Monograph

Current Sociology
1–22

DOI: 10.1177/00113921241272779
journals.sagepub.com/home/csi
Sage

Imaginative labor and embodied cognition: Economic sociology as a cognitive science

Dustin S. Stoltz
Lehigh University, USA

Abstract

How do we imagine economic objects, processes, and actions? More importantly, if the future is inherently uncertain what limits the range of possible imaginings such that actors can agree and coordinate? Building on the work of Jens Beckert, I outline an approach to imagination and imaginative labor in economic sociology grounded on the insight that embodied cognition is central to the capacity for exploring possibilities for action and organizing abstract domains. To demonstrate this approach, I build on the use of metaphor analysis in sociology, cognitive anthropology, and cognitive linguistics to analyze a field whose fictional expectations have a significant impact on the global political economy: elite professional advisory firms. This is a field in the business of selling imaginative labor, both within the backstage work of recruiting and the frontstage work of selling.

Keywords

Cognitive linguistics, cultural models, imaginative labor, management consulting

How do we imagine economic objects, processes, and actions? More importantly, if the future is inherently uncertain what limits the range of possible imaginings such that actors can agree and coordinate? Building on the work of Jens Beckert, I outline an approach to imagination and imaginative labor in economic sociology grounded on the insight that embodied cognition is central to the capacity for exploring possibilities for action and organizing abstract domains. To demonstrate this approach, I use examples from a field

Corresponding author:
Dustin S. Stoltz, Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Lehigh University, 31 Williams Drive, Bethlehem, PA 18015-3027, USA.
Email: dss219@lehigh.edu

whose fictional expectations have a significant impact on the global political economy: elite professional advisory firms. This is a field in the business of selling imaginative labor, both within the backstage work of recruiting and the frontstage work of selling.

> *'Not to lie about the future is impossible and one can lie about it at will'*.[1]

Statements about the future can be neither true nor false because, as far as we know, the future is not yet real. Time is often conceived as a 'linear flow stretching from the past into an open and uncertain future' (Deutschmann, 2019, 56) and as 'the future is yet to be created by the choices we make [it] is "problematic" and "undetermined"' (Bronk, 2009, 200). We cannot assume that events tomorrow will follow exactly the patterns of yesterday or today, which leads to the question: 'If we live in a world of radical uncertainty and hence are unable to gravitate to a uniquely rational set of expectations, how do we co-ordinate our actions with one another?' (Beckert and Bronk, 2018, 9). This is a central question in economic sociology.

In what follows, I engage this question by bridging the concept of *fictional expectations* (Beckert, 2016; Beckert and Bronk, 2018) with the interdisciplinary concept of 'embodied cognition'. This offers an expanded conceptualization of imagination as grounded in the body, which is thus unevenly distributed among social positions by virtue of this embodiment (Reay, 2010). From this naturalistic approach, imagination is not an immaterial discourse but is rather realized in flesh and blood. Imagination, then, is always imaginative labor: someone must do the work. This provides a firmer foundation to answer a key question for economic sociologists: *If all predictions about the future are neither true nor false, what curtails the range of fictional expectations?*

Consider, for example, a field whose fictional expectations have a significant impact on the global political economy: elite professional advisory firms. Such firms are in the business of selling imaginative labor: the work of imagining a possible future state of affairs, communicating that future state of affairs to others, and usually with some intention to influence decision-making in the present. The data I collected from this field can be divided into a frontstage and a backstage. In the frontstage, consultants communicate to the general public and potential clients. In the backstage, consultants work to recruit new talent.

Fictional expectations and imaginative labor

What 'comes to mind' when one 'imagines' the economy and its constituents? Does it have a definite shape and form? Is economic value a fluid in motion, circulating like blood through the economic body? And, what is the relationship between how we imagine 'the economy' and how we engage in economic actions? These questions bear a family resemblance to what Zukin and DiMaggio refer to as 'cognitive embeddedness', defined as 'the structured regularities of mental processes [that] limits the exercise of economic reasoning' (Zukin and DiMaggio, 1990, 15–16):

> Although none of the contributors to this volume emphasize this theme, most of them share, along with most work in sociology, a keen sense of the limits to rationality . . . The notion of

> cognitive embeddedness is useful in calling attention to the limited ability of both human and corporate actors to employ the synoptic rationality required by neoclassical approaches.

