

**The Pivotal Role of Perceived Discretion in Top Teams  
Setting a Research Agenda**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The strategic leadership research stream characterised by the predominantly instrumental upper-echelon research stream has provided extensive support for the strategic choice school of thought. In recent years it has been criticised for failing to develop from an exploration of whether relationships exist between managers background characteristics and their strategic choices and firm performances to an exploration of how managers characteristics influence outcomes. This paper provides a way forward and identifies perceived discretion as a pivotal concept in the exploration of the black box of demographic research and clearly separates the concepts of perceived, situational and enacted discretion. A broad conceptual framework, built on rather than replacing previous frameworks, is presented and future research is indicated. The concept of the discretion funnel is also introduced.

**Key words:** Perceived discretion, upper-echelons theory, top teams, strategic leadership, leadership demographics, cognitive structure, enacted discretion, belief system.

## INTRODUCTION

The strategic leadership research stream is broadly characterised by the continued development and testing of generalisable theoretical frameworks to explain the effect of antecedent executive and top team characteristics on firm strategy and performance (Boone et al., 1998; Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven, 1990; Finkelstein and Hambrick, 1990; Gupta and Govindarajan, 1984; Hambrick et al., 1996; Miller, 1991; Wiersema and Bantel, 1992). In part due to the temporal nature of the relationships between these variables, much of the research has been based on retrospective performance indicators and information about personal characteristics readily available from historical documentation (Finkelstein and Hambrick, 1990; Hambrick et al., 1996). Other approaches have used quasi-experimental methods (Boone et al., 1998; Carpenter and Golden, 1997) and a few notable studies have examined psychological influences such as locus of control (Miller et al., 1982) and managers neuroses (Kets de Vries and Miller, 1984) on organisational outcomes.

Criticism has been levelled at strategic leadership research (Boal and Hooijberg, 2001; Cannella and Monroe, 1997) in its predominantly positivist and quantitative instrumental form. These criticisms fall into two main categories. Firstly the inherent limitations of using demographic proxies for complex psychological profiles (Markóczy, 1997; Priem et al., 1999) because it is psychological profiles not demographic characteristics that are the central elements of the studies (Hambrick and Mason, 1984). Secondly, there are calls to, not only describe the relationships that exist, but also to explain the nature of these relationships (Stubbart, 1989) and to explore the “black box” (Lawrence, 1997) that lies between demographics and firm performance because “demographics are exceedingly limited, imprecise and noisy surrogates for executive and team psychology” (2001).

The fundamental questions that strategic leadership asks is, do managers matter to organisational outcomes and if so, how do they matter?

There are at least two apparently opposing and dichotic views in answer to the first question. In answering no or not really, Hannan and Freeman (1977) argue the case of population ecology and posit that organisations are inertial and subject to environmental selection. Some have even suggested that “belief in a political leader’s ability to alter affairs may generate a feeling of indirect control” in the same way “...that belief in supernatural forces provides the Trobriand Islanders with a feeling of control over important events which they are impotent to affect” (Lieberson and O'Connor, 1972:118). In answering yes, managers do matter, Child (1972; 1997) argues the case of strategic choice in that those who occupy the strategic apex of the organisation, “the dominant coalition” (Cyert and March, 1963), can through an essentially political process influence organisational goals, structure and outcomes.

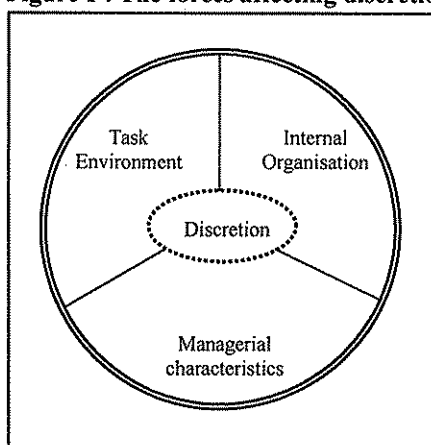
In this paper we explore the development of the strategic leadership stream of research and address some of the issues and challenges that it faces. Rather than suggest the suspension or replacement of this research stream in the face of these challenges, we propose its continued development and a shift in emphasis from the identification of relationships, which it has achieved admirably, to an explanation of relationships that has yet to follow. In our approach we concentrate on developing an understanding of managerial discretion. While this is not a new concept our treatment of it is. Rather than replace the existing concept we build on what has gone before and identify the pivotal role of perceived discretion in unlocking the black box of demographic research.

## STRATEGIC CHOICE AND POPULATION ECOLOGY

The dichotomous nature of strategic choice and population ecology has blurred over time and Child (1997:44) has argued that strategic choice now “regards both the relation of agency to structure and to environment as dynamic in nature” and in doing so “bridges a number of competing perspectives”. From a more pragmatic approach Hambrick and Finkelstein (1987) propose a model of “managerial discretion” to explain the circumstances in which executives may possess more or less discretion. The further development and understanding of executive discretion is the central theme of this paper.

Hambrick and Finkelstein’s (1987) perspective defines discretion as the outcome of an interplay between task environment, the internal organisation and the manager’s personal characteristics (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1 : The forces affecting discretion



Source: Adapted from Hambrick and Finkelstein (1987: 379)

