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Strategic discourses of 'competitive advantage': Comparing social representation of causation in academia and practice

Low Perren

Brighton Business School, University of Brighton, Mithras House, Lewes Road, Brighton BN2 4AT, UK

KEYWORDS

Competitive advantage;
Discourse;
Causation;
Practice;
Social representation

Summary The term 'competitive advantage' is frequently used in academia and practice, but does it mean the same thing? Academics are concerned about the gap between academia and practice. This paper reveals the nature of the gap by comparing the social representations of competitive advantage in both settings. Based on empirical comparisons of academic articles and practitioner annual reports, the analysis reveals surprising similarities and crucial differences. For example, both portray competitive advantage as tangible and favour internal causes generated by the organisation; but practitioners favour strong claims about simple causal chains, whereas academics favour hedged claims about complex causal chains. Based on these findings, tactics are recommended to bridge the academic to practitioner gap.

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Introduction

The term 'competitive advantage' is frequently used in academia and practice. Last year it appeared in 2400 academic and 1900 practitioner articles (Business Source Premier). It is used in both settings, but does it mean the same thing? Previous work suggests not (Moscovici, 1984, 2000), but is it right? Management academics are concerned about the gap between academia and management practice (e.g. Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2009; Starkey & Tempest, 2005). Comparing the meaning of competitive advantage in both settings reveals the nature of the gap and indicates bridging tactics. Given the frequent use of the term in both contexts and the concerns regarding the relevance of management

academics, it is surprising that this comparison has not been conducted before.

This paper addresses this gap. It is based on empirical comparisons of the meaning of competitive advantage in academic articles and company annual reports. The first section provides a theoretical background in two parts: the theoretical underpinning of the social representation of meaning in academia and practice; a review of the conceptual discussions of competitive advantage. The second section provides research questions. These build upon the theoretical discussion to focus the empirical investigation. The third section provides the method. This justifies academic and practitioner 'cause-effect' sentences containing the term competitive advantage as a way of surfacing meaning in both contexts. It explains the extraction of the sentences and their analysis. The fourth section provides the results. This gives an analysis of sentences in academia and practice, followed by a comparison between them. The fifth section discusses what is needed to bridge the gap between

E-mail address: l.perren@brighton.ac.uk.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2012.12.001>

Please cite this article in press as: Perren, L. Strategic discourses of 'competitive advantage': Comparing social representation of causation in academia and practice. *Scandinavian Journal of Management* (2013), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2012.12.001>

academia and practice. The final section summarises the findings and implications.

Theoretical background

Social representation of meaning in academia and practice

Terms, like competitive advantage, gain meaning through use. Repeated use associates the unfamiliar term with familiar terms so they become 'anchored' and can be absorbed into different settings (Duveen, 2000; Moscovici, 1984, 2000). Over time such interactions lead to the meaning of terms having some stability, although a certain amount of fluidity remains (Gergen, 1997; Potter & Weatherell, 1987). Since individuals in groups interact more with each other than with outsiders, terms gain nuanced meanings that are shared by particular groups (Gergen, 1997). Individuals are not pawns in this social representation game, but have their own agency and wish to construct meanings (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005). They call upon terms to make sense of their world and to legitimise actions (De Rond & Theitart, 2007; Giddens, 1986; Jarzabkowski & Sillince, 2007; Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007). These processes can lead to the meanings of long-standing terms becoming 'taken for granted' by the wider society (Berger & Luckmann, 1972) and for important variations of meaning at the local level (Gergen, 1997). There is continuous interplay at all levels in this construction of the meaning (Jarzabkowski, 2008; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007).

Academia and practice are subject to these processes and can be viewed as two separate groups. Actors in each group are more likely to interact with each other than outsiders; they are likely to have shared rationales for legitimisation and also to share sense-making strategies (Gergen, 1997). Therefore, it is expected that the meaning of the term competitive advantage will vary between academia and practice. Furthermore, given the importance of competitive advantage to strategy (Powell, 2001), these differences will reflect underlying assumptions about the nature of strategy.

Moscovici (1984) can throw some light on the differences expected between academia and practice. He looked at how terms from psychoanalysis were transferred to and represented in the 'commonsense' world of lay people. Much of his work was concerned with the diffusion of scientific ideas to the wider society. This is outside the remit here. The term competitive advantage is different in this respect, as it was not generated by academics and then transferred to practice; rather it is likely to have been co-constructed in both groups at the same time. Nevertheless, the differences he finds in the academic and the commonsense worlds are still germane here. Academic representations of competitive advantage will be expected to be tightly defined, to be formalised, scientific and have alleged independence (Bangerter, 1995). In contrast, practice representations would be expected to be loosely defined, informal, commonsense based and dependent on who is making the representation and in what context (Bangerter, 1995). This predicted gap between academic and practitioner representation of competitive advantage, if correct, hints at the challenge that strategy academics face to be relevant.

Conceptual representation of competitive advantage and causation

The discussion above has provided the underlying theoretical lens of representation for this research. Before launching into the empirical analysis of representations in academia and practice, it will be helpful to have an overview of the conceptual discussions of competitive advantage in the literature. It needs to be emphasised that this is not the systematic analysis of the representation in academia, which is to follow. This is an outline of the key conceptual debates. The aims are to understand the conceptual limits of competitive advantage within these debates, to provide a broad framework of elements to inform the empirical analysis and to provide a shared understanding of the debates.

Understanding the causal relations between competitive advantage, sustained superior performance and other factors is central to the strategic management project (Barney, 1991; Powell, 2001). The representation of causal relations between terms (representing things) gives insight into the core characteristics of their meaning (Sloman, 2005). How people represent the interaction between terms (representing things) reveals the nature of the term and ultimately how it may be portrayed to "intervene in the world" (Sloman, 2005). For competitive advantage, understanding how its causal relations are represented is central to understanding the underlying meaning behind the term. Since competitive advantage is at its heart of strategy (Barney, 1991; Porter, 1985; Powell, 2001), understanding these causal representations is also core to understanding the strategic management project. Therefore, the representation of the causal relations of competitive advantage is important.