Compared to other forms of embeddedness, the cognitive has received much less attention, leaving cognition undertheorized in economic sociology (but see Bandelj and Zoeller, 2019; Collet, 2009; Dequech, 2003; McDonnell et al., 2022; Vila-Henninger, 2021).[2] Often, cognition enters in reference to the Carnegie School and the notion of bounded rationality (e.g. Simon, 1972). Swedberg (1997, 168), for example, interprets cognitive embeddedness as the 'factors that limit the human mind in its mental processes'.

This framing is unsatisfactory for many economic sociologists as it casts the task of sociology as the study of 'leftovers' (Granovetter, 1990, 89) and privileges the rational actor as an ideal toward which flawed social actors, nevertheless, strive (Calnitsky, 2014). Jens Beckert (2009) reframes economic sociology around the notion that genuine *uncertainty* means no amount of improvement in cognitive capacities (or, say, augmentation with artificial intelligence) will lead to perfect rationality (see also Mirowski, 2002). In turn, this renders cognition central to the project of economic sociology (e.g. Beckert, 1996)

More recently, Beckert turned to the *imagination*, as exemplified by *Imagined Futures* (2016) and *Uncertain Futures* (2018) with Richard Bronk. As I will argue, Beckert (2016) generally relies on a pragmatist conception of cognition, but at key points evokes (perhaps inadvertently) an untenable epistemological assumption that there is a 'bifurcation between the objective world and our perception of it' (p. 244). This weakens the usefulness of *fictional expectations*. However, as I will argue, the concept of *embodied cognition* replaces this assumption and provides a firmer foundation to answer a key question for economic sociologists: *If all predictions about the future are neither true nor false, what curtails the range of fictional expectations?*

The epistemological pitfall in Imagined Futures

Imagined Futures offers one the most straightforward contemporary engagements with imagination, and thus cognition, in economic sociology. To summarize, we can split *Imagined Futures* into three components: ontological, phenomenological, and epistemological. Regarding the first, Beckert argues uncertainty about the future is an ontological fact. His position would likely be reasonable to most social scientists (e.g. Abbott, 2001; Mische, 2009). As far as we know, time moves in one direction. The future is contingent upon the unfolding of activities in the present.

Beckert also argues that, unlike economies of the past (c.f. Guseva and Mooney, 2018, 338), uncertainty is uniquely central to capitalist dynamics. Capitalism orients economic actors toward the future, making uncertainty a phenomenologically salient feature of economic life. Most economic sociologists would also agree that, for most actors in contemporary political economies, the conscious anticipation of a particular future state of affairs is experientially central.

Finally, we turn to the epistemological question of how actors are able to generate plausible fictional expectations and coordinate their activities despite an unpredictable future. Beckert (2016) asserts that 'it is impossible to obtain direct knowledge of the world because knowledge is an a priori conception the human mind applied to its sense

impressions' (p. 242). Here Beckert adopts a problematic approach to cognition, which we can call the disembodied theory of mind.

The disembodied theory of mind

For much of the 20th century, the orthodox view in the sciences of the mind rested on the Cartesian premise that thinking – that is categorizing, conceptualizing, abstracting, calculating, reasoning, and imagining – was distinct from bodily systems – that is movement, perception, sensation, and emotion. Knowledge was presumed to be encoded (or translated) into amodal symbols, operating analogously to computer code (Barsalou, 2008). Commonly called 'mind-body' or 'substance' dualism, an 'ideal' mental substance of the mind is distinct from the 'material' physical substance of the body and the world. Mental contents, mediating between inputs (perception) and outputs (actions) are constituted by an entirely 'symbolic' system that is somehow transmitted from person to person, and which is said to make perception and action possible – for a cross-disciplinary critique, see Dreyfus and Taylor (2015).

Beckert invokes this theory of mind at some points (specifically, Beckert, 2016, 94, 242–44), and often grounds it in a 'sociologized' rendering of Kantian transcendental idealism (Lizardo, 2015, 577; Rawls, 1996).[3] Very often, Durkheim's (1995) *Elementary Forms* is the exemplar citation to motivate such a model. However, this is a result of – via Parsons (1952) – confusing Durkheim's epistemological argument with his sociology of knowledge, 'leading to its general misinterpretation as an idealist argument that beliefs and collective representations are the origins of the basic categories of thought' (Rawls, 1996, 430).[4] Sensory experience is inchoate and meaningless, this argument goes, until organized into a cultural system that is internalized via the process of socialization. In other words, people never *directly experience* a shared world, but rather must somehow internalize *shared explicit representations* of it.