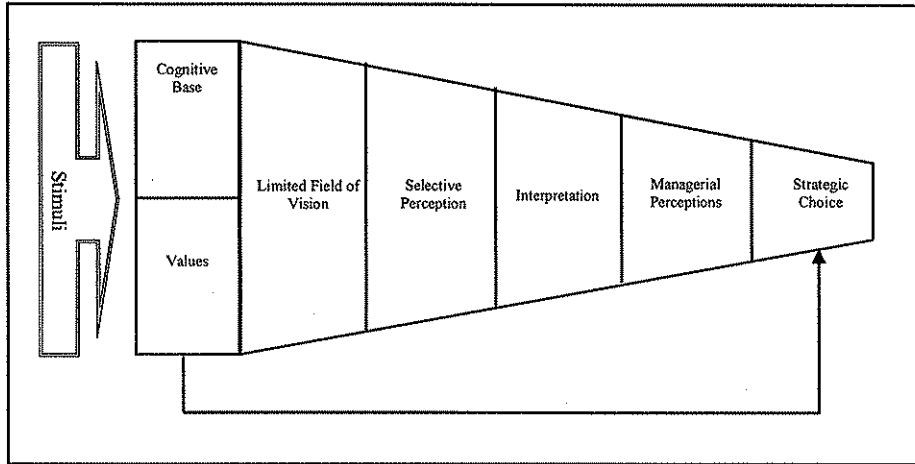
While the multi-level multi-unit of analysis complexity of this model make it a difficult research proposition it nevertheless is an important addition to our understanding of the real world interplay of selection, evolution, choice and adaptation. Perhaps most importantly for the purpose of this paper it identifies “managerial characteristics” as constraints to action. Viewed in this way “managerial characteristics” are antecedents of Whittington’s (1988) notion of “action determinism”. Action determinism proposes that even in the absence of external constraints (for example task environment and internal organisation) managers do not have truly free choice. Their choices are in some way determined by their “built-in preference and information processing systems” (Whittington, 1988: 524). That is, managers bring to any situation an inherent bias that they may or may not be aware of. This is an important addition, because, given this understanding one views strategic choice and population ecology no longer as a dichotomy of voluntarism and determinism but rather the interplay of deterministic human action and deterministic (multi-level) selection.

Defined in this way discretion is not simply a consequence of the situation, but an interplay of the situational variables and the manager’s characteristics. In other words different managers will interpret the same “situation” in different ways. This is an important piece of the strategic leadership puzzle because it goes to answering the question of how managers matter?

## HOW MANAGER MATTER?

The upper-echelons perspective (Hambrick and Mason, 1984) has its roots in the behavioural theory of the firm (Cyert and March, 1963; March and Simon, 1958) and the principle underlying the theoretical framework is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Strategic choice under conditions of uncertainty



Source: Adapted from Hambrick and Mason (1984: 195)

Central to this theory is the understanding that managers make choices, not on the basis of full information, but on the basis of partial information gleaned from the environment. In conditions of uncertainty, time pressure and information overload managers will selectively perceive or filter environmental stimuli as they create “their perception” (Hambrick and Mason, 1984: 195) or “construed reality” (Finkelstein and Hambrick, 1996: 42).

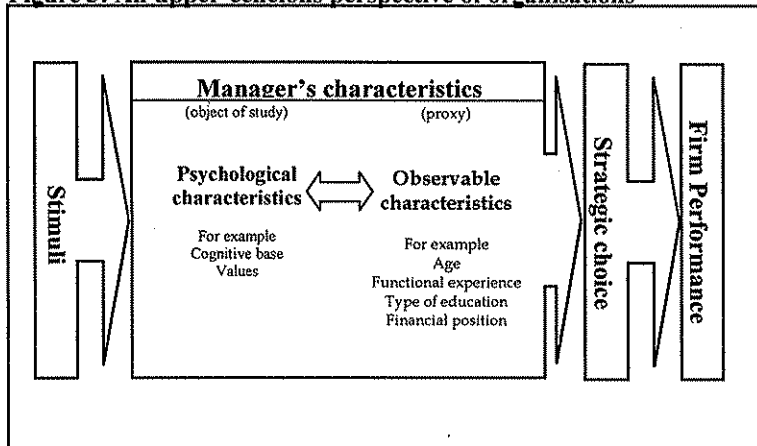
The research model developed to explore the strategic choice model (see Figure 3 below) became a popular framework for researchers in the strategic leadership stream. There is now a significant body of research supporting the relationship between managers’ background characteristics and both strategy and firm performance, including the relationship between top-management team characteristics and firm performance (Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven, 1990; Finkelstein and Hambrick, 1990; Norburn and Birley, 1988; Thomas et al., 1991), top-management team tenure and strategy (Finkelstein and Hambrick, 1990; Gabarro, 1987; Wiersema and Bantel, 1992), the effect of experience on potential technological alliances (Tyler and Steensma, 1998), functional background and successful strategy implementation (Gupta and Govindarajan, 1984; Miles and Snow, 1978), and even in non-business fields looking at the relationship between the characteristics of bishops and ordination outcomes (Yuengert A, 2001). An indication of the popularity of the upper-echelons conceptual framework is the excess of 450 times it has been cited since publication<sup>1</sup>.

Although much less numerous there have been studies confirming the relationship between the psychological characteristics of managers and both firm strategy and firm performance. These studies have mainly used experimental approaches and support relationships between Jungian type and capital investment appraisal decisions (Nutt, 1986), cognitive complexity and the pace of evaluation (Wally and Baum, 1994), need for achievement and organisational structure (Miller and Droge, 1986) and locus of control and firm performance (Boone et al., 1998). There have also been a few notable field studies supporting relationships between locus of control and strategy, structure and environment (Miller et al., 1982), manager’s

<sup>1</sup> Web of Science Citation Index, Oct 2002

neuroses and organisational dysfunctionality (Kets de Vries and Miller, 1984) and locus of control to firm performance (Miller and Toulouse, 1986).

