Paradox as a Generative Practice

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Abstract
The more conscious management of paradoxical situations is gaining currency as practitioners wrestle with so called ‘wicked problems’ within regulated policy environments. Organisations involved with improving lives, through furthering development goals, often advance linear frameworks for such problems, amidst contradictory and political inter-dependencies. The paper challenges prevailing practice perspectives on rational strategy that are both claimed and assumed by the mandates of development. Instead, core practices around incremental action occur, which in effect massage the grand strategy. The findings theoretically anchor these central adaptions through invoking Brunsson’s political qualities of organisations and inserting acquired practices as conduits between his four qualities. In extending the theoretical context of Brunsson’s analysis, the paper argues that practices and practitioners sustain and are the carriers of both politics and action towards a calibration of organisational hypocrisy, equilibrium and strategic survival.

Keywords: Strategy Activities and practices (SAP); organisational hypocrisy; nano narratives; development.
JEL classification: M1; 02; 03

Introduction
Advancing development of societies has always carried with it noble notions to improve lives in a sustainable manner. Development has been attempted through redistribution of resources or leveraging local capabilities more intelligently in order to facilitate human and ecological development. Martens (2004:4) supports this and states that “income redistribution between humans – is a phenomenon that is very deeply embedded in human behaviour…. What distinguishes us as human, he argues is “our ability to redistribute and share resources within a much
wider social setting, outside immediate family and kin groups, even with persons we have never met or will never meet...[such as] foreign aid, [which is] worldwide redistribution to far-away places and people.” Radcliffe (2016) claims that this premise is simply spurious, arguing for how capitalism has undermined the common good. Moyo (2009: xviii; 49), however, ventures that where the rich are impelled to help the poor through “aid”, it might well be a perverse cycle that encourages dependency, declines in local livelihoods and facilitates underdevelopment. In fact, perhaps the opposite of improving lives. Yet, countries continue to accept such support, including those countries whose budget does not require any funds from development assistance. (See: South Africa’s Development Co-operation, 1994-2017).

Paradoxically, as well, with the rise of new forms of organisation, social entrepreneurship and intellectual capital leveraged through big data and technology, the macro context of ‘aid’, and attendant development, now faces creative destruction (OECD, 2017; Ramalingam, Laric and Primrose, 2014). Development practitioners globally are expected to undo established norms of tight rational management, and find more open and innovative means to respond to constituencies (Lowe, 2013: 213: Ramalingam, Hernandez, Prieto, & Faith, 2016). New and creative forms of financing are both provided, and challenged, as a new panacea for poverty and inequality, previously addressed through development effectiveness (Busan Fourth High Level Forum, 2011; Mawdsley, Savage, and Kim, 2014). Yet, rational strategies are still systemically and systematically entrenched in terms of how organisations interact within the development or ‘philanthropic’ sectors, despite periods of disruption and transition. (Radcliffe, 2016). Asymmetry continues to characterise the strategic relationships: rational on the side of the givers, attempts at more organic on the side of the receivers (Eyben, 2006 a and b; Easterly, 2002; Lowe, 2013).

This paper takes up the problem of the organisation of financing for development and challenges the landing of such strategies, in practice, as rationally-driven (Abulof, 2015; Easterly, 2002, 2006; Holzapfel, 2016). We argue, instead, for a shift in perspective that seeks to open up micro layers of practices that, in turn, move institutionalised goals towards more contextually relevant strategic outcomes (Ash and Howell, 2016), as well as strategic survival. The data does draw on traditional development co-operation (OECD-DAC, 2013), given the focus of the transition of practice, in the nation under study (South Africa).
‘Aid’ or development architecture has gained prominence for its measurement-driven agendas (Linnerud & Holden, 2016) that are drilled down from multi/bi-lateral levels to communities whose lives are to be ‘improved’. Development funding strategies have privileged the control and measure culture in pervasive ways through ‘value for money’ and ‘results based management’ (Hatton and Schroeder, 2007; Holzapfel, 2016; Vähämäki, Schmidt, & Molander, 2011: 7 and 16; Radcliffe, 2016;) as well as ‘payment by results’ (Lowe, 2013: 213; Holzapfel, 2016) or ‘cash on delivery’ (Center for Global Development, 2014). Economist, William Easterly, seminally, highlights that, ‘It is a lot easier for…agencies to produce observable frameworks rather than actually implement risky programs like “empowering the poor”’. (Easterly, 2002: 25).

The researchers therefore asked, through a locally-situated narrative design, and a strategizing activities and practices (SAP) perspective, the following research question: ‘Within a transition, how do practices of strategic practitioners respond to a formally proclaimed strategy? The paper probes the narratives of practitioners in South Africa who were/are organizationally mandated to orchestrate development strategies, using official development assistance (ODA). Such support, it has been argued, is to enhance the reconstruction of people’s lives from intergenerational, oppressive deprivation towards development. While the data relates to South Africa, this paper has implications for the “wicked problems” of development practices and sustainable development, across the globe. (Gaim & Wåhlin, 2016; Ramalingam, Laric and Primrose, 2014; Ramalingam, 2013).

