

# *Talking about strategy: the role of epic plot structures in international contracting*

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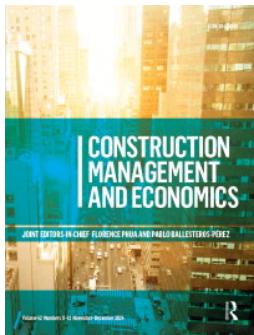
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## Talking about strategy: the role of epic plot structures in international contracting

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### ABSTRACT

Emerging international markets are frequently characterized by high levels of economic and political uncertainty. Such inherent uncertainties render established ideas of competitive positioning problematic. An alternative perspective is developed which focuses on the day-to-day enactment of strategy through the medium of narrative. Narrative interviews with senior managers from Turkish international contracting firms provide insights into the contested storylines of strategy making. The plot structures mobilized are seen to comprise strategy making "in flight". Senior managers are further held continuously to test emergent narratives against different audiences for the purposes of enhancing their persuasiveness. The aim is to instil an overall sense of coherence and direction among those with whom they interact. The temporal narratives mobilize epic plot structures from the past for the purposes of ascribing Turkish contractors with heroic identities in their quest for a desirable future. Yet the shared narratives also serve as a means of identity work through which the narrators strive to position themselves within their networks as acknowledged strategy makers. The espoused plot structures are further seen to coalesce to form a narrative infrastructure with direct implications for the future enactment of strategy. The research focus on the essential temporality of strategy narratives has important implications beyond the specific context of enquiry.

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Strategy making; narrative analysis; epic plot structure; narrative infrastructure; international contracting; Turkish contractors

## Introduction

Strategy research within the context of construction remains largely shaped by the tradition of competitive positioning as exemplified by long-established sources such as Chandler (1962), Ansoff (1965) and Porter (1985, 1990). Such sources are notable for implicit assumptions of market certainty and the supposed efficacy of top-down rational planning. They further remain influential among those who focus on strategy making within the construction sector. Many authors emphasize supposedly static "factors" that need to be considered for the purposes of ensuring competitiveness (e.g., Ofori 1994, 2003, Flanagan *et al.* 2007, Zhao *et al.* 2009). The recurring assumption is that the factors that were relevant in the past will continue to be relevant in the future (Green *et al.* 2008, McCabe 2010). However, such assumptions are of limited validity in the context of the emerging markets of international contracting. The derivation of supposed "critical success factors" may arguably provide a useful

checklist of issues for discussion, but there is little consideration of how they might meaningfully be mobilized in practice.

An alternative point of departure for the described research is provided by the concept of strategy-as-practice. In contrast to macro-level notions of competitive positioning, strategy-as-practice focuses attention on the micro-level activities, processes and practices that characterize strategy making on a day-to-day basis (Vaara and Whittington 2012, Balogun *et al.* 2014, Golsorkhi *et al.* 2015). Of particular relevance are those sources which emphasize the importance of narrative as an essential component of strategy making (i.e., Fenton and Langley 2011, Brown and Thompson 2013).

The discursive nature of strategy making is notably attracting increasing interest among construction-related researchers (e.g., Löwstedt and Räisänen 2012, 2014, Duman *et al.* 2019, Sergeeva and Green 2019). Löwstedt and Räisänen (2012) are of particular relevance in

employing a narrative approach to strategic change in a construction company. Their focus of interest lies in exploring how formal and individual narratives interact. Green *et al.* (2008) further suggest that quasi-academic narratives of strategic management are actively implicated in the way practitioners bring "strategy into being" (cf. Callon 1998). Notions of performativity thereby become important whereby practitioners mobilize alternative "theories" for the purposes of being persuasive (Gond and Carton 2022). But there remains a stark absence of such research within the specific context of international contracting.

The adopted focus on Turkish international contractors is justified on the basis of their prolonged success in emerging markets characterized by high levels of uncertainty. Duman *et al.* (2019) have previously analyzed the sectoral narrative of the Turkish international contracting sector as published by the Turkish Contracting Association (TCA) (Tayanç 2011). This formalized sectoral narrative is presented as a strategic resource for the explicit purpose of building a shared heroic identity and vision for the sector at large. The TCA document also draws heavily from an underpinning epic plot structure whereby the "founding fathers" (sic.) of Turkish international contracting are routinely presented as heroes who triumphed against the odds in challenging circumstances. The current research complements this earlier work by focusing on how individual senior managers talk about strategy.

The research aim is to explore the narrative plot structures used by senior managers for the purposes of being strategically persuasive. The focus of the empirical research is provided by the following research questions:

RQ1: Do strategy makers mobilize narrative plot structures for the purposes of being strategically persuasive?

RQ2: To what extent are the adopted plot structures representative of the pre-existing narrative infrastructure as represented in sources such as Tayanç (2011)?

The above questions remain almost entirely unexplored as a means of understanding how strategy is enacted in the context of international contracting. The research further develops new theoretical avenues of enquiry for understanding how strategy narratives are formulated in practice. It is also of practical benefit in helping practitioners structure their strategic narratives more effectively. The research is seen to have significant implications for those seeking to enact

strategy irrespective of context. There is little reason to suppose the findings are in any way unique to Turkish international contractors. The research is also relevant to those who are seeking to enact strategy on the sectoral level under the guise of industry transformation.

The paper is structured into five sections. The first offers a brief overview of the competitive strategy literature, highlighting the shift towards strategy-as-practice. The second section introduces the essential tenets of the adopted theoretical perspective. It is argued that strategy is a discursively contested concept that is enacted through the medium of narrative. Strategy narratives are further seen as a means of identity work through which managers strive to position themselves as acknowledged strategy makers. Thereafter, the methodology is described and justified in terms of the reliance on narrative interviews. The empirical findings are then presented in accordance with the identified parameters of analysis. This is followed by a discussion of the emergent themes. Finally, conclusions are offered with a particular focus on the broader implications.

## Understanding strategy

Strategy research is characterized by a broad diversity of competing perspectives. The first such perspective was born from the tradition of economics and is largely concerned with the exogenous factors that shape competitive markets (e.g., Chandler 1962, Ansoff 1965, Porter 1985, 1990). The second perspective focuses on the endogenous resources and/or capabilities which supposedly provide firms with unique sources of competitive advantage (e.g., Prahalad and Hamel 1990, Barney 1991, Teece *et al.* 1997). The third perspective differs in its emphasis on the constituent processes of strategy making (e.g., Mintzberg 1990, 2007, Pettigrew 1997). It is this latter perspective which provides the antecedents of strategy-as-practice (Whittington 2006, Jarzabkowski *et al.* 2007). In broad terms, strategy research can be seen to have evolved from the attempted reification of strategy as something that a firm possesses towards seeking to understand it as a socially situated activity. Empirical studies have accordingly moved away from macro-level analysis towards scrutinizing individual practitioners and practices at the micro-level. The strategy-as-practice perspective is especially notably for accentuating the continuously contested nature of "strategy making" (Vaara and Whittington 2012).

Notwithstanding the above, there is a danger in focusing on the situated micro-practices of strategy

making without any understanding of how they interact with the broader macro-level strategic context. As a means of bridging between the two levels of analysis, Whittington (2006) emphasizes three dimensions of strategizing. The first, described as *praxis*, encompasses the quasi-formal activities involved in the formulation and implementation of strategy. The second, labelled *practices*, comprises the tools, methods and knowledge artifacts that are mobilized for the purposes of strategizing. The final dimension relates to the *practitioners* actively engaged in the creation and enactment of supposed strategic activities. Strategy making is further seen to occur at the intersection of these three dimensions (Whittington 2006, Jarzabkowski *et al.* 2007).

