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A structuration theory perspective on the interplay between strategy and accounting: Unpacking social continuity and transformation

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ABSTRACT

Anthony Giddens is generally considered one of the most prominent sociologists of modern time. In this paper, we draw upon a micro-process case study to explore how his theory of structuration (ST) can be used to analyze the interplay between strategy and accounting in day-to-day-organizational life. In short, we find that strategizing and accounting should not be viewed as two separate practices, but rather as two aspects of *one* and the same practice, which form and feed each other in a recursive manner over time. Based on these findings, we also elaborate on how ST may be usefully applied to understand continuity and transformation of strategizing practices more generally. An overall conclusion is that ST not only provides a strong and consistent ontological framework for theorizing about these practices, but also offers a rich conceptual toolbox which can be usefully applied to better understand how and why structural continuity and change may coexist and intermingle in daily organizational life.

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1. Introduction

As one of the most prominent sociologists of modern time (e.g. Cassell, 1993), Anthony Giddens' writings cover a large number of intellectual endeavours, ranging from the early critiques and reinterpretations of sociological classics to later writings on modernity, globalization and the third way politics. Perhaps most known though are his writings on the theory of structuration (ST), in which he suggested a view of society as constituted in and through social practices. Moreover, his view aimed to abandon a number of conventional dualisms in social theory (such as individual/society, subject/object, conscious/unconscious) in favour of a recursive approach which emphasized "the mutual dependence of [among other things] structure and agency" (Giddens, 1979; p. 69).

Thanks to the works of Whittington (1996, 2006, 2010) and others (e.g. Carter, Clegg, & Kornberger, 2010; Carter, 2013; Jarzabkowski, 2004, 2008), ST has been introduced and exploited as a valuable theoretical lens in the steadily growing Strategy-As-Practice (S-A-P) literature (see e.g. Jarzabkowski & Paul Spee, 2009, and Vaara & Whittington, 2012; for excellent reviews of this literature). Guided by the works of Giddens and other practice theorists, an overall message of this literature is that "we should examine strategy not as something a firm *has*, but something a firm *does*" (Jarzabkowski, 2004; p. 529), emphasis added, see also Carter et al., 2008a). That is, we should look upon strategy as emergent practices—i.e. processes of

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strategizing—rather than as managerial decision-making by means of particular ‘strategic tools’ such as SWOT-analysis and the Boston Matrix (Carter et al., 2008b; Whittington, 1996).

This paper adds to the extant S-A-P literature in two important respects. First, we explore how Giddens’ theory of structuration can be usefully applied to analyze how strategizing and accounting may interplay in day-to-day-organizational life. The premise is that not only has ST been extensively used in the S-A-P literature to investigate strategy as constituted in what people actually do (Seidl & Whittington, 2014; Whittington, 2010), but also in the accounting literature to understand accounting as an organizational and social practice (Conrad, 2014; Englund & Gerdin, 2014; Englund et al., 2011; Roberts, 2014). However, there is relatively scant attention given to exploring how the practices of strategizing and accounting may coexist and interplay to produce both social continuity and transformation (but see Jørgensen & Messner, 2010; Whittle & Mueller, 2010). Judging from our micro-process case study described below though, these practices may not only coexist, but rather constitute *one* interlaced practice where strategic and accounting considerations form and feed each other in a recursive manner as they are played out in organizational life.

Second, based on these empirical findings, we discuss how Giddens’ theory of structuration may be usefully applied as a conceptual apparatus for exploring strategizing practices more generally. More specifically, we consider how ST can assist us to better understand how processes of strategizing are: (i) institutionally embedded, (ii) brought off by knowledgeable actors, and (iii) inherently emergent in nature. In particular, these final sub-sections assist us to articulate and cast light on the co-existence of both continuity and transformation that characterizes much of day-to-day strategizing practices.

All in all then, this paper seeks to reinvigorate Giddens’ ST as a highly useful theoretical apparatus for exploring unfolding strategizing (and other organizational) practices. However, we also hope that our case analysis, in which we draw upon various (hitherto largely unexplored) facets of ST to theorize the intricate interplay between continuity and transformation, will offer a ‘sensitizing device’ by which future research may continue to explore the dynamics of such processes.

The remainder of our paper is organized as follows. The next section provides an outline of some of the central assumptions underlying ST. Thereafter, we present our case study, which assists us to develop our ideas relating to the intersection of strategy and accounting. Then, we draw upon our case study evidence to discuss how a Giddensian perspective may assist analyses of processes of strategizing more generally. In a final section, we then discuss the implications for theory and future S-A-P research.

2. Giddens and social practices

The writings of Anthony Giddens date back to the 1960s, when he above all offered a number of critical commentaries on a wide range of sociological writers and schools of thought (see Giddens, 1971, 1973). In essence, he was rather unappealed with the ways in which one of the most central problems of sociology had hitherto been understood, namely that of *social order*. A problem that centered around the question of how it can be that a collective of individuals—with different experiences, feelings, ambitions etc.—can live together side by side without ending up in what Hobbes called a ‘war of all against all’ (e.g. Dawe, 1970).

As suggested above, two main ways of understanding the problem had been largely dominating in the literature, namely a *structure-centered* (represented by e.g. Structuralism and Functionalism) and an *agency-centered* view (represented by e.g. Symbolic interactionism and Social phenomenology). Both these views shared an interest in ‘knowledge orders’, and hence, located the production of social order in the human mind (Rasche & Chia, 2009). Importantly though, in the former case such knowledge orders were typically separated from human action per se, and treated as universal and ‘objectively’ given constraints on human activity. In the latter case it was believed that “a description of knowledge orders that transcend the subject is unhelpful in explaining human action, and that, instead, the focus needs to be on the acts of meaning production by knowledgeable subjects” (Rasche & Chia, 2009; p. 718).

According to Giddens, a main problem with the first view was the tendency to end up in social determinism. “In their eagerness to ‘get behind the backs’ of the social actors whose conduct they seek to understand, these schools of thought [functionalism and orthodox Marxism] largely ignore just those phenomena that action philosophy makes central to human conduct” (Giddens, 1979; p. 2). On the other hand, he suggests, the agency centered view “has not paid much attention to issues that are central to social science: issues of institutional analysis, power and social change” (1979, p. 2). In Giddens’ view then, we clearly ran the risk of ending up in either an over socialized or an under socialized view of man.

In three pioneering books, namely *New Rules of Sociological Method* (1976), *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (1979), and his magnum opus *The Constitution of Society* (1984), Giddens launched his Structuration Theory (ST) as an alternative to the previously ruling views on the social order problem. This theory was indeed heavily influenced by previous writings, but also differed significantly from these as it focused neither on “the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of societal totality, but [on] *social practices ordered across space and time*” ((Giddens, 1984; p. 2), emphasis added).

The basic building blocks of ST are the concepts of ‘structure’, ‘system’ and ‘duality of structure’ (Giddens, 1984). Indeed, the notion of structure had been extensively used in previous works, but as suggested above, a key difference is that it was *not* conceptualized as something existing external to and independent of human actors, yet constraining their actions. Rather, structure in the Giddensian sense refers to virtual memory traces in the human brain orienting the conduct of knowledge agents. And as such, structure thus refers to the “structuring properties allowing the ‘binding’ of time-space in social systems, the properties that which make it possible for discernibly similar social practices to exist across varying spans of

time and space and which lend them to ‘systemic’ form” (Giddens, 1984; p. 17). The notion of social systems, therefore, refers to the socially ordered practices enabled and constrained by the existing structures. Or more simply put, social systems is used to denote the recurrent, empirically observable and situated doings of human actors.

