

## Role Expectations and Middle Manager Strategic Agency

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**ABSTRACT** Based on an analysis of 262 interviews, I argue that role expectations have the potential to both enable and constrain middle manager strategic agency. To explain why the same role expectations have contradictory effects on agency, I analyse enabling conditions corresponding to four strategic role expectations, based on Floyd and Wooldridge's work on middle manager roles. After presenting eight enabling conditions for strategic agency, specific to the four role expectations, I argue that the dominant functionalist view of strategic roles should be augmented from a middle manager viewpoint. I suggest a reciprocal view of strategic role expectations, which elucidates the tensions between dialogue, legitimacy and rationality within a set of strategic roles.

### INTRODUCTION

This paper is about how and why role expectations enable or constrain middle manager strategic agency. The importance of agency has increased steadily in the strategy literature since the strategy process literature was established in the seventies (see Pettigrew, 1992 for review). A key insight in strategy process research was that the organization is not a monolith, but consists of multiple agents engaged in social interaction. Many results showing that middle managers can be the drivers of organizational strategy have been published. Consider, for instance, Burgelman's (1983) classic account of Intel's business exit – where lower middle managers played a key role – from the memory business into the processor business (see also Bourgeois and Brodwin, 1984; Floyd and Wooldridge, 2000; Hart, 1992; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995).

The observation that the realization of organizational strategies is often fuelled by the agency of non-senior managers has given rise to a literature focusing on the impact of middle manager agency on the organizational strategy process (for instance, Balogun and Johnson, 2004, 2005; Burgelman, 1983; Floyd and Lane, 2000; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992, 2000; Wooldridge and Floyd, 1990). Middle manager agency is a basis for strategic renewal, a bottom-up process where strategy is adapted to a changing

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environment (Floyd and Wooldridge, 2000). Agency is also important in the process of implementing deliberate strategy, where non-motivated middle managers slow down, or even sabotage implementation efforts (Guth and MacMillan, 1986; Kim and Mauborgne, 1991, 1998).

As action is exhibited by individuals, agency is often associated with a micro-sociological orientation. In contrast, structures are exhibited by social systems and are thus the concern of a more macro orientation (Giddens, 2001). This paper contributes to an emerging literature in micro-strategy that aims at understanding the micro activities of strategy, as well as the practices guiding and fuelling those activities (Jarzabkowski, 2004, 2005; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2003; Whittington, 1996, 2003, 2006).<sup>[1]</sup> Middle managers are an important group of strategy practitioners. In Jarzabkowski's (2005, p. 43) model of micro activities of strategy, a tripartite relation exists between (1) the top managers, (2) an organizational community, and (3) strategy. Middle managers can be regarded as key members of the organizational community (2), as they act as mediators between the top management and the rest of the community (Floyd and Wooldridge, 2000). In organizational life, this mediation is structured by role expectations.

There is also a growing empirical literature relevant to middle manager agency within the micro strategizing literature. For instance, Regnér (2003) has shown that expected strategic activities for managers differ radically between organizational centres and peripheries: in the periphery, managers are faced with a complex environment and approach strategy inductively, whereas in the centre, the environment is regarded as stable and strategy approached deductively. Through a careful analysis of diaries written by middle managers involved in an unfolding process of intended change, Balogun and Johnson (2004) demonstrated how negotiations between middle managers are radically shaped in the absence of top management and how collective schemas of organizing are built anew. In a later paper (Balogun and Johnson, 2005), they use the same data to explain the emergence of unintended consequences out of intended strategies as a result of a process of sensemaking by middle managers.

In this paper, I seek to advance this literature on middle manager strategic agency by concentrating on the fulfilling and disabling effect of *role expectations* on middle manager strategic agency. Balogun and Johnson (2004, 2005) have accounted for various ways by which middle manager micro-level agency shapes strategy. As their focus has been on what middle managers do in the absence of top managers (Balogun and Johnson, 2004, 2005), their contribution can be advanced through an analysis of the *constraints* imposed by top managers to shape this agency, thus 'making their presence known' in middle manager strategizing. As role expectations are a classical sociological constraint on the behaviour of individuals (for instance, Katz and Kahn, 1966), I examine how expectations by top managers exercise constraints over middle manager agency.

In addition to the micro-strategizing literature, there is another relevant discussion within strategic management that concentrates on middle manager roles. In accounts such as those of Floyd and Wooldridge (1992, 2000), Floyd and Lane (2000), and Wooldridge and Floyd (1990), researchers have started to build an understanding of the functional roles played by middle managers in strategy implementation and renewal. However, this literature does not account for agency, as it seeks to explain behaviour by explicating *external constraints* to individuals.

This paper is placed in the intersection of extant work on strategic roles and the micro strategy literature. It augments the emerging micro strategizing literature by addressing constraints on agency, placed by top managers on middle managers. Unlike the mainstream of role literature, I will not argue that middle manager involvement is structurally determined. Instead, the paper augments the role literature by concentrating on the tension between top management role expectations, constraining middle management behaviour, and the *enabling conditions* presented by middle managers themselves regarding their agency in strategy.

## ROLES AND AGENCY

Social theories use the concept of 'role' to explain the behaviour of individuals by relying on constraints external to the acting subject. Roles are typically discussed in objectivist language, the concept of a role being commonly defined as the totality of *expectations* directed by others toward an individual (Linton, 1936; Turner, 1978) within a social structure (Katz and Kahn, 1966). The attributions of others (or 'alters', see Turner, 1978) are reflected on the actions of an agent (or 'self', see Turner, 1978), thereby moulding the role attributions placed by agents on themselves.

