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**Presenting as a Chief Strategy Officer: a discourse-analytical study of elite subjectivities and vulnerabilities**

**Professor Eric Knight**

[Eric.knight@mq.edu.au](mailto:Eric.knight@mq.edu.au)

Macquarie Business School, Macquarie University, Sydney Australia

**Professor Paula Jarzabkowski**

Paula Jarzabkowski <p.jarzabkowski@uq.edu.au>

UQ Business School, University of Queensland, Queensland, Australia

*Accepted in Human Relations*

**Abstract**

Do elite strategists always project powerfulness in how they talk about their strategy work? Whilst the strategy discourse literature has often assumed that those occupying senior strategy positions project strength in how they negotiate power through discourse, our findings challenge and elaborate this assumption by revealing aspects of vulnerability and powerlessness in how they talk about themselves as elite strategists. Based on the strategy discourse of 48 elite strategists around the world, our findings extend the literature at the intersection of power and subjectivity, strategy discourse, and strategy work in three ways. First, we illuminate surprising vulnerability and powerlessness in some elite strategists' discourses about themselves, an element that goes beyond the assumption of exclusivity and influence embedded in current studies. Second, we contribute to the discursive opening up of the strategist role itself, showing how elite strategists position themselves in contrast to a variety of 'others' in strategy work beyond traditional hierarchies. Finally, we advance understandings on discursive competence in the strategy professional field, illuminating new ways in which its discursive competitiveness and continuity is manifest.

**Keywords:** chief strategy officers; discourse-analytic approach; subjectivities; tensions.

A growing body of work on strategy has given attention not just to managers' intentions but also to their strategy discourse (Balogun, Jacobs, Jarzabkowski, Mantere, & Vaara, 2014, p. 269). Strategy discourse matters not only because it reflects the context in which strategy takes place, but also because discourse is a crucial means by which strategy is constituted (Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Vaara, 2010). One of the key discursive issues that strategists face is how their language positions their stake in the organization's strategy (Brown & Thompson, 2013; Knights & Morgan, 1991). This has been defined in the literature as a strategist's "subjectivity": that is, how their discourse constructs them "as particular categories of persons who secure their sense of reality through engaging in strategic discourse and practice" (Knights & Morgan, 1991, p. 263). It is of particular importance for elite strategists, because illustrating how their "self is at stake" (Brown & Thompson, 2013, p. 1147) is widely regarded as important to projecting a central role in strategizing.

This stream of research on subjectivity, discourse and strategy work has evolved over time from a traditional focus on senior managers (Bower, 1970; Burgelman, 1983; Pettigrew, 1973) to the subjective construction of middle managers as strategists through discourse (Laine & Vaara, 2007; Mantere, 2008). However, the assumption in both cases has been on analyzing these discourses in terms of how "*existing* power structures and ideologies are enacted, reproduced, and legitimated" (Heracleous & Hendry, 2000, p. 2157). This assumes that senior strategists project powerfulness in accordance with their elite role within the organizational structure, while those lower down the structure negotiate around their relative powerlessness (Mantere & Vaara, 2009). This overlooks how new and evolving contexts reshape the structural association between strategists' power and subjectivity (Splitter, Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2022), so that even those in ostensibly elite positions must discursively negotiate their power within a structure that fails to define them (Torfing, 2009).

Indeed, such actors might subjectively project themselves as powerless within the organizational structure, when they must be deferential to those who control resources (Menz & Scheef, 2014), manage headcount (Powell & Angwin, 2012), or whose approval they seek as strategy gets “opened up” to diverse stakeholders (Dobusch, Dobusch, & Müller-Seitz, 2017; Knight, Cutcher-Gershenfeld, & Mittleman, 2015). Yet few studies go beyond the assumed projection of powerfulness by elite strategic actors, linking subjectivity to structural position, rather than acknowledging the incompleteness of structure (Torfing, 2009), and the multiple discourses through which subject position is constructed (Kuhn, 2009).

These issues came to the fore as we conducted a discursive analysis of interviews with 48 strategists in elite and dedicated strategy positions, around the world, and across various sectors (Paroutis & Heracleous, 2013, p. 263). Examining how they constructed themselves as strategists through discourse, we were struck by variations in the way they projected both powerfulness and powerlessness within their discourse. Such discourses seemed important to negotiate their subjectivity as strategists with an elite title, albeit that title did not provide clarity about their strategy work. This finding advances the literature on power and subjectivity, discourse, and strategy work in three important ways. First, we challenge the implicit assumption that elite strategists always project power within their discourse, by showing how vulnerability and powerlessness at times form an important part of their subjectivity, which enables them to get things done (Dameron & Torset, 2014). Our second contribution builds on this to show the opening up of the discursive construction of the strategist role itself. Whereas existing studies have located the strategist within traditional hierarchies – and, in turn, reflected traditional discourses reflecting top-down/bottom-up dynamics (Mantere, 2008; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Splitter, Jarzabkowski, & Seidl, 2021) - we show the multiple ‘others’ whom elite strategists construct in order to position their work (Mantere & Whittington, 2020) within an organizational structure that ill-defines them.

Finally, our findings extend understanding of strategy as a profession from a discourse perspective by elaborating claims of professional competence (Sandberg & Pinnington, 2009). In the sections that follow, we position our study in the specific literature on power, subjectivity, and strategy discourse, before outlining the methods and analysis that anchor our distinctive theoretical contributions.

## **ELITE STRATEGISTS, THEIR SUBJECTIVITIES, AND DISCOURSE**

Strategy discourse, in the form of talk, rumour, gossip, and conversation, plays a crucial role in how strategies get enacted and realized. One of the key challenges a strategist faces is how they talk about themselves. Self-construction through discourse - which we define as strategists' constructed subjectivity - plays a key role in how managers rationalize, justify, sustain and perpetuate their power and influence over others in strategy (Balogun et al., 2014; Balogun, Jarzabkowski, & Vaara, 2011). This is a particularly important issue for those in dedicated strategy roles, such as chief strategy officers and strategy directors, for whom positioning their worth and competence in strategy *is* an existential part of their work (Paroutis & Heracleous, 2013), unlike operations managers, marketers, accountants, engineers, amongst others for whom strategizing might be one part of what they do (Ezzamel & Willmott, 2008; Knights & Morgan, 1995). In other words, for these individuals their "self is at stake" in strategy work (Brown & Thompson, 2013).

The assumption in the existing literature on strategy discourse and subjectivity is that elite strategists negotiate power by projecting strength (Menz & Scheef, 2014), that is aligned to their structural position within the organization. Certainly, being at the top of an organization provides an opportunity for powerful discourse: elite strategists get the chance to present themselves as "worthy and competent human beings" in strategy (Knights & Morgan, 1991, p. 269). But it is further assumed that elites use this opportunity to present themselves as *able to* rationalize, justify, sustain and perpetuate their power. Knights and Morgan (1991),

for example, highlighted three strategy discourses - strategy as rational activity, strategy as managerial prerogative, and strategy as self-knowledge – each of which project the senior strategist as being in control of reason, their own prerogative, and themselves.