The third key notion—the duality of structure—refers to that there is a ‘double-headed arrow’ between on the one hand social structures which *generate* human action and, on the other hand, social systems which denote *social action as such*. That is, social structures not only inform human actions, but are themselves also the product of such reproduction. The premise is that agents are knowledgeable and reflexive, and may thus come to transform the very structures that guide their actions (see e.g. Englund & Gerdin, 2011, for an in-depth discussion of how and why structural change may come about when agents are embedded in, and thus largely constrained, by the existing structures). Accordingly, ST opens up for a non-deterministic and emergent relationship between structures and social systems. As will be illustrated by means of a company case next, ST may be usefully applied to analyze how strategy and accounting may interplay to produce both social continuity and transformation.

3. Giddens and the intersection of strategy and accounting – an illustrative case¹

The empirical material is drawn from a case study of Alpha, a Swedish subsidiary of a large multinational manufacturing group (Alphabetic). Alpha employs some 2000 people worldwide and develops, manufactures and markets a wide range of tunnelling and mining equipment for various underground applications. The material relates to a one-year long capital reduction project (REDCAPE) that was conducted in Alpha during 2005/06.

REDCAPE was built around ten parallel subprojects with specific aims and a responsible manager, all reporting to a project management group (PMG). In total, seven PMG meetings were held, of which we were able to make observations of the last four. We also attended 14 subproject meetings. As a complement to the direct observations of the meetings, we used transcripts from a total of 28 interviews, conducted during two main time periods (1999–2001 and 2006–2007). Key informants included the Managing Director, Chief Financial Officer, Purchasing Manager, Head Consultant and several managers in the production department. Finally, we also had access to a large amount of archival material in the form of internal memos, project material, accounting reports and official material.

Below, we use the case material to illustrate the basic building blocks of ST. Specifically, through making use of the naturally occurring data we illustrate how accounting and strategy unfolds as something that organizational members do in their day-to-day practices (cf. the notion of social system). And importantly, based on systematic analyses of such naturally occurring data from the project, we are able to show how situated practices are always re-productive of various structural elements that exist beyond the immediate context *per se* (cf. the notion of social structure). Moreover, through analysing how the sayings and doings are transformed during the project, we illustrate how the recursive and non-deterministic relationship between social structures and systems allows for both continuity and transformation over time. A more principle discussion of these illustrations is then presented in Section 4.

3.1. The strategic orientation in alpha

At the time of the case study, Alpha was undergoing an enormous expansion. According to the forecasts for 2005, for example, they expected a volume increase of 50% from 2004, with many orders to be delivered around mid-2005. And, judging from their past figures, this increase constituted a continuation of a ‘strong trend’. For example, during 2002–2005, Alpha nearly doubled its turnover and more than doubled the year-end result. In line with this, they received positive signals from their superiors within the Alphabetic group (e.g. in terms of ratifications of investment proposals) and from outsiders (e.g. in terms of positive opinions in national and local media). When asked to reflect upon how they had become so successful, two strategic aspects reappeared in the interviews, namely their focus on *superior product functionality* and a *strong customer orientation*.

Elaborating on the first-mentioned aspect, one of the respondents argued that “this organization is driven by technology, which results in amazing products”, while another contended that “the ultimate goal is to continue to be the leader in [machine] development and production”.

Regarding the second aspect—the far-reaching customer responsiveness—it was argued that although the product groups were relatively few, there was a large variation within these because of extensive adaptations to individual customer needs. As put by the Managing Director:

We have worked like this for 30–40 years; the customers are customers, they can make any changes they like.

Such a strong dedication to customized solutions (where some customers were even allowed to make changes to product specifications even after placing their orders) also meant that Alpha’s operations were characterized by frequent changes and discontinuities. Often, these would start out from their customer centres’ long-lasting and extensive negotiations with customers and work themselves through production planning, material sourcing, and assembly. For example, this was

¹ The case study was also used in Abrahamsson et al. (2011), although the main focus of that paper, and its theorisation, is very different to the present paper.

manifested in terms of the production department's specific routines for handling larger and customized machines and the engineering department's continuous development of customer-specific technical solutions. Alpha also had a number of cross-functional coordination mechanisms specifically developed to deal with the constant flow of 'Machine Order changes' (henceforth MO changes) following from these institutionalized working practices. For example, they had a routine of weekly 'order meetings' in which representatives from various functions came together to 'go through' and discuss how 'problems' related to each customer order should be solved.

Importantly however, while these practices involved a constant stream of changes, managers seemed to be genuinely proud of their ability to handle this 'permanent uncertainty'. In fact, some of them even expressed that they had learned to appreciate the challenge it offered and that they had developed a form of competence and 'routines' to handle the complexity and to find innovative solutions. As summarized by the Managing Director:

I think we are pretty good at customer adaptation. There are both pros and cons with that, but we have become good at dealing with difficult situations with big customers and large deliveries. We deliver. We can handle the non-structured world that we live in.

From a Giddensian structuration perspective, it is clear that there existed a rather coherent and positively connoted strategic orientation of technical superiority and flexibility in Alpha (cf. the notion of social structure). It was also clear that this structure was continuously reproduced, not only in and through managerial talk, but also in and through day-to-day actions throughout the whole company (cf. the notion of social systems). We also find that this reproduction was 'fueled' by recurrent positive reactions from external parties. For example, Alpha had been positively mirrored both in internal dialogues (e.g. "we grew enormously during this period") and in the financial media (e.g. "strong tailwind for Alpha").

Interestingly however, and as will be described in detail below, it also became clear to us as researchers that the 'positive spiral', was highly dependent on Alpha's ability to deliver financial results. As suggested by the managing director; "in a group like this, you are no better than your last month [i.e. than your last month's bottom line]". We also find overwhelming evidence that accounting was used as an important means for bringing Alpha's 'strategy', its consequences, and appropriate behaviour to the fore internally:

I might have an overconfidence in this idea of 'what gets measured gets done', but you really need to measure things. If you want to achieve something and you don't have a metric then you won't know if you deliver or not. [. . .] The analysis in a typical [top] management meeting starts out from the general picture in terms of the development of invoicing, costs, stocks and accounts receivable. After that, you start looking at the parts. If you don't have the 'right' development on the products' profit margins, you discuss it with the marketers. If you have too high after sales costs, then you talk to the regional customer centres. And if the product development projects take too long, you squeeze 'technology'.

Put in Giddens' terms, therefore, accounting not only functioned as an important cognitive schema for constructing Alpha's strategic orientation as 'successful' (cf. Giddens' notion of significance structure²), but also as a means of sanctioning (in)appropriate behaviour (legitimation structure) and exercising power (domination structure). Importantly however, as will be elaborated below, this relationship between strategy and accounting within Alpha was to become even stronger during the REDCAPE project. Below, we will first provide a glimpse of the project's starting point and then elaborate on how the project evolved.

3.2. Sudden cash-flow deficit

Bearing in mind the above characterization of Alpha's situation at the time of our study, we now turn back to how things were in May 2005, when the decision was made to launch a major and far-reaching project of reduction in capital employment. Again, the volume expansion in 2005 did not come as a surprise to managers in Alpha. However, what did come as a surprise was the internal financial report in May 2005 which showed a substantial deficit in cash-flow. In fact, judged by some of the expressions used by managers, it was obvious that the report was perceived as a major problem. For example, they talked about the report as a "red flag" and how "It was like an alarm-clock".