**Figure 3: An upper-echelons perspective of organisations**



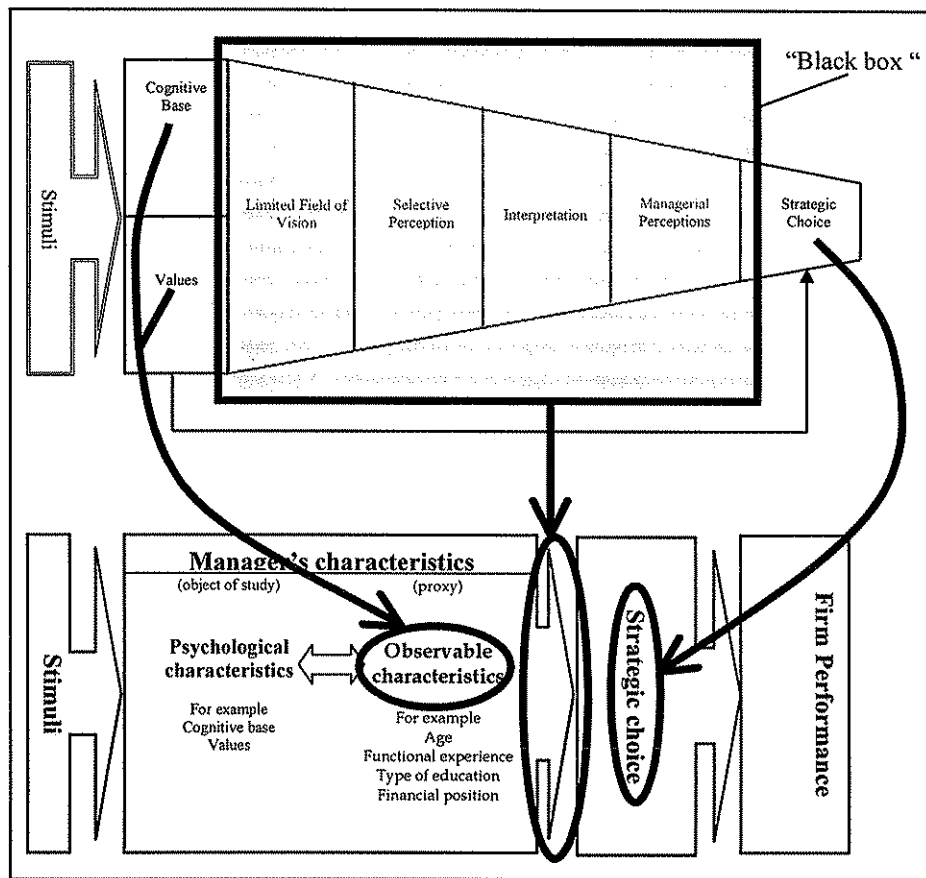
Source: Adapted from Hambrick and Mason (1984: 198)

### Exploring the black box of upper-echelons research

The addition of demographic variables to strategic leadership research provided access to a broad range of research issues but at the same time left some significant gaps. Stubbart (1989) identified managerial cognition as the missing link in strategic leadership research. Based on anecdotal evidence that “few researchers in strategic management accept consciously the economists model of think-alike managers”, he made a call for more research into “how strategic managers think?” (Stubbart, 1989: 326). Stubbart (1989) leaves two concepts central to the strategic leadership research agenda. One, the need to accurately represent the cognitive maps of strategic leaders and two, to account for both goal oriented behaviour and the effects of personal preferences both of which demand research that pushes beyond a purely instrumental approach.

When Hambrick and Mason’s (1984) developed a research framework that replaced cognitive bases and values with demographic proxies (see Figure 3 above) they placed the process of selective perception neatly into what became known as the “black box” of organisational demography (Lawrence, 1997) (See Figure 4 below). The result was an instrumental stream of research primarily concerned with prediction and with only a passing concern for explanation. At the time Hambrick and Mason (1984) recognised the macro bias in their framework and Hambrick (in “Cannella, 2001) among others (Boal and Hooijberg, 2001; Lawrence, 1997; Markóczy, 1997; Priem et al., 1999) continues to call for further research to explore the “black box”.

**Figure 4: The "black box" in upper-echelons research**



Source: Adapted from Hambrick and Mason (1984)

At the time of writing upper-echelons theory (Hambrick and Mason, 1984) the seminal work on selective perception was Dearborn and Simon's (1958) supporting research. However subsequent replication studies have found little support for the theory of selective perception (Beyer et al., 1997; Waller et al., 1995; Walsh, 1988) and some doubt has been cast on the original findings of Dearborn and Simon (Walsh, 1988).

Others have raised concerns in relation to the instrumental nature of strategic leadership research (Lawrence, 1997) with some even going as far as calling for a moratorium on the use of demographic variables as proxies for psychological constructs (Boal and Hooijberg, 2001: 523; Markóczy, 1997; Priem et al., 1999).

Researchers must remain cautious to observe prior work which shows that while demographic characteristics have proved to be good predictors in macro organisational studies, the results are less than conclusive when used in more micro studies dealing with specific cognitive characteristics (see Table 1 below). While we know that demographic characteristics do matter to firm performance, we know little about how they matter.

**Table 1: Summary of findings on demographic to cognition relationships**

Study	Independent variable	Dependent variable	Finding
Dearborn & Simon, 1958	Functional experience	Selective perception	Significant (Walsh (1988: 889) asserts that the data does not support this finding)
Walsh, 1988	Functional experience	Belief structure (Cognitive content)	Null
	Belief structure (Cognitive content)	Information processing (Selective perception)	Minor
Thomas et al., 1994	Experience	Strategic and political issue interpretation	Null
	Role	Strategic and political issue interpretation	Null
	Type of education	Strategic and political issue interpretation	Null
	Tenure	Strategic and political issue interpretation	Null and significant respectively
	Level	Strategic and political issue interpretation	Null and significant respectively
	Experience	Strategic and political issue interpretation	Null
Sutcliffe, 1994	Tenure	Accurate perception of environmental munificence and instability	Null and significant respectively
Beyer et al., 1997	Functional experience	Belief structure Cognitive content)	Null
	Functional experience	Selective perception	Null

Source: Compiled by the authors

The question therefore arises as to how we begin to explore the black box in a more meaningful and ultimately useful way. Harrigan (1983) suggested a more fine-grained approach was needed to explore the richness and complexity that lies within the black box. Certainly multi-method approaches will also be important and qualitative studies will aid the development of new theory to be tested for generalisability. There are however within the field of strategic leadership and more specifically within the upper-echelons, management discretion, and strategic leadership frame, several outstanding questions relating to managerial cognition that still requires answers.

## MANAGERIAL DISCRETION

Hambrick and Finkelstein's (1987: 371) propose that discretion, defined as "latitude of managerial action" is the integrating concept that bridges both population ecology and strategic choice perspectives. The addition of a theory of managerial discretion expands the remit of upper-echelons theory beyond the confines of strategic choice (Child, 1972) and action determinism (Whittington, 1988). It embraces a wider framework that seeks to explain why some managers have more discretion or latitude of action than others, and why managers have more discretion at some times than others. This is a more complete model describing how the nature of the organisation, the environment and the leader, through a process of interplay, influence and strategic decisions ultimately effect firm performance.

The greater utility of this model also brings with it additional complexity for the researcher. Hannan and Freeman (1977: 933) used the analogy of bioecology levels of analysis (individual, population and community) and warn that the choice of unit "involves subtle



issues and has far reaching consequences for research activity". They identify at least five levels that face the organisation researcher:

1. member,
2. subunits,
3. individual organisation,
4. populations of organisations,
5. communities (populations of populations of organisations).