The theoretical implications of the study thus open up insights within the practices of development—this in the light of current outcomes-based performance management frameworks that are dominating newer forms of development. (Lowe, 2013). The study also narrows a knowledge gap about how strategy practitioners, within an organisational unit, practice strategy in a manner that is not necessarily a configuration of strategy such as that found in official descriptions (see e.g. South Africa. National Treasury: 2003; 2013), but, rather shows human beings inhabiting and working within ‘the skin of’ political and paradoxical organisational systems. The milieu of entwined ambiguity, meaning-making and counter-strategizing are also suggested as fruitful study areas around strategic change, suggested recently by Spee and Jarzabkowski (2017).
Ramalingam (2013:134) advocates for ‘organised complexity’ in development contexts and the need to build the evidence base in these under-theorised and under-practised fields. The changes in development support also require different ways of strategizing, amidst transitions suggested by the previously cited creative destruction. This paper responds to such apertures.

The paper is in five sections. The first introduces the unit of analysis. The second provides an overview of historical and current contexts that both situate the strategy practices and practitioners and disclose the contrasts. The research methods and the conceptual points of departure are described. Data are presented (findings) and, thereafter, discussed. The conclusion identifies limitations and makes recommendations for further investigations.

**Context: a narrative on development assistance: South Africa**

In his analysis of pre-1994 development in relation to the people of South Africa, Fioramonti (2004: 4) recalls that the Special Programme for Victims of Apartheid was unique. The draconian state of apartheid regulations and the policing of activism allowed for the usual procedural controls of systems to be relaxed, as such processes would open up activist organisations to further oppressive measures. More permissive practices were characterised by trust in, and solidarity towards, the Liberation Movement, but were out of the ordinary mould for development agencies. The cause was ‘humanitarian’, given apartheid’s status as a crime against humanity (Centre for Policy Studies, 2001). South Africa’s liberation funding, therefore, set up alternative routines to govern funding, parallel to the routine of international development practices. Such patterns set up embedded practices to contend with socially complex issues. (Williamson, 2013). Furthermore, these practices grounded a looser negotiated approach between the practitioners within South Africa and the development agencies. This entailed creative contextual responses that disbursed development for covert on-the-ground liberation needs, and to bypass formal practice so that detection by the apartheid government was confounded. (Centre for Policy Studies, 2001).

In 1994, South Africa was welcomed as a democracy on the international stage. This created massive-scale change, which included a shift from liberation or ‘under-ground’ funding to Official Development
Assistance within a democratic state. Official development funds were, and still are, governed by The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) Fund Act (Act No 7 of 1994). (South Africa. National Treasury: 2003). Organizational and practice definitions around ODA were written into the adopted Policy framework and procedural guidelines for the management of Official Development Assistance (ODA). (South Africa. National Treasury, 2003). This policy framework is constructed around the global, formalised paradigms of aid effectiveness (Busan Fourth High Level Forum, 2011: OECD-DAC, 2013, South Africa. National Treasury, 2011). South Africa now needed rapidly to shift towards organizing development within globally-anchored development rules. (Ewing and Guliwe, 2008). This now required a re-orientation of practice, with practitioners moving from legitimately bypassing rational strategies to now legitimising such prescribed development strategies and working within ‘the rules of the game’. It could be assumed, if one traces this line of sight, that South Africa’s strategy practices would then become aligned with, and conform to, deliberate, exacting and legalistic patterns inherent in public financing. We challenge this construction.

Research Methodology

We responded to the research question qualitatively, using interpretive paradigms (Schultz and Hatch 1996: 537). Within narrative design and analysis, diverse story lines, documents and memory work were authoritatively associated (Shuman, 2015: 42; Schultz and Hatch 1996: 537; Haug, 1997) to respond to the bid for “the narrative turn” in SAP (Fenton and Langley, 2011:1171).

Methods, able to probe more deeply below the surface of strategy and organisations, were applied through in-depth unstructured interviews (Nicolini, 2013; Paroutis & Heracleous, 2013; Seidl and Whittington, 2014; Suddaby, Seidle & Lè, 2013; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). We used sensitising concepts (Bowen, 2008: 141) around SAP, followed by a central question. (As a strategic practitioner, please tell me the stories, from your experiences of organizing ODA…). A theoretical sample of nine practitioners was interviewed in an initial preliminary exploration, which confirmed the direction of the paper as well as the appeal of the narrative turn. Thereafter, twelve purposively sampled practitioners, including the researcher as a participant, narrated their insider knowledge
(Shuman, 2015: 43; Guest, Bunce and Johnson: 74). Interview conversations with participants from both samples were conducted over six months. As a methodological norm, (Tracy, 2013) ethical considerations were integral to the study.

The sampling frame thus included the relevant public sector organisational units that mainly deal with ODA. The main participants of the study (anonymised) are the senior management layer of the appropriate units. A past member of management was also interviewed.