And, when the report was distributed to superiors within the group, they received comments like "Could this be right?" and "What are you doing?" that further strengthened the gravity of the situation. As a result, several steps were taken promptly. First of all, the controller developed a new liquidity planning model in order to make better cash-flow estimations. They also made a liquidity forecast for the rest of the year which was to be used at the upcoming board meeting in order to convince superiors that the deficit was indeed temporary. The controller argued:

Basically, we have a safe and sound business that won't generate negative cash-flow over a year. And everyone knows that.

² Giddens claims that generative structures may be divided into a number of sub-sets of structural properties, more specifically into *rules* and *resources*, where rules are connected to both the constitution of meaning and sanctions (Giddens, 1984; p. 20). He identifies three dimensions of structures, namely, (a) signification (rules), which have their theoretical domain in the 'theory of coding', and hence, provide general 'interpretative schemes' necessary for communication; (b) legitimation (rules), which have their theoretical domain in the 'theory of normative regulation', and provide norms which sanction certain forms of conduct; and (c) domination (resources), which have their theoretical domain in 'theories of resource authorization and allocation', and provide facilities for the exercise of power.

In a sense, therefore, the problem of *unanticipated* liquidity deficits was solved within a couple of days after the announcement of the report. Interestingly, however, the top management team in Alpha nevertheless decided to thoroughly review and analyze Alpha's cash flow. As part of this, a consulting firm that had previously been engaged by other subsidiaries in Alphabetic was contracted, and a formal project was set up. One of the consultants commented:

It was obvious that something had to be done about the cash-flow but, at this stage, the alternative courses of action were not clear.

Based on an extensive mapping of the organization made by the consultants, ten subprojects were formed, basically organized around the working capital items on the balance sheet (e.g. accounts payable and receivable, and stocks in assembly, shipping, etc.). The overall aim was to radically reduce working capital employed (REDCAPE), or as expressed in an internal document in which the upcoming project was presented:

- We need to reach the same level of capital efficiency as the other business areas within Alphabetic.
- Through a more efficient use of capital, we will improve our position within Alphabetic.

In the subprojects, all participants were encouraged to come up with important factors to focus on. Through performance measures visualized in graphs, of which many were specifically developed for the project, these factors were then measured on a weekly basis and related to subproject targets. These results then constituted a point of departure for the discussions in the subproject meetings held every second week. Most importantly, though, the performance measures were also used for (action-oriented) decisions of how to proceed in order to reach the targets.

To sum up, accounting clearly helped to bring Alpha's strategy and its (unintended) consequences to the fore. That is, the cash-flow report clearly mirrored the ways in which Alpha handled its operations in a rather undesirable way, and as such, it became the starting point for the REDCAPE project. It is also evident that accounting—as a social structure in the Giddensian sense (Conrad, 2005; Englund et al., 2011; Macintosh & Scapens, 1990)—guided the very formation of the project (i.e. to depart from the balance sheet) and how it was to be followed up.

Interestingly though, as indicated above, there seemed to be no critical reflections about the prevailing strategic orientation as such at this time. Rather, judging from how the project was set up, there seemed to be a general understanding that the capital employed should be reduced within the boundaries of the existing ways of thinking and acting. Put in Giddens terms, therefore, we find “a routine characteristic of human conduct, carried on in a taken for granted fashion” (Giddens, 1984; p. 4). However, as it turned out to be practically unfeasible to achieve the radical targets of the project, it evolved into a gradual questioning of, and also change in, the prevailing strategic orientation. And, as will be elaborated below, we find that (changing) accounting practices played a key role in this strategic transformation in Alpha.

3.3. Accounting and strategizing in the REDCAPE project

We identified three main themes in the activities undertaken when struggling with what right from the very start of the REDCAPE project came to be *the* central issue, namely how to improve capital efficiency in assembly. Or more specifically, Fig. 1 illustrates; (i) that the REDCAPE project gradually transformed from being primarily focused on recovering Alpha's relative position through improving capital efficiency, to a more fundamental strategic reorientation towards standardization of products and processes, and; (ii) that this transformation both informed, and was informed by, the gradual development of existing and new accounting measurements. In the following sections, we will present three themes that point to the dialectical relationship between an emerging strategic change and the continuous encounter with accounting measurements.

3.3.1. Theme 1: improve overall position through efficient capital use

Based on their desire to receive the same status as other subsidiaries within Alpha, the top management started to control the subproject leaders by means of the newly developed measure ‘inventory days’ (cf. 1a in Fig. 1). However, although they experienced quite substantial improvements in some working capital elements early in the project (e.g. ‘accounts receivable’ and ‘spare parts’), the key metric capital employed in work-in-progress (WIP) in manufacturing showed no progress:

The sub-project results show a negative trend [. . .] no light in the tunnel, still huge problems with key components [and a number of machines] at stand still [in assembly]. (Internal REDCAPE material)

Based on these insights, top management and consultants started to more systematically address the delivery of key components. As a means of exploring the impact of this potential cause to the problem of missing components, they designed a new measure, ‘Material availability at picking’ (i.e. at that point in time when the assemblers need to be able to collect all the necessary materials for a specific machine, cf. Fig. 1 above). In their discussions about the outcome of this new metric, they also tried to identify potential reasons for the low availability. One such important reason identified was the inability of suppliers to deliver on time. To explore this matter, they created the measure ‘Supplier delivery precision’, and to allow drill-down analyses, this indicator was further developed (e.g. ‘Material availability of critical articles’, cf. 1b in Fig. 1 above).

Apart from elucidating the impact of late deliveries from suppliers, their subsequent analyses also revealed that early start-ups of some orders and internal logistical problems contributed to unsatisfactory material availability. That is, they expanded the analysis beyond suppliers' delivery precision as such and acknowledged that they tended to create a lot of the problems themselves through their internal working procedures. For example, they noted that a number of procurements seemed to be made too late for the suppliers to be able to deliver before production start. With the new measure 'Procurement within lead time' they visualized the extent to which this occurred (cf. 1c in Fig. 1 above). The feedback they got took them by surprise and engendered a lot of frustration and ambiguity (cf. Englund, Gerdin, & Abrahamsson, 2013):

Consultant—The [purchasing] orders are put in too late. We have investigated it and it can be as much as 38% [of all materials ordered], so it's bad.

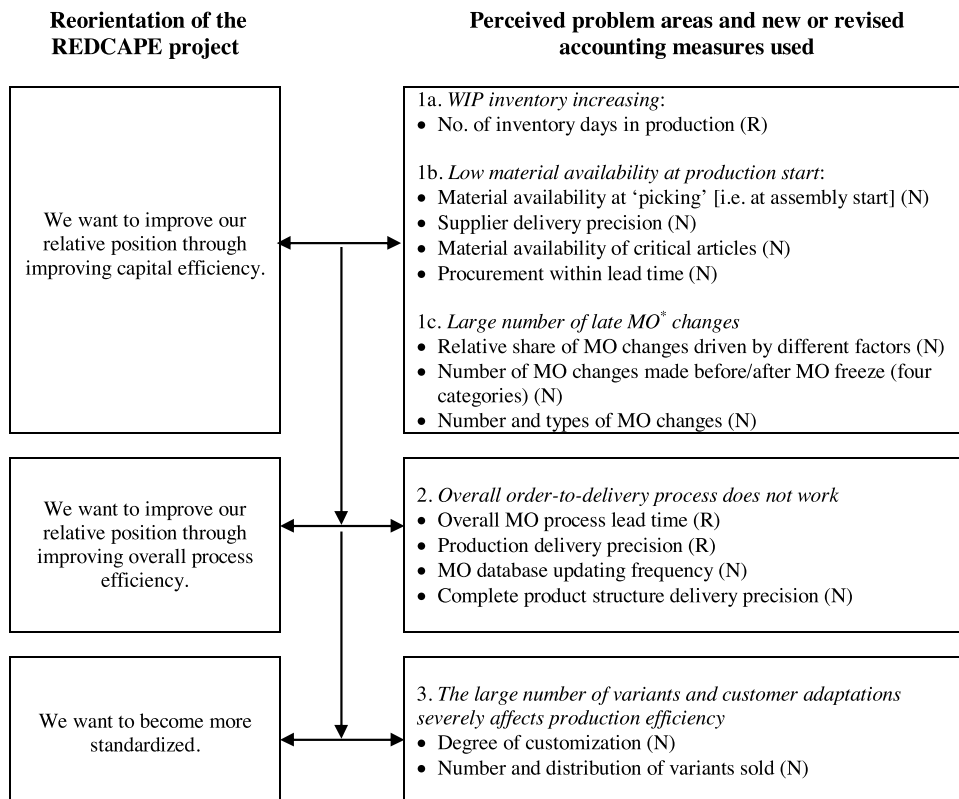
Purchaser—How in the h—l is that possible?