Studies of middle manager discourse perpetuate this same assumption of power discourses as embedded within structural arrangements (Hardy & Clegg, 1997; Hardy & Phillips, 2004). Laine and Vaara (2007), for example, in their middle manager study revealed three discourses about middle manager subjectivity - gaining control, creating room to maneuver, and distancing to maintain a viable identity - that squarely project elites (i.e. those above middle managers) as being in charge. Ezzamel and Willmott (2008), studying middle managers working at StitchCo, state that the CEO and senior managers “anticipated” outcomes and that a new strategy was “devised primarily by” and “introduced” by the top managers. Mantere (2008, p. 341), too, in a study of middle managers’ strategy discourse assumed “managerial hegemony” and that middle managers *responded to* agendas set at the top. In a related vein, Rouleau and Balogun (2011) explain middle managers influence over strategy as a matter of their discursive competence in managing relationships across the hierarchy, particularly with top managers. This gives meaning to Heracleous and Hendry’s (2000) observation that studies accept and assume that strategists’ discourse arises from “*existing* power structures and ideologies” (Heracleous & Hendry, 2000, p. 1257). These structures place senior managers in primacy of position and influence, and locate middle managers as subordinates who “elaborate some and resist other elements of the discourse” (Knights & Morgan, 1991, p. 269). Such work tends to take a ‘power-in-position’ approach that may not align with actors’ discursively constructed subject positions (Kuhn, 2009).

Studies that equate discursive power with structure overlook the ambiguity and incompleteness of structural arrangements within which discourses circulate, and through which power is constructed (Grant, Hardy, Oswick, & Putnam, 2004; Kuhn, 2009; McCabe,

2010). As organizational structure is never ‘complete’, positions within that structure should not be assumed to convey power (Torring, 2009). This is particularly important to counteract assumptions that elites project powerfulness. Rather, increasingly actors such as Chief Strategy Officers, who are in elite positions, must negotiate their power relationships in new and challenging contexts. For example, these strategists typically operate in settings where they do not control many resources or headcount compared to, for example, a CEO or a business unit manager. They also increasingly rely on the approval and support of stakeholders who exist outside the organization. In addition, Mantere and Whittington (2020), emphasize that new structures are “opening up” strategy to a growing array of actors who are lower-level employees or located well-beyond the organization – with whom these elites must strategize (Dobusch et al., 2017; Hautz, Seidl, & Whittington, 2016; Splitter et al., 2021). This “opening up” contributes to insecurities and self-doubt about strategists’ subjectivities. For example, Splitter et al. (2021) found that opening strategy participation threatens the subjectivity of middle managers as strategists, causing them to act in clandestine ways to reclaim their subject positions. Dameron and Torset (2014), similarly, found senior strategists and experts confronting conflicting expectations about what it was to be a strategist. In their case, rather than projecting a sense of being able to solve problems and exert their prerogative, they found their strategy discourse reflected experienced tensions between analysis and intuition, sharing and solitude, which were difficult to “solve”. Whittington (2019) too acknowledged that many with the title of Chief Strategy Officer arrive at the role via diffuse career paths that can be insecure and unpredictable, unlike those of tightly defined traditional professions such as law and surgery. Thus, these elite strategists’ ability to project authority and represent themselves as being in charge cannot be assumed.

Reading these recent studies casts old work in a new light, such as Knights and Morgan’s (1991) key insight on the “outsiderness” of strategists and strategy. Writing at a



time when the strategy profession was still emerging, Knights and Morgan (1991) cast the “outsider” nature of strategy discourse as a sign of strength projected by strategists: because “strategy is deemed so important *by outsiders*,” they wrote. “[it] follows that those professional groups within the organization which can *claim a central role and exercise in strategy will begin to exercise power over others*” (p. 265, emphasis added). Yet the recent work cited above suggests that more nuance is needed, as such affiliation between title, organizational position, and the mobilization of powerful discourses cannot be assumed (Hardy & Thomas, 2014; McCabe, 2010). Indeed, the emergence of lofty titles like “chief” strategy officer might project strength; but they might also at times project weakness. As Breene, Nunes, and Shill (2007) noted, the titles have certainly become more prolific, but they might well compensate for something insecure, contested and fraught about their position. From this perspective, rather than coupling structure with power, we need to examine how such actors negotiate power relations, mobilizing discourses to subjectively construct themselves as strategists (Grant et al., 2004; Torfing, 2009), without necessarily projecting powerfulness. This theoretical background informs our research question: how do elite strategists, in the chief strategy officer position, discursively construct their subjectivity, why and to what end?

To address this research question, we examine strategists’ discourse accounts of how they talk about their strategist position. Our point of entry analytically is strategists’ self-talk and the micro-stories they tell about themselves and their importance in strategy formulation and execution (Brown & Thompson, 2013; Ybema et al., 2009). A discourse-analytic approach allows us to view strategists’ discourse through two lenses: as both reflecting, and constituting, their managerial selves (Brown, 2017; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Moreover, by taking fragments of their self-talk constituted over the course of interviews where anecdotes and stories about their strategy work are captured, we are able to piece together a

complex and nuanced picture of how they structure themselves as strategists. Boje (2001) acknowledges that the experimental and unstable nature of subjectivities means that stories are seldom ‘complete’. Rather, each fragment of talk and text reflects, amongst other things ‘the incoherence, self-doubt, insecurity, antagonism ... [and] fragility evident in those moments of reflexivity when the actor interrogates rather than secures and glorifies the self’ (pp. 313–314). Thus, a discourse-analytic approach gives us a fruitful way into analyzing interview texts that capture both the powerful and powerless nature of elite strategists’ constructed selves.

Our particular interest in this study is to understand how elite strategists position themselves both in relation to the strategy, but also in relation to others within the strategy process with whom they must work. While we would expect to see fragments of ‘the other’ in the strategy discourse, we know little *prima facie* about the projection of power in such discourses. A discourse-analytical approach acknowledges the negotiated nature of the discourse as an actor seeks to ‘make a difference’ but leaves open for theoretical insight what mobilizes the discourse (Mantere & Whittington, 2020). Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) note that such discursive work involves ‘people’s engagement in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, or revising their identities’ (p. 137). Thus, a key element in studying this self-talk is to understand how strategists weave various external discourses into their ‘possible selves’, and why they do this (Ibarra, 1999).

In studying interview text, we recognize that an actor’s strategy subjectivity is also always incomplete (Torfing, 2009). It is a transient accomplishment in which discursive construction and reconstruction emerges from reflexive interaction between strategists’ individual sense of agency and the situations they confront in their daily work. Therefore, our interest is not to “define” the elite strategists’ subjectivity but rather to illuminate the recurrent preoccupations, tensions, and challenges with which they characterize the elite role.

## METHODOLOGY

As we wanted to study strategists' subjectivities through their own voices, interviews were a useful and appropriate approach to data collection. Interviews afforded a storytelling approach, capturing actors' discursive constructions of themselves as strategists (see also Kuhn, 2009; Mantere and Vaara 2008). We approached the interviews noting that they allowed an actor (i.e. a subject) to reflect in two directions: their impact on the world, and how the outside world (e.g. others in strategy making) shapes their own 'lifeworld' (Dick & Collings, 2014; Ezzamel & Willmott, 2008).

To find these elite in-house strategists, we adopted a snowball sampling approach. We approached two top-tier global strategy consulting firms based on access secured by the first author, who had previously worked for one of the firms. We began by identifying 100 potential informants, targeting the *most senior* in-house strategists within large, multi-business organizations, representing the global elite of the strategy profession. We then relied on our contacts in strategy consulting firms to facilitate introductions to these elite strategists (Harvey, 2011). These introductions were critical to building trust from the outset and encouraging strategists to openly share their reflections with us (Patton, 2015).