Recognising and identifying these levels is an important part of discretion research and Hambrick and Finkelstein's (1987) discretion model explicitly engages three levels, namely individual, organisation, and task environment. These difficulties do not mean that this type of multi-level research is not possible as its careful application can lead to interesting and potentially more insightful results (Thomas et al., 1994).

The development of the discretion framework also provided researchers with other obstacles. Hambrick and Finkelstein (1987: 400) noted that "the direct measurement of discretion will be extremely difficult". Today the issue of measurement remains as one of the most contentious issues in the strategic leadership area. Significant disagreement exists about what to measure (Boal and Hooijberg, 2001; Daniels and Johnson, 2002; Hodgkinson, 2002), and the meaning and validity of the measures (Markóczy, 1997; Priem et al., 1999).

There are many different dimensions that can and should be considered as we explore the "black box". One such dimension is "discretion". Discretion as it stands in the literature provides an important explanation of the interplay of situational and managerial characteristics, yet research has almost exclusively focussed on situational discretion.

Human cognition is a complex phenomenon and far too extensive to be adequately reviewed here. The seventy seven different labels Walsh (1995: 284-285) found associated with management descriptions of cognition is an example of the diversity within the field. There is a defined need for more fine-grained research within the 'black box of cognition' but developments should however where possible build on previous research and explicitly specify the links and developments.

Finkelstein and Hambrick (1996: 57) in a spirit of "theories are always in process" (Lawrence, 1997: 18) added further development to the concept of the executives cognitive models. They divide the managers cognitive model into three elements ranging from the most basic to the most complex:

- 1) Cognitive content,
- 2) Cognitive structure and
- 3) Cognitive style.

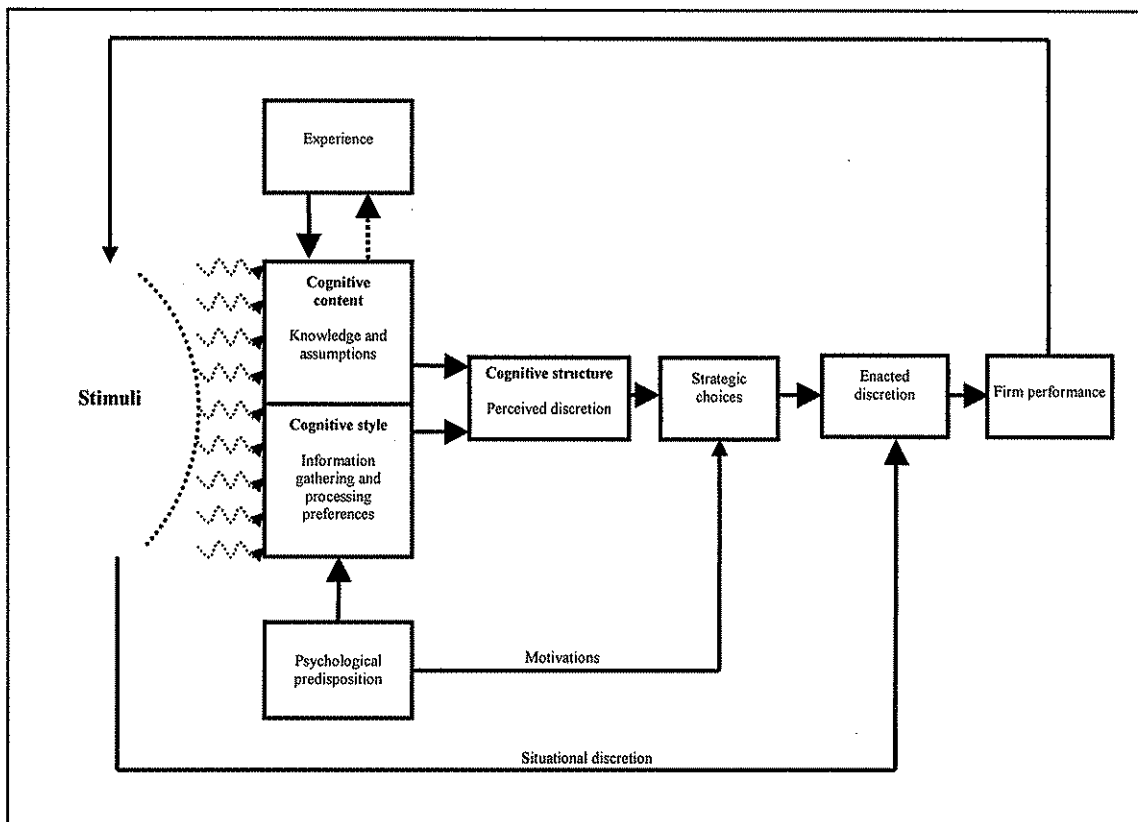
Cognitive content relates directly to the earlier notion of cognitive base; the knowledge a manager brings to a situation. Cognitive structure relates to the principles for arranging the cognitive content; a component of the earlier notion of values encompassing the beliefs about causality a manager brings to a situation. Cognitive style has resonance in the preferences of the earlier notion of values. It is however a much wider concept and includes the preferences a manager has for collecting and processing information. Potentially it has many more facets including locus-of control (Rotter, 1966), Jungian preferences such as those assessed by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers et al., 1998) and broad personality traits such as the 'Big

Five' (Norman, 1963) which can be assessed with the NEO instruments (Costa and McCrae, 1992).

This three-element model of cognition is not sufficient to explain the full gambit of human cognition but it provides a useful conceptual frame for disaggregating the broader concept. The elements are not mutually exclusive and in some contexts may be inextricably linked. No doubt they are closely related, influence each other and ultimately effect the decisions and actions of managers. As they stand they provide a useful frame of reference for managerial cognition scholars exploring the black box.

In the exploration of the black box we propose a more explicit formulation of cognition within the upper-echelons research framework. This framework is described Figure 5 below.

**Figure 5: Perceived, situational and enacted discretion**



Source: Compiled by the authors

### Enacted Discretion and Firm Performance

Explanation of firm performance is a key outcome in strategy research. In strategic leadership research our goal is to describe how managers matter in relation to this performance. In the framework described above firm performance is the result of enacted discretion. This is the interplay of constrained managerial choices and situational factors enacted in a dynamic and iterative process of engagement. Enacted discretion is a dynamic process of managerial engagement with the environment and as such can only be assessed retrospectively. To understand the discretion that is “actually” available one needs to act in order to allow others to react and so on. This temporal aspect to enacted discretion creates opportunities for researchers to conduct retrospective field studies but poses challenges for collecting data on some of the independent variables associated with managerial characteristics. While

demographics may be readily identified from historical records, data on psychological characteristics are not readily available. Retrospectively capturing the motivations of managers will also prove to be a considerable challenge.