Strategy authors also tend to be objectivists, and more specifically, *functionalists* in terms of explaining role behaviour. Functional roles can be thought of as if organizational members were organs in a body, each serving a specified purpose in the complete system of the body (Giddens, 2001, pp. 16–17). In addition to treating roles as externally determined, functionalists search for a perfect combination of roles for an organization in a certain environment. In the model of strategic roles by Floyd and Lane (2000), for instance, the roles middle managers play are contingent on which roles are made functional by current market conditions. When markets necessitate the redefinition of organizational competencies, middle management has the functional role of directing ideas emerging from the experimentation activities of lower middle managers upwards to gain approval from top management. Conversely, in situations calling for the deployment of competencies, the role of middle management does not involve championing but implementing, while the role of lower middle management involves conforming instead of experimenting. Such a contingency-framework for roles was already evident in Miles and Snow's (1978) typology, where defender organizations place a high emphasis on top-down implementation to maintain their market position, whereas prospector organizations rely more on bottom-up championing to open up new markets.

The basic problem of functionalist role theory, when applied to the task of explaining what people do in micro-social contexts, is that such role theory does not account for agency. Agency involves purposive action by subjects capable of reflecting on the conditions of their activities, and hence, also of transforming those conditions (Giddens, 1984). It can be argued that role-theoretical accounts assume homogeneity in the behaviour of actors falling under the same role expectations, whereas the whole notion of agency involves an 'ability to act differently' (Giddens, 1979). Giddens (1984) has criticized the very metaphor of a role as being deterministic and hence an incomplete model of social action. He argues (1984, p. 84) that an emphasis on roles tends to: 'emphasize the 'given' character of roles . . . The script is written, the stage set and the actors do

the best they can with the parts prepared for them'. Along the same lines, Biddle (1986, p. 71) has argued that 'contemporary role theory seems debilitated by its lingering association with functionalism'. Functionalist conceptions of agency, which displace agency in favour of external conditions such as social facts or structures, also find an opponent in Bourdieu, another well-known social theorist. In his critique of objectivism in social sciences, Bourdieu (1990, p. 41) argues that objectivism, in 'asserting the universality and eternity of the logical categories that govern the "unconscious activity of the mind"', ignores the dialectic of social structures and structured, structuring dispositions through which schemes of thought are formed and transformed.'

The critique posed by Giddens and Bourdieu is characteristic of social theories sensitive to *practice* (see Schatzki, 2001). The key theorists of the micro-strategizing viewpoint are heavily influenced by practice theorists (see, for instance, Jarzabkowski, 2004, 2005; Whittington, 2006). For a theory of practice, the essential problem in functionalist role-theory is that the knowledgeable ability of the agent of his or her own personal role set is ignored (Giddens, 1984). Knowledgeable agents, as envisioned by practice theorists, act reflexively, being at least partially aware of the structural conditions behind their agency. As such, they are also capable of transforming these structural conditions through their agency.

Despite the problems of role theory, in organizations, roles *are* a part of everyday strategy discourse and practice. Practitioners *do* think and communicate, relying on the concept of a role. Top managers do place role expectations on middle managers, influenced by a role discourse. In the context of practice, the limitation with functionalist role theories is that they tend to camouflage the fact that knowledgeable middle managers are capable of transcending and transfiguring these expectations of their behaviour, that is, they have agency. Indeed, Fondas and Stewart (1994) have argued that the discussion of manager roles should not only revolve around role expectations, but should also account for role *enactment*, which involves agency and context (see also Hales, 1999; Tengblad, 2006). In a similar vein, Mintzberg (1994c) has argued that not just the frame and the agenda of a managerial job are important – the person holding the job is also key to the managerial role.

Therefore, it is important not to abandon the pursuit of understanding middle manager roles, but to aspire to understand what enables agency for middle managers operating under specific role expectations. This is what I intend to do in this paper.

To act as a template for role expectations that top management places on middle management, I adopt the Floyd and Wooldridge's (1992, p. 154) fourfold categorization regarding middle management activity in the strategy process. The model is based on two dichotomies: upward vs. downward activity, and integrative vs. divergent activity. The four activity types are (1) implementing deliberate strategy (downward, integrative), (2) facilitating adaptability (downward, divergent), (3) synthesizing information (upward, integrative) and (4) championing alternatives (upward, divergent). As a generic and widely accepted classification of how middle management may be involved in strategy work, the model can be regarded to envelop most of the expectations middle managers are likely to meet from their superiors.

My task in this paper is to understand the conditions under which role expectations enable middle management strategic agency. By 'strategic agency', I am referring to an

*individual's capacity to have a perceived effect upon the individual's own work on an issue the individual regards as beneficial to the interests of his or her organization.*<sup>[2]</sup> This definition is based on Giddens's (1984) notion of knowledgeable, as well as on a view of strategy as an interpretive construct, 'intended to motivate members in ways that favor the organization' (Chaffee, 1985, p. 94). This definition implies that middle manager agency is to be regarded as 'strategic' if the middle manager names organizational interests as a motivator for his or her actions.

## METHODOLOGY: ANALYSING MIDDLE MANAGER ACCOUNTS

My methodological approach is based on hearing the point of view of the middle managers. I will attempt to make sense of how role expectations contribute to the capacity of these middle managers to acquire strategic agency.

I began the process of creating this paper with a data set of 301 semi-structured interviews with individuals from 12 organizations, which operate mainly in northern Europe. The interviews were conducted in a research project focusing on how organizational strategy is reflected and enacted in practical work activities. The organizations are professional service organizations in which many employees arguably play 'strategic' roles vis-à-vis other stakeholders. We included organizations with a relatively well-trained workforce, among which a relatively high level of decision making autonomy would be encountered. The organizations include eight companies from the finance, insurance, retail and telecommunications sectors plus four central government or municipal organizations.