All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and typically lasted around 90 minutes. Questions were conducted in a semi-structured manner, allowing strategists to narrate as freely as possible their views on strategy (for a similar approach, see Vaara 2002 and Mantere and Vaara 2008). Prior to the interviews, the first author collected information and materials on participants' organizations and professional responsibilities from LinkedIn and other archival sources to become familiar with their work contexts (Harvey, 2011). At the commencement of the interview, respondents were asked to "describe your experiences doing strategy work in your organization?". From this, a follow up question asked "what kinds of challenges did you

face?”. Interviewees were then asked to “reflect on what these incidents reveal about [their] experiences in strategy work?” Each response probed further at the challenges they faced, particularly how these manifested within and across their organizations. Finally, as the interviews progressed, interviewees were asked to “reflect on [their] professional roles within their organizations?”, and “areas where [they] felt [they] had been successful or not in influencing organizational strategy?”. Throughout, interviewees were asked to provide specific examples or stories, and to elaborate or explain their answers.

Interviews were conducted with awareness that they are relational processes in which participants may engage in impression management (Rhodes & Brown, 2005, p. 173). Therefore, careful attention was paid to how language was framed. Participants were told that their reflections would remain confidential and would not be shared with members of their organizations or the strategy consultants who had made the introductions. The interviewer played the part of a ‘fellow-traveler’ in the interviews to support participants as they engaged in the sense-making process (Gabriel, 2000). This meant that the interviewer encouraged participants to reflect on themselves and their experiences while empathizing with their challenges as a former strategist. The interviewer also served as a ‘social anchor’ by challenging certain claims and proposing alternative frameworks for sensemaking (Brown, Stacey, & Nandhakumar, 2008). Alternating between these roles during the interview process enabled the interviewer to test the participant-as-narrator’s self-conceptions and address attempts to engage in impression management when they arose.

In total, data with 48 elite strategists were collected. The final corpus of data included actors representing multiple sectors, regions, different tenures in their position, and different sized teams. Each occupied the most senior in-house strategy role within the organization, and this was reflected in their title. The final data corpus is illustrated in Table I.

===== Insert Table I about here =====

## Data Analysis

Consistent with other discursive analyses of subjectivity, we conducted our analysis in an abductive manner, iterating between emergent themes from the data and the literature (Mantere Whittington 2020; Laine et al 2017). To ensure consistency in our analysis, the first author and two research assistants read all of the interview transcriptions in isolation (Patton, 2015). They then began open coding, starting with five interviews which all three coded independently for key themes regarding how subjects talked about themselves as strategists. After comparing notes and talking about commonalities and differences in how strategists positioned themselves, they agreed on an integrated coding structure which was then applied to the other interviews. This was a negotiated process, and disagreements were discussed until there was agreement between the coders (Patton, 2015). This process gave rise to a large set of first order categories relevant to how elite strategists framed themselves in relation to strategy work.

The second stage considered the large set of initial codes against the existing literature on strategy subjectivity. This sensitized us to a range of interconnected themes that joined these codes together. For example, we realized that strategists constructed their subjectivity *in relation to* both conceptions of other actors implicated in the strategy (see Laine et al 2016; Laine and Vaara 2007) as well as conceptions of themselves (Mantere & Whittington, 2020). Further, we recognized prior work had considered these discursive responses by strategists as being in response to power-related tensions (Dameron and Torset 2008). This prompted us to analyze the connection between codes within a single interview as part of the self-talk that strategists articulated about themselves. In the second stage, the two authors developed a memo for each subject interviewee, seeking to capture the main incidents, interdependent actors, and tensions they articulated in their discursive positioning within strategy work (Mantere & Whittington, 2020). Comparing notes during this period, we identified three common

subjectivities that strategists constructed that we eventually labelled “strategist-as-impartial expert”, “strategist-as-quiet achiever”, and “strategist-as-unpopular champion”. We then prepared memos for all 48 interviewees, comparing and discussing similar stories, anecdotes and incidents evidenced within these three types of strategy discourses. We present illustrative quotes from our data analysis in Table II.

===== Insert Table II about here =====

The final round of analysis sought to more sharply identify the common discursive tactics used to compose these strategy discourses across all three subjectivities. Abducting from the literature on strategy discourse, work and subjectivity and our own interviews, we identified: power tensions, constructions of self as ‘elite strategists’, constructions of others implicated in strategy, and resultant vulnerabilities articulated in doing strategy work. We found these fragments came together to position the strategist as central to some work but, interestingly, marginal to other work. Upon completing our analysis, we shared our findings with several of our informants and contacts in professional strategy consulting firms (Patton, 2015). Their feedback gave us greater confidence in the trustworthiness of our findings.

## **FINDINGS**

Our analysis reveals three strategy discourses, through which elite strategists variably construct their subjectivities. These discourses not only frame themselves as central characters compared to others in the organization, but also contain clues to their projected vulnerabilities in enacting those positions. We present our findings by revealing nuances contained between these discourses. Our findings are structured by, first, showing the power tensions strategists experience; then, the elite and ‘other’ constructions they articulate in negotiating these tensions; and, finally, the vulnerabilities that arise from these discursive constructions.

**Subjectivity of the strategist-as-impartial expert: solve problems but risk subsequent irrelevance**

Elite strategists articulate the power tensions arising from their engagement in strategy as an objective, data-led process that bumps up against political agendas. In these cases, they experience tensions over their expertise not being understood or valued by others in the organization. For example, one strategist explained how one business unit that had been identified for cost efficiencies in the organization's strategy had been "let off the hook because their [business unit] leader was close to the CEO" (FinancialCo 6). These tensions were framed as undermining the nature of the work these strategists did, rendering it obsolete in the face of these stronger political agendas.

Such strategists negotiated these tensions by constructing themselves and their power base in terms of impartial expertise. That is, these elite strategists constructed themselves discursively as *impartial experts* in relation to their strategy work. Here, their self-construction was in contrast to 'others' who might lack this strategy expertise but hold other political or power interests (e.g., growing resources, securing job security, amongst other agendas). One elite strategist working in an energy business, for example, positioned herself as having deep strategy expertise:

[We] would play the role of 'independent expert' valuing the progress of execution of ... initiatives by various departments. So, what we are seeing is that we are not really there to work with the teams as their partner. Our job is to be impartial and be more down-to-earth, calling things as it is and holding people to account from a performance perspective. (IndustrialCo 1)

However, despite having this deep expertise, this strategist talked about competing demands and initiatives from various departments across the organization who ignored or pushed against her expertise. Although she framed herself as an expert, she felt she was pushed into "holding people to account" and resolving tensions based on those challenging her: "some people resist you simply because they don't like what your data is saying, so they come up with some other argument". Another strategist positioned himself similarly in negotiating this tension: "I'm the custodian of the CAGR [compound-annual growth rate, a type of objective financial metric]"

(FinancialCo 6). Working within a financial services business, this strategist framed his relevance in strategy as coming from being a detached and analytical expert, removed from others in the business who distracted from an impartial truth: the company's growth rate. He elaborated:

At the highest level, we analyze the returns for every new investment in the business. We have a database that filters into a lot of different strategic activities ... so we calculate what is the growth potential factor, and how it can be segmented in different ways ... We're a warehouse that can analyze a lot of the data that underpins that sort of strategic thinking and quantitative strategy of the organization. We do not get involved in political agendas of the business units. (FinancialCo 6)

Here, the strategist implicitly notes the tension with "political agendas of the business units".