The disembodied theory inherits several weaknesses. First, there is no 'center' or 'ground' from which the process of building knowledge begins – sometimes referred to as the 'symbol grounding problem'. Put succinctly, 'How can the meanings of the meaningless symbol tokens, manipulated solely on the basis of their (arbitrary) shapes [or positions], be grounded in anything but other meaningless symbols?' (Harnad, 1990, 335). This approach is often justified by reference to the presumed 'arbitrary' operation of language, presented as the exemplar autonomous (or self-referential) symbolic system, typically (erroneously) citing Ferdinand de Saussure (Stoltz, 2021). Second, the disembodied theory backs us into a corner where we (as analysts) have 'no way to adjudicate between conflicting statements regarding the constitution of the world other than authoritative pronouncement' (Martin, 2011, 112). In other words, it is not that the theory cannot be verified, but rather it is a theory that asserts nothing can be verified (Smith, 2011, 122).

Importantly, although Beckert evokes the disembodied theory in *Imagined Futures*, it is clear that he does not wish the enterprise to be beholden to the logical commitments of this approach. First, this does not align with his own foundations in pragmatism (Beckert, 1996, 2003, 2016), his presumption that 'expectations are, at least in part, built from historical experience', and that the '[i]magination cannot fully escape from the familiar' (p. 94). Second, Beckert presents expectations as falling on a fiction continuum – '*Imagined*

Futures does not argue that expectations in conditions of uncertainty are pure fantasies' (Beckert, 2018, 346) – and seeks to test the extent they remain fictional by appealing to objective reality. Pushed to its logical conclusion, however, the disembodied theory renders this point unnecessary: this approach leaves only 'authoritative pronouncement' for adjudicating the conceptual difference between a 'fictional' and 'non-fictional' expectation. There is nothing with which to 'ground' these fictions.

Theorizing imaginative labor: conceptualizing embedded cognition as embodied

Researchers across the cognitive sciences – linguistics, psychology, robotics, neuroscience, and anthropology (Hutto and Myin, 2012; Lakoff and Johnson, 2008; Wilson, 2002), and increasingly in sociology (e.g. Cerulo, 2015; Engman and Cranford, 2016; Ignatow, 2007; Leschziner and Brett, 2019; Lizardo, 2009b; Stoltz and Wood, 2023; Wood et al., 2018) – are converging on an alternative approach to the disembodied theory. This approach provides a solution to the grounding problem and dissolves the hard distinction between mind and body. Setting aside important differences, this provides a point of agreement between pragmatist, practice, and materialist theories in sociology. As Marx and Engels (1845, 42) argue in the *German Ideology*:

> it is a matter of ascending from earth to heaven . . . setting out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process demonstrating the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the brains of men are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process.

In what follows, I demonstrate how economic sociologists may 'ascend from earth to heaven' in the study of the imagination by exploring a field whose fictional expectations have a significant impact on the global political economy: elite professional advisory firms. This is a field in the business of selling imaginative labor, both within the backstage work of recruiting and the frontstage work of selling. Before diving into the empirical portion, I provide an overview of the 'embodied' approach to cognition. Next, to elucidate the implications of such an approach, I consider the cognitive anthropologist Naomi Quinn's critiques of Ann Swidler's (2000, 19, 182, 187) 'toolkit' or 'repertoires' approach in cultural sociology. Quinn, in turn, provides explicit methodological tools that align with an embodied approach to cognition and alter how we approach interpretative analysis.

The embodied theory of mind

Cognitive processes are 'grounded' in all modalities of bodily systems, which, while accessing a socially structured and ecologically relevant 'subset' of reality, nevertheless provide direct access to reality (Barsalou, 2008; Elder-Vass, 2014; Lizardo, 2009a; Lizardo et al., 2020; Martin, 2011; Smith, 2011). Importantly for our purposes, *this includes abstract thinking*. This position challenges the utility of conceiving symbols, meaning, or knowledge as 'autonomous' or 'bifurcated' from the world.

Rather than making a sharp distinction between reality and our knowledge of reality, this alternative takes a naturalistic approach and – rejecting dualism – presents our minds as 'embodied'. There is an empirical world that humans will encounter in common (with variability, of course) without first 'introjecting' an entire cultural system of categorization, representation, or similar (Martin, 2011). Here, 'cognition is seen as tightly linked to practical action and as inherently "grounded" in the non-arbitrary features of human bodies as they relate to the material environment' (Lizardo, 2015, 576).