We randomly sampled employees from different levels and different functional units of each organization, with an emphasis on non-senior managers. The total number of middle managers in this data set is 262. Of these, 108 had a university education, 119 had vocational training, and 33 had no professional training;<sup>[3]</sup> 116 were men, and 146 women. The term 'middle manager' is to be understood rather broadly here, as it is used to denote both upper and operational middle management (Floyd and Lane, 2000). Many of the middle managers discussed here do not have any direct subordinates. However, all of the middle managers here are responsible for managing some topic area in their organization on which organizational strategy has an impact.

All interviews followed the same semi-structured outline, which contained a set of questions repeated at each interview. The main idea was to follow a 'story-telling' approach, that is, to let the interviewees describe their views on strategy as freely as possible, allowing them to interpret the questions freely and pursue those themes that they regarded as central. The questions in the outline focused on the following:

- The interviewee's position in the strategy process and the role of strategy in the interviewee's daily work (for instance, 'How do you participate in your organization's strategy process?').
- The interviewee's conceptions of strategy in general (for instance, 'What do you understand by the term "strategy"?').
- The interviewee's perception of organizational strategic practices and their effectiveness (for instance, 'What kinds of practices are involved in the communication of organizational strategy? Do they work?').

- The interviewee's working environment and the impact of strategy on it (for instance, 'Have there been changes in your work lately? What kinds of changes?').

The interviews, which took from one to two hours, were tape recorded with the approval of the interviewees and transcribed verbatim. In addition to the interview texts, contextual data were gathered in the form of documents related to the organization's strategy process: graphs, strategy documents, annual reports, goal definitions, memos, etc. These data were used in forming a pre-understanding of the specific context against which the account of each individual interviewee could be reflected.

## Analysis

During the analysis process, I used *Atlas.ti* software to manage the data. My analysis followed an inductive research design, as I continuously iterated and focused my research interest, moving upwards to the level of theoretical generalization (Dougherty, 2002). The research question I chose, the theories I used and sought to contribute to, as well as the analyses I conducted were all crystallized in an iterative process. The scientific inference I used can be best characterized as 'abductive inference', which involves 'a constant movement back and forth between theory and empirical data' (Wodak, 2004, p. 200).

My overarching model for approaching the interview texts was that of a hermeneutical researcher, deepening his understanding of the meaning of the text in circular movement where the details of a certain text are contrasted with emerging, more generalized theoretical thoughts. The aim of a hermeneutical researcher is not to arrive at an 'original meaning' of the text but to seek to enter into a dialogue with it, seeking to 'merge horizons' between the interpreter and the text. This initially involves accepting the position of the interviewee as granted, yet engaging in a critical dialogue, conscious of the researcher's own preconceptions (Gadamer, 1957/1986, 1993).

My analysis progressed in three overlapping stages of analysis, during which the level of analytical generalization was raised step by step. In the *first stage*, I wrote a 'micronarrative' of each of the 301 interviews, focusing on the interviewees' personal social positions in strategy processes. Initially, I sought to account for whether the interviewees were content with their agency in the strategy process or not, and why. This linking of description of events and their causes is the most basic definition of a narrative (Polkinghorne, 1988). This approach was the result of my realization that in each interview, the interviewees seemed to be returning again and again to some central message about their agency, a 'story theme' (Boje, 2001) of sorts. I specifically searched for statements describing an interviewee's agency, and reasons provided by the interviewee for having or not having fulfilled the agency. The first stage was highly work-intensive, taking around six months of part-time work.

During this stage, I chose to focus on the 262 middle management accounts out of the total number of 301 micronarratives. I had realized that middle managers provided more interesting stories among the interviewees in terms of agency than top managers; top managers most often took agency for granted and did not discuss it at great length. Therefore, the top manager accounts tended to be impersonal and focused on



organization-level action instead of the personal micro-activity I had been interested in. I focused in particular on those middle managers who had expressed an interest in having strategic agency, as these accounts often contained the most explicit accounts regarding the conditions of agency (see Mantere, 2005 for an analysis focused on these 'strategic champions').

In the *second stage* of analysis, I coded the micronarratives I had written of each middle manager account, looking for accounts of enabled and constrained strategic agency. As noted in the previous section, 'strategic agency', denotes an individual's capacity to have a perceived effect upon the individual's own work. I treated a report of agency as 'strategic' if the interviewees emphasized organizational interests as a motivator for their actions. I treated the report on agency as 'enabled' if interviewees reported that they were content with the conditions for their agency and reported being able to make a difference in an issue regarded by them as important to organizational interests.

There have been situations where I have promoted a policy in some everyday issue, and later, maybe even after a year or more, I have noticed that this practice has been adopted as a part of our strategy. This has created a sense that I am not unstrategic in my everyday decision-making. I am not boosting my ego here, the same thing may have been proposed by a number of other department managers thinking about the same thing. (Department manager in a department store, in a chain of department stores)

I coded a report on strategic agency as 'constrained' if interviewees reported a failure in their strategic agency resulting from organization-specific conditions external to them. These quotations involved a negative affect expressed about an activity regarded by the interviewee as beneficial to organizational interests. The activity in question failed to take place due to some external constraint.

I used to work in a smaller firm where people could participate in strategy. In my new role in this large firm, I have had to teach myself that it is none of my business. They want to maintain a very small inner circle in this organization, and once a year, in a huge spectacle, to present it all in one magnificent slide. So, I run my own shop but that's it. (Sales support manager, multinational telecommunications firm)

In the *third stage* of the analysis, I focused on the *enabling conditions* for agency. I noticed that Floyd and Wooldridge's (1992) categorization fitted the role expectations explained by the middle managers in my data set. Many interviewees reported to being presented with top-down targets, which reflected strategy and required a specific line of action from them (implementing). Quite a few also reported that feedback on strategy success and failure, as well as other relevant information was expected of them (synthesizing information). Others reported that they were expected to challenge themselves and their subordinates to autonomously develop their work practices to fit the environment (facilitating adaptability). Still others reported that they were expected to challenge their superiors with new strategic ideas (championing alternatives). I completed my analysis by coding the quotations I had already coded in terms of enabled/constrained agency and

of the four generic role expectations: implementing, facilitating adaptability, championing, and synthesizing information. Floyd and Wooldridge's model was exhaustive enough to be used for the structuring of these expectations. This also helped me to connect more firmly with existing theoretical discourse on middle management in strategy, thereby building progressive coherence (Locke and Golden-Biddle, 1997).