Causal relations with a term, in this case competitive advantage, can be shown by putting the term at the centre of a diagram with things that cause the term on the left (upstream) and things that the term causes on the right (downstream) (Sloman, 2005). For example, an atomic explosion might be at the centre of the diagram, upstream causality might include a chain reaction and downstream causality might include radiation fallout. The complexity of upstream and downstream causality can vary considerably depending on the purpose of the person making the representation.

Fig. 1 uses this approach to provide an overview of the conceptual discussions of competitive advantage. Similar diagrams will be used to conduct the more systematic empirical analysis of academic and practitioner representation later in the paper. This framework cannot capture all the intricacies of the conceptual debates; it captures key debates that extended the representation of causal relations with competitive advantage. Fig. 1 is not intended to plot a Hegelian progression of ideas, so earlier representations are not bad and later representations good. For example, Porter's (1985) representation of competitive advantage may be earlier than Barney's (1991) but it does not make it better or worse. It also does not mean that a later representation necessarily stands for the mainstream representation, so Barney (1991) has not necessarily superseded Porter (1985). The story of the upstream and downstream causal representation is captured in most standard texts now and as such uncontroversial (e.g. Grant, 2010; Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 2009). Representation of complexities

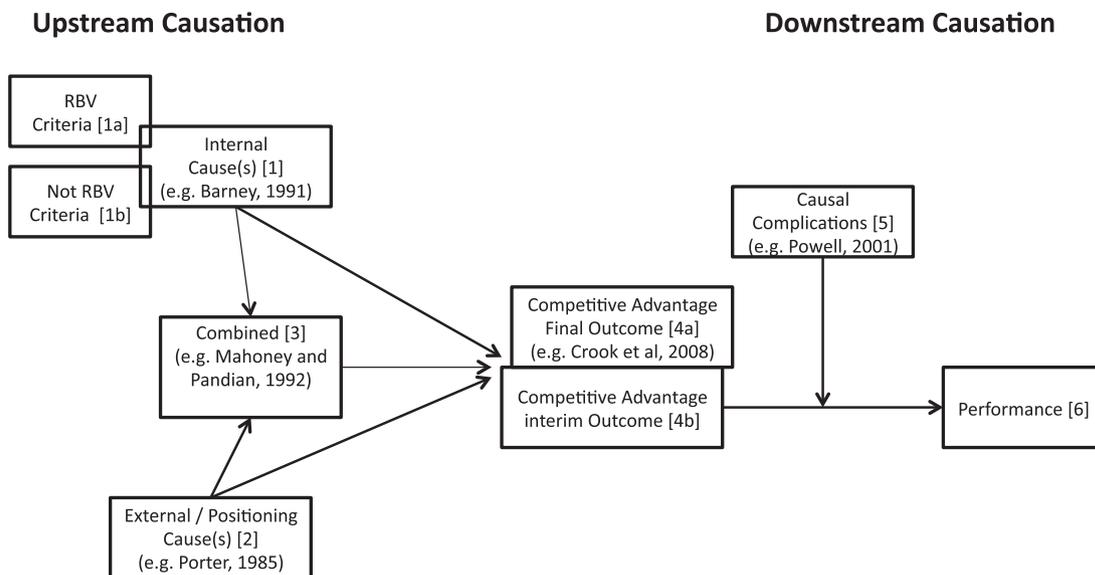


Figure 1 Social representation of competitive advantage and causality in conceptual discussions.

that might affect downstream causality is more controversial; here the framework has been particularly influenced by Powell's (2001) philosophical questions and the stream of subsequent debate that they prompted. The framework that results from this review cannot claim to be comprehensive, but it can claim to capture the key features and boundaries of the debate. Fig. 1 is explained below. Elements on the diagram are numbered to help cross refer.

Upstream causation

Porter's (1985) text brought competitive advantage into mainstream strategy thinking (Powell, 2001).¹ He emphasises the importance of positioning the firm in the external environment [2] as the key cause of sustained competitive advantage [4b] and thus superior performance [6]. Firms were advised to pick a 'generic strategy' (differentiation or cost leadership) so they were clearly positioned and not 'stuck in the middle' (Porter, 1985).

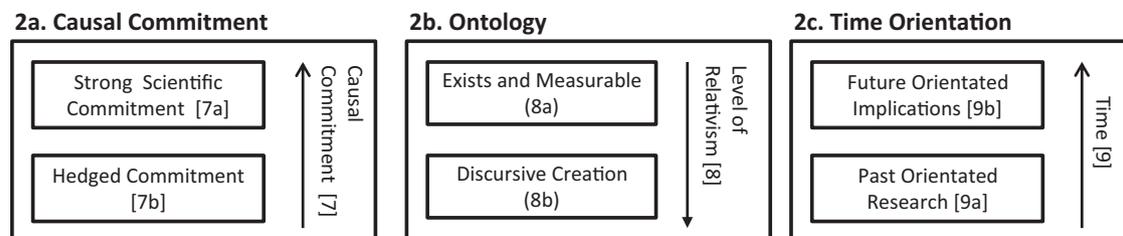
The resource based view (RBV) counter-balances the positioning approach by emphasising internal causes [1] as the key cause of competitive advantage [4b] and thus superior performance [6] (Barney, 1986, 1991; Conner, 1991; Crook, Ketchen, Combs, & Todd, 2008; Grant, 1991; Mahoney & Pandian, 1992; Newbert, 2007, 2008; Peteraf, 1993; Prahalad & Hamel, 1990; Wernerfelt, 1984). Much of the RBV debate circles around which of these resources are the best sources of competitive advantage, being difficult for other firms to

duplicate and valued by customers (Barney, 1986, 1991). Resources are examined to see if they meet RBV criteria [1a] or not [1b]. The nature of the RBV criteria [1a] has been the subject of considerable discussion over the years. Wernerfelt (1984, p. 173) talks of "resource position barriers" making it difficult for competitors "to catch up", but falls short of explicit definitions. Barney (1991) is more precise defining RBV criteria (VRIN) as Valuable (to enable the firm "to conceive of or implement strategies that improve its efficiency and effectiveness"), Rare (so they are not "possessed by large numbers of competing or potentially competing firms"), Imperfectly imitable (so competing firms cannot easily obtain them and firms competing cannot imitate) and Not substitutable (by "strategically equivalent valuable resources that are themselves either not rare or imitable").²