The first author was also in a senior role in ODA and was a participant observer, having been involved with ODA for eighteen years (1998-2016). This knowledge was integrated into the study through memory work (Haug, 1997:7). The first author, as researcher, took on the role of “organic intellectual” and therefore participated in the construction of the storying, as a participant, deliberately contributing to mutual memory-making. Eighteen years of anecdotal observation formed a backdrop of which two years rendered formal field notes.

Data were also analysed and associated through extracting story-lines from a document review (Bowen, 2009; Shuman, 2015) of twenty-three purposively sampled policy documents, official websites, research papers, newsletters, strategy documents and official ODA reports. This data was mainly used to establish the extant documented strategies, within which the practitioners are expected to practice.

Using ATLAS.ti for its ‘working context’, transparency and collation strengths (Silver and Lewins, 2014: 34), we used ‘structural coding’ and directed content analysis which Saldaña (2015:98) identifies as a means to respond to the research question. Coding was done in line with the theoretical approach of SAP to verify strategic practice bundles or pillars (Nicolini, 2013). The coding led to categories (Saldaña, 2015) that generated aggregated practice-bundles (Nicolini, 2013), derived from the document review, and from single and clustered codes induced from interview and observation data. These bundles provided the detailed, yet deliberate, organisational landscape, therefore addressing the sectoral strategic practice environment (Whittington, 2006: 620).

The second cycle of coding explored the more interpretive strategy-making against the deliberate landscape. (Jarzabkowski, et al, 2016: 254; Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2017). Second-cycle codes were then coupled to the foundational conceptual framework of the study that we had chosen a priori. Codes of contradictions, intelligibility and dissonance led us to

In coherence with the calls for fresh methodologies in SAP (Vaara and Whittington, 2012), the findings are re-created as nano narratives (Williamson, 2016: 863), defined, in a ‘byte-size’ world, as ‘concentrated views… in moments of routine or intensity… provided in novel nano accounts, departing from the tradition of lengthier narrative interview data’. These snippet narratives were derived from the coding-to-theme-to-theorising pathway in Saldaña’s model. (Saldaña, 2015:14).

Conceptual Framing

The strategy as practice research agenda (Jarzabkowski and Spee: 2009; Jarzabkowski and Whittington, 2008; Johnson, Langley, Melin & Whittington, 2007; Vaara and Whittington: 2012, Wang, Lou & Hong, 2016; Whittington, 1996; 2003; 2006) asks questions about what strategists do, in practice, for their strategising to be integral to the organisational direction, strategic outcomes, success and/or survival of the organisation. Given the multiplicities of strategies, strategists and strategic practices when one considers such a human-centred approach, it is not surprising that scholars in the field acknowledge that the strategy-as-practice field departs from the privileged mainstream of economic-driven models of strategy and, as such, requires more empirical work, such as this study, to establish its ontological positioning (Seidl and Whittington, 2014). Our intention was to explore the micro-level of strategic agency against the macro structure of deliberate pronounced strategy in terms of ODA (Jarzabkowski, Kaplan, Seidl & Whittington, 2016), predicating that deliberate policy may be pursued adaptively and iteratively.

To do this we used the theoretical lens of ‘embeddedness’ (Seidl and Whittington, 2014: 2) of more intense interrelated strategy practices and their outcomes, following the line of argument of Jarzabkowski et al., (2016). We traced both the declared and practice parlements of broader strategy in the society of ODA. Patterns of contradiction and paradox (Gaim & Wåhlin, 2016) were theoretically recognised. We attended to particular instances of how practitioners ‘interpreted, manipulated, and improvised’ strategy practice while they were also immersed with ‘entanglement and interdependence’ (Jarzabkowski, Kaplan, Seidl & Whittington, 2016:254), in attempts to implement policy. Brunsson’s

Brunsson (2002; 2006: xiii), in explaining the ‘organization of hypocrisy’, initially premises the consensual and normative views that organisations are formed and exist in order to work collectively towards the production of goods and/or services in a co-ordinated, effective and efficient manner, a manner which ‘acts’. (Brunsson, 1986; 1993; 1995; 2006). This is the formal organisation. In the so-called real world, however, there are environments, processes, structures and outputs (Brunsson, 2006: 213) that do not neatly fit into normative conformations of organisations and are intensely anchored in politics, including the winning of diverse stakeholder support. Brunsson thus follows on his initial contention and shows that managing inconsistencies, through dissonance and disassociation, enables survival. In fact, such contradictions should be specifically built into organisational ‘DNA’. These measures coalesce, then, into the informal organisation. Brunsson (1986, 1993, 2006) therefore provides an ‘action model’ as well as a ‘political model’ of organisations, as well as a mixture of both. (Brunsson, 2002; 2006). Pure action organisations operate on the basis of consistency which incorporates talk, decisions and actions that deliver products in coherent and predictable manners. Organisations which act and/or react politically are organisations constituted around shifting environmental norms, that have conflicting structures and that have outputs that are inconsistent in relation to their ‘talk, decisions and products’ (Brunsson, 1986: 181; 2006: 213). Organisations that operate within the political mode survive effectively and grow on the basis of ‘organisational hypocrisy’, which Brunsson (1986: 1) describes as ‘necessary’ and what we could expect of organisations.