### **Strategic choices**

In the context of the framework proposed strategic choice is an interplay of managers' cognitive structures or belief systems and their motivations for the future. Potential motivations may include the need for power or control, personal achievement or risk limitation. In all circumstances the motivation to make specific choices will be driven by some balance of desire between achieving personal goals and organisational outcomes.

### **Cognitive structure**

The term cognitive structure is used to indicate more than a collection of knowledge or even a particular theme or style associated with that knowledge. It includes components of knowledge and style but represents that knowledge and style in an ordered and structured way. By exploring the ordering and structuring of this knowledge managers beliefs or "givens" in relation to their situation can be better understood.

The means of assessing understanding or capturing cognitive structure are varied and appropriate methods are decided in the context of the research question. Research questions concerned with understanding or exploring a managers cognitive structure generally suggest ideographic approaches whereas questions exploring influences or effects of particular characteristics of cognitive structure suggest nomothetic approaches.

Cognitive structure captures the beliefs of managers in relation to a specified domain and can be represented in the form of a cognitive map or matrix. The term "belief system" has been used to describe these maps, but given the complexity of a human belief system it seems far too grandiose a title for such a meagre representation.

### **Cognitive content and cognitive style**

The framework presents a modified representation of concepts that bear similarity to the perceptual filters that Hambrick and Mason (1984) originally labelled cognitive base and values. The framework presents experience as the antecedent (and suitable proxy) of knowledge and assumptions; and psychological predisposition as antecedent (and suitable proxy) to preferences in the way we make sense of our experiences. Perceived discretion is therefore a managers understanding of the current situation as influenced by his/her knowledge and assumptions combined with the influence of preferences in the way he/she gathers and processes information.

Psychological predisposition is quite a broad concept and is intended to capture the manager's current cognitive and emotional state. It may encompass not only inherent psychological characteristics, but also broader aspects such as tolerance for ambiguity and future aspirations. It will be of significant interest to researchers to identify how these factors differentially explain managers perceived discretion and their strategic choices.

### **The significance of context**

The framework in Figure 5 above addresses three issues that are key to the further development and understanding of strategic leadership. The framework presented is still based on a behavioural theory of the firm (Cyert and March, 1963; Simon, 1957) and consequently the first issue to be addressed is situation or context in which the relationships

are examined. From a strategic management perspective researchers are interested to find the relationship between 'personal characteristics' and 'choice' under conditions of bounded rationality. While the seminal study of Dearborn and Simon (1958) and further studies by Walsh (1988) and Beyer et al. (1997) all test relationships it can be argued that none of the studies were conducted under conditions of bounded rationality. In 'real' situations senior managers making strategic decisions are aware that they are dealing with uncertain conditions and without all the facts. However managers taking part in experimental studies may:

- a) conclude that they are in fact dealing with 'full' information because the documented case is fictional and no other information exists,
- b) be less involved and more objective in their findings than they would be in a real organisational setting because, one they are not expected to implement the outcomes of their decisions and have little emotional investment and two, they need not consider the implications of the decision on their personal goals or career.
- c) feel they need not make significant judgements about trade-offs between search time and information quality. For example they would be aware that they are not in a genuine competitive setting and may feel certain that others completing the study will be dealing with identical information within a similar time frame, a luxury not afforded to executives in the uncertain world of strategic decision making.

If attempts are made to measure selective perception and choice experimentally, then it is necessary to replicate real life situations. That is, it is necessary to ensure that managers are making decisions under fully loaded conditions. Tests of selective perception and choice are valid only under the range of conditions described above which, given the extreme nature of strategic decisions and their attendant consequences will be difficult to replicate in experimental conditions. In fact researchers may need to closely observe or take part in decision-making processes to fully assess these relationships.

The framework presented therefore describes not only where managers place their attention when making choices but also their beliefs about cause effect relationships that might exist and their perceived ability to influence those relationships. This is based on the logic that if no relationship exists then no influence can be exerted. If a relationship does exist then the manager's belief about whether they can influence that relationship is a likely antecedent to its selection in any subsequent strategic choices.

### **Separating choice and discretion**

A second issue is that the upper-echelons model (Hambrick and Mason, 1984) assumes that perception leads directly to choice. This however assumes that the optimal choice for the firm is the optimal choice for the manager. A more realistic view is that managers make choices that to differing extents satisfy the organisations needs and their personal goals. Managers who recognise this trade off may see the decision making process as a politicised power play which according to McClelland (1970) has a range from a personal 'I win you lose' concern to a concern for group goals. Thus, while managers may perceive a range of options their own personal orientation, values and motivation will effect where they make their choice within that perceived range.

The important dimension of the observations above is the clear separation of discretion and choice. Discretion does limit choice, but not to the extent of eliminating choice. Discretion creates the *perceived range of possible action alternatives*. Which of these actions is ultimately selected will be the result of a more complex and *context specific goal dependent*

*process*. The framework presented is therefore concerned with the range of possible actions cognitively available to a manager as well as the enacted choice among those alternatives.

### **Perceived and enacted discretion**

A third issue to be addressed is the need to integrate Hambrick and Finkelstein's (1987) discretion model. Earlier we discussed discretion as a consequence of action (individual) determinism, organisational determinism and environmental determinism. While the simplicity of this model is attractive it nevertheless ignores the multi-level complexity of the discretion concept. We suggest the following common terms as a satisfactory representation of the levels to be considered although they are neither discrete nor absolute; individual, group, organisation, industry and global economy. The complete development of the issues raised by the multi-level nature of the framework is beyond the scope of the paper. We do however want to emphasise that while research on perceived discretion may be carried out at the level of the individual, research on enacted discretion automatically brings with it organisational level issues and possibly also industry and global economy issues. We note that Hambrick and Finkelstein's (1987) original representation of the discretion framework was intended only to provide an understanding between the apparently opposing views of strategic choice and population ecology. Because of that focus it dealt with a single concept of discretion as directly consequential to organisational, environmental and managerial influences.