Research studies that follow the strategy-as-practice perspective invariably concentrate on the execution of strategy in real time. However, the perennial challenge is to determine which practices are important at any given moment and the extent to which they can be meaningfully disconnected from the ongoing flow of *praxis* (Jarzabkowski and Spee 2009). Chia and MacKay (2007) similarly contend that strategies often arise from complex interactions in the absence of any conscious awareness. Such difficulties serve to accentuate the advantages of discursive approaches to the understanding of strategy (Fenton and Langley 2011, Brown and Thompson 2013). Especially significant is the way practitioners create shared meaning through the medium of narrative (Barry and Elmes 1997, Brown and Thompson 2013). Fenton and Langley (2011) have subsequently added "strategy text" as a fourth dimension of Whittington's (2006) proposed strategy-as-practice framework. They define strategy texts as artifacts that are produced and consumed during the process of strategy making. Finally, it is worth emphasizing that strategy narratives also often comprise identity work on the part of their advocates (Schultz and Hernes 2020). Many managers strive to construct subject positions for themselves as "strategy makers". To be recognized as such by others enables them to exercise influence irrespective of any formally allocated role.

## Theoretical framing

### Strategy as narrative

The core proposition of the narrative perspective is that people utilise stories as a means of making sense of a complex and continuously contested reality. It is further contended that narratives are directly implicated in the social construction of the organizational context within which individuals and organizations

enact their own stories (Fenton and Langley 2011). Of key importance is the role that narratives play in connecting the past to the present, and hence pointing the way towards a desired future (Rhodes and Brown 2005, Vaara *et al.* 2016). Polkinghorne (1988) notably construes narratives as temporal constructions that give meaning to experience. The narrative mode of explanation thereby acknowledges the social and historical context within which experiences take place. Polkinghorne further argues that the narrative mode of understanding is in essence retrospective in that it attributes significance to events that have happened in the past. More importantly, strategy narratives are held to be constitutive of the transient realities of strategy making. They thereby play a pivotal role in shaping the identities of those involved and in the determination of future courses of action (Fenton and Langley 2011). Hence strategy narratives can provide invaluable insights into the formation of strategy and its enactment in practice.

### Narrative construction: elements and plot structure

Narratives comprise plot structures that connect key narrative elements such as actors, actions, events and broader contextual parameters. They are constructed with the aim of justifying an advocated course of action (Polkinghorne 1988). The narrative elements are typically linked together along a timeline. The importance attached to each element and the implied causal relationships are significant features of the process of constructing a persuasive narrative. Hence the plot structure serves as a pivotal organizing concept that converts a passive chronological sequence of discrete elements into a convincing and meaningful whole (Czarniawska and Gagliardi 2003). It follows that the intended meaning is relatively easily altered through the adoption of alternative plot structures. Strategy makers can further be seen to be continuously sense-checking their preferred narratives against a succession of different audiences. Strategic narratives are hence essentially temporal in nature, and subject to a continuous process of adjustment in response to the reactions of others (Polkinghorne 1988).

It follows that analyzing narratives provides a more feasible means of accessing the "doing" of strategy than trying to observe enacted practices in real time. As already argued, managers are often unaware that a significant event is occurring until such time as a subsequent narrative retrospectively instils it with significance (Czarniawska 1998). More importantly, socially

constructed narratives also comprise significant contextual knowledge that may not otherwise be readily accessible. Hence the analysis of how narrative elements are embedded within a plot structure can provide insights that are otherwise unobtainable.

### ***The use of literary plot structures***

The conceptualization of organizations as storytelling systems is by no means new (Boje 2001). According to Gabriel (2000), there is much to be learnt by collecting organizational stories and analyzing how they are told. Different plot structures are routinely used to build a relationship between the narrator and the intended audience by instilling a different meaning into the described events. An epic plot structure typically aims to impress the audience by emphasizing the accomplishments of the selected heroes. In contrast, a tragic plot would seek to evoke empathy and sadness through the depicted failures of the highlighted protagonist. Of particular importance is the way narrators have the freedom to combine the characteristics of different plot structures to increase the persuasiveness of their narratives.

In an epic plot structure, the hero invariably takes centre stage while the storyline is enhanced by subsidiary characters such as helpers, adversaries or villains (Gabriel 2000). There is rarely any doubt regarding the chosen hero's unshakable integrity and loyalty. Table 1 summarises the narrative elements which typically comprise an epic plot as described by Gabriel (2000). According to Greimas (1987), narratives comprise specific elements called "actants". He argues that narratives invariably focus on a subject (or "hero") actant who strives to reach an object actant (or "plot focus"). Each narrative further typically depicts a series of interactions with various other characters and events throughout the depicted journey to the stated goal. Such subsidiary characters are assigned roles such as "helper" or "opponent" in accordance with the needs of the plot structure (Greimas 1987). Typically, helpers and opponents emerge as individuals, but they can also on occasion take the form of abstract concepts.

**Table 1.** Epic plot structure and narrative elements (Developed from Gabriel 2000).

Characteristics	The narrative elements
Protagonist	Hero
Other characters	Rescue object, assistant, villain
Plot focus	Achievement, noble victory, success
Predicament	Contest, challenge, trial, test, mission, quest, sacrifice
Fixed qualities	Nobility, courage, loyalty, selflessness, honour, ambition
Emotions	Pride, admiration, nostalgia, (envy)

Czarniawska (2004) contends that narratives are often constructed on plotlines that highlight how helpers may subsequently turn into adversaries (and vice versa). Furthermore, the same characters may take on the roles of heroes or villains at different points in the narrative. The demonstration of such temporal and dynamic connections over an extended timeline is hence of central importance to narrative analysis. Yet it is also important to recognize the intrinsic temporality invariably associated with the negotiation and enactment of strategy. Each narrative fragment may exemplify a temporal subject position. Hence a narrative approach does not aim to reveal a singular supposed objective reality, but rather to highlight the discursive, dynamic and iterative processes of strategy-making (Fenton and Langley 2011).

### ***Creation of narrative infrastructure***

The adopted theoretical framing further reflects the assumption that strategies are created, mobilized, and consumed over time through the interplay of various narratives. This concurs with the concept of *narrative infrastructure* as first coined by Deuten and Rip (2000) and subsequently reinforced by Fenton and Langley (2011). Narrative infrastructure refers to the progressive aggregation of previous narratives. Competing stories created in a particular context can further be seen to interact with each other continuously (Deuten and Rip 2000). Hence, narratives - and their material consequences - coalesce to constitute the "rails" along which the narrative structure travels. Strategy-making can similarly be viewed as a process through which the projected narratives of strategy interact, each providing discursive resources for the other. Over time, these interactions may give rise to new strategic storylines as individuals select elements that align with their agenda while rejecting others. Through these processes, commonly repeated themes emerge as narrative building blocks (NBBs) which act as key ingredients of the evolving narrative infrastructure. NBBs could comprise the concepts emphasized in grand narratives such as globalization, climate change, or any other such institutionalized storylines (Vaara 2002). Or alternatively, they could comprise concepts presented within pre-existing theories of strategy, such as competitive positioning, the resource-based view (RBV), or dynamic capabilities (Green *et al.* 2008). Deuten and Rip (2000) argue that favoured NBBs, and the resultant narrative infrastructure, serve to enable and/or constrain available options for the future.

Figure 1 illustrates how multiple narratives at different levels draw from pre-existing NBBs. It also shows how the narratives on the individual, organizational and sectoral levels continuously interact in an ongoing process of mutual shaping. Over time, this results in the formation of a narrative infrastructure from which others draw. Strategy narratives are hence continuously re-constructed through multi-level and multi-author processes. The resultant stories are thereafter shared, accepted and sometimes rejected across a series of organizational arenas. Such ongoing processes of aggregation and reconstruction continuously reconstitute the pre-existing narrative infrastructure. This in turn becomes a source of discursive resources which shape the espoused strategic direction (Fenton and Langley 2011). It follows that the analysis of how practitioners mobilize NBBs from the pre-existing narrative infrastructure offers potentially valuable insights into the processes through which strategies are formed, exchanged, and enacted.