Mahoney and Pandian (1992) argue that both internal and external causes need to be combined [3]. Other researchers have followed their suggestion (Afuah, 2002; Cockburn, Hendersen, & Stern, 2000; Oliver, 1997; Rindova & Fombrun, 1999; Spanos & Lioukas, 2001). To be fair, even Porter and

¹ Much of the early work in the strategy field recognised in various ways the need to bring into line the internal strengths and weaknesses of the organisation with the external opportunities and threats (Barney, 1991). The term *competitive advantage* was occasionally used before the 1980s, but it had not emerged as a core construct of strategy research; an electronic search of this earlier period revealed only a small number of articles that used the term and then not as a key feature (Chakrabarti, 1973; Clark, 1965; Hosmer, 1957; Hypps, 1937; Learned, 1951; Lillis, 1976; Longman, 1962; Michaelis, 1956; Payne, 1957; Wagner, 1963).

² Barney (1991) expanded on the potential sources of imperfect imitation including resources that are obtained by a "firm's unique path through history", causal ambiguity making it difficult to understand how resources generate advantage, and socially complex resource configurations such as a firm's culture or the relations between managers being difficult to imitate. Hoopes, Madsen, and Walker (2003) argue that *value* and *inimitability* are the main RBV Criteria as substitution is really a type of imitation and rareness only matters if a resource is valuable and cannot be imitated (Barney, 1991; Crook et al., 2008). It has been argued that the more *unobservable* a resource the more difficult to imitate and therefore the more *sustained* (see discussion in Godfrey & Hill, 1995). Tacit socially embedded resources such as organisational routines are argued to be the most *unobservable* creating causal ambiguity that creates barriers to them being copied (Reed & DeFillippi, 1990). King and Zeithaml (2001) have highlighted the paradox that ambiguity protects valuable resources, but also makes it difficult for managers inside the firm to leverage them and to signal them to stakeholders.



(See for example discussion in Durand and Vaara, 2009)

Figure 2 Social representation of causal commitment (2a), ontology (2b) and time orientation (2c) in conceptual discussions.

Barney who might be seen as the archetypal ‘position’ and ‘RBV’ champions accept to some extent the importance of the combined [3] causal perspective. Porter (1985) for example includes the value chain to look at configuring internal resources to fit with the positioning strategy selected. Barney (2001) in his rejoinder to Priem and Butler (2001) suggests that his 1991 article should be read in combination with his 1986 article to bring a external positioning market/product perspective to RBV. Perhaps such concessions are not surprising, as Cockburn et al. (2000) point out, RBV can be seen as a reinterpretation of the external positioning perspective; one describes why a differentiated position with high entry barriers could give competitive advantage and the other looks at how embedded heterogeneity makes such positions more *sustained*.

Downstream causation

Crook et al. (2008) argue that some RBV literature treats competitive advantage as the final outcome [4a] rather than an interim outcome [4b] linked to performance [6]. Foss and Knudsen (2003) make a similar point by arguing that it is possible using the logic in Barney (1991) for a firm to achieve his definition of sustained competitive advantage [4a] without achieving superior performance [6].

Powell (2001) introduces downstream causal complications [5] between competitive advantage and performance. He argues that a firm does not necessarily have competitive advantage because they have superior performance since ‘other causes’ may have generated that performance. Also having competitive advantage may not lead to superior performance because competitive disadvantages may negate the positive effect. Priem and Butler (2001) disagree with Powell’s first point, they suggest that if a firm consistently generates superior performance to its rivals it can be inferred that it has at least a single valuable resource; whereas they agree with Powell that it cannot be inferred that a firm that has a rare resource will necessarily generate superior performance. Durand (2002) and Tang and Liou (2010) extend Powell (2001) arguing he ignored other types of causal complications [5], such as where competitive advantage is a necessary but not necessarily sufficient condition; that is where competitive advantage needs to be combined with other factors to generate performance.

Representation of causal commitment and time orientation

Having captured the key features of work on upstream and downstream causality, this section outlines the conceptual representation of causal commitment (Fig. 2a), ontology (Fig. 2b) and time orientation (Fig. 2c). Fig. 2 summarises

the key features of these debates. Elements on the diagram are again numbered to help cross reference.

Durand and Vaara (2009) argue that such controversies regarding causal complications [5] arise from how authors represent reality. Some authors argue for a relativist [8] view of the world, they portray competitive advantage as just a discursive creation [8b] emerging from debate and they represent a hedged relativist commitment [7b] that suggests doubts about causal relations (see Fig. 2a and b). On the other hand, some authors put forward a less relativist [8] view of the world, they portray that competitive advantage exists and is measurable [8a] and they argue for a strong scientific causal commitment [7a] (see Fig. 2a and b). Porter (1985), Barney (1991) and most mainstream authors portray competitive advantage as though it exists and is measurable [8a] and they argue for a strong scientific causal commitment [7a] suggesting that their research has future orientated implications [9b] (see Fig. 2c). Others such as Powell (2001, 2002, 2003) argue for a hedged relativist causal commitment [7b]. Powell (2001, 2002, 2003) portrays a sceptical view of empirical work that purports to test RBV, arguing it is tautological³ and past orientated [9a] (see Fig. 2c). He argues that researchers find firms that have superior performance and then look for competitive advantage(s) that caused it; if none are found then it is often assumed that the resources were ‘unobservable’ by their nature (see Godfrey & Hill, 1995). Powell (2001, 2002)