Reflecting on why they had been chosen for the role, another strategist in a bank projected this tension in the following way:

When I came here, [members of the senior executive team] were trying to work out what sort of skill set they needed from their chief strategist. In the end, they decided they were looking for someone who was a finance person ... who could bring these very large datasets together and was an expert in putting forward a recommendation that was fact based. ... That suited me, because I prefer situations which are very structured, very organized ... where I can focus on the numerical side. I was very happy sitting separate to the other parts of the business. (FinancialCo 7)

Such discourses project self-as-strategist, based on technical expertise (i.e., as "a finance person"), subjectively positioning the self as "sitting separate to other parts of the business".

Across our data set, such discourses referenced and emphasized the 'expert' and 'impartial' nature of the strategists' role. Many described using a strategy "toolkit" or "craft set" (ConsumerCo 11) to help them negotiate the separation implied by their expertise. One strategist described being a "financial modeler" who knew what was involved in "calculating debt-to-equity ratios", in contrast with the strategists' colleagues who were less expert and therefore unable to make sound decisions: "most of the conversations I have with colleagues, they are wrestling with how to sort out options and solve problems. They approach it much more politically in terms of how they need to please rather than what the data is saying" (ConsumerCo 1). In this way, strategists constructed themselves as rational actors with superior



skills (e.g., as a “financial modeler”) to address problems that other less-informed or less-skilled actors “wrestled” with, and who, without the strategist’s expertise, might have made sub-optimal decisions.

Intriguingly, our analysis also revealed vulnerabilities stemming from this framing of the ‘strategist-as-impartial expert’. Specifically, by positioning their power base on objective analysis and data intended to resolve problems, they rendered themselves powerless or obsolete after problems were resolved, or the relevance of the strategy decision making turned on some other issue (e.g., a political agenda). Indeed, strategists frequently described the need to “*fix*” issues and “*solve problems*” (emphasis added, ConsumerCo 1). One strategist described becoming the person the CEO consulted when facing a difficult problem:

I have performed the same role for each of the organizations I have worked with ... I have been able to differentiate myself in terms of being able to solve specific problems in my influence areas and being able to convince organizations to change that have been very much operating by the seat of their pants. For example, when the CEO was unable to work out the implications international expansion was going to have on our cost of capital, it fell to me to work out the problem and provide a very structured solution that resolved things for us. (IndustrialCo 7)

Yet this fix-it discourse also had risks of being too unidimensional or irrelevant when problems did not need to be fixed. Noting the tendency of the business to be sidetracked by “a particular agenda”, one strategist also described how solving problems required them to mindfully “strike a careful balance” in how they talked about their relevance.

Since a chief strategy officer can sometimes *veer too much towards being a CEO henchman* who looks at execution success, *I need to strike a careful balance*. I need to ensure that my conversations with other senior executives are the right mix of *positive innovations*—such as the cloud discussion I have been having with the CIO where we are developing new product ideas—*versus draining conversation*—such as, why are our IT implementations off track and where can we cut costs. That way, I’m seen as *credible and independent* to the heads of the business and not someone who is out to serve a particular agenda. (TelCo 2, emphasis added)

Here, fixing problems absents the strategist from the emotional elements of strategy, leaving them seeming detached (“draining conversations”; “credible and independent”). In another

case, one strategist acknowledged that “sometimes politics is more important than analysis” in addressing an issue (IndustrialsCo 1).

This finding reveals a surprising insight from this strategy discourse: framing relevance in one area simultaneously frames that strategist as irrelevant to another area. By solving problems, they discursively sidelined themselves when the problems were solved or when the issues at hand were not rational but were cultural, emotional, or behavioural. As one strategist at a financial services organization noted, their strategy discourse of solving problems meant they effectively “restructured [themselves] out of a role” once the problem was fixed:

I have restructured myself out of a role ... Ultimately, my recommendation was that we needed to have three separate teams that reported in to each of the CEOs. That meant my role got enveloped within those three teams ... I didn't want to stay as part of that structure that I had created ... even though I was offered a job, as I felt like my work was done there. Also, for my advice to be taken seriously, I think it needed to come across independently without my own interests in the mix rather than it looking like I was vying for one of the final positions. (FinancialCo 6)

This discourse reveals how strategists can talk themselves out of job: when a strategist-as-impartial expert has fulfilled their purpose, they talk themselves into no longer being needed. Thus, we show that elite strategy discourse can be disempowering and self-exclusionary in its own way. The very discourses through which such strategists sought to remain “credible” and “independent” (TelCo 2) meant that they also constructed their value to their firms as temporary, expiring after specific problems had been solved.

### **Subjectivity of the strategist-as-quiet achiever: credible but at the risk of exclusion**

Other strategists articulated a tension between sub-unit and firm-level strategic interest. Whereas some strategy processes were dictated by following what was best at the aggregate level, other strategy processes were framed in relation to sub-unit interests or narrowly defined agendas (e.g., unit cost efficiency, rather than aggregate profitability). A tension here was that those pursuing aggregate interests might be overlooked or forgotten when it came to allocating

resources or recognition in pursuit of narrowly defined interests. For example, one strategist described this tension as follows “some people in the organization are very rational in what they are seeking to do, they just seek to do it in isolation to everyone else. It makes it very difficult to achieve an organizational outcome” (FinancialCo 2).

These strategists negotiated these tensions with a different strategy discourse. They constructed their subject position as *strategist-as-quiet achiever*: their source of power came from being organizational insiders whose efforts in strategy work happened in the background, yet might also go unrecognized due to their selfless focus on institutional interests. By contrast, these strategists described ‘others’ within the organization as those with clearly defined sectional interests, resources, and power bases that were sometimes divergent from the organization’s interests. Unlike strategists-as-impartial experts, this strategy discourse often projected the strategist as “clients” of the business unit heads, rather than as independent actors who shaped strategic content.

The real powerholders in the organization are the heads of the different business units. They are my main client and hold all the budget. Even if I came up with the best idea in the world, I would still need their support in order to be able to do anything about it. They are my key audience. (IndustrialCo 8)

These strategists relied on organizational powerholders to vouch for their credibility. Strategists who constructed this subjective positioning emphasized their supporting role:

We are there to support the process of strategy, not necessarily propose all the ideas. The Tuesday meeting is viewed as the final frontier of making decisions [for business leaders]. They may get more feedback than they might want from other parts of the business, but we provide the ground rules around behavior—values, such as safety, integrity, caring—and try to be guided by those. (IndustrialCo 14)

These strategists positioned themselves as critical, but also subordinate in providing “ground rules” and “guidance” for the powerful central characters. Another strategist explained:

Even though we have a relatively large and inclusive senior executive team [which I’m on], not all the positions are equal. Clearly the larger business units have a lot more say in the direction of the business. Strategy is seen as more of a service function into the business, so my job is to be best friends with the heads of the businesses and ensure their needs are met. (TelCo 5)

Interestingly, this elite strategy discourse also projected vulnerability in terms of implied powerlessness and exclusion amongst senior strategists. By positioning themselves as quiet achievers playing a supporting role, strategists revealed insecurities. They were not there to ‘resolve’ organizational tensions. Nor were they there to take center stage. They were support players who persisted even when their efforts were overlooked or underappreciated. One strategist described this sense of insecure relevance as follows:

When I joined [the organization], the hardest thing to learn was that I didn’t have to speak ... I was constantly looking for ways to add value, but that wasn’t what was important here. I *needed to learn how to be quiet and listen* to the senior executives so they opened up. It was important that they regarded me as an insider. (FinancialCo 2, emphasis added)

Here, this strategist felt they needed to speak in order to justify their relevance. However, they came to appreciate that keeping quiet was the best way to do that. Another strategist described tensions around building credibility within the organization: “I’ve been here several years, and I’m feeling only now do people look at me as though I’m a [company] person with enough knowledge to be listened to. It’s only now that I can begin to be useful” (ConsumerCo 9). Here, getting recognized for the work was the challenge– they needed to earn credibility, but they felt colleagues didn’t attribute that to what they said but rather whether they had “enough knowledge” of the tacit understandings within the organization.