Production technician—I believe it has to do with all the [machine order] changes made by the Construction department. All the Construction Memos they produce result in late changes.

Purchaser—Yeah. For instance, we had 10 Construction Memos one week and 25 another week.

– Consultant—I get annoyed. Why do they get away with it? We must somehow measure the influence this has.

As a result, the company started to analyse the problem area of late MO changes through the development of a number of new accounting metrics (cf. Fig. 1 above). However, as these measurements also showed little or no improvement, a number of suggestions were made, all focusing on removing the immediate obstacles to a lean and even production flow. In particular, it was suggested that a 'freezing point' three weeks before assembly start should be introduced, meaning that no changes in machine orders would be allowed after that point of time. Notably, however, there was no critical reflection of Alpha's current strategic orientation as an 'engineering driven' and 'highly customer-responsive' company. In fact, MO changes done before the 'freezing point' were coloured green in the measurements, thereby suggesting that MO changes per se were not deemed problematic—only *late* changes. In accordance with this, all actions undertaken at this time seemed to reproduce the prevailing strategic orientation. For example, it was explicitly stated in internal memos that 'early freezing' was only applicable to standardized machines, which suggests that late MO changes were regarded as an 'inherent' and 'unavoidable' characteristic of the production of complex and customized machines. Following this logic, it was also



* MO = Machine Order

Fig. 1. Emergent themes of the interplay between (re)constructions of the REDCAPE objectives and new (N) and revised (R) accounting measures (adapted from Abrahamsson, Englund, & Gerdin, 2011).

*MO = Machine Order.

proposed that these highly customized and complex machines should be handled separately in production, and that completed machines that required rebuilding should be transferred to a separate production flow.

However, despite these efforts, the accounting metrics showed that the number of late MO changes did not decrease, leading to marked frustration:

Production manager—The number of late MO changes is at about the same level as before.

Managing Director—So all our measures taken have not made any difference?!

Consultant 1—No, there are still a lot of changes made after the ‘freezing point’.

After market manager—Why do we make changes after the ‘freezing point’?

Consultant 2—We can’t see it in our data, but they severely affect our capital efficiency. But I mean . . . if we have decided that orders should be ‘frozen’, this must also be the case.

Managing Director—I thought it was the case.

Marketing manager—That’s the problem, the routine doesn’t work!

Managing Director—Make a ‘spot test’ [to find out why it still doesn’t work]! This makes us look like clowns!

Importantly, this and other unsatisfactory accounting measurement outcomes increased awareness that the problems with high level of capital employed in WIP were not just a matter for the production department, but for the whole company. That is, the top management started to express their critique of the underlying ‘atomistic financial focus’ that had characterized the REDCAPE project thus far: “You realize that the processes need to be there. Otherwise you just squeeze out the money . . . and then the problem is that it just pops up somewhere else!”. As summarized by the Managing Director:

It’s clear that also other units than production must take responsibility for bad performance [i.e. the production department performance is dependent on the performance of other units such as marketing, engineering and procurement]. If we can make the order process faster than [the main competitor] this will be a very successful company. Amen!

To summarize the process in Giddensian terms, observed actions and interactions still essentially reproduced the since long existing strategic orientation (social structure) in Alpha as being a highly customer-responsive company. However, we can also see that this strategic emphasis leads to unintended consequences in terms of a (too) high level of capital employed in WIP. And, when these unintended consequences “systematically feed back to be the unacknowledged conditions of further acts” (Giddens, 1984; p. 8), actors start to critically reflect on the state of the art. We also observe that accounting metrics seem to play a vital role in feeding such reflexivity through providing managers with disappointing or ambiguous information about the progress of the project (cf. Englund et al., 2011, 2013). Or more precisely, through the continuous mirroring of their emerging understandings of operations in extant and new accounting metrics, the focus of the REDCAPE project gradually changed from focusing on capital efficiency more generally, to focusing on MO-process efficiency (see Fig. 1 above). Again, however, note that while the emerging accounting practices led to a deeper understanding of how to reach the demanding REDCAPE objective, they at the time contributed to *concretizing* the overall REDCAPE objective rather than changing it.

3.3.2. Theme 2: improve overall position through MO-process efficiency

While this transformation was gradual and seamless, it became clear that top managers’ discussion increasingly revolved around the overall MO process, from customer order to delivery. For example, one manager argued that “It’s crystal clear now; we’ve had a lack of process perspective . . . each and everybody sat in their silos” while another noted that “One can conclude that we should have had a process perspective from the beginning”.

As before, new accounting metrics were used intensely for confirming the importance of and providing meaning to this reorientation of the REDCAPE project. For example, an immediate initiative was taken to measure the overall MO processing time—“Yes, the idea was to start to measure and now we know that the lead time is a huge problem” (consultant). Such metrics were also used in a feed-forward manner to explore possible ‘causes’ of their perceived problems.

Technician 1—Shall we look into the problem?

Purchaser—Yes, but who does it? It’s very difficult to trace the causes.

Technician 2—I can do it . . . but which data should we use?

Purchaser—Have a look at the MRP system. There you can separate the different production flows.

Production Flow Manager—Yes, but still it’s difficult to pinpoint what’s causing our problems.

Technician 2—Couldn’t it be [factor X]?

Purchaser—Perhaps, but remember that we must focus on lead time in the order-to-delivery process.

Technician 2—Sure, but the factors explaining lead time are numerous.

Production Manager—You’re absolutely right, but let’s construct a measure and see if we can find any patterns.

Based on this and other similar discussions, they refined and developed a number of accounting metrics specifically aimed at capturing the efficiency of the order-to-delivery process. As suggested by Category 2 measurements in Fig. 1 above, such new metrics included ‘Production delivery precision’, ‘MO database updating frequency’ and ‘Complete product structure delivery precision from the engineering department’. As was the case earlier in the project, however, their (inter) actions were remarkably consistent with the prevailing strategic orientation. That is, rather than reflecting upon their

customer responsiveness as such, they continued to develop and implement organizational routines aimed at isolating (rather than eliminating) the negative consequences of the existing ways of working. For example, rather late in the REDCAPE project, they decided to handle the troublesome disturbances in the MO flow through splitting the order process into two sub-processes—one dealing with the more complex machines and one with the simpler machines. However, despite this and similar actions, the newly developed metric showed no positive trend in manufacturing lead time:

Okay, let's face the misery [shows a slide depicting the one-year trend . . .] We don't get the stuff [i.e. machines] out fast enough. (Production manager)

From a structuration theory perspective then, emerging accounting practices are still an important means of 'making visible' the unintended consequences emanating from the reproduction of the prevailing strategic orientation (social structure). Furthermore, actors' perceptions of the unintended consequences of previous acts largely frame/condition interpretations of and future actions taken in the project. Again however, the day-to-day reproduction of extant social structures is by no means a deterministic process. On the contrary, a key assumption in Giddens' theory is agents chronically and reflexively monitor their own and others' activities as well as the contexts in which they occur. As a result, actors can 'always act otherwise' although, indeed, they are always bound by their previous experiences. In the next section, we will show how such 'path-dependent reflexivity' may come about and result in a gradual, yet fundamental strategic reorientation towards standardization.