### Strategy narratives of Turkish international contractors

#### Empirical context

The empirical context for the described research comprises the espoused strategy narratives of senior managers from within Turkish international contracting firms. As previously highlighted, the focus on Turkish contractors is justified based on their prolonged experience of operating in challenging international markets characterized by high levels of risk and uncertainty. Statistics produced by the Turkish Contractors Association (2023) suggest that since 1972 Turkish contractors have delivered a total of 11,605 projects across

131 countries. The cumulative value of these projects exceeds US\$472 billion (See Table 2). Ninety percent of the business volume between 1972 and 2022 notably relates to projects in the former Soviet Union or the emerging markets of the Middle East and Africa (MENA). Turkish contractors have notably thrived in such markets despite severe political and economic uncertainties. They also seemingly take great pride in operating in post-conflict zones where more risk-averse Western contractors seemingly fear to tread.

#### Methodology

The described research follows the interpretive tradition of narrative research. The guiding belief is that strategy narratives are representative of the temporal realities of strategy-making (Tsoukas 1994, Fenton and Langley 2011). The important notion of temporality is often overlooked in the construction-related literature (e.g., Ofori 1994, 2003, Flanagan *et al.* 2007, Zhao *et al.* 2009). In contrast, the current research accepts organizations as temporally evolving social constructions rather than supposedly static entities. Such assumptions are reflective of an underlying “becoming ontology” that emphasizes temporal processes rather than a supposedly static reality (Tsoukas and Chia 2002, Langley *et al.* 2013). The advocates of a temporal perspective tend to be dismissive of the identification of derived “factors” for the purposes of representing a supposedly fixed reality (Tsoukas 1994, Chia 1995). Hence the current study focuses on the temporal narratives of competitive strategy as mobilized by senior managers.

The primary research method comprised narrative interviews as a means of gaining access to the discursive

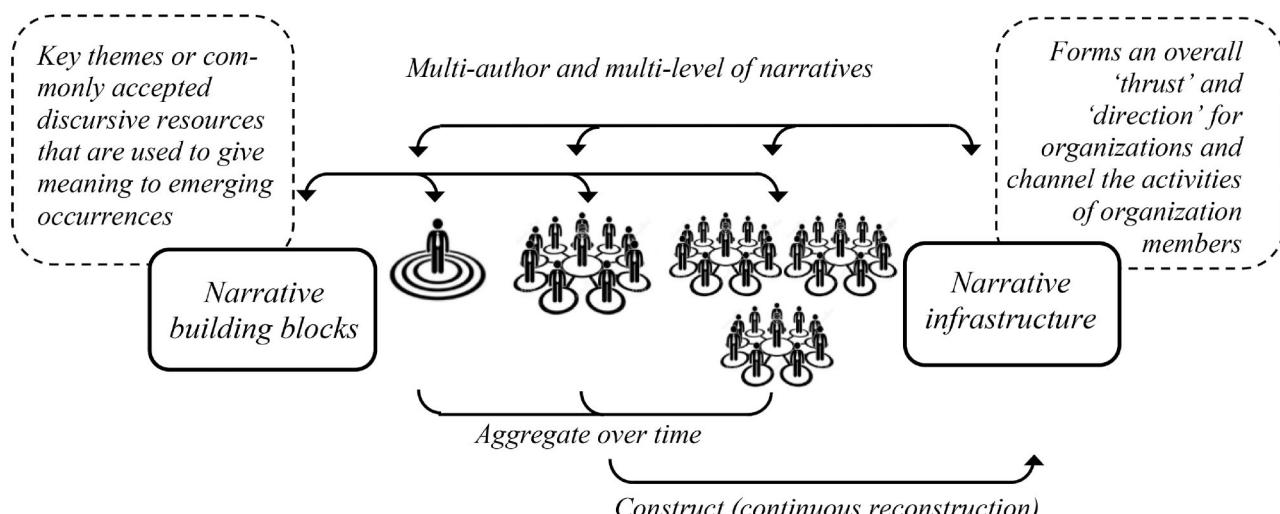


Figure 1. The construction of narrative building blocks and narrative infrastructure (Developed from Deuten and Rip 2000).

**Table 2.** Annual new project values of Turkish international contractors (2002–2023), adopted from (Turkish Contractors Association 2023).

processes of strategy making (Söderberg 2006, Czarniawska 2010, Fenton and Langley 2011). Narrative interviews differ from semi-structured interviews as normally described in the explicit recognition of a degree of co-creation involving both interviewee and researcher (Holstein and Gubrium 1995, 2012). It is important to emphasize that such co-created narratives are not seen to be representative of strategy as it might be enacted in other arenas. The focus of interest lies on the plot structures mobilized during the interviews and the NBBs upon which the participants draw.

### Research design

Thirty in-person narrative interviews were carried out with experienced managers from eighteen Turkish contracting companies. The interviewees were selected based on the length of their experience in international contracting and their claimed involvement in strategic decision-making. Most had senior roles in their respective companies, including positions on the executive board. One interviewee was also active within the TCA, thereby providing insights into the formulation of strategy narratives on the sectoral level. The interviewees represented a variety of backgrounds with markedly different career paths. Most were graduates in engineering, with civil engineering being the most prevalent specialization. Many were also recipients of a postgraduate degree (e.g., MSc, MBA, PhD). The length of industry experience varied from 10 to 53 years. The represented firms varied in terms of the markets within which they

worked. The summary of the interviewees' profiles is presented in Table 3.

### Data collection

The interviews were all carried out by the first named author who adopted the role of "fellow traveller" by taking an active role in the process of narrative construction (Gabriel 2000). She thereby undoubtedly contributed to the co-construction of the resultant narrative if only through gestures and non-directive comments (Hopf 2004). The interviews were generally conducted in English although some interviewees preferred to express themselves in Turkish. The latter interviews were translated into English prior to analysis. The interviews were recorded and transcribed with the explicit consent of the interviewees. The only exception was one manager who preferred not to be recorded, but generously gave sufficient time for the researcher to take notes. The length of the interviews ranged from forty minutes to three hours. In total, the interviews produced 3194 min of recorded data. Collectively, the interview transcripts comprised 667 pages of text. The number of interviews was deemed to be sufficient when the emergent themes became repetitive and saturated.

The interview schedule comprised six open-ended questions, each accompanied by contingent prompts. The interviews commenced with a request for respondents to provide a brief introduction to themselves and their professional background. The interviewees were then encouraged to describe the roles they had undertaken throughout their professional