I have relied on a large set of interviews to arrive at my results. As such, I have relied on the interpretations of the interviewees in the assessment of their agency. I had to trust their views on whether their agency was enabled or constrained. My approach is based on the position of Harré and Secord (1972), who regard individuals as the best source of information when inquiry is made on the character and motivations for their activity. It may be argued that interview accounts, necessarily retrospective in nature, are subject to informant biases, impression management and so on. However, I read the interviews as complete narratives, also giving careful thought to internal consistency. The assessment by individuals of their agency and its conditions are not based on off-hand remarks, but on themes dominating the interview narratives. I have sought to validate my findings by making my judgments as transparent as possible, and illustrating my analyses with as many illustrative quotations as possible.

## ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR MIDDLE MANAGER STRATEGIC AGENCY

The contribution I seek to make in this paper is to explain how top management role expectations enable different aspects of strategic agency (Table I). This has been achieved through an analysis of the conditions middle managers name as enablers of and constraints on their agency in response to the specific role expectations. For the sake of simplicity, I have collapsed both enabling and constraining conditions into a single column called 'enabling conditions'. Indeed, accounts of constrained agency typically gravitated around the absence of some enabler of agency. The quotes in Table I illustrate this.

While implementation was clearly the most common of the four types of expectations among my data, I detected all four of Floyd and Wooldridge's (1992) middle management activities as role expectations while reading the interviews. All four had relevant enablers.

### Implementing

The expectation to implement strategy is top-down in nature, and involves such elements as disseminating strategy downward to one's subordinates, as well as seeking and exhibiting conformance to top-down objectives and guidelines (Floyd and Lane, 2000). The expectation to implement strategy may be the most typical of expectations encountered by a middle manager in the context of organizational strategy – it was certainly the topic of the greatest amount of discussion within my interview data. As such, four enabling conditions were found in relation to this specific expectation.

First, the expectation to implement strategy may impact positively on agency when the top-down objectives build continuity in work. The key enabling condition for creating such continuity is top management *narrating* the thought processes that have led to the



Table I. Enabling conditions for agency with respect to different role expectations

<i>Role-expectation</i> <i>(Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992)</i>		<i>Aspects of enabled agency</i>	<i>Enabling conditions</i>	<i>Representative quotes</i>
Top-down	Implementing	Ability to perceive implemented objectives in the light of previous activities. This creates a sense of incremental progress in work, as strategic objectives form a coherent narrative from past to present.	<b>1. Narration</b> Top managers open up the internal logic of thought processes leading to the selection of strategic direction, linking it to past experiences	‘The problem seems to be that our top management team, after some hard thinking about the firm’s strategy, does not realize that the rest of the organization has not gone through the same through process. They are therefore dumbfounded by the notion that the content of their ideas is not as self-evident to the rest of us as they think.’ (IT solutions unit manager in a large insurance firm)  ‘Frankly speaking, there have been no targets formulated with my work that would reflect our firm’s strategy. It is up to me to realize that it is crucial for me to find ways to make my work serve our strategy.’ (Sales manager, telecommunications firm)  ‘The new CRM systems, customer segmentation initiatives and so on, they are all signs that we are moving in the right direction. They signal that the top management is motivated to help us implement this customer strategy.’ (Service development manager, multinational telecommunications firm)
		Ability to use strategy as a tool in practical, situated problem solving. This creates a sense that strategy is useful in everyday work.	<b>2. Contextualization</b> Top managers make an effort of linking strategy to relevant work contexts.	
		Ability to see everyday work as useful to strategy. This creates a sense that everyday work is valuable and meaningful.	<b>3. Resource allocation</b> Middle managers receive explicit top management authorization to make changes to everyday work. Resource allocation reflects changes needed in everyday work.	

#### 4. Respect

Top managers acknowledge the value of everyday work as implementation activity, and as such relevant to strategy.

'I am expected to have my team implement a bunch of new targets without the necessary resources. We see this time and time again. The problem is that the development people in the headquarters have not experienced work on the shop floor. They should visit more often, at least before they hit us with another strategy.' (Department manager in a department store, in a chain of department stores)

'I am expected to act as a "godfather" of sorts for the implementation effort. I guess they value my history in various developments efforts in this firm.' (Installation team manager in a provincial telecommunications firm)

'We had a meeting with the other unit managers. In this meeting we sketched a new model for operations as a reaction to some of the problems we had experienced in our units lately. We presented this to the top management and to our surprise, they had already had a meeting in which they had arrived at pretty much the same conclusion.' (Unit manager in a large insurance firm)

#### 5. Trust

Top managers encourage new ideas, as well as open communication regarding success and failure in experimentation.

Ability to experiment and creatively develop work activities. This creates a sense of creativity and freedom in work.