3.3.3. Theme 3: we want to become more standardized

As suggested above, actors within Alpha started to reflect critically on, and also question, the current ways of thinking and working as the project proceeds. In particular, it was discussed whether it was a mistake to leave out the engineers from the project, since they were perceived to have a major impact on the present functioning of the order process through their 'constant issuing' of MO changes. For example, the production manager commented on a disappointing measurement on lead time in manufacturing in the following way:

Sure, we have reduced lead time on standard [machines]. But on the more complex machines, where a lot of late MO changes are done, the trend is disappointing. [. . .] The idea to make such adjustments in a special production flow has not worked.

And, as before, actors also used the newly developed metrics on MO changes, both as a point of departure for critical reflection (e.g. "There's a negative trend in manufacturing which can be explained by the fact that we have a number of internal MO-changes, which is a problem") and as a means of identifying plausible ways forward (e.g. a "decrease in production throughput time requires a reduction of the number of late MO changes"). Importantly, however, actors now not only considered late MO-changes as a problem, but also the very existence of a large number of changes in existing orders. In other words, top management started to address what they now believed to be the 'root causes' of the order process problems, namely Alpha's vast product range and far-reaching customization. The emerging assumption was that their habit of continuously adjusting/improving individual machines to meet specific customer demands was not appropriate in the 'new' business context characterized by large, and rapidly increasing, sales volumes.

Well, when we assembled 180 machines, we could busy ourselves with every single machine. We can't do that anymore. We would never have managed to deliver 750 machines last year—as we did—without this idea of standardization. (Purchasing Manager)

And, as before, new accounting metrics were developed as an important means of exploring the 'substance' of these emerging insights. For example, they introduced a measure of 'degree of standardization' (cf. Category C in Fig. 1 above) which showed that only eight percent of the machines sold were fully standardized, a figure that was deemed 'far too low'. They also started to measure the number and distribution of variants sold in order to "analyse which options we sell and to make reduction more effective" (internal memo).

Based on these measurements, they took a number of steps, all focused on reducing the number of variants and customer-specific adaptations of machines. Importantly, though, since this work was only in an initial stage, few or no operational effects were experienced thus far. On the contrary, the recurrent measurements highlighted that the high level of customization negatively affected lead times and capital tied up in manufacturing.

Managing Director—To me it's crystal clear . . . we don't have the foundations. It's about four things: first, it's about having correct structures [product specifications], second, if we sell standard products, we know what we sell, third, the customers will understand what they buy and, fourth, we make no changes! [As it is today], we still don't know what we have sold, the customers don't know what they have bought and changes occur all the time. We're stuck in that behaviour and, hence, it becomes difficult to deliver in the project [. . .] and we'll never be a better company.

Marketing Manager—It's in the walls [i.e. the strategic commitment to customer responsiveness is deeply rooted in the company].

Production Manager—Yes, and there is a problem with the engineers.

Managing Director—Yes, they're not around the table. Maybe that's the missing link.

Consultant—I agree, but we must remember that a lot has been improved.

Managing Director—Yes, but there's an 'I-shall-just' mentality in the company [i.e. engineers and others 'just want to make one more adjustment/improvement' to meet the demands from customers]. I don't know how we can overcome this. If nothing changes, I'll have to approve [sanction] all MO changes myself!

Interestingly, however, although we find recurrent and strong expressions of the same kind (such as “people who make MO changes should be pilloried”), our evidence also clearly shows that this period was characterized by a ‘balancing’ or ‘swinging’ between the previous and the emerging strategic orientation. That is, the existing strategic orientation was still invoked by actors as an important part of how to do things in Alpha—“that's the business we're in” or “we wouldn't get this type of orders if we didn't do it like this”—even after they started to express the need to abandon their extreme customer responsiveness.

Importantly, though, although the formal project ended before this ‘balancing act’ was ever settled, it was clear that the idea of standardization now seriously challenged the previous way of thinking about the organization:

We must definitely work in another more conscious way. These kinds of deals [with highly custom-made machines] must be exceptions from the rule, not the rule itself. (Managing Director)

Hence, when the project came to an end, they had come to believe that they must become considerably more standardized in order to improve their position within Alphabetic (cf. the initially formulated objective in Fig. 1 above, which stressed improved capital efficiency more generally). And, when we revisited Alpha one year later and talked to some of our informants about their continued efforts, it was clear that the strategic orientation was now highly focused on standardization:

We now have one standard machine for South America instead of 50 as before. All deviations have to be approved now, so we've really reduced our lead times. (Purchasing Manager)

Nowadays, it's standard, standard, standard. That's where we're heading, and that's where we have to go. [. . .] It's an expression of our will, but also something that we're working with. (Production Manager)

It is probably also important to note that following the reorientation of Alpha's strategy towards greater standardization, there were positive consequences for profitability. In one of our follow-up interviews, some 12 months after the REDCAPE project, a purchasing manager told us that “[. . .] revenues have increased by 20%. Also, bottom-line profits and capital turnover have increased significantly [. . .] these improvements would not have been possible without the standardization”.

To sum up the process in Giddensian terms then, we observed a gradual, path dependent transformation of Alpha's strategic orientation. As suggested by the above quotes, this was not only a shift in mind-set, but also a fundamental change in day-to-day organizational working procedures and routines. We also find that while it was not an intended aim of the project to reflect upon, let alone question, the prevailing strategic orientation, the continuous encounter with extant and new accounting measurements on the unintended and undesirable consequences of their far-reaching customer orientation created the conditions for critical reflection among knowledgeable agents. In this sense, therefore, changing accounting practices constituted both an important means and outcome of this transformation.

4. Discussion

The Alpha-case illustrates how strategy and accounting are constituted not by any inherent properties they may possess, but rather, by what organizational members do in their day-to-day activities. It also illustrates how such activities—or forms of *practices*—tend to form and feed each other as they are played out in organizational life. Below, we will elaborate on how a Giddensian perspective may be used so as to further our understanding of these particular findings, and also, of the relation between strategic and accounting practices more generally. In particular, we will focus on the conceptual resources that Giddens provides for discussing how social practices are; (i) institutionally embedded; (ii) brought off by knowledgeable agents, and; (iii) inherently emergent in nature.

4.1. The institutional embeddedness of social practices

When conceptualizing strategy and accounting as *forms of practices*, attention is not primarily focused on any strategy documents as such or the design of an accounting system, but rather, on what people actually do (e.g. Carter et al., 2008a,b). As suggested by Kornberger and Clegg (2011, p. 137) and others (e.g. Englund et al., 2011; Whittington, 2010) such a focus means that the micro-level details of organizational life are brought centre-stage, so as to capture how strategy and accounting are constituted in and through the actual sayings and doings of people (cf. the notion of situatedness).

