involving *co-presence*? If we followed a Goffmanian understanding, clearly, we would *not* do this. Rather than adopting the definition propagated by Whittington, we will now outline a Goffmanian understanding, which is *not* predicated on a somewhat problematic distinction between praxis and practices.

Based on Goffman, we have argued that reality is not only socially constructed but is constructed *in and through performances*. Instead of invoking norms or values as separately existing entities, we have attempted to foreground Goffman's notion of 'idealization', which incorporates culturally valued principles and standards. Strategists, when delivering their performances, will perform idealized notions, which exclude things that need to be banished to the backstage: power, politics, money, greed, self-interest. These are the culturally unacceptable 'forces', characterized by Douglas (1966/2003) as 'impure', as 'dirt', that must not be seen to drive organizational change, even if, in reality, they are absolutely the driving forces of organizational change. For any strategist to publicly mention these would mean not keeping "within the spirit or ethos of the situation" (Goffman, 1963: 11). The frontstage needs to remain 'pure', retain a proper "public decorum" (1963: 21) and 'dirt' needs to be confined to the backstage, the "private places" (1963: 9) or the in-between scenes, when strategists are permitted to "let expression fall from their faces" (1963: 25). When a group of strategy consultants presents to the Management Board, the *idealization* that they are a group of highly educated, very knowledgeable and highly competent professionals, always needs to be maintained, even if the strategy work was done by new recruits, barely out of university. For strategists, like for other professions, the audience needs to keep believing in the show: if the audience stops believing, *the show cannot go on*.

If talking is an essential part of the performance, and if performing in front of others is a big part of strategizing, then talk in a public setting is a big part of strategizing. For strategists, such talk consists of convincing the clients that strategy is a legitimate discipline, that strategy is effective in improving the organizational performance, and that the tools and techniques offered by strategy as a discipline are actually effective. We have shown that such performances are not simply an add-on or the sales part, somewhat removed from the real work of strategy, but form a *core part of the process of strategizing*. Whittington (2011: 184) is not wrong to argue that

“strategizing always express larger, more enduring structures than just the activity observed in a particular moment.” However, one might be forgiven for having a sense that we are coming full circle. ‘Enduring structures’ have been analyzed by non-SAP approaches, such as Foucauldian approach to strategy (Knights & Morgan, 1991) or it has been used by Porter (1990) in the shape of the ‘National Diamond’, which contains fairly permanent societal and industry structures. It has been used by Porter (1980) in the notion of industry structure. Was the whole point of SAP not to move away from such abstractions and focus in on the mundane, the daily improvisations, the actual goings-on every day? Has S-A-P in response to its critics turned full circle in the attempt of wanting to please an ever larger audience?

Strategy, and especially S-A-P, research inspired by Goffman is not suited to examine how “shifting institutional alignments condition, and are conditioned by, transformations of the settings in which social life is lived.” (Giddens, 1988: 279) Goffmanian inspired SAP wants to focus on the actuality of performances and there is much to be done. For example, there is little research into what happens on the backstage of strategists or strategy consultants. What are the conversations that take place in between the formal meetings, the formal presentations? Which type of footing is adopted by presenters or strategists in meeting? Can this footing stance at all be related to how successful organizational changes progresses subsequently? This is the promise of Goffman inspired strategy research.

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