Facilitating adaptability

Top-down

Table I. Continued

<i>Role-expectation (Floyd and Woolldridge, 1992)</i>	<i>Aspects of enabled agency</i>	<i>Enabling conditions</i>	<i>Representative quotes</i>
Bottom-up	Synthesizing information	Ability to feed back past experiences regarding strategy realization, helping strategy to adapt. This creates a sense of continuity in work and a sense of involvement in strategizing.	<p><b>6. Responsiveness</b></p> <p>Top managers respond to feedback, communicating success and failure of past actions.</p> <p>‘You can give feedback alright. But what the top managers don’t tell you is whether you succeeded or not, that is, whether all your efforts were in vain or not.’ (Product development manager, multinational telecommunications firm)</p>
Bottom-up	Championing alternatives	Ability to present new ideas impacting the organizational future. This creates a sense of being in control of one’s fate.	<p><b>7. Inclusion</b></p> <p>Top managers invite and expect middle management to participate in planning.</p> <p>‘I’ve sent my superiors downtown a bunch of e-mails about a lot of different issues about practical yet strategic issues. I might declare that our advertising sucks, do the calculations and press “send”. I wait until I get a response. In the response they usually say: “you’re right, let’s see if we can do something about it”.’ (Manager of one large department store in a chain of department stores)</p>
		<p><b>8. Refereeing</b></p> <p>Top managers react to new ideas, refereeing between ideas.</p>	<p>‘Our recent strategy away-day was like an auction. Everybody could bid and everybody did. We ended up with a strategy that makes no sense. Plus it was nearly impossible to get your ideas heard.’ (Unit manager in a ministry)</p>

formulation of the goals to be implemented. This is instrumental in helping middle managers make sense of how the present objectives are linked to past ones. Indeed, a key constraint on agency associated with the implementation expectation is realized when middle managers feel unsure whether they have everyday relevance to strategy realization because they have not had access to top management thought processes. For instance, one of the interviewees, a manager in the IT solutions unit of an insurance firm, notes that the top management of her organization is genuinely 'dumbfounded' that their strategic ideas do not seem self-evident to middle managers (see Table I). The reason for this lack of clarity is that middle managers in her organization do not participate in strategizing discussions. Hence, when the top management narrates how current strategy is related to past experiences, middle managers experience greater enabling of their agency as implementers of that strategy. They can construct a meaningful pattern in the strategy that enables them to fulfil their role in implementing the strategy.

Second, the implementation expectation may also impact positively on middle manager agency when it involves a *contextualization* of the top-down objectives to be implemented. Well-defined objectives give focus to the work of a middle manager, supporting contextual decision-making. A well-defined set of top-down objectives provides a 'backbone' for work activities, supporting everyday work. Strategy becomes a tool, which is at hand, helpful in everyday 'practical coping' (Chia and Holt, 2006).

The strategies they [the headquarters] provide us with are quite clear-cut. They give us a direction, a framework for what we need to achieve. (Head nurse in a public health clinic)

Third, the implementation expectation may enable middle management agency if there is a sufficient shift in *resource allocation* to support implementation of the specified top-down objectives. One interviewee, a service development manager in a multinational telecommunications firm, praises the top management of his organization for authorizing the implementation task by offering a number of practices and resources to back it up. He notes that 'the top management is motivated to help us implement this customer strategy' (see Table I). In a sense, resource allocation, coherent with top down objectives, may be interpreted as the top management 'walking the talk' with sufficient resources.

Strategy, without a set of tools is nothing, just useless flapping of the mouth. (Middle manager in a financial organization)

From a middle manager's perspective, resource allocation in coherence with top-down objectives is a sign of top management commitment. The fourth enabling condition, *respect*, involves another portrayal of such top management commitment to implementation, which involves little or no expended resources. The implementation expectation may enable middle manager agency if top management shows respect towards everyday problem solving, or again, 'practical coping' (Chia and Holt, 2006) as a strategic activity. This allows the middle manager to perceive everyday work actions as meaningful and valuable.

The top management sends us a framework for strategy. The role of my team is to pool our expertise to hammer out the details. They rely on our competence to pull this off. (Team leader, multinational banking organization)

Respect is based on an acknowledged interdependence between different social classes (Sennett, 2003). Respect in implementation can be based for instance on the assumption that top management strategies have little value if they are not implemented effectively. The strategist needs the implementer and vice versa. One sales support manager of a multinational telecommunications organization expresses the sentiment of interdependence as follows:

You cannot build strategy on the top floor where the elevators are locked. Or, you can do that, but whether that's implementable . . . You have to have the experience from the customer interface. And this is what we provide to the people on the top floor.

The atmosphere of respect appears to be reached through an exchange where the top management shows respect for the competences of middle managers and their teams, and they respond by showing respect for the strategy work of top management.

### **Facilitating Adaptability**

The second role expectation, facilitating adaptability, is top-down in nature, yet in a very different way than implementation. Within its scope, middle managers are expected to promote experimentation and autonomous development of work within their areas of responsibility. This expectation is placed on middle managers with the aim of work practices being adapted to the changing environment (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992).

The expectation to facilitate adaptability also has the potential to enable middle manager strategic agency. The enabling condition is *trust*, harboured by the top management. A clear indication from top management is called for, legitimizing the efforts of middle managers to develop work practices.

Developing our own practices is an acknowledged part of our job. (Information systems development manager in an insurance firm)

Failure to perceive such trust involves the propensity of a middle manager to stick to one's habitual activities, as this involves a tolerable risk level. In particular, the fear that unexpected failures will be punished constrains agency in this context. One interviewee, a production manager in a multinational company operating in a very dynamic environment, laments the lack of openness in her organization regarding failure:

Competition is so fierce around here, with people worried about their careers, that if you make a mistake, you sure are not motivated to disclose it to others. Besides, the people are constantly changing jobs anyway, so whatever problems you cannot deal with yourself, can always be left to your successor.

The expectation to facilitate adaptability has the potential to enable agency, as it can help to create a sense of creative freedom in work (see also Mantere, 2005). Interviewees satisfied with their agency in facilitating adaptability often reported a strong sense of ownership or responsibility over a specific domain of work activity.