³ Durand (2002) disagrees that much RBV research is just *tautology*; he recognises it could be *confounded* by the complexity of the causation, but still feels it is reasonable, if not completely correct, to infer that *competitive advantage* will entail *superior performance* under the necessary but insufficient condition of a capable organisation and therefore it is reasonable to research “ex post proxies for competitive advantage”. Durand (2002) espouses a realist stance that competitive advantage and causal relations exist although accepts (like Godfrey & Hill, 1995) that they may be difficult to observe. Arend (2003) agrees that some aspects of *competitive advantage* research are analytic, tautological and cannot be empirically falsified, but he also argues that between competing theories one might have more “scientific justification when alternative explanations either falsify elements or further detail elements of the particular strategy theory” (p. 281). In the end Arend (2003) adopts a more traditional almost positivist *scientific* view of competitive advantage and causality suggesting “interesting effects, like sustained superior performance, have causes worth investigating scientifically”. These competing philosophical perspectives regarding causation and research are captured on Fig. 1 as the ontological continuum from *realism* to *relativism* and the epistemological scale from *scientific conviction* to *tautological scepticism*.

represents a pragmatic stance that portrays a sceptical view about the reality of competitive advantage and related causal propositions, but nevertheless argues that they are pragmatically potentially useful discursive creations [8b] while they help move the agenda forward.

It is impossible to capture all the contributors to the conversation, but Figs. 1 and 2 map the shape of the debate on competitive advantage and causality. Having provided an overview of the conceptual discussions of competitive advantage, it is now timely to turn to the research questions.

Research questions

The following research questions build upon the discussion above to focus the empirical investigation:

- What is the representation of competitive advantage in academia and practice?

From the review above, competitive advantage is expected to be carefully defined in academia and examined formally (Bangerter, 1995; Moscovici, 1984). Careful consideration of the importance of upstream internal, external and combined causes is expected (Mahoney & Pandian, 1992). Careful consideration is also expected of downstream causal complications (Powell, 2001). Views are expected to range from low hedged causal commitment to strong scientific commitment (Durand & Vaara, 2009). These patterns are expected in the representation of competitive advantage in the general discourse of academia, but are they what actually happens? Observing that conceptual discussions of competitive advantage display these characteristics is one thing, but that does not mean that representation is the same in the discourse of general articles that are not focused on such conceptual issues.

From the review above, competitive advantage is expected to be loosely defined in practice (Bangerter, 1995; Moscovici, 1984). It is expected to be largely based upon informal commonsense and lack the precise discussions of academia (Bangerter, 1995; Moscovici, 1984). These patterns are expected in the representation of competitive advantage in practice, but are they what actually happens?

- How do they compare?
A large gap is expected between the representation of competitive advantage in academia and practice (Bangerter, 1995; Moscovici, 1984). This gap is expected to reflect differences in the purpose and rationale for legitimisation in academia and practice (Bangerter, 1995; Moscovici, 1984). A large gap is expected, but does it actually exist?
- Given the comparison, what is needed to bridge the gap?

Assuming that strategy academics should be relevant to practice, having established the gap, how can it be bridged?

Method

Causal sentences as the unit of analysis for comparison

To answer the research questions above an empirical approach is needed that examines the representation of

competitive advantage in the everyday discourse of academia and practice. Ideally the unit of analysis will be consistent in both settings to aid systematic comparison. As previously observed, the representation of causal relations between terms (representing things) gives insight into the core characteristics regarding their meaning (Sloman, 2005). In this case, examining how academics and practitioners represent upstream and downstream causal relations with competitive advantage will reveal their portrayed meaning of the term. Since competitive advantage is at the heart of the strategic management project (Barney, 1991; Powell, 2001), then revealing their portrayed meaning of the term also gives insight into their meaning of the strategic management project. Causal relations are expressed in language in sentences (Sloman, 2005, chapter 11). Therefore, the unit of analysis is practitioner and academic sentences that express upstream and/or downstream causal relations between competitive advantage and other things.⁴

Extracting sentences for comparison

Access is needed to a database of academic and practice causal sentences. For this study it would be beneficial if such sentences stand in the public glare of wider stakeholders. Public assertions of this type must stand the test of not seeming foolish. In some studies such public domain assertions would be a concern due to potential effects of impression management and attribution bias (e.g. Bettman & Weitz, 1983; Tsang, 2002). Here such effects are not distortions to the 'truth' about causation; rather they are part of the very fabric of the social representation of competitive advantage in discourse.

For the practitioner sentences, like many researchers from Bowman (1978) onwards this research turns to Annual Reports. For the academic sentences, this research turns to academic articles published in peer review journals. Both these sources fulfil the criteria above well. Another attraction of these documents is that they are easily available, especially now that they are available in electronic form through the internet (Beattie, Dhanani, & Jones, 2008).

The Financial Times Annual Report Service (FTARS) was selected as the source for the practitioner documents as it offers an excellent electronic service that allows easy access. 634 annual reports that were available electronically in PDF format were downloaded at the census date (11th July 2008). These were all Public Limited Companies (PLC) quoted on the London Stock Exchange (LSE); the annual report downloaded

⁴ For the purest linguist, these are not strictly 'sentences', but utterances that can be viewed through the "abstract theoretical entity" of a sentence defined through a theory of syntax, although in most empirical situations the distinction "may be quite obscure" (Levinson, 1983, p. 18). Here the term sentence will be used to denote the empirical manifestation of an utterance within practitioner discourse. Some have argued that exploring phrasal synonyms for *competitive advantage* might have allowed further to be explored; this may be the case, but it is helpful when conducting an intricate analysis of sentences of this type to reduce the variance that adding this dimension would be likely to bring. It would also be difficult to argue that such phrasal synonyms were representing the same ontological space as the term *competitive advantage* and this would generate unnecessary controversy regarding the analysis.

for each company was the most recently available on the FTARS with dates ranging from 2006 to 2008. The companies range from household names like the retailer Tesco PLC with a turnover of £46bn through to significant companies less known outside their sector like the print solutions company Domino Printing Science with a turnover £231m. There were also some companies of relatively smaller scale like the storm and wastewater control company Hydro International PLC with a turnover of £26m.