In his discussions of such organisational configurations, Brunsson (2006) indicates that the public sector, in particular, which incorporates more politically-based institutions, requires deepened study as there has been little attention paid to contributions and interpretations made by the sector in relation to organisational theory. In addition, Brunsson does not attend to the role of practices in such institutions. These are gaps addressed through this research.

In consideration of the above theoretical position, ODA might well be considered as a political organisation, located as it is in the public sector and dealing with wide-ranging contradictions from the environment

(Collier and Dollar, 2004; Easterly, 2002, 2006; Holzapfel, 2016; Quadir, 2013), multiple, conflicting and competing interests (Moyo, 2009; Radcliff, 2016; Ramalingan, 2013), and problem orientation and inconsistencies integral to the complexities of development (Abbas and Niyiragira, 2009; Easterly, 2006; Easterly and Williamson, 2011; Ramlingam, et al., 2014). Development and public policy are seen to deal with ‘wicked problems’ (Ramalingam, 2013; Gaim & Wåhlin, 2016).

While the data confirmed paradoxes that Brunsson’s scholarship makes explicit, they also showed complex responsiveness in the micro incremental practices of strategy. Complex responsiveness (Stacey and Griffin: 2006, Stacey: 2012) became further instrumental theoretical positions that, as Galle (2011: 91) states, provided the ‘task’ lighting of the subject matter, providing ‘more concentrated illumination’ and accelerating a more nuanced understanding of practitioners’ strategy work in ODA.

Stacey and Griffin (2006: 3) argues that there is a naive assumption that the public sector is constituted of simple systems programmed around intended global patterns which are expressed through a targeted, rational and almost cybernetic management of ‘the system’ and its performance. Despite this, programming and systems, in ODA, are taken up in the discipline and enacting of logical framework and results-based management (Cracknell, 1989; Earle, 2003; Wiggins and Shields: 1995). Stacey does temper his assertion by indicating that there are also people who bring a more sophisticated level of systems thinking to within the public sector. Challenging this assumption, and in the light of his tempered assertion, Stacey (2006: 33) cautions that people should not be seen as ‘simple rule-following human beings’, an organisational tenet taken up by Gaim & Wåhlin (2016: 34), who argue for creative people working within coexisting paradoxical tensions. Organisations and systems, like strategies, are not things, but are instead an intricate set of relational interactions between people (and their practices) and the infrastructures of their organisations (Stacey and Griffin, 2006). As such, Stacey (2012) considers organisational life not only at the level of the macro, but pointedly refers us to the local and micro. At this micro level, organisations might better be understood through the closer study of paradoxical strategising practices of the organisation and, in understanding these strategising practices, understand how both people and organisations continue to cope, survive (Brunsson, 1986; 1993;
2006) and even thrive. (Chia and Holt, 2006; Chia and Mackay, 2007; Suddaby, et al., 2013; Gaim & Wåhlin, 2016).

Our review and subsequent data thus led us to the consonance between Brunsson’s constituents of a political organisation and complex responsive processing of relating (Stacey and Griffin, 2006). This alignment is demonstrated in the following table which shows how Brunsson’s characteristics have the close-to-equivalent characteristics in complex adaptive or responsive processes of relating. Table 1 presents an alignment of these respective characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of the Political Organisation</th>
<th>Characteristics of adaptive and responsive processes within systems of complexity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paradoxical and inconsistent</td>
<td>Contradictory and contains paradox; often in state of non-equilibrium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrasting organisational structures: formal and normative and informal and performative/ritualised</td>
<td>Formal and covert informal patterns at play as people respond to complexity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political activity as a form of organisational hypocrisy</td>
<td>Political actions as a form of chaos or evolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict structure</td>
<td>Disjuncture and chaos can take the forms of conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existence of organisational hypocrisy that leads to survival</td>
<td>Ordinary everyday processes of relating allow people to cope with complexity and uncertainty of organizational life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergent outputs as opposed to action outputs or in ‘real organisations’: part action, part political</td>
<td>Outcomes that move along continuum of emergence and intentional</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not overt or conscious</td>
<td>‘Tacit and unconscious’ (Stacey 1995: 493)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balancing a multiplicity of ideological networks</td>
<td>Self-organising in processes of emergence; local networks support emergence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People expressing contradictory ideas and practising inconsistent ideologies within a complex environment</td>
<td>Human responsiveness that expresses contradictions within complexity</td>
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These theoretical perspectives, as discussed above, framed the exploration of strategising practitioners as they calibrate strategic
outcomes (Jarzabkwoski et al., 2016), amidst the political attributes of the ODA system. These calibrations, entwined in both practices and practitioners, entail the use of the requisite hypocrisy. (Brunsson, 2006).