We learn, in part, through the slowly acquired sensorimotor schemas (i.e. habits, dispositions, procedural memory) which accrue by automatically schematizing the most redundant co-occurring experiential patterns encountered through daily locomotion and manipulation (Bourdieu, 1977; Mandler, 1992; Wood et al., 2018). While some of these patterns are near-universal, many are quite particular: 'Growing up in an environment of a given cultured shape brings with it a distinctive pattern of experiences and corresponding neural changes' (Strauss and Quinn, 1997, 9:90). These mundane, and even wholly unremarkable, activities 'anchor' culture, and do so prior to the internalization of public discourses.

Consider Schwartz's (1981) *Vertical Classification*. Building on the work on laterality by Durkheim's student Hertz (2013), Schwartz seeks to explain why, near-universally, the abstract concepts of morality and power are understood in terms of verticality, associating UP with moral goodness and power and DOWN with immorality and weakness. He argues that these disparate domains are structured by a more basic 'experiential prototype', emerging out of practices that are near-universally experienced by infants and children. That is, the 'origin of the fundamental categories of thought [is] in the concrete empirical details of enacted practices' (Rawls, 1996, 430).

From imaginings to the body via conceptual metaphors

Swidler called to scrutinize – rather than assume – when, where, and to what extent culture is *coherent*. As it relates to marriage in the United States, she concludes 'that both internalized schemata and public cultural representations are too multiple, too disorganized, and too fluid to structure experience and action' (Swidler, 2000, 250). Quinn questioned Swidler's conclusion. They both conducted research on how Americans understood marriage at roughly the same time and using similar interview-based methods. Quinn (2018, 142) explains, 'Although we did so on opposite coasts . . . what her interviewees and mine had to say about marriage was remarkably similar in some respects'.

Quinn (2018) argues '[i]t is not that Swidler's interpretation is wrong, it is that it is myopic. In zooming in on [each] interviewee's individual perspective on marriage, Swidler overlooks what the speaker shares with other interviewees' (p. 167) and explains away apparent consistencies. Quinn (2018) contends, 'she [Swidler] takes every variation on this [shared cultural] model as evidence of separate variants' (p. 151).

Quinn's analytic technique involves extracting linguistic metaphors interviewees used when discussing marriage and reducing them to more basic, conceptual metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, 2008): lastingness, mutual benefit, sharedness, compatibility, difficulty, effort, risk, and success. She then sought to understand their reasoning behind

using these eight, which revealed the following shared cultural model of marriage in the United States (Quinn, 2018, 146):

> Americans expect marriage to be lasting, shared and mutually beneficial. However, in their marriages they inevitably encounter difficulties, typically caused by incompatibilities between spouses . . . As much as they want their marriages to last, contemporary Americans also expect to benefit mutually from marriage in the sense of both being fulfilled by it. If they are not so fulfilled, they should end their marriage.

Why does Swidler miss this coherent cultural model anchoring her own interviewee's accounts? This is 'because she has no *systematic constraint*, such as the metaphors for marriage provided me, on the passages on which she focuses her analysis, or on the content of those passages upon which she chooses to comment' (Quinn, 2018, 166).

These conceptual metaphors, grounded in embodied experience, are subsequently *recruited for use in abstract thinking*, which curtails the range of plausible ideas and discourse (Barsalou, 2016; Thibodeau et al., 2017). In order to think and talk about abstract entities – economies, organizations – actors draw metaphorically from a domain with which they have direct experience. Analysts of future imaginings can, thus, rely on these *relatively* static conceptual metaphors to provide 'systematic constraints' and a means by which to compare commonly occurring fictional expectations.

Data and methods

The qualitative data used in the subsequent analysis derives primarily from four sources (Stoltz 2020): (1) books, articles, and reports written by consultants; (2) interviews with consultants; (3) four consulting recruitment workshops; and (4) secondary historical data, such as memoirs and biographies. In addition, I actively read a consulting forum on Reddit.com (i.e. a subreddit) that included 85,000 users (roughly 200–400 online at any one time) and regularly listened to podcasts produced by firms. These various sources of insight into the elite advisory industry allowed me to triangulate my findings throughout.