Wiley Online Library was selected as the source for the academic documents as it offers online access to the *Strategic Management Journal*. Sentences from articles in this journal were selected as it is highly ranked and cited by academics (ABS, 2011). The PDFs of 73 articles published in 2007 were downloaded that contained the term competitive advantage. This year was chosen as the majority of the annual reports downloaded were from the period 2007.

A bespoke Java application developed by the researcher was used to convert the academic and practitioner PDFs into plain text and to store them in a database (the Java Class at pdfbox.org helped with this program). Another bespoke Java application was used to extract those sentences containing the term competitive advantage and store them into a database for further analysis (informed by the programming approach of Mason, 2000 and the corpus approach of Stubbs, 1996). This resulted in 235 practice sentences from 125 companies and 276 academic sentences from 57 articles. Sentences relevant to this study are those where a causal relationship is represented with the term competitive advantage. 186 practitioner sentences from 100 companies⁵ met this condition and 111 academic sentences from 45 articles⁶ met this condition.

Analysing the sentences

To ensure fair comparison the academic and practitioner sentences were analysed in the same way. Drawing on Sloman (2005) and the review of the conceptual representation of competitive advantage, the following potential sentence elements were identified (the numbers in square brackets cross reference back to Figs. 1 and 2):

- Internal upstream causes of competitive advantage [1]. Whether they meet RBV criteria [1a, 1b]. Whether they are single or multiple and general or abstract causes (additional elements added during analysis) [1c, 1d, 1e, 1f]

⁵ Of the 100 companies, eight were from the primary sector (e.g. mining), 55 from the secondary (e.g. industrial engineering) and 37 from the tertiary (e.g. general retailers). This is broadly in line with proportions at the LSE, although there appears to be slightly higher representation from secondary sector companies but this was not felt to be significant (using the Euroland.com company database). The sentences were distributed proportionately between the sectors. Most companies have one (62%) or two (19%) competitive advantage sentences, the percentage then drops to 6% for three sentences, 7% for four, 2% for five and then 1% onwards to a maximum of nine sentences for one company; this pattern is similar across the three sectors.

⁶ One article was removed from the sample (Newbert, 2007) as it was a review of the resource-based view of the firm with multiple mentions of competitive advantage. This would have distorted the analysis.

- External positioning upstream causes of competitive advantage [2]. Whether they are single or multiple and general or abstract causes (additional elements added during analysis) [2a, 2b, 2d, 2f]
- Combined causes of competitive advantage [3]
- Competitive advantage as final outcome [4a] or competitive advantage causing downstream performance [4b, 6]
- Downstream causal complications [5]
- Hedged or strong causal commitment [7]
- Level of relativism [8]
- Time orientation, whether past, present, future or timeless [9]
- Knowledge claim by citation, summary or assertion (additional elements added during analysis) [10a, 10b, 10c]

These elements, when they existed, were tagged in the database for each sentence. This parsimonious and precise coding approach reduces, as far as possible, the need for interpretative judgements. It is recognised that any form of content analysis requires interpretation and a degree of flexibility (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The emphasis here is on reducing the need for judgement calls by the researcher through a tight protocol, while being open to extending the framework if the empirical data highlighted other areas to be coded. The original coding framework only required slight modification; codes were added to record the nature of the causes [2a, 2b, 2d, 2f] and knowledge claims [10a, 10b, 10c]. This tight but flexible approach provides a systematic framework that can be replicated without becoming a cage that excludes results. The following sentence provides an example:

“Our scale [cause 1], powerful distribution [cause 2] and efficiency [cause 3] all [no hedging] provide [present tense] us with critical competitive advantage [CA interim outcome] and ensure we are well placed to succeed in this environment [final performance outcome].” [Practitioner sentence]

The following coding observations can be made by walking through the example sentence. ‘Our scale’ was coded as an internal cause that does not meet the RBV criteria of being imperfectly imitable as it is neither dependent on the firm’s ‘unique history’, is ‘causally ambiguous’ or ‘socially complex’ (Barney, 1991). If the cause had for example been ‘...building and maintaining a high performance culture across the group’ then it would have been coded as meeting RBV criteria. ‘Our scale’ was also coded as being a specific instance of cause as ‘our’ relates to the particular company, rather than something like ‘scale can cause competitive advantage’ which is general or ‘relevant complementary assets’ which is abstract. The verbal phrase ‘provide us with’ is in present tense and has an ongoing causality that will continue to ‘provide’ competitive advantage to the organisation; therefore it was coded as present/future orientated strategy. The subordinate clause ‘ensure we are well placed to succeed in this environment’ was coded to final performance. In some sentences a subordinate clause contained the complete causal aspect of the sentence and therefore formed the basis of the analysis. The level of causal commitment was coded using Allan’s (1986) modal scale (Saeed, 2003). In this sentence there is no modal hedge so the causal

commitment was coded as strong. If the sentence had contained the modal auxiliary 'might', as in 'might provide', then it would have been coded as hedged.

Tagging the sentences in the database in this way allowed queries to be run to summarise patterns across the sentences. These queries can answer simple questions like, 'the percentage of academic or practitioner sentences that had internal causes'. By combining tagged elements they can also answer more complex questions like, 'the percentage of academic or practitioner sentences that combined both internal and external causes'. Running these queries produced two schematics that highlight similarities and differences in the representation of the term competitive advantage in academia and practice.

Results

The results are structured around the research questions. Two schematics capture the representation of competitive advantage in academia and practice. Fig. 3 presents upstream and downstream causality and Fig. 4 presents causal commitment, time orientation and causal justification. This leads to a table comparing the representations in each context.