**Findings**

The strategy practices established through the document review are described with their descriptive nano elements and thematic antecedents. Table 2 presents a summary of the strategy practices described with their nano elements and thematic antecedents.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Policy, Formalised strategy, Global alignment to development effectiveness, Policy Prescriptions</td>
<td>Formulaic presentation of strategy</td>
<td>Practice bundles of formal ODA strategy elements: RDP/NDP; Development Effectiveness Agendas; Strategic Partnership; Executive/Parliamentary processes and documents Medium Term Strategic Framework/Budget; Outcomes Approach; Strategic Plans; Country Strategy Papers; Agreements; Guidelines; Programming; Annual consultations, Formal meetings; Logical Framework Approach; Reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Espousing/acknowledging legitimacy of formal strategy, Informal strategy, Multiplicity and Contradiction, Attempts at alignment, Massaging policy and issue selling</td>
<td>Espousing Strategy and seeking Alignment</td>
<td>Multiple agendas: inherited flexible systems (pre-1994) are overtaken by formal ODA; South Africa’s transition towards alignment; yet practice on the ground remains contradictory and practitioners espouse policy while juggling multiple agendas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading the system, Finessing, Reframing, Mediation, Translating</td>
<td>Intelligible Responsiveness</td>
<td>What is stated in policies is juxtaposed and massaged through responding to misalignments or conflict in the system with intelligibility and responsiveness</td>
</tr>
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Table 2. Summary of the strategy practices described with their nano elements and thematic antecedents. Source: authors
Formal organisation (compliance),
Informal adaptations (contradictory),
Seeking equilibrium,
Contradictory compliance
Paradox
Made up of the formal and informal organisations; complexities. Hypocrisy allows for mediation between the complexities and therefore for the organisation of ODA/DPs to be sustained and survive.

These described practices establish the extant proclaimed strategy. Data presented from interviews, as nano narratives, are headed with in vivo codes (Saldaña, 2015), selected for their evocative imagery, and are accompanied by the interpreted strategy practice.

Nano Narrative 1: Practice of espousing strategy while seeking alignment: ‘...the art of managing multiple agendas... that intricacy, that finesse’ (William)
We established practice bundles of the deliberate strategy landscape. Yet, countering this prevailing view, the data capture the espousing of strategy within actual manifold agendas. Attempts at strategic alignment are described against the mandated and deliberate agenda (first, the RDP/ later the National Development Plan – NDP) and strategies of ODA. Yet participants relate the ‘finesse’ of choreographing formalised strategy against parallel and often seductive imperatives. Data categories showed that formalised strategy bundles abound and that each practitioner sells the deliberate strategy, citing it and explaining it. Yet what is practised is the ever-present active massaging of the plans within conflicting demands.

Susanna: This is integral to your story, an RDP office: a whole lot of donors, some of whom had very strategic, important links with the ANC in exile, like the XX and YYY... wanted to be part of building a new South Africa. It was romantic, it was idealistic, it was the sexiest thing in the world...everybody flooded in with bags of money.

William: The issue is that ODA started from a fraternal relations perspective and moved... become more sophisticated and we need to up our game to meet that sophistication, that intricacy that finesse. [From] the honeymoon period, [donors] became worried and created a whole range of additional bureaucracy, and South Africa said this is actually not what we want for development.

Organizationally, the transition from the pre-1994 looser practices (the “sexy”; “honeymoon” period), in the introductory problem
statement, and the bureaucracy of official relations become problematic. Practices that had held true for political liberation funding now had to be aligned to formal agreements. Activists of the struggle now become mainstream strategists and find themselves straddling a paradoxical tension.

Felicity: [We have]… a disconnect between political and strategic …so let’s allow for parallel processes that do ‘get’ to each other…because you have such a lot of just parallels … everything … looks so smooth on paper, this is the time frame for this…but it never happens like that…everybody wakes and like oh, there’s now guidelines to satisfy on the donor’s side and there’s your public finance management act on the other part of the local partners side that needs to satisfied and there’s really a disjuncture…”

Amidst formulaic means of implementing strategy, practices of issue-selling and story-telling try to mimic or modulate the deliberate agenda. The strategists provide exemplars of seeking alignment amidst contradictory circumstances.

Charles: …my experience of strategy, in this space. Things happen, there’s an international agreement, there’s a move, there’s a new paper, there’s a new policy, there’s research coming out. You take these ideas on, and you digest them and you apply them without even knowing or thinking into your current practice and so, that’s how quick it is, it really happens quickly, there’s always a new perspective.

Peter:…[S]trategies has had to be constantly readjusted, that’s what it’s about. I mean strategic planning is about saying at this point in time with what you know here and what you don’t know here or what you think you don’t know here you can do the following things. But by next year you need to readjust the strategy …it is always fluid.

Felicity: …In terms of the strategy, it could have taken forward much better if there wasn’t this disconnect between the programming and signing of financing agreements basically …if there was more honesty around where you heading to a certain extent.

Amidst balancing multiple agendas, the practitioners were also seen to respond with practices that show how to sustain inconsistencies (Brunsson, 2006) through responding, intelligibly, to the dissonance in the system. This introduces Nano Narrative 2.