One such ‘quiet-achiever’ strategist described the task of supporting the freight-handling function of a large logistics company. The strategist quickly realized that others did not recognize his authority to tell them what to do. Rather, during interactions with employees who had worked in the business and on the frontlines for many years, the strategist adopted a “quieter” supporting role aligned with “how business actually operates on the inside”:

Initially, I was much more directive around the things we could do to turn things around, but people started to look at me and ask, ‘Who are you?’ I’m quieter now and I’m much more focused about how business actually operates on the inside, and what it takes to get things done ... When you are sitting in front of a spreadsheet all day you get detached

from what is actually happening because of the time it takes to know all the key stakeholders in the system. (IndustrialCo 12)

This self-talk reflects a negotiation of tensions in strategy work where strategists live with challenges by working out ways to support perceived powerholders, even if that support is largely unrecognized.

The vulnerability and potential exclusion projected in this discourse can also come at a professional cost: their discourse projects a subordinate status in conversation in order to have influence. One participant said that as brokers of competing interests, strategists must “shun the limelight and leave the focus on the businesses while enabling them in reaching their goals. We are the supporting act, not the main game” (ConsumerCo 16). But this might mean they could also be overlooked for promotion, recognition, or exerting their own vision on the strategy. Another strategist put it more starkly: failing to work as quiet achievers in the background exposes strategists to the risk of professional ostracization. An elite strategist in a retail bank explained:

As the chief strategist, you have to be very careful about how you spend your political capital. I had to be very cautious, for example, in how I sought to influence the mortgage lending part of the business, which is a huge profit center for the bank and very powerful. If I had been too vocal, I would have been cut off. What I learned is that at some stage you need to influence, but you need to take your time. The risk is that you end up becoming a floater. At [the bank], the first 60 days was to ensure that it became natural for me to be there. The various interests in the room had to be comfortable with me just being in the room. (FinancialCo 1)

In this respect, these strategists are limited in what they can say and, by extension, potentially in what they can do. They must talk about strategy but unobtrusively. They cannot claim too much credit and they must position themselves as supporting, guiding, and assisting in strategy work without appearing too prominent. Failing to do so risks sidelining themselves in relation to colleagues and diminishing their strategy influence.

**Subjectivity of the strategist-as-unpopular champion: overcome or risk being overcome**

A final articulated tension was between championing the CEO versus following what is popular amongst staff. These interests were sometimes at odds, generating experienced tensions in the strategy process. Moreover, because CEOs could come and go within the organization, these tensions could discursively put elite strategists in a powerless position because of their need to “take sides” as part of their strategy role. For example, one CSO noted that “You report to the CEO but you are also a member of staff...sometimes those things are at odds, especially if the CEO makes a call you don’t agree with” (ConsumerCo 4).

Amid these tensions, strategists developed a third strategy discourse - that of the *strategist-as-unpopular champion*. Strategists who constructed this subjectivity presented themselves as champions of their CEO’s ideas even when such ideas were not popular with others in the organization. This discourse framed the CEOs as powerful actors, and themselves as champions who helped their CEOs achieve important goals by overcoming organizational resistance. These strategists positioned themselves as neither independent actors nor insiders, but as agents of their CEOs:

The Chief Strategy Officer needs to be willing to challenge the opinions of the business and the leadership team on behalf of the CEO and to explore new ground and break existing thought patterns ... By design, our interaction is a lot higher with the market-facing entities, especially given that our transformation agenda focuses on the market-facing part of the organization. We work with the board and the CEO in shaping the agenda on what opportunities are emerging on the horizon and how can we best address these, and then we really pursue these within the business so that the organization and the CEO can deliver. (TelCo 4)

A similar subjectivity is reflected in the following quote about a strategist’s organizational role as a champion of the CEO’s interests who helps the leader overcome obstacles:

[The Chief Strategy Officer] position is a lookout post in charge of capturing weak signals of changes and reporting these back to the CEO. I am there so that the CEO and I can ask the hard questions of who we are and where we belong in the marketplace. It is like being a muse. (TelCo3)

Whilst in some respects a powerful discourse, it was also a powerless one. Strategists who aligned with the CEO also put themselves at the whim of the CEO and challenges this

might create for them with their colleagues. They also had to lead change, even as resistance buffeted the organization. This is illustrated in the following example of self-talk by a strategist at a consumer goods company shifting from soft drinks to healthier options. This change was in line with the CEO's long-term vision but in contrast with others regarding the industry's traditional positioning:

As we moved to focusing on the health agenda, I had to act much more like an activist. So in one sense it was what I was doing before—using Excel and PowerPoint techniques I'd been taught and using storytelling to explain why it made good business sense ... I think the difference was this time I didn't try to tell the story in one 1-hour meeting in a presentation. I told it over months and months and months ... Every time I found another data point, I was consciously priming people in the conversation based on what I knew about them. (ConsumerCo 4)

In this example, the strategist describes conflict with others not yet bought in to the CEO's vision for the organization. They have to put themselves in the position of being an "activist", suggesting their role is one that is against the norm and that challenges the status quo.

In another example, a strategist describes championing the CEO's agenda in terms of "building a burning platform". Discursively, this strategist frames their position as a provocateur: the metaphor is one of an arsonist or fire lighter who is challenging settled ways of doing things. The strategist projects agreement with the CEO that the organization needs to pursue a radical new exploration agenda focused on greater R&D investment in artificial intelligence applications. However, by discursively putting themselves into an activist position, they are required to bear the brunt of unpopular work; this is not just keeping "people happy" but going beyond that to achieve an "outcome for the business". The strategist explains:

When you get brought in as a consultant, it typically means the burning platform has already been built somewhere ... and you are just responding. But as the Chief Strategy Officer, a huge part of my job is about building a burning platform ... I'm constantly trying to persuade some business executive that something is a good idea. This is about more than trying to keep people happy. It's about delivering an outcome for the business in a short time frame ... that is in line with what the CEO wants. (IndustrialCo 5)

This strategy discourse reveals a third type of vulnerability at the heart of how elite strategists' can frame their subjectivity. Even though they project themselves as being in a

position to *overcome* organizational tensions, they were also at risk of being overcome by the resistance to change. It cannot be assumed that elites always prevailed in the strategy: when organizational actors could not be persuaded, the strategist carried the burden and bore the cost.

The strategist who drove the health agenda within the consumer goods company explained:

One of the issues I got quite afraid of is that if I failed in making the change, I would just burn my own career and nobody would trust me ... If you're the naysayer in the business [about why soft drinks are not good business]—the one who's always saying everything is going terribly—people just get sick of listening to you. (ConsumerCo 4)

Unpopular champions described costs associated with striving to overcome tensions and ignoring the resistance of those around them. Strategists who failed in their quests to generate transformation would endure the fate of the defeated champion and be cast out. One talked about leaving the organization, an ultimate encapsulation of the exclusion embedded in the unpopular champion discourse: “I think I would leave if the CEO decided to quit” (IndustrialCo 5). In this respect, the fractured nature of the strategy discourse is also its weakness: if the strategist fails to be a champion and persuade, then they simply remain unpopular. This is the hidden vulnerability and exclusion embedded within this discursive approach.