Despite the fact that discretion in choice can only be exercised within the limits of its perception there has been little research on this specific topic. The concept of a cognitively constructed frame of reference limiting choice is not new. Kelly (1963: 19,22) recognised the hierarchical nature of the concept when he wrote that "if one accepts all the usual superordinating constructions of the situation, he may, indeed, find his course of behavior determined with very little latitude left to him" and that "the man whose prior convictions encompass a broad perspective, and are cast in terms of principles rather than rules, has a much better chance of discovering... alternatives". In other words our construed cognition of the situation creates limits for our actions.

In the only study of "perceived discretion" known to the authors, Carpenter and Golden (1997: 189) discuss the need to recognise the limits of situational determinants of discretion because "managers may differentially interpret common strategic situations". That is "cognitions are thought to mediate stimulus-response relationships" (Carpenter and Golden, 1997: 189). In their study Carpenter and Golden (1997) asked subjects to assess the level of discretion they believed they had in a set of predetermined circumstances. In circumstances where industry experts identified low discretion the study reported that "internals" on Rotter's (1966) locus-of-control scale identified greater perceived discretion than externals thus supporting the view of differential interpretation based on psychological characteristics. They note that the study provides "preliminary empirical support for Hambrick and Finkelstein's (1987) theorizing that individual differences are associated with differences in managerial discretion" (Carpenter and Golden, 1997:202).

In Figure 5 above, following Carpenter and Golden's (1997) guide that discretion can only be acted on if perceived, we separate the discretion concept into two components, labelled "perceived discretion" and "enacted discretion". We do this to more accurately represent the intermediate steps between environmental stimulus and firm performance. We propose that at the individual level, environmental stimuli are processed by the manager who then develops an understanding of the situation. This understanding of the situation is a consequence of the

objective reality as mediated by personal factors. This understanding of the situation dictates what is 'possible' from the manager's perspective. These possibilities create the limits of action that the manager can consider. It therefore represents the outer limits of their perceived discretion and contains within it the range of possible actions that the manager can conceptualise.

Within the perceived discretion of the manager there will be different categories of possibility constructed along lines of risk, security, potential etc. The actual choices made by managers may therefore be more influenced by their categorisation of the possibilities and their goals orientation as it relates to these categories.

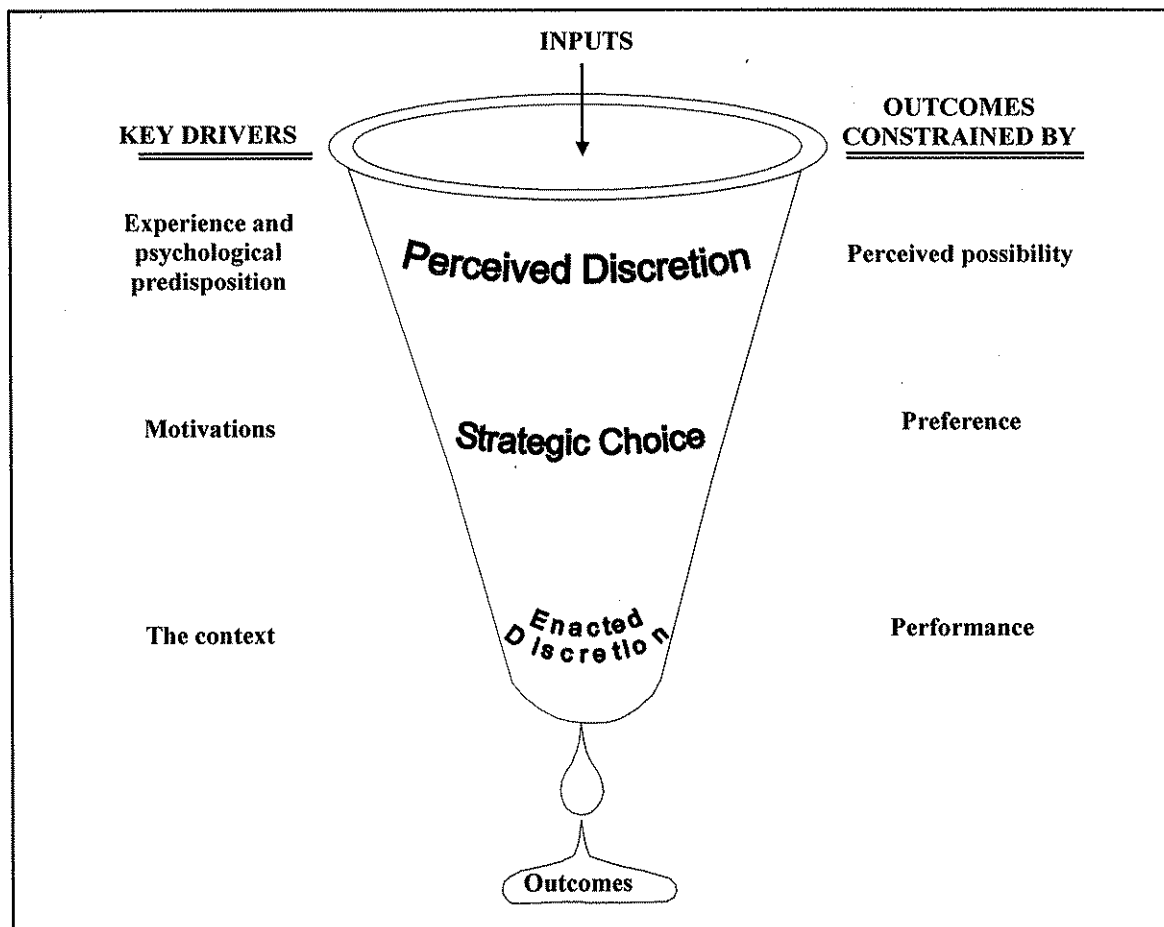
### **Enacted discretion**

Following the above line of thought enacted discretion can only be defined in action. Enacted discretion is the result of choices as enacted in their context. Enacted discretion is therefore equivalent to performance. Technically we might conclude that learning takes place when perceived discretion differs from enacted discretion, in other words when things don't happen the way they should (that is outcomes either exceed or do not meet expectations). However this objective knowledge of firm performance must also be processed through the individual lens of the manager and the quality of that lens will determine the quality of the learning experience.