I have my own 'turf' of which I am responsible. By taking care of this turf to the best of my ability is how I contribute to the realization of our firm's strategy. (Branch office manager in a multinational banking corporation)

In sum, the potential of the expectation of facilitating adaptability in enabling middle manager agency is based on building a sense of responsibility to service strategic interests by developing work within a certain organizational domain. However, putting oneself out on a limb by trying out new practices requires energy and commitment as well as a sense of ontological security (Giddens, 1984; Mantere, 2005) that divergent behaviour will not be punished. Therefore, trust is the key enabling condition for this expectation.

### Synthesizing Information

When engaged in the activity of synthesizing information, middle managers actively gather information about issues relevant to organizational strategy and distil the relevant information and forward it to their superiors (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992). This activity is both bottom-up and integrative, as the middle managers act as 'uncertainty absorbers', resting their reputations on the robustness of their interpretations of the environment (March and Simon, 1958).

The expectation to synthesize information may enable agency in a manner not dissimilar to the way in which the implementation expectation enables agency – by creating a sense of continuity and progress. When the middle managers provide top management information as a basis for strategic decision-making, feedback assures that top-down strategic plans are rooted in past experience. A key element is an increased understanding of whether past work efforts have been successful. This sentiment is crystallized by one interviewee, a product development manager in a multinational telecommunications firm. She laments that she does not know whether her efforts had been 'in vain' (see Table I).

The expectation to facilitate adaptability may allow the middle managers a sense of involvement in strategy in terms of having something to contribute. It may also involve the further enabling aspect of being able to represent one's subordinates. One interviewee, a product development manager in a multinational telecommunications firm, reports that in her firm, middle managers are expected to maintain annual target-setting discussions with all of their team members. She reports that this practice allows everybody to have an effect on strategy, as everyone is expected to feed back insights from their work experiences:

Through our annual target setting discussions, everybody gets to affect what our strategies turn out to be.



The key enabling condition for the third expectation is top management *responsiveness* to the synthesized information that they receive. It appears that there are multiple instances in strategy practice where top managers expect feedback but do not respond to it. Indeed, there were multiple frustrated expressions by middle managers in the interview data, reports of feedback not receiving a satisfactory response.

Our superiors seem to fear feedback. They ask us to give feedback on strategy, but should you give it, all critical comments are squashed. It's not that they would even think of building on the differences by letting them offer new perspectives. (Sales manager, multinational telecommunications firm)

### Championing Alternatives

The expectation to champion ideas involves a middle management activity of promoting bottom-up ideas that have the potential to renew the current content of strategy (Floyd and Lane, 2000). Such activity is focused on impacting the future, both in terms of an individual as well as a social collective. For an individual, plans coordinate one's efforts and help reflect on what has been achieved, while for a collective, the meshing of individual plans into a collective plan creates coherence by forming a collective intent (for a theory of agency based on planning for the future, see Bratman, 1999).<sup>[4]</sup>

The expectation to champion new ideas, often achieved through participatory practices in strategic planning, has the potential to help fulfil agency for middle managers. The first condition for the championing expectation for enabling agency for a middle manager is *inclusion* (Westley, 1990) in the process of planning. When top managers invite and expect middle managers to participate in planning, the middle managers gain more control over the future. Such a sentiment is reported by one interviewee, a branch office manager in a multinational banking organization in which a bottom-up/top-down annual cycle of strategic planning is in place. He feels that such a system reduces the risk of 'being smashed in the head with targets you've never heard of'.

All the targets intended for my office for the next year are discussed with me before they are finalized. I also discuss the targets with my team members and look for their input. It is important that people can participate in planning. The worst thing that can happen is being smashed in the head by targets you have never heard of. (Branch office manager in a multinational banking corporation)

Top management *refereeing* is the second enabling condition for middle manager agency under the expectation of championing. When top managers do not evaluate and reward the quality of ideas championed, motivation to promote one's ideas is undermined. A radical illustration is provided by a unit manager in a ministry, who laments the lack of refereeing between ideas among top managers. He complains that strategy in his organization is an 'an auction where everyone can bid' (see Table I). Indeed, the role of refereeing between bottom-up ideas has been proposed as one of the most important top management roles in the strategy process (Bourgeois and Brodwin, 1984).

## DISCUSSION: TOWARDS A RECIPROCAL VIEW OF MIDDLE MANAGER STRATEGIC ROLES

Many authors emphasize the beneficial effects of middle manager involvement in strategy. Wooldridge and Floyd (1990, p. 237) found senior management negotiation with middle management is positively associated with higher strategic consensus, due to increased understanding. Ketokivi and Castañer (2004) showed that participation by middle managers in strategic planning increases the ability to reach agreement on a decision because it decreases their position bias (see also Kim and Mauborgne, 1991, 1998; Klein and Sorra, 1996; Løvendahl and Revang, 1998; Marcus, 1988).

Yet, extant literature on middle manager involvement has largely been functionalist, concentrating on what roles are necessitated by operating environments, neglecting what enables and constrains the fulfilling of those roles. To address the limitations of functionalist role models for middle managers, I have derived four functional role expectations in an abductive process between data and Floyd and Wooldridge's model of strategic role activity. I have derived eight conditions enabling middle manager agency under the different conditions (Table I): narration (1), contextualization (2), resource allocation (3), respect (4), trust (5), responsiveness (6), inclusion (7) and refereeing (8).

The conditions I have presented deal with middle management experience on what constrains and enables strategic agency for them. However, when one looks at the content of the enablers, they can also be read as expectations the middle managers place back on their superiors, the top managers. Indeed, a key insight to be learned from the discussion regarding enabling conditions for middle management agency is a *reciprocal view of role expectations*. The eight enabling conditions show that while strategic role expectations are placed on middle managers, this alone does not fulfil agency that is coherent with the expectations. For middle manager agency to take place, reciprocal actions by the top management is needed for the fulfilment of these roles.