Strategists who subjectively positioned themselves as unpopular champions were also vulnerable to changes in their CEOs' opinions or status (i.e., through organizational exit). One strategist, for example, recognized potential costs associated with this positioning: “I would expect that if [the CEO] were to leave, most of his senior team including me would leave with him. We are very visibly connected to the strategy, and so if it doesn't work, we would ultimately hold that accountability jointly” (TelCo 6). Thus, strategist-as-unpopular champions also lived with the discursive consequences of the subjectivity they constructed: if the leader that they champion departs, they need to leave too.

## DISCUSSION



In this paper we asked: how do elite strategists discursively construct their subjectivity, why, and to what end? The strategy discourses from our finding and their impact are summarized in Table III.

===== Insert Table III about here =====

The table details three types of subjectivities through which elite strategists discursively construct themselves (Table III, column 2 titled ‘elite construction’): *strategist-as-impartial expert*, *strategist-as-quiet achiever*, and *strategist-as-unpopular champion*. These represent three different ways in which strategists can discursively project themselves as playing a role in the strategy.

Why do these subjectivities emerge? Our findings illuminate three tensions in constructing power over their strategy work that bring these subject positions to the fore in their discourse (Table III column 1 titled ‘power tensions’). Specifically, the discourse of strategists-as-impartial experts emerges in negotiating the tension between an elite’s projected expertise and others in the organization with political agendas, from which the strategist must remain independent in order to solve organizational problems. The discourse of strategist-as-quiet achiever negotiates a different tension, anchored in working with divergent individual interests to broker institutional agreement. This differs again from the discourse of strategist-as-unpopular champion, whose subject position is framed in terms of their advocacy for the CEO and top management, often in contrast to those lower down the organization.

In terms of what end these subjectivities achieve for the strategists, each is discursively constructed in relation to others in the organization who are depicted as lacking in expertise (strategist-as-impartial expert), divergent and inflexible (strategist-as-quiet achiever), or resistant to CEO-led change (strategist-as-unpopular champion) and who must be won over, or worked around in order for the strategist to achieve their own work (Table III, column 3 titled ‘construction of ‘other’). Addressing these tensions and overcoming the challenges posed by

others comes at a cost, as each subject position also discursively projects vulnerability of self (Table III, column 4 titled ‘elite vulnerability: powerlessness and exclusion). The discursive tactics that strategists use to project relevance and achieve their work also implicitly projects irrelevance in other areas. We call these vulnerabilities because they reveal the *limits of power* in elite strategists’ discourse, in which they can ‘talk themselves out of’ or project themselves as irrelevant to some aspects of strategy work. These insights extend the literature on power and subjectivity, strategy discourse, and strategy work in three important ways.

### **Powerlessness of elite strategists: limits within elite discourse**

Our primary contribution is to go beyond the assumed projection of powerful discourses by elite strategists in relation to their strategy work (Heracleous & Hendry, 2000) to show the vulnerability of the positions they articulate for themselves (McCabe, 2010). Their self-talk projects strength, certainly, but *at the same time* it can also project weakness as a way of negotiating their power and influence. This second element is a theoretical elaboration to the strategy discourse and subjectivity literature, showing how powerfulness and powerlessness can be dual aspects of elite strategy discourse, in which power is ambiguous, fluid and messy (Grant et al., 2004; McCabe, 2010). The very way that elite strategists assert power within the social order they construct is also the source of their dislocation or alienation from that social order (Torfing, 2009). Exclusivity and exclusion may thus be two sides of the same coin, in which the discursive work that elite strategists adopt to get work done can have unintended consequences in terms of their importance or ongoing relevance to that strategy work.

This extends prior research, which generally assumes power discourses are associated to hierarchical position, so that those close to the CEO project power over strategy (Ezzamel & Willmott, 2008). Studying the discourse of middle managers about strategy work, Mantere and Vaara (2008) conclude that “top managers are seen as the key strategists”. Laine, Meriläinen, Tienari, and Vaara (2016, p. 518) offer a critical view: they suggest elite strategists

*think* they have power and that they “submit to technical-rational knowledge production and the illusion of control”. But in practice, they argue middle managers play the decisive role in resisting elites and “act as agents creating new discursive and social practices for unit-specific needs” (Laine & Vaara, 2007, p. 53). Splitter et al (2021) further argue that middle managers construct their subjectivity as strategists in relation to whether top managers enable their participation in, or exclusion from, the strategy process. All these prior studies of strategists’ subjectivity come from a similar starting position wherein executives project strength and centrality to get things done in strategy.

Our surprising finding offers an extension that challenges whether elite strategists do in fact always discursively project control. Our findings suggest that the projection of *lack of control* is commonplace in elite discourse, and that in fact projecting vulnerability plays an important role in strategy work. Our elite strategists’ discourses articulated fears and concerns about ways in which their contribution to strategy was limited, finite, or susceptible to being excluded or ignored. Their discourse included references to framing themselves as being overlooked, independent, and unpopular contributors to strategy. This projected vulnerability may assist in making strategists more approachable to stakeholders whom they rely on in strategizing. But it may also have negative consequences if this discourse excludes them from the visible recognition (Paroutis & Knight, 2019), intuitive decision-making (Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999), and popular participation (Mirabeau & Maguire, 2014) that are important elements of strategy work in other studies.

This contribution also further elaborates the finding of Mantere and Whittington (2020), which questions the unproblematic treatment of hierarchical position in prior studies. Studying discourses of strategy managers, they found that “being a strategist” was different to doing strategic things. Often the acts of strategy influence coincided with strategists feeling ontologically insecure, pushing themselves to achieve, and being driven by self-measurement

and self-actualization. We build on this self-doubt of elite strategists by showing its discursive resonance. When strategists put themselves “out there” in terms of their strategic subjectivity, they are vulnerable to the reactions of those they work with. This in turn may contribute to the kinds of insecurities Mantere and Whittington (2020) identified in their study. The key point is that strategists’ subjectivity is not uniform, enduring, and structurally determined by their organizational position (Kuhn, 2009; McCabe, 2010). Rather, it is fragmented and indeterminate as strategists project both powerfulness and powerlessness, with their projected discourse providing both an anchor to and an alienation from their strategy work (Grant et al, 2004; Torfing, 2013).

### **Opening up the strategist: elite constructions of ‘other’ strategists**

Our second contribution is to extend the literature on open strategy by showing how the strategist’s subjectivity is opened up to newly constructed relationships that go beyond traditional power structures of top/middle manager hierarchical relations. Studies have already picked up on how structures in the strategy field are opening up, with many sets of individuals – consultants, middle managers, professional actors, lower level managers – increasingly doing strategy work (Hautz et al., 2016; Seidl, von Krogh, & Whittington, 2019; Splitter et al., 2021; Whittington, Cailluet, & Yakis-Douglas, 2011). Our contribution focuses on the discursive aspects of such opening. We suggest that elite strategists may talk about their strategy work in “open” ways, relating themselves and their work to a more diverse set of stakeholders than might be assumed by traditional, top-down hierarchies, and projecting their relevance to strategy work through these more diverse lenses.

The literature on subjectivities recognizes that strategists use discourse to secure “their sense of meaning, identity and reality” as strategists (Knights & Morgan, 1991). A key part of the “opening up” of elite strategists discourses is how they project themselves in relation to “others”. For example, our findings reveal three types of constructed “others”: those who lack

expert skills, those with inflexible or divergent individualist interests within the organization, or those who resist CEO-led changes. These are three self-other tensions that strategists discursively negotiate in the framing of their strategy work, which do not necessarily accord with traditional hierarchies. Indeed, some of our elite strategists framed these “others” as colleagues at the C-suite level with whom they wrestled in order to get their strategy work done.