Nano Narrative 2: Practices of intelligible responsiveness: ’...we apply the theory when we use these concepts in the big forums, but what does
While observing the workings of a political organisation and hearing its stories, we encounter complex responsive people using intelligibility to counter the misalignment and conflict in the system (Nicolini, 2013). We hear that strategy, while it is stated in policies, is not reified. It needs to be hands-on and driven by attuned, conscious micro-practices.

Giselle: …got to find the balance between the necessary red tape and the unnecessary…so when you stretching the boundaries and trying to make things happen you’ve also at the back of head you’ve got a piece of legislation. The person is not using that [stretching] to get away with something or have an easy time, the person’s actually seeing the complexity of the situation and knowing how to respond in order to get you to what needs to be done.

Practising intelligible responsiveness entails a balancing act between the espoused and the practised strategies. The dynamic interactions between inconsistent attributes (Brunsson, 2006) are refereed by human-driven practice.

Charles: I think that’s the word, ‘responsiveness’. We are forced to be responsive to the system, because the environment is constantly changing … the system works, it does work, but, at the same time, it’s a human driven system. In development, more than anything else, it is human driven. You know, you’re not building machines.

The intention is to sustain the system through these hypocritical (Brunsson, 2006) practices. Consequentially, one such practice is reframing and, while there are several examples from the participants, the following exemplar is illuminating: A donor prescribes the policy to fund the HIV and AIDS crisis. The recipient receiving the funds does not have the mandate to implement HIV and AIDS responses, but does have the mandate to improve government systems. The practitioners, through responsive interpreting and reframing, convince the donor that HIV and Aids would be better addressed, if at a strategic level, there is a focused programme to address the country’s health systems as a whole, and not simply HIV and AIDS in isolation. This was but one of many examples of spinning the implementation to fit the formal agreements.

A second exemplar of a survival practice is mediation. Several participants speak of different layers of mediating between policy, politics, people and implementation on the ground. An assumed tidy world of strategy, delivering according to the agenda of development, is disrupted by what a seminal participants outlines as ‘untidy’ to-ing and
fro-ing between donor and government as practitioners spend a year of bureaucracy meeting, massaging and debating on a small set of common indicators: ‘…there was even a fight…about how to create indicators…’ (Peter). Peter’s words, reproduced here verbatim, illustrate this practice of mediation even further:

What government tried to do was to persuade them [development partners] away from saying to us you have to do the following indicators, because that was how we were going to use ODA. We were saying to them, ODA is for value addition… it had to do what supported Governments’ strategic direction and indicators…[so we had] to re-orientate the view, and it was not an easy thing…

Giselle sums this up in her explanation of the importance of translating formal strategy into practice:

…[we] drive this whole process by saying whatever theorising we’re doing and pontificating around issues, what does it mean in our practice? Is this adding value [as ODA policy states] to the Government that we are supporting? So, how are you translating all of this, in practice?

Therefore, the practices of attuned responsiveness, reframing and mediating, while ostensibly smoothing the surface, also speak to the creative tension of paradox (Gaim and Wåhlin, 2016).

Nano Narrative 3: Contradictory compliance as a generative practice:
‘I give, in a way, schizophrenic answers…’ (Maria)
The story of paradox is oftentimes the narrated and observed tale of the formal and informal organisation (Brunsson, 1986; Stacey, 1995). On the one hand, the formal organisation exists with a declared strategy that, nevertheless, emanates tension and questioning. It is held as the binding agent of formal policy and the ‘right thing to do’ within the mandates of policy. Not consciously surfaced, but in the sub-text layers of practitioners and practices, is the informal organisation. It is made up of contradictory compliance (seemingly complying with the rules, yet with an interpretation that is more adaptive and intelligible so as to rationalise rule-following while massaging diverse stakeholder interests). Hence, strategy is practised through daily re-interpretations, re-framing and ultimately survival within Brunsson’s ‘political attributes’ (2006: 213). Yet, at the same time, the formal strategy may not be lost and is invoked (see also: RDP and NDP) to provide referent power amidst the daily asymmetrical informal dimensions so as to reconcile competing demands and to ‘simplify a complex reality’ (Gaim and Wåhlin, 2016:
The following extracts demonstrate the contradictions in the system and the calibrations between the formal and informal dimensions:

Charles: And that means that I probably do more, say more in coffee breaks, in talking to colleagues and supporting certain stances, rather than you know, dominating a policy discussion in plenary. That’s the practice, the practice is influence… it does become a hidden agenda…

Interviewer Yet, you’ve got a rational strategy that you’re now implementing…

Charles: You know what, we do… except development co-operation is a conflation of so many different interests at play… The strategy is a guide, the strategy is part of cajoling, convincing and motivating, the strategy paints this picture, a better South Africa for all and that’s a different thing for everyone…

Felicity: So you have all the regulations, that’s good, but there’s this disconnect to get to implementation… so a lot gets lost in terms of that…

The quotations above are but a sample of data that combined to demonstrate both the organisation of hypocrisy (Brunsson, 2006) and the umpiring role of practices to facilitate survival and equilibrium (Brunsson, 2006; Stacey, 1995). The data, while responding to the articulated gaps, also responds to a gap in ‘practical competence in divergent situations’ as well as explorations of ‘micro practices’ amidst ambiguity (Gaim and Wåhlin, 2016). Practitioner competence within disjunctive situations, therefore, might well be about the practices demonstrated by such data. These issues and the data of the study are taken further in the discussion that follows.