**Table 3.** The profiles of the interviewees.

Number	Interviewee	Interview duration (minutes)		Experience	Bachelor	Postgraduate	Position	Areas of business
		Interview 1	84	22 years	Civil Eng.	MSc	Former CEO (10 years)/ Owner of new company since 2015 Vice President	Transportation, infrastructure, energy, environmental, real estate
2	Interview 2	Interview 2	83	28 years	Civil Eng.	MBA	Deputy Manager, Business Development	Contracting, energy, development & investment, healthcare
3	Interview 3	Interview 3	126	10 years	Civil Eng.	MBA	Member of the Board	Superstructure, infrastructure, transportation, industrial
4	Interview 4	Interview 4	124	44 years	Civil Eng.	MSc	Civil, industrial, project management	Transportation, energy, civil
5	Interview 5	Interview 5	89	20 years	Civil Eng.	MSc	Multiple firms / multiple business lines	Civil, industrial, project management
6	Interview 6	Interview 6	145	33 years	Civil Eng.	MSc	Marine, civil, infrastructure, groundworks, energy, management	Marine, civil, infrastructure, groundworks, energy, management
7	Interview 7	Interview 7	117	53 years	Civil Eng.	MSc	Housing, transportation, petrochemicals, industrial, water & sewage, energy	Marine, civil, infrastructure, groundworks, energy, management
8	Interview 8	Interview 8	99	44 years	Mechanical Eng.		General Manager	Water, Energy, Transportation, Superstructure
9	Interview 9	Interview 9	92	13 years	Civil Eng.	MSc, MBA	Business Development Executive	Energy, infrastructure, civil, transportation, real estate
10	Interview 10	Interview 10	120	17 years	Civil Eng.	MBA	Commercial Manager / Business Developer	Energy, infrastructure, industrial, PFI
11	Interview 11	Interview 11	93	23 years	Architecture		General Manager and Board Director	Superstructure, infrastructure, industrial, real estate, construction systems & materials
12	Interview 12	Interview 12	55	27 years	Mechanical Eng.	MSc	Secretary General	Trade association/ TCA
13	Interview 13	Interview 13	175	47 years	Civil Eng.		Partner, Member of the Board	Transportation, infrastructure, civil, real estate, construction systems & materials
14	Interview 14	Interview 14	82	16 years	Civil Eng.		Owner and CEO	Contracting, energy, development & investment, healthcare
15	Interview 15	Interview 15	63	11 years	Civil Eng.	MSc, PhD	Director of BIM	Transportation
16	Interview 16	Interview 16	106	40 years	Civil Eng.	MSc	Owner	Civil, infrastructure, industrial, engineering
17	Interview 17	Interview 17	170	39 years	Civil Eng.	MBA	Advisor to the Board	Marine, civil, infrastructure, groundworks, energy, management
18	Interview 18	Interview 18	62	19 years	Civil Eng.		Project Controls Director / Business Development Manager	Transportation, energy, civil
19	Interview 19	Interview 19	118	15 years	Civil Eng.	MSc	Project Controls Director / Business Development Manager	Civil, infrastructure, industrial, transportation, engineering, real estate
20	Interview 20	Interview 20	126	20 years	Civil Eng.	MSc	Commercial Manager / Business Developer	Energy, infrastructure, civil, transportation, real estate
21	Interview 21	Interview 21	40	25 years	Civil Eng.	MBA	General Manager and Board Director	Superstructure, infrastructure, industrial, real estate
22	Interview 22	Interview 22	82	16 years	Civil Eng.		Owner and Chairman	Contracting, energy, development & investment, healthcare
23	Interview 23	Interview 23	98	40 years	Civil Eng.		Construction Coordinator	Energy, infrastructure, civil, transportation, real estate
24	Interview 24	Interview 24	143	38 years	Aeronautical Eng.		Group Deputy Coordinator	Housing, transportation, petrochemicals, industrial, water & sewage, energy
25	Interview 25	Interview 25	103	24 years	Aeronautical Eng.	MSc	Coordinator	Superstructure, infrastructure, civil, transportation, industrial
26	Interview 26	Interview 26	136	49 years	Civil Eng.	MSc	Construction Coordinator	Energy, infrastructure, transportation, Industrial
27	Interview 27	Interview 27	166	22 years	Civil Eng.	PhD	Vice President	Groundworks, marine
28	Interview 28	Interview 28	166	26 years	Civil Eng.	MSc	General Manager	Marine, civil, infrastructure, groundworks, energy, management
29	Interview 29	Interview 29	162	40 years	Civil Eng.	PhD	Member of the Board	Energy, infrastructure, civil, transportation, real estate
30	Interview 30	Interview 30	135	35 years	Civil Eng.	MSc	Project Manager	

careers. They were further invited to discuss their past and present experiences and to elaborate on the extent of their involvement in strategy making. Thereafter, they were asked to explain how their respective companies had evolved over time. Prompts were occasionally employed to encourage interviewees to offer additional details. For example, the interviewer frequently asked: "could you tell me a bit more about this?". A further open-ended question invited the managers to offer their insights on the future prospects for Turkish contractors in international markets. Lastly, the interviewees were encouraged to articulate their thoughts on the extent to which the established trajectory of their firms shaped and/or constrained future opportunities. However, the process of posing these questions and prompts varied in each interview. The guiding imperative was to empower the interviewees in terms of what they wished to prioritize, thereby giving them the flexibility to recite their stories as preferred.

### **Data analysis**

The adopted approach to narrative analysis followed two complementary modes. The first comprised thematic analysis with a focus on the content of the transcribed narratives. The analysis began by multiple readings of the interview transcripts highlighting similarities and dissimilarities. Of additional interest were the recurrent words and phrases (Brown and Humphreys 2003). Issues considered relevant were coded as an initial first step of an evolving analysis (Reichert 2004). The process was repeated several times until no new codes emerged from the individual narratives. The codes were then grouped into tentative themes by cross-referencing across the 30 interviews (Holstein and Gubrium 2012). The themes were finalized after extensive checking against the data and were ultimately equated to the concept of NBBs as described in the literature.

Although the authors had few preconceived notions about emerging themes, it is important to emphasize that there was no attempt to analyze the data in the absence of any theoretical or contextual awareness. For example, the analysis was informed by the known tendency of practitioners to mobilize knowledge artefacts derived from the strategy literature (e.g., Wilson and Jarzabkowski 2006). Hence, the analysis was preconditioned to search for discursive resources derived from the quasi-theoretical narratives rooted in the strategy literature. The concept of "bricolage" is applicable here whereby pre-existing tools and concepts are

appropriated for the purposes of being persuasive with little allegiance to their theoretical antecedents.

The empirical data was also subjected to structural analysis, whereby the main concern was how the plot was structured (Czarniawska 2004, Holstein and Gubrium 2012). Rather than adhering to a singular structural analytical model, the chosen coding structure was formulated through an iterative process whereby the empirical data was explored using example plot lines derived from the literature (e.g., Greimas 1987, Gabriel 2000). The adopted mode of analysis involved the progressive deconstruction of individual narratives through a process of detailed interrogation. This enabled the identification and coding of key constituent plot elements. A coding structure was hence created utilizing accepted narrative elements such those identified in Table 1. Care was also taken to identify whether the "other characters" were positioned as helpers or opponents in terms of the achievement of the depicted end goal. The analysis again depended upon prolonged engagement with the data prior to the derivation of a colour coding structure relating to the identified narrative elements. The interrogation of the empirical data with these concepts in mind enabled the researchers to identify the plot structures around which the espoused narratives were organized. Such structural issues would have been beyond the reach of any reductive exercise in content analysis.

### **Findings**

#### **Strategy depicted as an epic struggle**

The thematic analysis enabled the identification of the constituent narrative building blocks (NBBs) which represent the key themes emerging from the data. In tandem, the structural analysis facilitated the identification of the recurring plot structures and the constituent narrative elements. This is illustrated in Table 4. Although the NBBs reflect the commonly emphasized themes across individual narratives, the storylines comprised a diversity of micro-plot structures. However, the broader plot structure consistently sought to position Turkish contractors as heroes involved in an ongoing epic struggle. It is important to note that the identification of the epic plot structure was a product of the analysis rather than something that was preconceived.