Importantly however, such a focus on the situated activities of people does not mean that we are “concerned with the activities of the ‘free agent’” (Giddens (1984, p. 139). On the contrary, from a structuration point of view, we always have to consider how the activities of people “are embedded in wider reaches of time and space” (Giddens, 1984; p. 298)). That is, we have to ‘thread outwards’ in time and space, so as to see how situated activities (e.g. when interacting about the strategic importance of late MO changes) are always guided by, and reproductive of, structural properties beyond their immediate context. Put differently, we need to understand how structural properties that are not linked to a particular context still enable and constrain the situated activities, and hence, help to produce a form of ‘systemness’ (Giddens, 1984; p. 181)).

When it comes to such an institutional embeddedness of strategic and accounting practices, the Alpha case brings the following three key aspects of ST to the fore. *First*, and largely in line with what has already been suggested in the strategy-as-practice (e.g. Jarzabkowski, 2004) and accounting literatures (e.g. Roberts & Scapens, 1985), the empirical story illustrates how strategy and accounting *per se* may be understood as parts of the generative structures which people draw upon in their daily (inter)actions. For example, the strategic orientation of Alpha had for a long time been characterized by an emphasis on technical superiority and flexibility. Importantly though, this orientation did not exist as any inherent property of the organization as such, but rather, as structural properties continuously drawn upon by organizational members. That is, as part of the social structure, they only existed as part of the 'mutual knowledge' whereby organizational members understood e.g. what was 'strategic' and what could be trivialized. And, as argued by Giddens (1984), these guiding principles are only visible as they were instantiated in day-to-day social (inter)actions (see the above descriptions of how their strategic orientation as customer responsive was manifested in and through daily talk and working practices).

In a similar manner, it was clearly evident that accounting worked as an important cognitive structure through which people in Alpha made sense of the problems they perceived, as well as of how to set up and carry through the project. As suggested above, for instance, the very division of the project into a number of sub-projects based on working capital elements in the balance sheet, clearly shows how accounting (as a structure) contributed to shape the set-up of the project and thereby defined what was to be counted as (un)important. We also find that the accounting notions of 'cash-flow' and 'capital efficiency' gave meaning to and sanctioned particular (inter)actions during the project. Thereby, they provided the means whereby certain actors could hold others responsible, and hence, influence their activities (e.g. Englund et al., 2011; Macintosh & Scapens, 1990).

A second aspect that the Alpha case brings to the fore is the importance of considering how structural properties may have very different 'time-space-extensions'. Generally speaking, Giddens (1984) emphasizes how "the day-to-day activity of social actors draws upon and reproduces structural features of wider social systems" (p. 24), and hence, that the daily activities "contribute to the reproduction of larger institutional forms" (p. 293). Importantly however, he also emphasizes that the extent to which day-to-day activities in one particular setting are 'typical' also of other contexts may vary. In order to analyse such variation in how generally occurring particular practices are, Giddens offers among others the notions of 'regional intersection', 'routinization', and 'time-space-distanciation' (1984, p. 298). The first notion emphasizes how particular (inter)actions may spread away spatially from their immediate context, and hence, be occurring at different places. In contrast, the second notion emphasizes the temporal spread, and hence, includes the analysis of how history tends to repeat itself through the repetitive character of daily life. Finally, the third concept covers how particular activities and relationships may be linked "to features of overall society or to inter-societal systems" (1984, p. 298).

In relation to the Alpha case, it can be argued that while some structural properties can be considered as more or less unique in this particular context (e.g. the 'positive attitude' towards making a large number of late MO-changes) they stem from more generalized ideas of profit- and efficiency-seeking in capitalistic societies. After all, it was an 'established fact' within Alpha that this type of customer responsiveness was central to being a financially successful actor in a highly competitive market. Accordingly, much of the observed reproduction of Alpha's strategic orientation can be viewed as 'local variants' (Barley & Tolbert, 1997) of these more general structural principles.

A third, and final aspect, is that the case material points to the importance of considering structures as complex 'sets' of structural elements which may be highly intertwined (1984, p. 302). As suggested above, such complexity may take at least two forms. First, Giddens suggests that "the production of interaction has three fundamental elements: its constitution as 'meaningful' [referred to as significance structure]; its constitution as a moral order [legitimation structure]; and its constitution as the operations of relations of power [domination structure]" (Giddens, 1976; s. 104). Hence, every form of (inter)action can be fruitfully analysed from the point of view of these three structural dimensions although, indeed, Giddens suggests that they may be separated only analytically. Along these lines, for instance, the Alpha case showed that the accounting structure 'simultaneously'; (i) contributed to the interpretation or even (re)construction of the state-of-the art in the company; (ii) gave legitimacy to certain actions and to hold particular actors responsible in accounting terms, and (iii); provided some actors with resources for the exercise of power over others, i.e. making them do things they would not otherwise have done (see also Englund et al., 2011; Macintosh & Scapens, 1990).

Second, Giddens teaches us that every social structure is complex in the sense that it consists of an array of different, yet highly intertwined 'guiding principles'. And, importantly, some of these may be both internally inconsistent and ambiguous. As highlighted in the Alpha case, for instance, the since long established strategic orientation as customer responsive represented a fundamentally different lens for interpreting and monitoring daily activities as compared to an accounting lens. As a result, these two cognitive structures gave quite different pictures of what type of actions that was deemed (in) appropriate, leading to structural clashes or contradictions (cf. Giddens, 1990; see also discussion below).

To conclude thus far then, a Giddensian perspective suggests that strategy and accounting, when understood as social practices, constitute important parts of the social structure that enable and constrain what people do in their day-to-day activities. Importantly, though, although these guiding principles may have very different time-space-extensions, they are only visible as they are reproduced in and through these everyday (inter)actions. ST also stresses that structure should be seen as consisting of a set of structural properties which are typically highly multifaceted, intertwined, inconsistent and ambiguous. Not least important is Giddens' distinction between the dimensions of signification, legitimation and domination.

4.2. Aspects of reflexive agency in social practices

While the notion of embeddedness emphasizes how social structures enable and constrain social (inter)actions, the relationship between social structure and the acting individual is always one of *duality* according to ST. This means that structures should always be seen as both a medium for, and an outcome of, social interactions. It also means that structures do not work as some 'external force' behind the back of individuals, but rather, as internal memory traces that they actively draw upon as they partake in social (inter)actions. Consequently, from a ST-perspective, social practices can never be understood only by reference to the structural properties they exhibit. On the contrary, we have to consider how such structural properties may be played out in different ways, depending on how they are actively and reflexively drawn upon by knowledgeable agents.

When it comes to such reflexive agency in social practices, the Alpha case brings at least the following two aspects of ST to the fore. *First of all*, it clearly illustrates how people, although they are typically guided by generalized forms of knowledge of how to go on in social life, still adapt such knowledge to the particular circumstances that characterize each and every situation they encounter (see also the discussion in Englund & Gerdin, 2011). For example, we find that the highly generalized idea of being a 'financially successful business', was manifested in (inter)actions in three different ways during the REDCAPE project (i.e. as a strive to excel in capital efficiency, MO-process efficiency, and standardization, respectively) as the contextual preconditions changed.

According to Giddens (1984), a main reason for such contextual adaptations is that our knowledge of structures is largely methodological in character. That is, it consists of typified schemes that provide actors with a form of generalized capacity to engage in social encounters, but it does not "specify all the situations which an actor might meet with, nor could it do so" (Giddens, 1984; p. 22). As a result, people typically have to make the type of ongoing interpretations and adaptations of structural properties that were observed in the Alpha case, as these are 'acted out' in various situations. In fact, this ability is central to Giddens' theorizing of the knowledgeable actor, as it is linked to the notion of reflexive monitoring. That is, an important part of people's ability to make adjustments to the particularities of various 'settings' is based on an ongoing and reflexive monitoring of their own and others' activities as well as the social and physical aspects of such settings (Giddens, 1984; p. 5). Through such monitoring people continuously make sense of what themselves and others say and do, and based on this, they reflexively adapt to the ongoing flow of conduct.