Discussion

As our data substantiate, we distilled core elements that constitute practice bundles (Nicolini, 2013) and shaped these into narrative accounts of how strategy, in reality, is practiced against a proclaimed official plan. While the ‘case’ was one of South Africa’s development, there is sufficient evidence that development agencies work with prescribed goals and plans (See United Nations Sustainable Development Goals; Organisation for Economic and Development Cooperation: Development Assistance Committee; World Bank and bilateral development partner strategies), yet might well be under pressure to go through change. (Ramalingam, 2013).
We responded to the research question (repeated for ease of reference: ‘Within a transition, how do practices of strategic practitioners respond to a formally proclaimed strategy?) through findings and interpretations that follows.

The practice lens, as presented in this research, uncovered the rendering of contradictory and assumed political stratagems. Practice (SAP) is a hitherto theoretical dimension not covered by Brunsson whose organisational theory on political characteristics include: ‘the environment of inconsistent norms’; ‘conflict’ at the level of structure; problem-focused and ‘rationalistic processes’ as well as ‘outputs’ that are equivocal in terms of the interplay of ‘talk, decisions and products’. (Brunsson, 2006: 213). Ramalingam et al., (2014) anticipated the need for a shift in global development practices that need to address wicked problems during anticipated or real transitions. This study provides some of the exploratory flesh of how practitioners may respond in a localised manner, using both politics as well as incremental action, as opposed to keeping only grand strategic swathes of development in mind.

South Africa, as one player, within the chronological trajectory of its evolving systems, takes on formal practices of ODA in alignment with its structure of government. Yet the data allude that this micro lens is founded in macro expected practice, structure and processes of international partners. The influence of the wide-spread development partners, with their more mature democracies, indicates a practice environment, drawing from their broader socialised practices (Whittington, 2007). These established practices are brought to bear on low income and emerging economies that do not necessarily respond to the sophistication of systems (Easterly and Williamson, 2011), while they are grappling with the complexities of their home-grown growth and survival.

Within this situated contradictory space, we discerned incremental and embedded patterns of strategy practices that have been reproduced, developed, adapted, directed and tweaked. The main organizational practices (Jarzabkowski et al: 2007) of espousing strategy, alignment, responsiveness, reframing, mediation and paradox happen in a web of inter-alia: messiness, negotiations, issue-selling, politicking, romanticising, rationalising/ trade-offs and ‘talk’ (Brunsson 1986: 7) between development givers and recipients. These routines, as this research suggests, are established through responsive practitioners, equivocally spanning the disjunctive formal and informal organisations,
while seeking equilibrium for strategic outcomes, within contextual complexity (Stacey, 1995). The actions are also undertaken in the interests of improving lives, the so-called intention of the development co-operating partners. Following Brunsson (2006), we find the use of organisational hypocrisy as one of the productive solutions by which these tensions could be managed. ‘Hypocrisy is seen as a solution, it possesses moral advantages and it is often impossible to avoid’. (Brunsson: 2006:xi).

Therefore, unlike a so-called normative view of hypocrisy which is treated as ‘dysfunctional, problematic and to be avoided at all cost’, the practice of double standards (Brunsson 2006: xvi; 1986: 4) is part of managing the tensions and intellectual endeavours around the artificial separation of ‘the formal and informal organization.’ (Stacey: 1995: 488; Brunsson: 2006:7: 206). Practitioners deal with and ‘survive’ the complex strategy demands of development architecture, by infusing practices with ‘organized hypocrisy’ amidst wicked problems (Brunsson: 1995, 2002; Ramalingam, 2013). Because of the transitions in the dynamic world of aid, practitioners are required to walk a tight rope of alignment and responsiveness, artfully interpreting their strategy journey. (Eyben, 2006; Whittington, 2006). Practising strategy, therefore, at a granular level, entails both complexity and hypocrisy. Strategizing together with organisational hypocrisy allow the parties to build deliberately actions of ‘inconsistencies into the organization and into the organizational output’ (Brunsson, 2006: 13; 206), given that most public sectors faces problem that cannot easily be solved or resolved. In this case, the public sector faced an additional problem: how to undo a history of organic practice and reformulate it into an expected formalised strategy. This has implications for strategic change (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2017) that has to accommodate the manifold slippery meanings of development assistance.