#### **Heroes and their assigned characteristics**

##### **Commitment to delivery**

The findings illustrate how a *heroic* identity is routinely assigned to key Turkish managers and the organizations

**Table 4.** From identified narrative blocks (NBBs) to narrative elements.

Narrative building blocks (NBBs)	Narrative elements
- Commitment to delivery - Thinking beyond boundaries - High propensity for risk	Heroes and their assigned characteristics
- The role of government - Client as omnipotent sovereign - Competitors as opponents	The roles ascribed to others
- Moving upwards in the value chain - Developing managerial and financial capabilities - Focusing on collaboration	Plot focus
- Continuous struggle with economic and political crises - The organisation structure: Family vs corporate company	Predicaments

for whom they work. Indicative phrases included "creating novelty", "winning awards" and "breaking new ground". The interviewees notably tended to highlight what they saw as distinctive and unique about themselves, and their employing organizations. Particularly notable was the recurring emphasis on expressions such as "clients know we can deliver" and "Turkish firms offer quality". These sentiments were especially clearly articulated by a former CEO of a contracting company:

Because Turkish contractors have such a strong reputation for quality in these countries, clients repeatedly say that when you have appointed a Turkish contractor, they will definitely deliver a quality job (Interviewee 1)

The above quotation does not of course have to be accepted as true for it to be recognised as an intrinsic component of strategy making. Several interviewees were similarly eager to highlight that establishing a successful brand image for Turkish contractors has taken several decades. Preserving this carefully cultivated brand was therefore deemed a crucial responsibility for the new generation of *heroes* tasked with expanding operations into new markets.

Sentiments relating to dedication such as those cited above were often followed by emphasizing that "work is the priority of life for Turkish people". This was made especially clear in the following quotation:

We are very hardworking company... starting from the bosses to every professional in the company, and everyone puts up their hands and takes the risk under this stone as we say in Turkish. I remember several times when we didn't take vacations; everything was postponed until project completion. Each one of us felt that we are a part of something important, not for only to that country also for our own country (Interviewee 3)

The above interview extract depicts how employees were routinely ascribed with the qualities of dedication and hard work. Also of significance is the emphasis on everyone being equally dedicated to the

achievement of the assigned heroic task. Turkish employees were further often described as being flexible and highly self-motivated - otherwise construed as "madly hardworking". This characterization was often used to distinguish Turkish workers from their Western counterparts:

Turkish people often prioritize work over pleasure... This is the reason why an increasing number of Turkish contractors appear in the ENR list of leading contractors. Turkish employees are happy to work in challenging locations. In contrast, if you want to take a Canadian to Algeria, he typically refuses to go because he can't play ice hockey every week. But our people sacrifice such pleasures for the welfare of their family (Interviewee 11)

Notwithstanding the above, some interviewees argued that the dedication of those who work in Turkish contracting is primarily shaped by the limited availability of jobs in the Turkish domestic economy. Hence the tendency to describe international contracting as a career development opportunity for young employees to advance their professional lives.

### Thinking beyond limits

Many interviewees further differentiated their firms based on a claimed capability in innovation. Although generally attributed to engineering and technical capabilities, the central claim was that Turkish contractors invariably "think outside the box". Turkish firms were seen as having the capability to find alternatives to the standard solutions allegedly offered by their competitors. Especially notable were the supposed cost and time advantages realized through the development of alternative solutions. One interviewee described their capacity for innovation in terms of value engineering:

If you evaluate [pioneer] companies, they were good at applying value engineering. They delivered the same result through the adoption of a different approach at reduced cost. The same strategy is still

effective. [Company X] won a tender in Ethiopia through the application of value engineering. This was appreciated by the president of Ethiopia, and they were awarded for the project. (Interviewee 9)

What stands out in the preceding quotation, and in similar such storylines, is the tendency to highlight an orientation towards innovative solutions as a key component of the heroic identity of Turkish contractors. There was a notable repeated emphasis on seeking to present the client with alternative solutions. Such heroic attributes were commonly linked with the mythologized founding figures of Turkish international contractors. The individuals involved were repeatedly portrayed as exemplars for subsequent generations to follow.

When invited to talk about potential future markets, most interviewees typically emphasized that they saw "no limits on what can be achieved". Such narrative fragments are again suggestive of the internalization of an ascribed heroic identity. This is especially clear in the following extract:

We do not consider that there is any project that cannot be executed by [our company]. We have this self-trust, self-motivation that we can execute any project anywhere. Imagine that you are building a factory, or a sport complex, and the only material you can find in the country is cement... If you can do this [project] in [that market], you can do [projects] anywhere (Interviewee 2).

The above quotation suggests that the *heroes* of Turkish international contracting are routinely tasked with the responsibility of pushing beyond normal accepted limits. They pride themselves as being able to achieve this based on their supposed exceptional courage and fortitude. As previously, whether this is substantively true is not the issue; the crucial point relates to how such *heroic* identities are consistently reinforced as an essential component of the projected strategy narrative.

### **High propensity for risk**

A further prominent quality ascribed to Turkish contractors was their supposed propensity to accept high levels of risk. Several interviewees cited the example of the entry of Turkish contractors into the Russian Federation following the breakup of the Soviet Union. It was repeatedly emphasized that the decision was made despite the high levels of prevailing uncertainty. A further example was provided by a former CEO who set out his expectations for expansion in the Middle East:

If there is a peace deal in Middle East... wow! The whole Middle East will be a great market for Turkish construction sector. Again, everybody else will be scared to enter but we (Turkish contractors) will be the pioneers (Interviewee 1).

The primary message was the tendency to depict political risk as a *helper* for Turkish contractors. However, others argued that Turkish contractors would be better advised to focus on developing more formal risk management capabilities. The founder of a highly successful contracting company notably mobilized a gambling metaphor:

Risk taking varies from company to company, and from person to person. Some people take calculated risks, we call them businessmen (sic.); others take uncalculated risks, we call them gamblers. So, I would say that Turkish companies, especially at the beginning of their expansion into international markets, were in essence gamblers (Interviewee 16)

Many interviewees recalled previous Turkish companies that have gone out of business apparently due to a lack of effective risk management. While most respondents emphasized the linkage between high risk and high return, there were others who saw this as a sign of corporate immaturity. The contention was that as companies expand and become progressively more corporate, a more formalized approach to risk management becomes increasingly important.

### **Ascribed roles of other characters**

#### ***The role of government***

The Turkish government was routinely positioned as another key character who shapes the strategic journey of Turkish contractors. Some interviewees saw the government as a helper, especially regarding expansion into new markets. Government-initiated business trips or trade agreements were further seen to provide contracting firms with opportunities to develop networks of contacts in targeted markets. Desirable contacts were seen to include government officials and local business leaders. In the words of the former CEO of a contracting company:

It's not easy to find new markets. I am not waiting for the government or these kinds of associations to give me a project, I just want them to go and have an agreement with the president of Pakistan saying that we now have an economic trade agreement which makes us eligible to enter into a new market without the need to look for a local partner. (Interviewee 1)

The above statement expresses the expectation that the government should foster trade connections with other nations to provide opportunities for Turkish contractors. Indeed, there was a broad consensus that contractors from other countries were more strongly backed by their governments and that Turkish contractors are deserving of similar support. Such a view seemingly co-exists with the common complaint that

state support to Chinese contractors comprises unfair competition (see below).

Notwithstanding the above, the unpredictability of the Turkish government's foreign policy was often emphasized as a key opponent to be overcome. In the words of a business development director in a contracting company:

At the end of 2015, due to the plane crisis with Russia and the tensions between the Turkish government and Iraq, we started experiencing difficulties in our markets with high business potential. (Interviewee 10)

What is striking about above quotation is the way in which it positions the available opportunities as being constrained by the prevailing geo-political context. Many interviewees similarly emphasized that a more consistent foreign policy on the part of the Turkish government would provide them with a greater degree of market certainty.