While the first aspect may be said to emphasize a form of 'acting space' for knowledgeable agents, the case also actualizes a second and related aspect, namely the degree of intentionality that actors bring to such acting spaces. Generally speaking, Giddens suggests that social actors are highly knowledgeable and that most of what they do can be considered as intentional in some sense. Moreover, he suggests that most people may be said to have a continuing theoretical understanding of why they act the way they act, and "will usually be able to explain most of what they do, if asked" (1984, p. 6). Importantly though, such understandings are in many ways limited. For example, we typically have only a limited understanding of the conditions for, and consequence of, our own actions. That is, even though we may be highly aware of some structural properties, and hence, may intentionally choose to act in accordance (or by contrast) with these, there will always be other properties with which we were not familiar. As a result, some consequences of our actions are typically intended while some are not. And importantly, the "unintended consequences may systematically feed back to be the unacknowledged conditions of further acts" (Giddens, 1984; p. 8), thereby limiting the extent to which social practices as such may be seen as intended projects.

The Alpha case clearly points to the importance of acknowledging such 'interplay' between intended actions on one hand and their unintended consequences on the other. For example, although the case certainly shows a high degree of intentionality underlying their ongoing endeavours, it also becomes evident that these intentional activities always produce unintended consequences. One such example is constituted by the large expansion that Alpha underwent during the first years of the 21st century. While the expansion as such in terms of assembled machines was a highly intentional effort to adapt to the 'growing market', the effects it had on their liquidity were largely unintended. And importantly, as these fed back to form the new conditions for their further activities, they illustrate how a practice full of intended activities can become a highly unintended project.

To conclude then, a ST-perspective emphasizes the need to study how social structures are actually played out in situated practices. Again, the premise is that there is always room for individual agency in relation to such structural properties, as reflexive and purposeful agents need to consider the contextual specificities of every situation they encounter.

4.3. The emergent nature of structuration processes

When considered in tandem, the first two points—i.e. the idea of social practices as being structurally embedded on the one hand and as brought off by reflexive agents on the other—open up for an intricate interplay between continuity and change. As illustrated above, for instance, this was the case in Alpha where daily organizational life was characterized by interchanging stages of structural reproduction and transformation. However, the case is also interesting as it pinpoints that both processes of continuity and change are emergent and largely unpredictable. After all, purposeful efforts to accomplish 'radical change' largely involved structural reproduction of the extant strategic orientation, and vice versa. A key question is thus how ST may be used to understand such seemingly paradoxical observations.

If we start with the observation that even efforts to make radical changes oftentimes resulted in the reproduction of existing ways of thinking and doing, we propose that there are at least two key sources of continuity inbuilt in ST. One source lies in the very assumption that extant structures are always conditioned by actors' previous experiences (Giddens, 1984). That is, actors' interests, intentions and motives are always historically bound and, thus, are by definition constituted by the social structures in which they originated. Unlike more voluntaristic approaches, therefore, Giddens' assumption of path dependency implies that structural continuity and reproduction is an important, even inherent character of day-to-day structuration processes.

A second and related key source of structural continuity in ST is the notion of routinization; "Routinization is vital to the psychological mechanisms whereby a sense of trust or ontological security sustain in the daily activities of social life. Carried primarily in practical consciousness, routine drives a wedge between the potentially explosive content of the unconscious and the reflexive monitoring of action which agents display" (Giddens, 1984; p. xxiii). In other words, there is a 'stabilizing' effect of routinization as some structural properties are either taken-for-granted or perceived as 'ontologically safe' and, thus, are more or less automatically reproduced in and through agents' daily conduct.

On these bases, we may thus understand how and why the prevailing strategic orientation toward customer responsiveness was so persistently reproduced during larger parts of the REDCAPE project. Again, this strategy was not only reproduced in and through daily (inter)actions, but also strengthened through the development of new organizational routines and working procedures (e.g. in terms dividing the order-to-delivery process into highly customized and complex machines and more standardized machines). In fact, we find that this 'stabilizing effect' of historical contingency and routinization in the Giddensian sense are very powerful sources of structural continuity as their customer orientation strategy was reproduced for considerable time, also when actors were confronted with accounting information that challenged the perceived appropriateness of this strategic orientation.

As described in detail above, however, top management in Alpha eventually came to question this strategic orientation and instead increasingly focus their efforts on standardization of products and processes. Arguably, this rather unexpected and radical transformation brings at least four sources of structural change 'inbuilt' in ST to the fore. As mentioned above, a first source of change can be referred to as unintended consequences of both intended and unintended acts (Giddens, 1984). That is, both the most unreflexive reproduction of existing structures and purposeful agency may involve structural change as agents are chronically 'forced' to relate to the new and unforeseen conditions produced by their own previous acts (such as Alpha's cash-flow problems emanating from their customer responsiveness strategy in an expanding market).

More generally, therefore, Giddens (1990) argues that there is an inherent indeterminacy of all social reproduction. That is, all instances of social reproduction contain a seed of (potential) change since the contextual conditions governing every moment of reproduction are always unique. And as suggested above, this implies that reflexive and knowledgeable actors continually have to draw upon and combine existing structures (which are general in character) to 'fit' the contextual particularities of each and every day-to-day situation that they encounter.

A second source of structural change suggested by the Alpha case draws upon the ST assumption that social structures are heterogeneous and that such multiplicity may generate system contradictions or clashes between structural elements (Giddens, 1984, 1990). More specifically, we find that one actor group perceived and contrasted at least two contradictory structural elements in the sense that the strategic commitment to customer responsiveness and an accounting orientation, respectively, provided actors with opposing views on what actions were deemed (in)appropriate. Importantly and again, however, this perception of them as posing conflicting demands was not clear during the earlier parts of the project. Rather, actors' awareness of this structural contradiction emerged gradually in and through a complex interplay where these two structural elements fed and formed each other over time as illustrated by Fig. 1 above.³ In other words, it was not until very late in the project that the emerging contradiction gave rise to conscious reasoning about the limits and potential of the prevailing strategic orientation (cf. the notion of reflexive agents).

A third source of structural change observed in Alpha is what Giddens (1990) refers to as reflexive appropriation. That is, reflexive appropriation occurs when actors outside a particular social system are able to 'see through', and critically reflect upon, a largely taken-for-granted social order. In a sense, this was the case in Alpha as both the managing director and the consultants hired had extensive experiences from other divisions within the company pursuing other strategies. And, as suggested above, these 'fresh eyes' contributed to the perception 'that something radical had to be done'. Interestingly, however, despite these experiences, they did not have a clear picture from the beginning as to what needed to be done, let alone that the prevailing strategy should be changed. Rather (and again), it was in and through a recurrent 'mirroring' of the (unintended) consequences of the existing strategy in an emerging set of accounting metrics that the contours of the new way of thinking emerged.

The fourth and final source of structural change brought to the fore by the Alpha case is related to what Giddens (1990) refer to as resource access. The premise here is that such change may derive from "differential control of desired resources" (p. 304). And as described above, for example, the very initiation of the REDCAPE project was related to Alpha's dependence

³ As argued by Giddens (1990), another principal way of viewing the exploitation of structural contradictions is that political action is taken by one actor group—who explicitly recognize that their interests are not adequately served by the existing order—to overthrow the position and influence of another group (cf. Giddens' notion of 'dialectic of control').

on the parent company for liquidity to cover the unforeseen cash-flow deficit. It was also clear that the extensive use of an accounting language and metrics during meetings largely (re)produced a perception of resource scarcity and that the resources available 'must be used more efficiently'.