By moving away from assuming subjectivity is always constructed vis-à-vis traditional hierarchical echelons and role groups (Grant et al., 2004; Kuhn, 2009; Torfing, 2009), our work further elaborates a trend away from role structure toward opening up strategy discourse. Dameron and Torset (2014) note that “previous studies of strategists’ subjectivity have tended to link a particular kind of subjectivity to a specific role group – such as top management teams (Laine & Vaara, 2007; Menz & Scheef, 2014), strategic directors (Paroutis & Heracleous, 2013), or middle management (Balogun et al., 2014; Laine & Vaara, 2007; Mantere & Vaara, 2008)”. The opening up we reveal suggests that elite strategists are open to discursively projecting different subjectivities according to their experience of strategy contexts, the power tensions they engender, and their self-identified expectations of how to negotiate these tensions. Thus, “the other” that is discursively constructed is their reflection of experienced tensions that they come up against, which might transcend organizational or professional background.

At the same time, our findings illuminate new forms of competition at the heart of strategy work itself. Even though ‘the other’ is important in our discourses, it is its tension or alterity with *the self* that motivates how strategists frame and articulate their ability to act (Hardy & Thomas, 2014). In other words, the *self-other* construction is an important ‘engine’ for subjective positioning among Chief Strategy Officers. Strategy is a competitive practice. Strategists discursively construct their subjectivity in relation to others they frame

themselves as different to, and whom they project themselves as being able to influence, even where that influence arises from projected powerlessness. Our findings elaborate previous insights regarding rivalries faced by professional strategists within their organizations (Angwin, Paroutis, & Mitson, 2009; Menz & Scheef, 2014) by extending these rivalries to competitions strategists construct by and with themselves. In Mantere and Whittington (2020), strategists' subjectivities are inwardly constructed and the insecurities they face are inwardly focused: they talk about discursive tactics of self-measurement, self-construction, and self-actualization. However, their interviews were conducted in a student context without the ongoing challenges posed by organizational strategy work. We go further and show that elite strategists frame their subjectivities in terms of competition within the self to influence others. For example, the strategist-as-impartial expert subject position allows strategists to frame themselves as having higher order skills and expertise than others. Through such competitions with a constructed other, strategists craft credible narratives for their own ability to influence, even projecting their powerlessness with these others as a source of power over them (see Torfing, 2013). Our findings thus extend the literature on strategists' subjectivity by highlighting the importance of self-other rivalries and competitions in the discursive construction of what it means to be a strategist.

### **Strategists and professional competence: discursive subjectivity perspective**

Finally, our analysis contributes to an emergent interest in strategy as a profession by examining the subjective experience of the professional (Kuhn, 2009). Whittington (2019) suggested that strategy-as-a-profession must be understood in the practice and praxis of its professionals: in this respect, in-house 'strategists are like other professionals in that they deal with problems of risk and uncertainty, and that they determine appropriate actions through a combination of personal discretion and shared practices. Strategists address unknowable futures' (p. 23).

We have examined the profession through the lens of strategists' discourse and how they construct themselves as competent strategists within their organizations (Sandberg & Pinnington, 2009). Interviewing elite strategists across various regions and firms, we were struck by the multiple discourses within which different subjectivities of the impartial expert, quiet achiever, and unpopular champion were constructed. These subjectivities are not statements about the self per se, but are (some) of the discursive resources through which the profession of being a strategist is constructed (Kuhn, 2009). In particular, outsider-ness might be an enduring discursive aspect of the profession. Our analysis displays the strategy profession as one in which the primary actors constantly compete with themselves by (re)constructing and comparing themselves with others for strategy importance. Our study contributes to understanding about the precariousness of the profession (Whittington et al., 2011), involving a constant state of discursively constructed competition between self and others, to negotiate tensions, and to prove ongoing strategic 'worth' to the organization.

Knights and Morgan (1991) were amongst the first to frame strategy as a profession. There, they foreshadowed extra-organizational and societal forces as strengthening the outsider discourse being used by professional strategists. For example, they surmised that military discourse shaped subjectivities owing to 'the prestige of the military deriving from victory over Germany and Japan', which 'added weight to the view that strategy was a central feature of success' in organizations. Similarly, the adoption of financial discourse by IT strategists (Knights & Morgan, 1995) or the leveraging of professional associations by accountants (Armstrong, 1987) 'credentialized' the claims strategists made about themselves. Our findings offer a more nuanced view: perhaps the competitiveness of strategy discourse is also its weakness (Kuhn, 2009; Torfing, 2013). By constantly foregrounding the other in strategy, strategists' subjectivity is always on edge and always insecure, fighting for relevance as the strategy work is continually updated.

A curious extension on this point, though, is that professional strategists also seem to be an evergreen (Whittington, 2019). Therefore, it might be that this constant discursive fight for survival also keeps strategists linguistically sharp, helping them to discursively reinvent themselves. Challenges to expertise (as in the case of strategists-as-impartial experts), recognition signals (as in the case of strategists-as-quiet achievers) or executive leadership (as in the case of strategists-as-unpopular champions) serve as a constant source of tension and angst that feeds professional strategists talk and their (evolving) projected subjectivities. Moreover, as Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) note, since strategy discourses themselves need to be updated, strategists may be able to switch between these discourses over time to renew their relevance in new areas as old areas decline (See also Boje 2001).

## **BOUNDARY CONDITIONS AND CONCLUSION**

Our paper has practitioner implications by attuning elite strategists to the issue of how they talk about themselves and their strategy work. These statements are crucial to how strategy is done, and importantly project themselves in relation to others. By outlining these differences, we sensitize strategy practitioners to these nuances. We also afford them new ways to fluidly and tactically shift how they locate themselves in relation to their strategy work.

Given our research focus, several boundary conditions are relevant opportunities for additional theorizing and future research. First, we explored how 48 strategists gave meaning to their full-time, elite strategy roles. In the future, researchers might observe such actors longitudinally within a specific organizational context to determine how their organizational and professional senses of self interact (Knight & Paroutis, 2017). We see potential to situate our findings in a broader set of interpersonal and organizational practices in future work. In the future, scholars might also consider conducting sequential interviews with strategists over time



to consider how their subjectivities might discursively evolve as they execute strategies that bring their roles to a logical end (Knight & Cuganesan, 2020).

Second, we focused on those with Chief Strategy Officer or equivalent titles. These elite strategists offer particular advantages for moving beyond a ‘power-in-position’ approach, because, despite their title, these strategists often have little direct control over resources (Angwin et al., 2009; Breene et al., 2007; Menz & Scheef, 2014). In the future, researchers might apply our approach in two ways. First, considering whether those who are traditionally assumed to project powerfulness (e.g., Mantere and Vaara, 2008), due to their positions, such as CEOs, might also construct powerless and vulnerable subjectivities. Second, to study strategists at other levels, including those not typically considered strategists, yet whom research has shown to be highly consequential to strategy making (Jarzabkowski, Kavas, & Krull, 2021), such as occupational specialists (Pettit & Crossan, 2020) or even reinsurance underwriters (Jarzabkowski & Bednarek, 2018). The discourses through which these actors construct themselves as doing strategy work may reveal new tensions, self-other relationships, and vulnerabilities beyond those we find in those who are designated as strategists.