### ***The client as omnipotent sovereign***

The interviewees also often ascribed an iconic status to the clients for whom they worked. Clients were almost invariably seen as omnipotent actors deserving of special deference. Hence the espoused strategy was often one of keeping the client "happy". One interviewee notably used a parenting metaphor to emphasize how clients invariably believe their projects are of special importance:

Every client wants to feel that his project is more important than those you have built previously. It's like believing that your kid is different from other kids. Even if you see that the others are more handsome or beautiful, you believe that yours is the best. Yet each client must be treated very differently from the others. Clients simply don't want to hear that their project is simple and straightforward in comparison to others. It's a matter of understanding the psychology. (Interviewee 1)

The above quotation clearly explains how Turkish contractors consistently ascribe a privileged position to their clients. Several other interviewees similarly emphasized how treating each client as "special" sets Turkish contractors apart from their competitors. In contrast, Western companies were routinely labelled as the "snob guys" who expect clients to adapt to their rules and procedures. Clients in post-Soviet countries and MENA were also described as often requesting changes during project delivery. It was further recognised that many such clients might also face financial difficulties which prevent them from making payments on time. A recurring theme was to emphasize how Turkish contractors invariably strive to respond positively to such challenges. In contrast,

Western firms were routinely held to prefer a "claim and blame" approach. Typical phrases included "we don't say no, even if the client is wrong". Several interviewees stressed the importance of ensuring client satisfaction as a means of securing future contracts. Others emphasized that the markets targeted by Turkish contractors lack the transparency routinely observed in the West. Hence their recurring emphasis on the need for a close relationship with clients.

### ***Competitors as opponents***

The interviewees consistently described how contractors from other countries often seek to impede the strategic journey of Turkish contractors. Chinese contractors were repeatedly positioned as providers of low-quality, low-cost services, often benefiting from substantial financial support from the Chinese government:

China has significant state support. Chinese companies are state-owned, not private. Turkish companies, on the other hand, are all privately owned. Turkish contractors do not have the same level of government support. If I were a client and you and a Chinese contractor came to me, even if your bid is 5 percent higher, I would prefer you because I know you offer better quality. That is why clients prefer not to work with Chinese companies. (Interviewee 13)

The above storyline was routinely used to justify why Turkish contractors often struggle to compete with Chinese firms on the criterion of cost. Several interviewees expressed particular concern about the dominance of Chinese companies in African markets. The increasing number of trade agreements between China and many African countries is allegedly important in the provision of privileged access to Chinese contracting firms. This was seen to comprise "unfair" competition.

Western contractors were also identified as competitors, otherwise construed as opponents in the epic struggle of Turkish international contracting. It was usually conceded that Western firms provided good quality. But they were also seen to be slow on delivery because of their overly bureaucracy procedures. Some argued that the bureaucratic procedures of Western contractors often result in better quality than their Turkish counterparts. This was held to be especially true for complex engineering projects. Nevertheless, the interviewees also tended to associate Western contractors with an orientation towards claim management. Typical phrases included: "They employ more lawyers than managers" and "they earn their profits through contractual claims". The attachment of such identity labels to Western competitors was often used to clarify the strategic positioning of Turkish firms:

It's useful to look at what our competitors offer in terms of what you pay and what you get. Western companies tend to be the most expensive, and Chinese companies are the cheapest. Turkish contractors lie somewhere in the middle – we strive to deliver optimum value in terms of the quality you get and the amount that you pay. (Interviewee 3)

Several other interviewees echoed the preceding sentiment, contending that Turkish contractors are positioned in the middle ground between low-cost, low-quality Chinese firms and high-cost, high quality Western firms who invariably deliver late.

### **Plot focus**

#### ***Moving upwards in the value chain***

Many interviewees advocated that Turkish contractors should move upwards in the value chain by offering integrated services that extend beyond traditional contracting. Many referred to the trend towards "investor-contractors" and the tendency for mega projects to be delivered through BOT or PPP. Given such changes in the market, there was a recurring fear that being "masters of contracting" is no longer sufficient to sustain the epic story of Turkish international contracting. Several also referred to the existence of informal league tables of international contractors... In the words of an eminent owner of a contracting company:

Turkish contractors find it difficult to gain access to the top league. This is largely a consequence of the pre-qualification requirements imposed by clients. There are so many requirements, not only technical but also financial, and relating to past experience. So, there is a different level at which international companies are playing with better margins. Not too many Turkish companies are there yet I believe (interviewee 16)

The above statement clearly illustrates how managers create a challenge for themselves by citing "the top league" in international construction as a plot focus. Such narrative fragments often emphasize the importance of enhancing design, engineering, and financial capabilities. Interviewees from some of the largest companies also highlighted their capability in delivering EPC projects within the expanding industrial and energy sectors. However, others still feel obliged to collaborate with Western contractors for the purposes of meeting stringent pre-qualification criteria.

#### ***Developing managerial and financial capabilities***

The particular importance of developing managerial and financial capabilities was highlighted as an essential requirement for the heroic journey of continuous strategic

development. The consensus was that Turkish contracting companies are currently in the process of developing the required managerial capabilities to move beyond being old-fashioned contracting businesses. As expressed by some, the development of managerial capabilities means "understanding the bigger picture" rather than continuing with the traditional "hands-on" approach. This was routinely followed by emphasizing the importance of having a list of trusted sub-contractors as a supposed "source of competitive advantage". In the words of one business development manager:

The competitiveness of our company is dependent upon our specialized sub-contractors who we know can deliver on time to a certain cost... Having this sub-contractor database and a variety of business lines has enabled us to be more competitive in the market. (Interviewee 9)

The above quotation highlights that the capability in managing sub-contractors is important in enabling main contractors to remain competitive. Hence, developing managerial capabilities is depicted as essential if Turkish contractors are to move "up the value chain".

The individual narratives also routinely referred to the crucial importance of financial capabilities, regardless of the focus of the interview questions. The ability to provide project finance was repeatedly emphasized as a key requirement for continuing the epic storyline, especially in terms of moving up the assumed league table of international contracting. The managers from a few leading companies proudly described the financial power of their firms, especially the capacity to obtain project finance from international credit institutions. These managers were keen to emphasize the reputation and credibility of their firms as key *helpers* to securing project finance. However, the benefits of being an investor-contractor seem to be available to a limited number of firms:

Financing capability, is limited to one-two companies. [Company X] find funding, OK, [Company Y] can find funding, OK, maybe [Company Z] can find funding, but 10 companies maybe, I mean, then the other medium levels [smaller companies] can develop in much smaller countries and very profitable projects, but they cannot secure funding. (Interviewee 6).

The above quotation alludes to the importance of extending financial capabilities to contracting firms of different sizes. The individual narratives tend to highlight limited financial capabilities as a consistent *predicament* for most Turkish contractors other than for a few larger companies. Working in partnership with large Western contractors was held by some to be a key strategic action to overcome the financial requirements of

international projects. The individual narratives also emphasized that the ability to provide finance for large-scale projects is directly related to the credit rating of the government. The key discussion point was the need for project credits or loans to be provided by the government and state-owned credit banks.

### ***Focusing on collaboration***

The individual narratives further routinely emphasized joining forces with others as a key *helper*. Collaboration with others was seen to be especially important in winning tenders for projects that exceeded the capabilities of a single organization:

Of course, there are some projects that we are not qualified technically, legally and in this case we are able to bring new people [referring to partners] next to us or under us or above us. (Interviewee 2)

The above quotation outlines how Turkish contractors follow different collaboration practices depending on the project. For many, collaboration was defined as becoming a JV or consortium partner with a Western company. "Stronger muscles" and "larger financial opportunities" were the metaphors used to describe the associated benefits. The partners were hence seen as *helpers* in reaching beyond the capabilities of any single organization. This was seen to be especially important on large-scale EPC projects.