### **LEVELS OF DISCRETION CONSTRAINT**

A more descriptive representation of the proposed research framework is presented in Figure 6 below. At the first level, perceived discretion, is driven by the manager's experience and psychological predisposition. When presented with input stimuli in the form of a set of circumstances the manager, through a range of cognitive and emotional responses, produces a perceived range of possible actions. This represents the set of all possible options the manager perceives to be available in the circumstance. The perceived range of options is influenced both by the manager's experiences to date and psychological predisposition. At this level the constraints to possible action that exist are only those that exist in the managers mind.

Figure 6: The managerial discretion funnel



Source: Compiled by the authors

At the next level the manager makes choices. That is chooses preferred actions based on the understanding of the situation developed at the previous level. It would seem appropriate that managers would make strategic choices that deliver outcomes which they perceive to be possible. That is the choice flows directly from and is a neat subset of the options developed at the previous level. While this would make for a neat model and fit our standard notion of a funnel it may not necessarily be true in action. A manager may make a choice without understanding the possible outcome or even believing it to be possible. They may in fact make a choice and take action just to see what happens. They may indeed make non-rational choices driven by processes other than the cognitive understanding of the possibilities available to them.

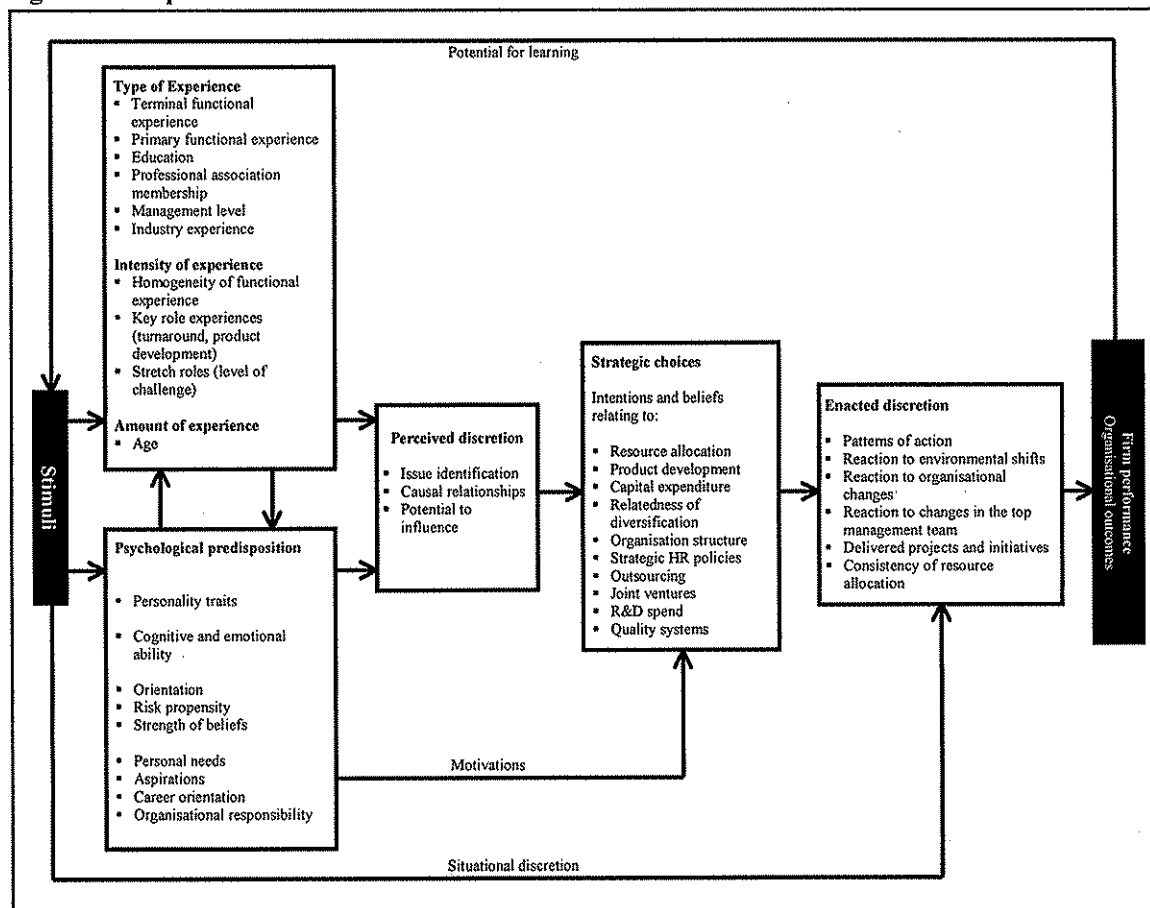
At the third level managers take action which creates a reaction. The results in an interaction between the manager, the organisation and the broader environment. It is particularly important at this point to recognise the iterative and dynamic nature of these processes. At the level of strategic decision making it will rarely if ever be the case that a single set of possibilities is perceived, a single choice made and a single action taken. Each action creates a new understanding of what is possible in practice, the enacted discretion. Which, if learning occurs, will influence the managers perceived discretion and in turn alter the choices to be made in the next iteration.

For the sake of clarity the research model does not include the effect of the political and contextual skills of managers in action. Their impact should however be acknowledged. Because enacted discretion is a dynamic concept, the skill to negotiate the implementation of choices interacts with the situational constraints. Therefore managers more skilled at implementation and influence will have broader enacted discretion ranges than less skilled managers. While the key driver of the constraints at this level is the situation the manager is nevertheless constrained by their ability to perform in the situation.

## TOWARDS A RESEARCH AGENDA

We believe that this exploration of the black box opens up many new interesting and important strands of research. These have been grouped into three strands: antecedents of perceived discretion, antecedents of strategic choice and antecedents of enacted discretion, all of which are based on the exploration of the framework proposed in Figure 7 below. Each set leads to different road map for exploration.

Figure 7: An operational framework for discretion research



Source: Compiled by the authors

### Strand 1: Antecedents of perceived discretion

The traditional operationalisation of upper-echelons research involves the treatment managers' observable characteristics as proxies for psychological characteristics (Finkelstein and Hambrick, 1990; Hambrick et al., 1996). While this approach has provided great utility



for macro instrumental research which helps answer the question 'do managers matter?', it has not led researchers to a greater understanding of 'how managers matter?'. To help formulate answers to the latter question we propose two approaches that will help illuminate this area.