The interviews were conducted from 2015 to 2019 with 40 people (8 women, 32 men), at multiple stages in their careers, with 10 working in Southeast Asia and the rest in North America.[5] Using a dataset for an ongoing project that uses digital trace data available on firms' websites to build profiles of consultants, I engaged in a combination of stratified sampling and maximum variation sampling, and continued until I reached saturation (Small, 2009). As gaining access to 'elites' is often difficult, I accepted three referrals. Their employers were primarily the three most prestigious consulting firms: McKinsey, Boston Consulting Group (BCG), and Bain, which are often known collectively as MBB. I also interviewed strategy consultants from two of the 'Big Four' accounting firms (Deloitte, EY, PwC, and KPMG), and five of the large tech consulting firms (e.g. Accenture, IBM, and Capgemini) and 'Tier 2' generalist firms and smaller boutique consulting firms (e.g. A.T. Kearney, Booz Allen Hamilton, L.E.K, ZS Associates, and Bridgespan Group). The interviews ranged between 30 minutes to 2 hours and began with the narrative of how they came to be in consulting, followed by

how they see the major players in the advisory industry, what they see as a usual client 'engagement', and the typical business problems they encounter, who they see as good candidates for consulting, as well as a general discussion of what they see as the biggest problems facing consulting (often related to recruitment, diversity, competition, and automation), and where they see the future of the industry heading.

The recruitment workshops included two in-person events and two webinars. The first were conducted by former consultants who were currently unaffiliated with a firm (Case-in-Point and ManagementConsulted.com). The second were invite-only webinars hosted by BCG and McKinsey. During both, I was able to take extensive notes, and I recorded the webinars. All of these workshops included discussion about 'what consulting forms wanted' and 'how to think like a consultant', but foremost they were 'case interview' preparation courses (which I discuss in more detail later).

While analyzing transcripts, notes, and consultants' writing, I turned to established strategies to reduce linguistic metaphors to conceptual metaphors. Specifically, I used RQDA to code the transcriptions following the MIP method of metaphor analysis (Pragglejaz Group, 2007). This entails closely reading each lexical unit to determine whether they have a 'more basic' or 'literal' meaning in other contexts as compared to the current context (here, this is a discussion of economies and organizations by consultants). More specifically, this means (Pragglejaz Group, 2007, 3):

- 'More concrete; what they evoke is easier to imagine, see, hear, feel, smell, and taste'.
- 'Related to bodily action'.
- 'More precise (as opposed to vague)'.
- 'Historically, older'.

Once linguistic metaphors are identified, I follow Steen's (1999) five-step method in reducing these to more encompassing conceptual metaphors. In the presentation of the data, I select representative quotes demonstrating the underlying conceptual metaphors, while also contextualizing the quotes with secondary information as needed.

As I use interviews, talk from videos and presentations, and text written by consultants, the debate regarding the use of what people say as data is relevant. Spurred by Vaisey's (2009, 1687) critique of interviews for drawing out 'practical consciousness', several sociologists responded with support for interviews (e.g. Lamont and Swidler, 2014). While primarily in agreement with Vaisey, Quinn (2018, 174–175) departs from his characterization of interviews:

> Extensive interviews are not just 'conscious' or deliberative, as Vaisey would have it. Rather, the understandings on which they rely are so taken for granted by speakers, and they are so practiced at talking about them, that they do not even realize that they are making the assumptions they make . . . unaware as they are of the understandings of love and marriage that infuse their talk about it, and their presumption of the model of marriage that underlies them both, they are quite unable to deliberate on or inhibit their speech.

Following Quinn's (2005) method entails incorporating the embodied theory of mind into our understanding of language in general (Ellis, 2019; Lakoff and Johnson, 2008; Lizardo et al., 2020). We may have conscious (reflexive) access to what we say, but much of what goes into speech production and comprehension is tacit (Rotolo, 2021). Focusing on metaphors 'disciplines', the coding process by guiding our analysis toward these intuitive mental building blocks. Building on this pioneering work of Quinn, Lakoff, Johnson, and collaborators, sociologists have increasingly used metaphor analysis (Ignatow, 2003, 2004, 2009; Kharchenkova, 2018; Mattson, 2015, 2020; Rafoss, 2019; Rotolo, 2020; Schulz, 2002).