There was also a strong message that Turkish contractors should stop competing among themselves:

The biggest problem for Turkish firms is that when they enter a new market, they trip themselves up by competing against other Turkish contractors. Western firms do well by focusing on different markets or consolidation through mergers and acquisitions. This applies not only to companies from the same country, but also to those from within the European Union... For example, the French and German do not enter each other's market. (Interviewee 28)

The above expressed need to eliminate "meaningless competition" was a recurring theme. The trend towards consolidation among Western companies was described by many as being an example to follow. However, many interviewees also argued that the family-owned organization structure of Turkish contractors does not allow such a strategy.

### ***Predicaments***

#### ***Continuous struggle with economic and political crises***

Many interviewees consistently described the importance of the broader context in shaping the political

and economic characteristics of the markets in which they compete. In common, with the broader sectoral narrative, the 1970s oil price boom was described as an initiator of the entry of Turkish contractors into international markets. The resultant boom in oil prices was seen to be important in boosting construction demand within the oil-rich MENA countries thereby creating new opportunities. A similar theme was evident in the recited stories about the opportunities which arose from the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991:

We [first] went abroad in 1991. And, by that time there was a crisis in Turkey. That is why we set a target to be international... It was a [economic] crisis for us, but it was a time of big opportunity for oil producers like Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Russia. Our mentality is that if there is a crisis in Turkey, there are probably big opportunities abroad. In contrast, when there is a decrease in oil prices, MENA countries have a crisis; however, other countries in Europe become potential construction markets. That is why we move from West to East, or from East to West in accordance with fluctuating oil prices. (Interviewee 14)

The above quotation is notable in its depiction of Turkish contractors as oscillating between different markets depending on the prevailing economic conditions. A common emphasis was that economic prosperity means investment, and hence the potential for new projects. The reverse argument was that economic instability inevitably presents challenges. Typical cited consequences included projects being suspended, due payments being delayed or even on occasion unilaterally cancelled. Political instabilities within countries such as Libya and Russia were hence often presented as *opponents* in the depicted epic struggle. However, other interviewees were insistent that Turkish contractors would continue to persevere in such markets despite prevailing difficulties:

When there is war, there is not much activity. But, if those wars, somehow, stop or move to another part of the world, then places like Syria may suddenly become the world's biggest market, who knows? I mean if there is an investment in somewhere like Libya, then it potentially becomes a lucrative market. I'm not sure who is governing Libya now, but there is still oil over there. So it can suddenly become a very nice market, because energy is always important... I think, nowadays, we are at the bottom of this loop. Probably, construction demand will go up again... (Interviewee 6)

The preceding statement serves as a notable illustration of how political crises are often perceived as opportunities for Turkish contractors. Countries such as Iraq, Libya and Russia, were typically described as

"deep" markets with strong future potential. Conflicts and problems were seen as part of the day-to-day reality of international contracting. Uncertainty was hence celebrated as the norm rather being held in any way to be unusual.

Turkish people were also often portrayed as being accustomed to dealing with uncertainty and risk because of the sustained economic and political instability within Turkey:

We [the Turkish people] don't worry about political risks because we have grown up in Turkey. We have always lived with uncertainty to some extent - social, political and economic. We have experienced many crises over the years. Hence our people would accept many uncertainties that Western people would not (Interviewee 11)

As illustrated above, most interviewees emphasized that Turkish contractors are better equipped to handle instability than those which operate from within relatively stable markets. Several interviewees also emphasized that the political economies of Central Asia and MENA have much more in common with Turkey than with Western countries. They further tended to emphasize the cultural and historical ties between Turkey and these markets as a *helper*. This was considered particularly important in convincing employees to work in locations that were held to be more hostile for non-Turkish competitors.

### ***The organisation structure: Family vs corporate company***

Turkish contracting companies traditionally tend to be owned and governed either by a single family or a tightly-knit group of partners. Comparatively few operate as publicly listed companies. The interviewees expressed differing opinions on the relative merits of contrasting forms of ownership. The distinction was drawn between the direct control exercised by family-owned Turkish firms in contrast to the supposedly "stifling governance procedures" that were alleged to apply within Western contractors. Those who supported the former view, tended to emphasize that centralized decision making in family companies are key *helpers* in enabling Turkish contracting companies to be flexible and agile. This was well-evidenced in the following quote:

My opinion is [that] the stakeholders of the company, the owners of the company; they must have their hands-on in the company management. I don't believe that a construction company, especially in Turkey... can be managed by professionals or can be opened to the public. This is my personal decision ... but as a professional who has lived in this company for 45 years

in the Turkish market, construction companies cannot be managed by the professionals... decision makers of the company should have 100% power... They are dealing with the [client] (Interviewee 4)

However, a common view among many was that family-owned companies often only survive for approximately three generations. They further tended to argue that maintaining an active hands-on approach becomes challenging for family firms as they expand. However, even those who see their companies as being "corporate" often ironically allude to the presence of a "strong boss figure". For many there is a need to maintain the right balance between relying on a single leader and the potential risks of becoming unresponsive to emergent opportunities. Such comments on organizational structure were usually followed by emphasizing the importance of agile decision-making. The interviewees frequently argued that construction firms require quick responses to emergent opportunities. They further contended that clients prefer having direct contact with those who have the authority to make decisions. Being able to directly respond to client requests was depicted as crucially important in securing projects within their targeted markets. This was well illustrated by the TCA representative when describing the internationalization of Turkish contracting companies:

Turkish people ... are always quick to decide and go to such markets abroad. For example, the first contractors who went to Russia after the demolition of the Berlin Wall in 1989 were Turkish contractors. When Western contractors were thinking about how to do this, our people (Turkish contractors) went quickly and delivered badly needed social housing before others were able to reach any decision. Similarly, they went to Central Asia, and the first contractors who went to Afghanistan were also Turkish contractors (Interviewee 12).

The above quotation mobilises the claim that Turkish managers can act more quickly than their competitors. In essence, a capability in agile decision making was repeatedly highlighted as a distinguishing characteristic of Turkish contractors. Hence, agility is emphasized as an important part of the heroic identity that must be reinforced for the ongoing progression of the *heroic journey*.

## **Discussion**

### ***The use of epic plot structures***

The first research question (RQ1) sought to explore how strategy makers mobilize narrative plot structures for the purposes of being strategically persuasive. The narratives mobilized by the research participants

were found consistently to reflect an epic plot structure. As such they support the contention that narrative plot structures are routinely mobilized for the purposes of strategic intent (Polkinghorne 1988, Barry and Elmes 1997). Whether the senior managers involved will continue to be recognized by their colleagues as "strategy makers" is dependent on the extent to which their narratives remain persuasive. The narratives mobilized are undoubtedly temporal in nature and prone to continuous adjustment in accordance with the reactions of successive audiences. It follows that the identified strategy narratives are constitutive of strategy making as a process rather than being representative of a supposed external reality.

The important methodological point which follows from the above is that the essential temporality of the presented narratives does not distract from their validity as research objects. This aligns directly with the notion of strategy-as-practice as shaped by a "becoming ontology" (Tsoukas and Chia 2002). Such a perspective stands in harsh contrast with the literature orientated towards the identification of the supposedly static "determinants" of competitiveness (e.g., Öz 2001, Dikmen and Birgönül 2003, Özorhon 2012).

The findings also support the contention that strategy narratives are used for the purposes of linking the past, present, and future (Fenton and Langley 2011). The highlighted narrative fragments offer several instances where respondents have depicted past heroic deeds and projected them into the future as examples for others to follow. Indeed, it was striking how often the respondents presented well-rehearsed epic stories of how Turkish contractors entered new markets in the past, and how they seemingly prevailed in difficult circumstances. However, such narratives clearly draw very selectively from the past with an eye towards a desirable future (cf. Fenton and Langley 2011). The stories mobilized were invariably set against a broader geopolitical landscape in a way that would be considered unusual in the domestic markets of the West. The collapse of the former Soviet Union was an especially common point of reference, likewise the various conflicts in the Middle East. But the overriding message for the future would seem to be that Turkish contractors should look for opportunities in conflict zones. The dominant strategy narrative is that Turkish contractors should go where others fear to tread.