The reciprocal view on strategy process, based on the eight enabling conditions for middle manager strategic agency, can on the one hand retain the perspective of what functional demands environments place on organizations, as perceived by authors such as Floyd and Wooldridge (1992) and Floyd and Lane (2000), yet on the other hand augment this functionalist view by discussing enablers for carrying out the roles implied by these functional demands. For instance, in relatively stable environments, where competencies are deployed, and implementation and conformance expected from middle managers (Floyd and Lane, 2000), the reciprocal view would account for the enabling activities of narration (1), contextualization (2), resource allocation (3) and showing respect to implementation work (4) by the top managers. While the exploration of the reciprocal view, offered here, can only be tentative in nature, I hope to be able to show the impact of the results presented here on a wider strategy discourse.

There are important precedents in the extant strategy process literature for the reciprocal view. The first relevant discussion involves a *dialogical* view on the strategy process. In the dialogical view, strategy is regarded as a multi-vocal discussion, constantly re-enacted as a result of interaction among different narrative logics (Barry and Elmes, 1997, p. 444). Variations of the dialogical view are supported by authors such as Barry

and Elmes (1997), who emphasize the view of strategy as interacting narratives; Bartlett and Ghoshal (1994), who emphasize strategy as collective purpose; Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), and Gioia et al. (1994), who present strategy as a movement between sensegiving and sensemaking; and Weick (1987/2001), who notes that sensemaking is the best way to create collective purposive behaviour.

Many of the eight enabling conditions, presented in Table I, help to explicate aspects of the dialogical view into the context of middle management roles. It can be argued that narration (1) and contextualization (2) of strategy content are best achieved in dialogical terms. Narratives achieve their momentum through the social activity of collective storytelling (Boje, 2001; Weick, 1995). Contextualization may only take place if the top management has an understanding of the local context of middle manager work (Regnér, 2003). This understanding of local contexts can only take place through dialogue between centres and peripheries. The middle management expectation of respect (3) between top and middle managers, as expected by middle managers implementing and conforming to a top-down strategy, can also be regarded as a part of strategic dialogue. Respect between groups of different social standing is maintained in building a sense of interdependence between the different parties, achieved through social interactions (Sennett, 2003). In the case of an organization engaged into a top-down mode of planning-implementation, it can be argued that an atmosphere where top managers respect the ability of middle managers as implementers, while the middle managers respect the top managers as planners and visionaries, enables both the planning and the implementation in the strategy process. From the dialogical viewpoint, the key is to regard neither task as 'mechanical' or 'replaceable' by nature, but to acknowledge that both depend on each other. Refereeing (8) and responsiveness (6) to feedback can be also regarded as explicit forms of dialogue, where top managers actively address middle management initiatives and feedback.

The reciprocal view on strategy process does not collapse on the dialogical view, however. The enabling condition of resource allocation (3) is an important example of this. The resource allocation enabling condition, while highly relevant, may be the least surprising of the enabling conditions as resource allocation lies at the core of the classical maxim 'structure follows strategy', on which the *classical/rational* view on strategy is based (Whittington, 1993). Chandler (1962, p. 11) collapses the very notion of strategy implementation to resources: '... decisions, either tactical or strategic, usually require implementation by allocation or reallocation of resources – funds, equipment, or personnel'. The reciprocal view acknowledges that there is a rational aspect to strategy, where resources are allocated, structure following strategy. Resource allocation, often functionalist in nature, is one key aspect of middle manager role formation. The other results of this paper should have convinced the reader that it is not the only relevant aspect.

Another issue, where the reciprocal view cannot be reduced to a dialogical view, is the need for *legitimacy*. Strategizing plays a strong role in who is regarded as a legitimate party in decision-making (Neilsen and Rao, 1987). A number of the enablers portrayed in Table I deal with the assigning of legitimacy by top managers to middle managers. Invitation (7) to participate in planning is an important example. Encouraging championing without allowing the champions legitimacy to participate on planning constrains

agency. This also brings out another aspect of refereeing (8). Many interviewees argued that participation should involve norms supporting good ideas against bad ones, that is, refereeing (8) between ideas is also called for in championing. As well as being a dialogical activity of discussing ideas, championing is also a process of assigning legitimacy to specific ideas. Top managers are expected to act as judges. This result was anticipated by Bourgeois and Brodwin (1984, p. 242), who championed the 'crescive model of strategizing', where the role of top managers is to act as 'premise-setters and judges', and by Mintzberg (1994b, p. 111) who calls out for top management to 'get their hands dirty digging for ideas, and real strategies are built from the nuggets they uncover'. Middle managers, facing an expectation to facilitate adaptability expect to have official top management trust (5) in middle managers' facilitating activities. Howell and Higgins (1990), as well as Hammer and Turk (1987), found that top management commitment to middle managers increased the legitimacy of those middle managers. That legitimacy in these studies gave middle managers the authority to define goals for the unit, make work assignments, select new employees, and control expenditures that increased their understanding of what was possible for them to achieve. When middle managers are expected to facilitate adaptability, to go out on a limb with new work practices, they need to be reassured that creativity will not be punished. My results concerning the condition of trust (5) underline the importance of accepting failure. Middle managers expected to facilitate adaptability want an atmosphere where it is possible to report failures as well as successes.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have built an account of how the role expectations placed on middle managers impact on their agency. While others have articulated middle management roles, there is little evidence about how middle managers are able to fulfil those roles. I have identified eight enablers of middle management agency and shown how these enablers are associated with middle management ability to fulfil the role expectations placed upon them. Hence, I have opened up the micro dynamics involved in fulfilling roles, which have hitherto been less explored.

I have argued that based on my results, the functional view of middle manager strategic roles needs to be extended to a reciprocal view. This view has strong connections with the dialogical view in strategy process literature, but also envelops more classical themes such as resource allocation and legitimacy. The suggested building blocks of the reciprocal view are explored in this paper in the form of enabling conditions for middle manager agency.