What is the representation of competitive advantage in academia and practice?

Fig. 3 maps the representation of upstream and downstream causation in academia and practice. The term competitive advantage is at the centre of the schematic with cause flowing

from upstream on the left to downstream on the right. The percentages in curved brackets relate to the proportion of that particular element compared with similar elements. For example, in the academic representation at the top of the diagram internal causes [1] constituted 69% of all causes and external positioning causes [2] constituted 31%. The numbers in square brackets provide a cross reference in the discussion.

A number of patterns are worthy of note in the academic representation in the top half of the schematic. Internal causes [1] are the most prevalent and a high proportion of these meet RBV criteria [1a]. Causes are general or abstract [1e, 1f, 2c, 2d] rather than specific [1c]. Upstream causality tends to be complex with multiple and combined causes [1e, 1f, 2c, 2d, 3]. Indeed only 1% are single specific causes [1c]. Competitive advantage is normally the final outcome in sentences [4a]. There are some examples of downstream causal complexity [5].

The patterns in the practice portion in the lower half of the diagram are somewhat different. Internal causes [1] are again the most prevalent and a high proportion of these meet RBV criteria [1a]. Causes are specific [1c, 1d, 2a, 2b] rather than abstract. Upstream causality tends to be simple with single specific internal and external causes being most prevalent [1c, 2a]. Indeed only 28% are multi-cause or combined [1d, 2b, 3]. Competitive advantage is normally the final outcome in sentences [4a]. There are no examples of downstream causal complexity [5].

Fig. 4 maps the representation of causal commitment (Fig. 4a), ontology (Fig. 4b), time orientation (Fig. 4c) and causal justification (Fig. 4d) in academia and practice. It follows a similar format to Fig. 2.

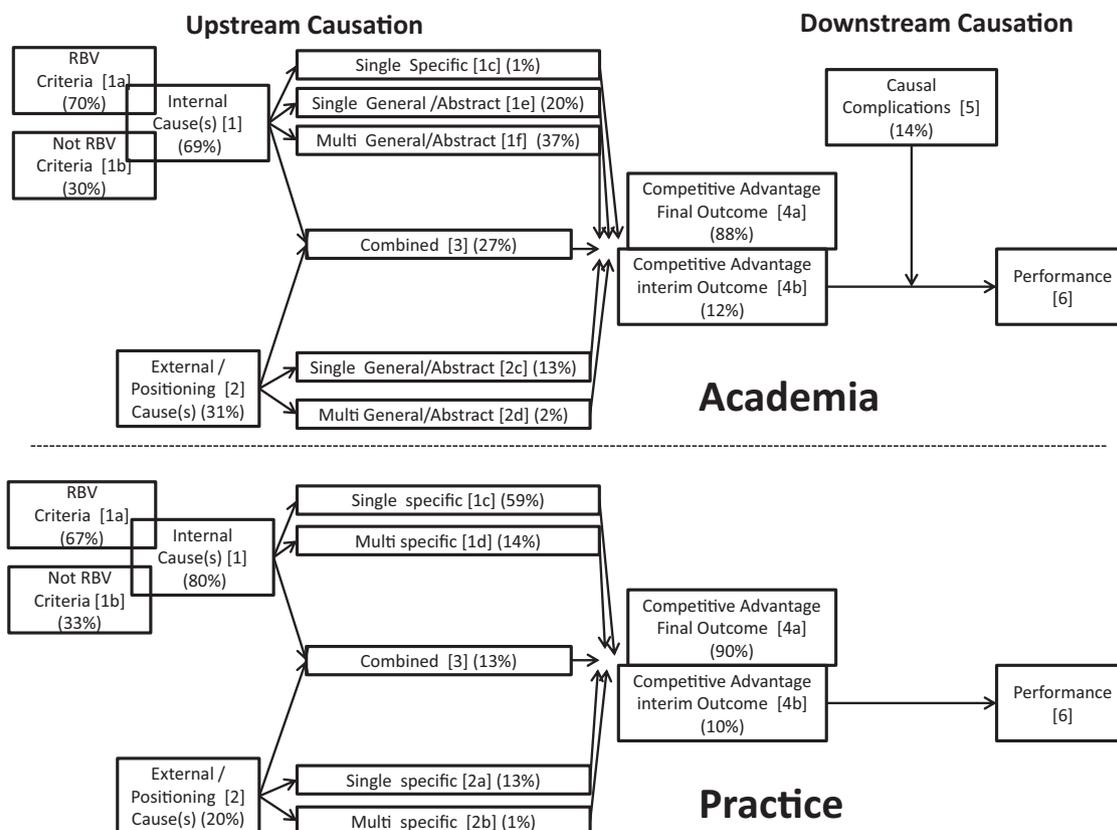


Figure 3 Social representation of competitive advantage and causality in academia and practice.