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**Table I: Summary of informant characteristics**

Sector	Region	Job title	Team size (FTEs)	Tenure in position
ConsumerCo 1	America	Chief Strategy Officer	5–10	0–5 years
ConsumerCo 2	America	Chief Strategy Officer	10–20	5–10 years
ConsumerCo 3	America	Chief Strategy Officer	5–10	0–5 years
ConsumerCo 4	America	Chief Strategy Officer	0–5	0–5 years
ConsumerCo 5	Asia	Chief Strategy Officer	0–5	0–5 years
ConsumerCo 6	Asia	Strategy Director	5–10	5–10 years
ConsumerCo 7	Asia	Strategy Director	30–40	0–5 years
ConsumerCo 8	Asia	Chief Strategy Officer	0–5	0–5 years
ConsumerCo 9	Europe	Chief Strategy Officer	0–5	0–5 years
ConsumerCo 10	Europe	Strategy and Operations	0–5	5–10 years
ConsumerCo 11	Europe	Strategy and Operations	30–40	0–5 years
ConsumerCo 12	Europe	Chief Strategy Officer	5–10	0–5 years
ConsumerCo 13	Europe	Strategy and Operations	5–10	5–10 years
ConsumerCo 14	Europe	Chief Strategy Officer	0–5	0–5 years
ConsumerCo 15	Europe	Strategy Director	5–10	5–10 years
ConsumerCo 16	Europe	Strategy Director	10–20	5–10 years
ConsumerCo 17	Europe	Strategy Director	0–5	0–5 years
ConsumerCo 18	Europe	Chief Strategy Officer	5–10	0–5 years
IndustrialCo 1	America	Strategy Director	50–60	5–10 years
IndustrialCo 2	America	Strategy and Operations	5–10	0–5 years
IndustrialCo 3	Europe	Strategy and Operations	10–20	0–5 years
IndustrialCo 4	Europe	Chief Strategy Officer	0–5	10+ years
IndustrialCo 5	Europe	Engineering	5–10	5–10 years
IndustrialCo 6	Europe	Strategy Director	5–10	5–10 years
IndustrialCo 7	Europe	Chief Strategy Officer	10–20	5–10 years
IndustrialCo 8	Asia	Chief Strategy Officer	5–10	5–10 years
IndustrialCo 9	Asia	Chief Strategy Officer	0–5	0–5 years
IndustrialCo 10	Asia	Chief Strategy Officer	10–20	0–5 years
IndustrialCo 11	Asia	Strategy Director	10–20	10+ years
IndustrialCo 12	Europe	Strategy Director	20–30	10+ years
IndustrialCo 13	Europe	Chief Strategy Officer	5–10	5–10 years
IndustrialCo 14	Europe	Chief Strategy Officer	5–10	0–5 years
FinancialCo 1	Asia	Strategy Director	5–10	0–5 years
FinancialCo 2	Asia	Strategy and Operations	5–10	5–10 years
FinancialCo 3	Asia	Chief Strategy Officer	5–10	0–5 years
FinancialCo 4	Asia	Chief Strategy Officer	5–10	0–5 years
FinancialCo 5	Asia	Chief Strategy Officer	5–10	0–5 years
FinancialCo 6	Europe	Strategy Director	20–30	0–5 years
FinancialCo 7	Europe	Strategy Director	5–10	0–5 years
FinancialCo 8	Europe	Strategy Director	10–20	5–10 years
TelCo 1	America	Chief Strategy Officer	5–10	5–10 years
TelCo 2	Asia	Chief Strategy Officer	20–30	5–10 years
TelCo 3	Asia	Strategy and Operations	5–10	0–5 years
TelCo 4	Europe	Chief Strategy Officer	0–5	0–5 years
TelCo 5	Europe	Strategy and Operations	5–10	5–10 years
TelCo 6	Europe	Strategy Director	10–20	5–10 years
TelCo 7	Europe	Strategy Director	5–10	5–10 years

**Table II: Illustrative quotes from data analysis**

Aggregate theme	Second-order theme	Representative quotes
Strategist's elite construction	Strategist-as-impartial expert	“In our role [as strategists], we're supposed to be an unbiased unit in the sense that we're supposed to provide numerical, quantitative research.” (IndustrialCo 4)
		“The strategy department plays the role of being “ <i>independent</i> ” ....That is very important to our credibility within the organization. We do the numbers and let others decide what they want to do with that.” (FinancialCo 7; emphasis added)
		“There is always that kind of tension within me to both translate research into something that is communicable—to make it simplified enough— [for my business stakeholders] without making it inaccurate and to show people what the value of research is ... in a way, defend it.” (FinancialCo 8)
	Strategist-as-quiet achiever	“Most people think strategists are really smart but don't really know how the business works. We're trying to change that ... We need to prove that it's natural for us to be here... We need to offer independent advice that is unaffected by other pressures on the business, so the business can make more objective decisions.” (TelcoCo 1)
		“[We] need to engage, sometimes even artificially, in joint common causes to engage better and build coalitions across levels. The success mantra for interacting with other functions is <i>non-threatening collaboration</i> ... Our job is to get things done but in the <i>quietest</i> way possible.” (ConsumerCo 18, emphasis added)
		“We drive strategy, but we are often invisible ... The business units hold the budget in the organization so that is where you need to be every day. If you're not working with the business units, you can easily become irrelevant to the business.” (FinancialCo 6)
		“We talk about “V” curve in our work because we're having to go back and forth between senior executives and the business to work out what people want. There are lots of different noises out there and it is very hard to tune them ... We are more brokers than making the decisions ourselves.” (ConsumerCo 4)

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Strategist-as-  
unpopular  
champion

“Our main job is as a lookout post for the CEO. We provide the strategic advice to them and a source of support as they look to drive change through the organization by being able to follow up on agendas and make sure they get delivered.” (ConsumerCo 2)

“The first 100 days [for a Chief Strategy Officer] are make or break, especially in terms of getting the right traction with the CEO. I have seen that the CEO forms his impressions in the first 100 days and rarely changes that later on. It is crucial to have the CEO’s support because all the authority of the CSO flows from implementing his or her agenda.” (IndustrialCo 5)

“The strategy department is in charge of every new project falling outside the boxes of the traditional organization. It is not meant to be about business as usual at all. It is where the CEO goes to execute strategic vision and change.” (TelCo 5)

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**Table III: Elite subjectivities: their strategy discourses and constructed vulnerabilities**

<b>Power tensions</b>	<b>'Elite' construction</b>	<b>Construction of 'other'</b>	<b>Strategists' vulnerability in the strategy</b>
Tensions between data-driven expertise, and political agendas, in driving decision making	Strategist-as-impartial expert	Other organizational actors who lack expert skills and knowledge	<p>By using objective analysis and facts, the strategist attempts to <i>resolve</i> organizational tensions.</p> <p>But role can be seen to be obsolete once problems are resolved, thereby creating a ground for their future exclusion.</p>
Tensions between institutional interests and narrower sectional interests to guiding strategy process	Strategist-as-quiet achiever	Powerholders within the organization with divergent or inflexible agendas	<p>The strategist performs an important but underappreciated brokering role between divergent interests amongst powerholders, and thus <i>lives with</i> organizational tensions.</p> <p>But subordination of the strategist's own views in favor of more powerful interests render them powerless in certain contexts</p>
Tensions between the CEO's view and what is popular amongst organizational members more broadly	Strategist-as-unpopular champion	Organizational actors who resist CEO-led strategic change	<p>While maintaining staunch alignment with the CEO, the strategist attempts to <i>overcome</i> organizational tensions by priming the understandings of lower-level agents.</p> <p>But they face exclusion and undermining of their strategy relevance if change is rejected or CEO leaves</p>