### ***Creating subject positions/labelling others***

The individual narratives of the interviewees were further noteworthy for the way they attributed specific

subject positions to other characters. Given the performative power of narratives in shaping future strategic ambitions, the labels assigned to other characters become crucial components of strategy making (Vaara *et al.* 2016). Through labelling other characters as either helpers or opponents, managers not only interpret the roles of others, but also how they might meaningfully respond. For example, most interviewees seemingly expect that foreign ambassadors should serve as helpers in facilitating market entry to different countries. Many described the heroic journey of Turkish contractors as a "market war" against Chinese and Western companies. The interviewees were hence very explicit in labelling their competitors as a means of defining a clear subject position for themselves. The consistent labelling of others can hence be viewed as an essential component of strategy making. This was also evident in the consistent labelling of the sovereign client.

### ***Identity work: Heroes of international contracting***

A further emergent theme related to the extent to which the strategy narratives could usefully be construed as identity work. Most of the interviewees saw themselves as the new generation of heroes seeking to progress the legacy of their predecessors. There is therefore an expectation that the new generation of heroes will learn from the mistakes of the past and respond accordingly. The findings hence suggest that the current generation of managers readily accept the epic storyline of heroes striving to overcome significant challenges. Nevertheless, paradoxically, they were also eager to highlight their supposedly modern capability in advanced risk management techniques, especially when compared to the practices of earlier generations. They arguably still see themselves as risk lovers, but with increasingly sophisticated capabilities in risk management. Such attitudes to risk are consistent with the arguments of Vaara *et al.* (2016) regarding the power of narratives to foster both stability and change.

Agile decision-making was further often highlighted as a key characteristic that differentiates Turkish contractors from their competitors. This was seemingly asserted as an issue of identity shaped by the underlying cultural norms associated with Turkish people (cf. Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003). Such arguments comprise a means of continually strengthening the success story of Turkish international contractors. They hence align with recent interpretations of strategy narratives as a means of identity work (Brown 2015, Vaara *et al.* 2016). The underpinning contention is that "Turks can

deliver the project no matter what happens". Such expressions can be seen to comprise distinctive discursive resources that are mobilized as a way of "telling yourself forward" (Deuten and Rip 2000).

### ***Influence of pre-existing narrative infrastructure***

The second research question (RQ2) related to the extent to which the adopted plot structures are representative of the pre-existing narrative infrastructure as represented in sources such as Tayanç (2011). The empirical data undoubtedly provide extensive evidence of recurring storylines within the recited narratives which echo the sectoral level plot structures advocated by the TCA. A common thread throughout is the identification of individual heroes who battle against the odds. The depicted plots are notable for the epic geopolitical landscapes within which the stories unfold. But they are also notable for the way the plots are enriched by other protagonists such as helpers, adversaries, and villains. There is also evidence of the tendency for helpers to subsequently turn into opponents as suggested by Czarniawska (2004). Perhaps the best example is the way the Turkish government is depicted in different ways at different times for the purposes of making different arguments. Reference was also frequently made to other external "grand" narratives as previously highlighted by Vaara (2002). Perhaps the most striking examples are those of a geo-political nature whereby Turkey is forever oscillating in its orientation between the West and Russia.

A further recurring theme was Turkey's cultural alignment with the MENA region and the emerging economies of central Asia. This was frequently mobilized to emphasize the unique opportunities that are open to Turkish contractors. Of further note is the repeated mobilization of the "energy" narrative in response to fluctuating oil prices. Although the precise arguments often differed, the essential narrative building blocks (NBBs) again had much in common with the institutionalized narrative promoted by the TCA (see Duman *et al.* 2019). There would seem therefore to be a broadly accepted set of parameters within which the strategy narratives of Turkish international contractors are projected. Such parameters might usefully be understood in terms of the NBBs which shape the evolving narrative infrastructure of Turkish international contracting.

The resonance between the findings presented above and the institutionalized narrative projected by the TCA further suggests a strong degree of interaction between the individual and sectoral levels (cf. Fenton and Langley 2011, Coupland and Brown 2012).

Such reciprocal shaping can be seen to comprise a continually evolving narrative infrastructure for the entire sector (cf. Deuten and Rip 2000). It further provides a distinct point of reference for generating future narratives with direct strategic consequences. The NBBs identified in the narratives of Turkish contractors notably follow the characteristics of an epic plot. Collectively, these are seen to comprise the constitutive elements of the narrative infrastructure of Turkish international contractors. The identified NBBs can further be seen as socially constructed resources that evolve through a continuous interplay between the past, present, and future.

### **Conclusion**

The presented research is held to break new ground in the study of strategy making within construction firms. This relates both to the findings and to the adopted methodological approach as rooted within narrative analysis. The findings demonstrate how senior managers within contracting firms routinely employ literary plot structures in their espoused strategy narratives. Such narratives have been further construed as identity work on the part of their advocates. The extent to which the espoused strategy narratives are persuasive can further be seen to have material implications in terms of creating opportunities for the individuals concerned to exercise influence. In accordance with the principles of strategy-as-practice, such opportunities can be created irrespective of any formally allocated role.

The underlying contention is that the strategy narratives articulated by individual managers provide useful proxies for the day-to-day practices of strategy making. The analysis further illustrates how managers utilize narratives for the purposes of testing their understanding against that of others with whom they interact. The identified narratives thereby reflect the extent of diversity that exists across individual accounts of strategy making. The empirical work further illustrates the temporal connections that are made in strategy narratives between the identified actors, their actions, and the broader external geopolitical context within which events take place. Such scripting is invariably subject to post-hoc rationalisation and narratives can be seen to play a pivotal role in assigning meaning to past events.

Of further interest are the insights gained through the concept of narrative infrastructure, especially how it is constituted in terms of NBBs. The analysis points towards a dynamic narrative infrastructure for strategy making in the Turkish international contracting sector

which continuously shapes the strategy making of firms within the sector. The identified NBBs can further be seen to convey important messages regarding continuity and change in respect of the practices associated with the success of Turkish contractors. The recurring reliance on epic plot structures further evokes the esteemed heroes of the past for the purposes of instilling desirable feelings of honour and pride. The empirical data suggest that the importance of these NBBs is not primarily rooted within fact, but in the way they create expectations for the future of Turkish international contracting. Hence the identified NBBs are important not only in terms of their substantive meaning, but also as a guide to future practice with direct strategic consequences. The research is hence held to be of practical benefit in helping practitioners structure their strategic narratives more effectively and thereby making them more persuasive.

Although the research has focused on the strategy narratives mobilized within Turkish international contracting firms, the findings have broader implications for those seeking to enact strategy irrespective of context. The research is also potentially of relevance to those who are seeking to enact strategy on the sectoral level. This relates not only the adopted epic plot structures, but also to the broader concept of narrative infrastructure.

In terms of limitations, the narratives presented were undoubtedly co-created and temporal. They thereby only provide insights in the processes of strategy making through the adopted proxy of the narrative interview. The research therefore does not claim to be representative of any sort of assumed fixed reality. But this has rather less to do with the limitations of the research as described, and rather more to do with the contested and temporal nature of strategy making. The adopted mode of narrative analysis is nevertheless held to be more widely applicable thereby opening up new theoretically-rich avenues of strategy-related research. Above all, the research demonstrates that the way managers talk about strategy is not a trivial issue.

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## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [First author], upon reasonable request.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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