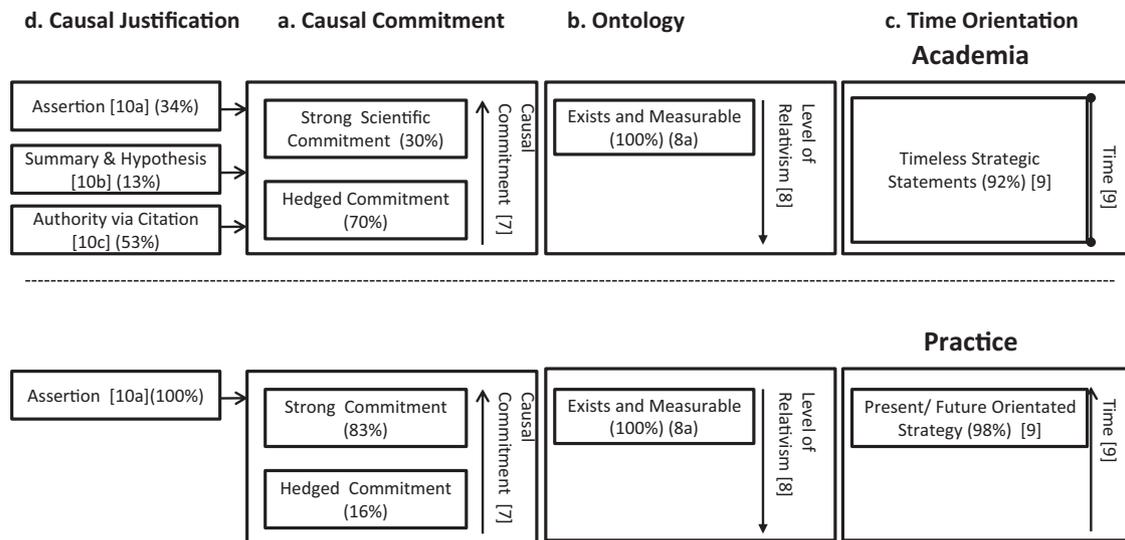


Figure 4 Social representation of causal commitment (4a), ontology (4b), time orientation (4c) and casual justification (4d) in academia and practice.

The top half of the schematic shows academic representation. In academia causal commitment tends to be represented as hedged [7] and/or rely on citation to other authorities [10c] (see Fig. 4a and d). 70% of academic sentences showed hedged commitment and only 30% portrayed strong commitment. 92% of the academic sample made timeless strategic statements (see Fig. 4c). In contrast, in the lower half of the diagram, practice representation showed high causal commitment [7] with 83% having strong commitment (see Fig. 4a). Causal justification entirely relied upon assertion [10a] (see Fig. 4d). 98% of the sentences represented a present or future orientated strategy (see Fig. 4c).

How does the representation of competitive advantage in practice and academia compare?

Table 1 compares the representation of competitive advantage in practice with academia. The square bracketed numbers in the table cross reference to elements in Figs. 1–4.

Academia and practice share some characteristics. Both have the same causal direction, moving from upstream causes [1, 2] to competitive advantage [4]. Both have the same ontology, representing competitive advantage as real, tangible and measurable [8]. Both tend to have competitive advantage as the final outcome, rather than an interim outcome on the way to performance [4a].

Academia and practice differ regarding other characteristics. They have different time orientation. Practice has a present and future horizon [9], whereas academia makes timeless law like strategic statements [9]. They have different causal commitment: Practice has strong commitment [7], whereas academia hedges causal commitment [7]. They have different causal justification: Practice makes assertions [10a], whereas academia mainly calls upon cited authority [10c] and summary of findings [10b]. They have different upstream causal complexity: Practice favour simple, specific single causes [1c, 2a], whereas academia favours complex, abstract multiple causes [1e, 1f, 3, 2d]. They have slightly

Table 1 Comparing the social representation of competitive advantage and causality in the academia and practice.

Characteristics	Practice sentences tend towards:	Academic sentences tend towards:
Time orientation	Present/future orientated strategy [9]	Timeless strategic statements [9]
Causal direction	Forward from causes [1, 2] to competitive advantage [4]	Forward from causes [1, 2] to competitive advantage [4]
Causal commitment	Strong [7]	Hedged/cited [7]
Causal justification	Assertion [10a]	Cited authority [10c], summary [10b] and assertion [10a]
Upstream causal complexity	Simple, specific single cause [1c, 2a]	Complex, abstract multiple causes [1e, 1f, 3, 2c]
Key upstream causes	Single internal specific cause [1c]	Internal multiple and combined abstract causes [1f, 3]
Downstream causality complications	None	Some [5]
Ontology	Competitive advantage is real, tangible and measurable [8]	Competitive advantage is real, tangible and measurable [8]
Final outcome	Competitive advantage [4a]	Competitive advantage [4a]

different downstream causality complications: Practice has no complications, whereas academia occasionally represents some causal complexity [5].

The gap between practice and academia is not as wide as predicted (Bangerter, 1995; Moscovici, 1984). Both share the same fundamental ontology and causal relations. Unlike some of the conceptual discussions of competitive advantage reviewed, the empirical results show that in the general articles academics represent competitive advantage in a commonsense way as existing and being tangible, rather than more relativist representations (Durand & Vaara, 2009). This commonsense view of competitive advantage aligns well with practice.

Practice and academia share the same fundamental causal relations: Upstream factors cause competitive advantage. They differ on the level of upstream complexity: Practice represents causality as simple and generated by specific factors, whereas academia represents causality as complex and generated by general abstract factors. Academics were expected to have a complex view of upstream causality involving internal, external and combined causes (Mahoney & Pandian, 1992). Academics were also predicted from the conceptual discussions to have a complex view of downstream causal complications (Arend, 2003; Coff, 1999; Durand, 2002; Peteraf & Reed, 2007; Powell, 2001; Spanos & Lioukas, 2001; Tang & Liou, 2010). There were some examples of these downstream complications, but most academics had simpler representations that aligned with practice. Overall, the gap between academia and practice is less than expected, but there are still important differences in representation of competitive advantage and causation that need consideration.

Discussion

Given the comparison, what is needed to bridge the gap between academia and practice?

It is encouraging that the term competitive advantage is important in academia and practice. It is also encouraging that the gap is less than predicted, especially given the concerns that have been expressed regarding relevance of academia to practice (e.g. Starkey & Tempest, 2005). Both contexts share the same fundamental ontology of competitive advantage and its causal relations. Even so there are challenges. There are still important differences in representation of competitive advantage in academia and practice. These differences may reflect underlying differences in acceptable arguments about strategic causation and legitimacy (Arend, 2003; Bangerter, 1995; Moscovici, 1984). Also, just because the term is shared does not mean that there is meaningful communication between the two settings (Keto-kivi & Mantere, 2010).