Also, in the use of micro-practice, so as to extend Brunsson’s thesis, we discerned that Brunsson’s (2006:19; 213) ‘political organisation’ has more ‘action’ than previously assumed: manifested in practitioners’ creative, adaptive actions. These incremental measures are detected as forms of action only when and if organisations recognise that micro actions do constitute interpretive strategy instead of focusing only on best practice (Jarzabkwoski et al., 2016) and/or grand scales of strategy.

Graphically, we depict the contention on micro strategizing within political attributes, in Figure 1 as follows:
Therefore, when Brunsson (2006) questions the interrelations between the ellipses of the figure of political attributes of organisations, as he does (see: Brunsson, 2006: 212-215), we overlay Brunsson’s interconnecting arrows with daily, intermeshed configurations of the strategising practices as connectors or practice carriers between Brunsson’s four dimensions. (Brunsson, 2006: 213).

By adopting a practice-based lens as complementary to the other four existing dimensions of political processing (environment, process, structure and output), incremental practices may, therefore, allow the systemic dissonance to be better discerned, used, understood and worked with, within organisations that have political leanings (Brunsson: 1986; 1993; 2006).

The central implication, therefore, is that the strategising practices, as daily levels of activities are in themselves micro actions, or are part of micro politics, towards a strategic outcome. Therefore, while action-driven organisations might well see the marks of more obvious and dramatic actors producing central action-oriented outputs, the practitioners of this political world calibrate micro activities through various elucidated practices to achieve an output. This output might well
be strategic compliance with, or achievement of, the expected outcomes, but, within the world of hypocrisy, it might well be seen as ‘contradictory compliance’. The summative concept of contradictory compliance also modestly deepens Jarzabkowski, et al.’s views that strategy is ‘neither deliberate nor emergent…[but] is continuous deliberation of interpreted, manipulated, and improvised’ practices (2016: 254) of people who go beyond the economic man and woman to the responsive emotive men and women who speak in both text and sub-text as they strategise, respond and adapt.

This study therefore adds to the model of the political qualities of organisation through inserting practices as central conduits or associations between the four qualities. In extending the theoretical context of Brunsson’s figure (2006: 213, 1986: 181) with practices, and with practices being inherently based at micro activity, we are contending that micro calibrations of practices introduce a subtle level of ‘action’ into the real world of organisations. These micro elements are made up of ‘patterns of action with the sub-text of politics’ and ‘patterns of politics with the sub-text of actions’. The activity is undertaken by various practitioners who play an integral role in working with strategy, not only through their creativity…, but also through ‘resistance and reinterpretation’ (Whittington: 2010: 121), as has been shown through the findings and interpretation of the data.

Beyond this, we have also introduced the very real existence and implications of strategic practices into a figure that has, thus far, been limited to norms, structure, processes and outputs. We posit that Brunsson’s theory has not, until this study, been opened up to the practice perspective.

Conclusion

This exploration found that South Africa’s ODA is not necessarily only about the pursuit of planned-for development goals for the sake of nation and humanity, but an intensely political construction between role players within international relations who talk, act, legitimise and respond in complex ways that calibrate the system towards ‘a necessary, [and responsive] hypocrisy’ (Brunsson: 1993; Stacey: 2012; Stacey and Griffin: 2006).

The research has a number of implications for development programmes within the public sector and perhaps even for the
understanding of organisational strategy, also within the public sector. The latter is an area, to which Brunsson (2006) alerted scholars, as being under-theorised. ODA and public sector practitioners need to examine current strategy practice in the light of how the dissonance between espoused strategy and strategy-as-practised operates. This would imply recognising the value for organisational hypocrisy as a survival and coping mechanism which allows people within the organisation to be more responsive to a multiplicity of differing, but perhaps equally important, expectations.

This study was undertaken following an exploratory research process that brought forth a more human-centred ‘take’ on ODA within a transitional public sector setting. As such, this research has its limitations in that it has explored a country that has a responsible track record in the management of ODA and international relations (Alden and Schoeman: 2013; South Africa, 2008; Vickers: 2012). There is therefore room to apply these theoretical implications to other settings of ODA where the contours of politics, development needs, and the management of public monies might be more complicated and complex.

The practice turn, in the light of its confluence with organisational hypocrisy and complex adaptivity and responsiveness, requires far more empirical ventures in order to develop a more robust view of what it is able to bring to these evolving theoretical approaches. Equally, organisationally hypocritical practices, as complex responsive processes equivocating between deliberate and emergent strategies (Jarzabkowski, et al, 2016) and meaning making during change (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2017) may render a more insightful view of the contested practice landscape, illustrating that it requires far more intense examination and exploration.

Taking into account these limitations and areas for future study, but, in full consideration of the empirical findings, the research reinforced, within organisational studies, the worth of strategy as practice, organisational hypocrisy and complex responsive relating as useful lenses to understanding strategy in a public sector setting and beyond the documented scripts and espoused statements of that strategy. Certainly, it allowed broader insight into how strategy practitioners live out and cope within a complex continuum of intentional and unintentional practice options. People, we discovered, inhabit such strategy day-to-day and also enter and need to survive within the paradoxical layers of such strategy.
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