Importantly, however, structural transformation sparked by resource scarcity should not be equated with a physical-science view on causation. On the contrary (and again), a key element in ST is that structures are virtual and only exist as memory traces in the human mind (but see e.g. the discussion in [Sewell \(1992\)](#); about the ontological status of resources in ST). Accordingly, also resources per se, and a state of resource scarcity (or access), must be constructed as such by knowledgeable agents. Also this point is illustrated by the Alpha case, where the one-month cash-flow deficit was constructed as a critical event (cf. [Munir, 2005](#)), despite the fact that all involved actors were confident that Alpha would generate a positive cash-flow in the end-year result, and also, that liquidity deficits are 'naturally occurring in a growing company'.

So to conclude then, Giddens offers a number of interesting thoughts as to how we may understand both the social order and continuity that characterize much day-to-day practices, and more or less radical changes of such an established order. In short, ST suggests that there is a 'stabilizing effect' of the routinization of daily conduct and structures being historically bound, but also that there is an inherent indeterminacy also in the most unreflexive and uniform reproduction of existing arrangements. This is so because the seeds of (un)intentional structural change are continuously present in every single moment of reproduction of these very structures.

5. Conclusions, contributions and the future

Overall, our study of how Giddens may be usefully mobilized as a means for analyzing (inter-)actions taking place in management meetings largely corroborates important findings in the S-A-P literature ([Jarzabkowski & Paul Spee, 2009](#); [Vaara & Whittington, 2012](#)). For example, it shows that the rather remarkable strategic reorientation observed in the case company was not only emergent in nature ([Jarzabkowski, 2004](#)), but also largely unintended. And, as such, it thus casts further doubt on presumptions of methodological individualism, heroic managers, and strategy as plans which characterize more traditional approaches in strategy research ([Whittington, 1996](#)). The premise is that from a practice-theoretical perspective, such as Giddens' ST, strategy becomes something a firm *does* rather than something it *has*; it becomes a form of *social practice* ([Carter et al., 2008a,b](#); [Jarzabkowski, 2004](#)).

Arguably, our case analysis also nicely illustrates some of the qualities that have made structuration theory particularly attractive for understanding such practices, namely its "attention to micro-sociological detail; a sensitivity to institutional context; and openness for change" ([Whittington, 2010](#); p. 113). That is, ST not only asks us to bring to light all those contextually situated activities that make up emergent processes of strategizing, but also, to take into account how such activities are always enabled and constrained by broader institutional arrangements. For Giddens, we may do so through analyzing how the motives, intentions, and knowledge that people draw upon as they 'go on' in daily social life, incorporate and thereby reproduce more general features of society. Importantly though, while institutional arrangements (or social structures as Giddens also calls them) indeed enable and constrain day-to-day practices, the relationship between structure and action is not deterministic as knowledgeable and reflexive agents always have the capacity to (consciously or not) modify these very structures through their (inter)actions (cf. [Giddens', 1979, 1984](#), notion of duality of structure).

Arguably, however, apart from illustrating and discussing such attractive qualities of ST to the S-A-P literature, our study also adds new insights to this literature in two important respects. First, it highlights the importance of accounting practices for understanding how and why processes of strategizing emerged that way they did. In fact, our case study evidence suggests that strategizing and accounting practices should not be seen as separate and largely independent organizational phenomena. On the contrary, they may well constitute *one* social practice, where strategic and accounting considerations feed and form each other in a recursive manner as they are played out in daily organizational life. Or more specifically, we find that changing accounting practices not only constituted an important means for, but also outcome of the emergent strategic reorientation towards standardization, and vice versa.

Indeed, the intersection between strategizing and accounting practices has been addressed in some recent works in the accounting literature. For example, [Jørgensen and Messner \(2010\)](#) suggest that accounting information guides actors' strategizing efforts through reminding them that such efforts ultimately must pay off in financial terms. In a similar vein, [Whittle and Mueller \(2010\)](#) find that accounting may constitute a type of obligatory point of passage into the strategic agenda of the firm. It has also been suggested that accounting devices and practices, rather than being limited to the implementation of strategy ([Anthony & Govindarajan, 2001](#)), are performative and thus contribute to the very shaping of "strategic options and the external economic conditions of the corporation" ([Skærbæk and Tryggestad, 2010, p. 108](#), see also [Carter et al., 2010](#); [Whittle & Mueller, 2010](#)).

The present study largely corroborates these findings through highlighting that emergent processes of accounting and strategizing co-construct or even co-constitute each other. Arguably, however, the conceptual apparatus introduced in the previous section, also extends previous insights into the interrelationships between strategizing and accounting. The premise is that a Giddensian perspective provides a useful 'sensitizing device' for theorizing about how and why strategizing and accounting practices may interplay to produce social continuity and transformation. For example, the assumption of a routine and taken-for-granted characteristic of human conduct may explain why the extant strategic orientation was

reproduced during larger parts of the change project, while the idea that unintended consequences of intended actions oftentimes feed back to be unacknowledged conditions for future acts may explain how and why disappointing accounting information contributed to spark critical reflection and change of this strategic orientation.

On these bases, an overall implication for the future arguably is that considerably more efforts should be put into exploring the potential synergies between the ST oriented strategizing and accounting literatures. After all, both literatures have made important contributions to the ‘practice turn’ in social science (see e.g. Englund et al., 2011; Whittington, 2010). Yet, little attention has been devoted to exploring how they may cross-fertilize each other, at least in any detail (but see Fauré & Rouleau, 2011; Jørgensen & Messner, 2010).

This brings us to the second important insight of this study, namely that while ST has already been introduced and insightfully applied in extant S-A-P research, we believe it has not yet been used to its full potential. Indeed, the extant S-A-P literature has certainly considered a number of key aspects in Giddens’ writings when theorizing strategizing processes as: (i) institutionally embedded, (ii) brought off by knowledgeable actors, and (iii) inherently emergent in nature (see e.g. Jarzabkowski, 2004, 2008; Whittington, 1996, 2006, 2010). That is, researchers have mobilized (one or more) key notions to understand strategy as a structuration process, such as social structure, social system, duality of structure, routinization, and unintended consequences (e.g. Jarzabkowski, 2004; Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008; Paroutis & Pettigrew, 2007; Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Whittington, 2010). Some authors have also picked up on Giddens writings on power in general (e.g. Carter et al., 2010) and the dialectics of control in particular (e.g. Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Kaplan, 2008).

However, and echoing the findings in the accounting literature (see Englund & Gerdin, 2014; Englund et al., 2011), we can conclude that other more specific ST concepts, including those referred to above as ‘time-space extension’, ‘mutual knowledge’, ‘reflexive monitoring’, ‘structural contradictions’, ‘ontological security’, ‘unintended consequences’, and ‘reflexive appropriation’, are figuring considerably more sparsely in the literature (but see Rouleau, 2005; and Jarzabkowski, 2010, for notable exceptions).

On these bases, this paper has sought to re-invigorate Giddens’ writings to the interdisciplinary accounting audience and the strategy-as-practice community. The premise is that his multifaceted writings should offer a highly useful conceptual apparatus for further theorizing how it may be that the most profound details of everyday strategizing talk and activities become stretched across wider spans of time and space. For example, his modeling of how social structures work through people’s memory traces and mutual knowledge on how to go on in social life, should enable such theorizing. A form of theorizing that not only allows us to consider how structural constraints “operate through the active involvement of the agents concerned” (Giddens, 1984; p. 289), but also, to understand the intricate interplay between continuity and transformation in strategizing processes without reverting to structure-centred or agency-centred explanations.

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