***Approach 1: Differential influences on perceived discretion***

Identifying the impact of differential influences on perceived discretion will require the following to be examined:

- What type of experience influences perceived discretion?
- What psychological predispositions influence perceived discretion?
- What are the differential effects of psychological predisposition and experience on perceived discretion?
- Are there particularly influential combinations of psychological factors and experience that influence perceived discretion?

***Approach 2: Interaction of experience and psychological characteristics***

Understanding interaction of experience and psychological characteristics on each other will require the following to be examined:

- Do particular psychological characteristics attract people to particular experiences?
- Do particular psychological characteristics cause people to avoid particular experiences?
- What effect do experiences have on psychological characteristics?
- Do key experiences influence particular enduring psychological characteristics?

**Strand 2: Antecedents of strategic choice**

There have been some studies examining different aspects of influence on strategic choice, such as the examination of the influence of personality type (Nutt, 1993; Stumpf and Dunbar, 1991), personal values (Verplanken and Holland, 2002) and external relationships (Geletkanycz and Hambrick, 1997) on choices. We believe that further exploration of these areas holds many further opportunities. In particular it will be helpful to build research that helps explore the black box in a more structured way so that theories may be continually developed and refined.

In continuation of the strategic leadership tradition we support the continued exploration of the relationship between observable characteristics of managers' and the strategic choices they make. However we do not support the continuation of research that claims observable characteristics as proxies for psychological predispositions without further research to support such relationships. While we are clear that there are relationships between observable characteristics and both choices and outcomes, we now need to develop our understanding of the process that underpins those relationships.

Most particularly for research into strategic choices we need to emphasise the need for fully loaded cognitive conditions. The strategic leadership research stream is built on the foundations of a behavioural theory of the firm. It is posited that managers operating in ambiguous circumstances with limited information, time and resources for solution searches will create the conditions necessary for behavioural rather than objective components of decisions making to emerge. Clearly then research conditions must try to emulate these conditions. Asking managers to identify the best or preferred option in lightly loaded cognitive conditions equates more to perceived discretion, that is something they could, rather than something they will do. To understand strategic choices we believe researchers need to

examine the actions that managers have taken. The question is one of defining when a choice is actually made, that is, when the point is reached in a managers mind that they will definitely take one particular course of action rather than another. We suggest that from a research perspective this is most appropriately identified as the moment an action is taken.

In the development of our understanding of this arena we suggest the following approaches to researching this strand.

***Approach 1: The effect of perceived discretion on strategic choices***

Understanding the effect of perceived discretion on strategic choices will require the following to be examined:

- Is a broad range of perceived discretion antecedent to a broad range of choices?
- Do managers with limited perceived discretion make more focussed choices?
- Are limitations to choice uniform or are managers particularly constrained by focal limitations to their perceived discretion (that is things they fundamentally perceive cannot be negotiated) that limits their choices?

***Approach 2: Differential influences on strategic choice***

Understanding the differential influences of perceived discretion and motivation on strategic choices will require the following to be examined:

- Is perceived discretion (could do) or motivation (want to do) a greater driver of strategic choice?
- What level of motivation is already accounted for in the concept of perceived discretion? Do managers simply avoid formulating some possibilities they are not motivated to choose?
- Where managers have similar perceived discretion does motivation account for the difference in choices or vice versa?
- Where managers have similar perceived discretion can key experiences account for the difference in choices or vice versa?

**Strand 3: Antecedents to enacted discretion**

Although we do not believe this to be the complete set of relationships to be uncovered the final exploration we urge is an understanding of the impact of strategic choices, situational factors (situational discretion) and implementation skills on enacted discretion. The framework in Figure 7 above identifies enacted discretion as an outcome of perceived discretion as further constrained by choice and situational discretion and this is broadly in line with Hambrick and Finkelstein (1987). For the sake of clarity we have omitted from the framework the additional influence which comes into play when the framework is viewed as a dynamic iterative process. In an iterative and dynamic process we must account for the effect of the managers' skill in negotiating the implementation of their choices. We define skill in this context as the application of experience and psychological preconditions. We can readily conceive of a situation where managers having made similar choices and finding themselves in similar organisational and environmental conditions will, after many iterations, find themselves drifting towards different ultimate outcomes as their experiences, perceptions and choices diverge.

The exploration of enacted discretion will help to expand our understanding of how some managers have greater freedom to act despite the fact they appear to have the same perceived discretion as others in the situation with them. Anecdotally we would identify political skill as

a key determinant of differences in enacted discretion. This raises questions as to the nature of political skills. Are they consequences of experience, consequences of cognitive or emotional characteristics or abilities, or are there other key process not accounted for in the framework.

To help explore the area further we suggest the following tentative questions:

- In what ways does perceived discretion and strategic choices explain the differential in enacted discretion?
- Are those with more focussed choices and limited perceived discretion more or less effective in a given situation?
- Do particular experiences explain differentials in enacted discretion?
- Do particular cognitive or emotional abilities explain the differentials in enacted discretion?

## CONCLUSION

The strategic leadership research stream has been an influential part of strategy research and a key component in re-balancing the streams of population ecology and strategic choice. The identification of key relationships between the observable characteristics of managers and their choices and firm performance has provided clear support for the proposition that managers do matter. The instrumental nature of the stream has however meant that we have researched little about how managers matter. We do not go as far as calling for a moratorium on the use of demographics as proxies for psychological characteristics, we do however call on researchers to support their claims for demographic surrogates as research has clearly shown these proxies may indeed carry far too much noise (Markóczy, 1997).

Our aim in this paper is to begin the process of providing a framework for exploring the "black box" of demographic research. To exhort researchers to explain not only that managers do matter but also how managers matter. Our framework identifies perceived discretion as the pivotal concept in this explanation. We are ourselves already working on the empirical testing of some elements of this framework that will help explain the relationships between psychological characteristics, observable characteristics and perceived discretion. We urge others to take on the challenge of developing this field and to ensure that the excellent work developed over almost two decades of upper-echelons research is built upon as it moves into a further phase of development.

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# The Pivotal Role of Perceived Discretion in Top Teams Setting a Research Agenda.

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