This paper responds to several calls for research made within the micro-strategizing discourse. Whittington (2003) explicates a need to further understand how the work of strategizing is organized. This paper gives new insight on how a crucial aspect of strategy, the relationship between the top management and the middle management as key representatives of the organizational community (Jarzabkowski, 2005) could be conceived through reciprocal role expectations. Jarzabkowski (2004, p. 549), in a review of the field, raises the question: 'How are practices appropriated in order to meet the goals and needs of actors within a given firm . . .?', noting that the answering emphasizes the

importance of agency. In this paper, I have explored the question of middle manager agency, while the enablers on middle management agency can be regarded as a relevant aspect of practice, mediating strategic activity. After accounting for differences between manager strategizing activity in organizational centres and peripheries, Regnér (2003, p. 80) notes that the interactions between management activities in the centres and peripheries should be considered in more detail. In this paper, such interactions have been explored in terms of the expectations top managers, typically located in organizational centres place on middle managers, typically located in peripheries.

There is an ongoing discussion and debate within the micro-strategizing community as to what the proper *outcome variables* for micro-strategizing should be (see, e.g. Johnson et al., 2003). This paper can be viewed as an argument in this discussion. My argument is that while organization-level indicators are one important group of outcome variables (defined as, for instance, the success of strategizing episodes, as in Hendry and Seidl, 2003; Johnson et al., 2003; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2003), another group of useful outcome variables exists at the level of individuals. The enabling of middle manager agency is one such outcome variable. In Jarzabkowski's model of strategic activity, the organizational community contributes to, and resists the goal-directed activity known as organizational strategy (Jarzabkowski, 2005). Success in enabling middle manager agency means that the organization in question has managed to leverage the enthusiasm of its members, enabling them to voice their ideas into the organizational knowledge resource (Burgelman and Grove, 1996; Floyd and Wooldridge, 2000), helping the its strategy to adapt (Jarzabkowski, 2004; Lovas and Ghoshal, 2000). Such an organization also secures the inclusion of its members in implementation activity through increased commitment (Beer and Eisenstat, 1996; Guth and Macmillan, 1986; Hart, 1992; Klein and Sorra, 1996). Middle managers who claim to have strategic agency are in a beneficial relationship with their organization's strategy and are able to contribute to it (Chaffee, 1985; Hales, 2005; Pappas and Wooldridge, 2007).

Organizations do not create, implement or renew strategies. People do. It can be argued that competent and active individuals are a strategic resource for organizations. In a post-industrial society, where the focus of production is moving towards more customized products, more services, and more emphasis on the early parts of a value chain, active individuals at all organizational levels become relevant as strategic agents (Kim and Mauborgne, 1998; Løvendahl and Revang, 1998). The findings in this paper suggest that enabled agency in the fulfilment of their strategic roles enables better utilization of middle managers as a crucial strategic resource.

This paper can also be regarded as a critical statement with regard to the current praxis of strategy, that is, the way strategy is practiced across institutional boundaries (Lumpkin and Dess, 2006; Whittington, 2006; Whittington et al., 2003). Strategy discourse plays an active part in working the subjectivity of organizational stakeholders, marginalizing non-managerial voices (Knights and Morgan, 1991). Strategy is also a resource which can be mobilized in discursive struggles over power in organizations (Laine and Vaara, 2007). A functionalist strategic role model is a discursive resource, which can be employed to marginalize middle manager agency in strategy work. The reciprocal view on roles presents middle manager agency as a legitimate concern in strategy practice.

## Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

In a manner untypical for most strategy research, top managers were not granted voice in this research, as they were excluded from the interviews analysed. Top manager expectations were derived from the accounts of the middle managers. Allowing top managers themselves to reflect their expectations to middle managers would bring another side to the story. This is an important future direction, which was excluded from this paper due to limitations in space and argument breadth, and also because the present top manager interview data do not support such an enterprise.

A further limitation that needs to be addressed is the type of firms presented here. As noted, they are professional service organizations, in which a large number of operative personnel have a degree of self-determination in their work, and therefore, middle manager agency is relevant to their strategy processes. The organizations included in the sample had lots of highly trained, expert personnel. With the data here, the delimitation to include organizations with professional personnel was a conscious one to assure the data had relevance to exploring strategy. A follow-up study in a more manufacturing-type organization with less professionally trained personnel would be highly interesting, in order to see if the same conditions to agency appear in another context.

Finally, the suggested reciprocal view on strategy also brings up the process of *role negotiation*. It can be assumed that while business environments impact on the issue, all organizations are imperfect and that 'perfection' or 'functionality' is always interest-laden and contestable. Roles are negotiated between parties of varying interests through the placing of reciprocal expectations. While my present data set did not investigate the negotiation process itself, it seems safe to suspect that in many organizations, roles are negotiated between parties of varying interests through the placing of reciprocal expectations. The existence of such negotiations also makes roles potentially agency-fulfilling, as negotiation allows for subjects to have an effect on the roles they play, in order to 'act differently' (Giddens, 1979). A further exploration, using a more process-oriented methodology, would no doubt increase understanding of the micro-dynamics within the reciprocal view on the strategy process.

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## NOTES

- [1] I have chosen the term 'micro strategy' to denote a body of literature, which is often also called 'strategy-as-practice'. This choice is harmonized with Johnson et al.'s (2003) paper in the *Journal of Management Studies*.
- [2] I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this formulation.
- [3] The educational background of two interviewees could not be confirmed.
- [4] The notion of planning in strategy literature has been contested by authors with a strategy process orientation. After Mintzberg (1978), it has been acknowledged that strategic plans do not often explain



very well what strategies are realized. However, this realization should not be mistaken for the notion that plans are irrelevant. They are often important media of communication and control, as Mintzberg (1994a) acknowledges.

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