Based on these findings, the following tactics are recommended to face these challenges and to bridge the academic to practitioner gap. These tactics are not aimed at practitioners; they have little interest in engaging with academia and do not read journals like this. These tactics require action by academics. These tactics are modest; calls for ambitious change towards more practitioner focus in academia have failed in the past (Tranfield & Starkey, 1998). These

tactics are based on the notion of academics as producers of knowledge that is conveyed to practice; this may seem old fashioned and didactic to some (see discussion of Humboldt in Starkey & Tempest, 2005), but it is a realistic view of the current situation. These tactics are based on competitive advantage providing a boundary communicating term that can enable academics to communicate with practitioners (Bowker & Star, 2000; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2009). These tactics are based on adapting the way that academics communicate their research to practitioners so that it is persuasive, yet retains the underlying integrity of the results. Academics have to sensitively balance their need to make knowledge claims backed by valid research with the need for their research to be communicated in a way that it will engage practitioners and help them take useful action in the world.

These tactics may leave academics feeling ethically uncomfortable. Impartiality, transparency and peer review are accepted norms of the social sciences (e.g. Social Research Association, 2003). These tactics may appear to stretch the norms by compromising rigour and transparency for practice relevance. Closer examination shows this not to be the case. No change of research standards is being called for within academic boundaries; the design, implementation and dissemination of research within academia should remain the same. The change is only to the final stage of dissemination to practice and even here safeguards are suggested to protect academic integrity. It is recommended that academics adopting these practice communication tactics report them in their outputs within academia and provide a rationale for using them. In this way the tactics themselves become transparent in academia and subject to peer review. Such disclosures not only remove the ethical responsibility from a lone researcher taking hidden decisions, it also makes practice relevance and communication an integral part of the 'strategy conversation' within academia (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2009).

Specific communication tactics are provided below with guidance on the boundaries of their use. Academics will be required to make ethical decisions about the trade-off between transparency and persuasion. The touchstone of such decisions should be whether practice would be helped or harmed by employing the tactic. To engage with practitioners strategy-academics need to show how competitive advantage is achieved in the future rather than make timeless law-like statements. When communicating their findings to practitioners they need where possible to use the future tense; they need to claim future causation even if their research is based on the past. The decision to shift tense will require academics to judge whether their findings have the potential to inform future causation or whether they are too deeply embedded in a particular historic context or too equivocal to warrant such claims.

Strategy-academics need where possible to make causal commitments rather than hedging their claims. Hedging will not engage and persuade practitioners. If academics are to engage, they need to make strong claims, sometimes even when their results are less certain. They need to reflect upon their ethical concerns about misrepresentation and make a judgement call whether it will do more good or harm to make such claims, even if they have some doubts. Hedged claims are unlikely to persuade, practitioners are searching for

certainty not doubt, so where results are stronger academics should consider asserting their claims clearly and passionately, rather than justify their views through cited authority, complex empiricism or summary. Practitioners are not interested in the citation games of academics or their gainsay arguments (Ketokivi & Mantere, 2010). Where findings are equivocal they should perhaps remain in the boundaries of academia, rather than creating noise and uncertainty in practice.

Academics need to continue to portray competitive advantage as the final outcome, rather than be persuaded by recent discussions to portray it as an interim outcome in some complicated causal chain. They need where possible to distill simple causal claims. Ideally upstream causes need to be distilled to a key cause rather than complex multiple causes. Equally causes downstream from competitive advantage should be largely ignored; where shown any unnecessary complications should be avoided. A judgement call will again need to be made regarding the efficacy of ignoring these upstream and downstream complexities.

Academics need to ground their portrayals in specific examples rather than abstract factors. Such examples are persuasive; practitioners identify with them and through 'naturalistic generalization' extend appropriate aspects of the example to their situation (see discussion in Stake, 2000). In short, strategy-academics need to be supple, able to communicate like a researcher in one setting and a practitioner in the other. They need to be able to cope with the personal and professional challenge of bridging the two worlds.

Conclusion

An empirical comparison of the social representation of the term competitive advantage in academic articles and practitioner annual reports has revealed surprising similarities and crucial differences. Both portray competitive advantage as the final result of a causal chain. Both favour internal causes generated by the organisation rather than external positioning. Both depict competitive advantage as tangible and concrete. But practitioners focus on the future whereas academics make timeless statements. Practitioners favour simple causal chains, whereas academics favour complex chains. Practitioners make strong causal claims whereas academics hedge their claims. These similarities and differences in meaning of this important strategic term are symptomatic of underlying tensions between academia and practice.

Based on these findings, tactics have been recommended to bridge the academic to practitioner gap. These tactics may appear to stretch the norms of social science research, but closer examination shows that this is not the case. Strategy-academics need to maintain the rigour of their research within the boundaries of academia, but be willing to pragmatically adapt the dissemination of their results to meet the expectations of practice. They need to exercise judgement in adapting the message, the touchstone being whether it will help or harm practice. In short, they need to be flexible, able to think like an academic and communicate like a practitioner.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to colleagues and students who attended the BAM conference session and various presentations of working drafts of this paper at the University of Brighton. Thank you also for helpful comments from Professor Aidan Berry, Dr Charles Dannreuther, Professor Martin Fougère, Tony Greener, Professor Abby Ghobadian, Dr Mark Hughes, Jo Lucas, Professor Saku Mantere, Cathy Matthews, Chris Matthews, Richard Morland, Professor Nicholas O'Regan, Professor Patrick Reinmoeller, Geoff Ruggeri Stevens, and the anonymous reviewers of various earlier drafts. Thank you to the anonymous reviewer who called for the analysis of practitioner sentences to be extended into a systematic comparison between practice and academic representation of competitive advantage. The data generated from this research may also be used for other yet to be completed projects, for example, with Professor Patrick Reinmoeller comparing this data with Campbell-Hunt's meta-analysis of generic strategies and with Geoff Ruggeri Stevens exploring the social construction of 'sustainability' in various contexts.

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