Analysis

UNSTABLE SUBSTANCES in the consulting frontstage

On r/consulting, the lively subreddit for the consulting industry, one user asks the community if anyone has read the *Constraints of Corporate Tradition*: 'I was watching videos of Dominic Barton [former Global Managing Director of McKinsey] . . . and he keeps mentioning this book'.[6] The 1987 book was out of print and no one on the subreddit had heard of it. The author was Alan Kantrow, who held an undergraduate degree in anthropology and a doctorate in history, both from Harvard. He published the book after 10 years as senior editor of the *Harvard Business Review*, right before joining McKinsey as the editor of the firm's in-house journal the *McKinsey Quarterly*. His key argument was that management can use tradition to 'generate legitimacy, commitment, allegiance, and a sense of being centered. All this we would hate to lose. What is troublesome is its blind, mechanical devotion to inappropriate or outdated content' (Kantrow, 1987, 149).[7]

This book, and Dominic Barton's endorsement of it in 2018, is part of a widespread skepticism toward *stability* in consulting. Although Kantrow's book was not a bestseller, its argument is thematically similar (and more empirically rigorous) to the book that launched the popular business book industry: *The Search for Excellence*, first published in 1982. This book incubated in the collective imagination of the U.S. business community as they witnessed the rise of Japan to be the second-largest economy during the 1960s and early 1970s (Drucker, 1982). Although this growth involved much guidance and financial assistance from the state, these factors did not capture the interest of business leaders. Rather, the 'secret' to their success was believed to be the way the Japanese firms managed their businesses, and more generically culture.

Search was written by two McKinsey consultants, Tom Peters and Bob Waterman, who were tasked with studying 'high-performing' companies to determine what made them so successful. Although heavily criticized for at worst 'faking the data' and at best 'selecting on the dependent variable' (Rosenzweig, 2008, 83–105), this book became a paragon of the 'cultural approach' in the study of organizations and economic growth (e.g. Orru, Biggart, and Hamilton, 1996), alongside fellow collaborators Robert Pascale and Anthony Athos's (1981) *The Art of Japanese Management* and William Ouchi's (1982) *Theory Z: How American Business Can Meet the Japanese Challenge*.

As Peters notes, his enemy was Peter Drucker (the 'founding father' of modern management), while his hero was Karl Weick.[8] In contrast to the supposedly rigid,

command-and-control model of Drucker, Weick emphasized contingency, uncertainty, and flexibility. In the face of the primary insight of Alfred Chandler's *Structure and Strategy* (1962), Peters and Waterman claimed that 'the crucial problems in strategy were most often those of execution and continuous adaptation: getting it done, staying flexible' (Peters and Waterman, 1982, xx). This stance is explicit in the title of the first article to come out of the project: 'Structure is Not Organization' (Waterman et al., 1980). Peters would sum up their project, and coin a corporate mantra, with: 'hard is soft, soft is hard'.

Not long after *Search*, Richard Foster (1988), a senior partner at McKinsey, published *Innovation: The Attacker's Advantage*. Like Peters and Waterman, Foster 'search[ed] for "the excellent company" – the all-seeing, all-knowing, all-wise company that made all the right moves in advance' (interviewed in Wolfe, 2011, n.p.). What he discovered was that rather than harboring some unique quality ensuring success, these companies were often blindsided by 'technological discontinuities'. In his own words: 'I realized that the reason markets outperform companies was closely tied to what Joseph Schumpeter called "creative destruction"'. Almost 15 years later, along with Sarah Kaplan – a McKinsey consultant in the 1980s before going on to become a professor at Sloan and Harvard Business School – Foster would publish *Creative Destruction*, in which they argued (Foster and Kaplan, 2001, 16):

> 'Cultural lock-in' – the inability to change the corporate culture even in the face of clear market threats – explains why corporations find it difficult to respond to the messages of the marketplace. Cultural lock-in results from the gradual **stiffening** of the invisible **architecture** of the corporation and the **ossification** of its decision-making abilities, control systems, and mental models. It dampens a company's ability to innovate or to shed operations with a less exciting future.

In this quote, the skepticism toward stability (stiffening, ossification) is based on the idea that the market is an UNSTABLE SUBSTANCE and anything in contact with it will be destroyed unless it is flexible, agile, nimble, able to bend, flow, and change with it.

In parallel, Clayton Christensen, after attending Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar and then completing his MBA at Harvard Business School, joined the Boston Consulting Group in 1979. He then returned to Harvard to get his PhD in business in the late 1980s, with his first publication from his dissertation being: 'The Rigid Disk Drive Industry: A History of Commercial and Technological Turbulence' (Christensen, 1993), and later 'Disruptive Technologies: Catching the Wave' (Bower and Christensen, 1995). This research culminated in perhaps one of the most-read contemporary business books: *The Innovator's Dilemma* (Christensen, 2013). In it, Christensen makes the claim that 'doing the right thing is the wrong thing', because companies that are successful are not investing in potentially disruptive technologies until it is too late. Regardless of its accuracy, this book has eclipsed search in its influence. In a thorough critique of Christensen's empirical work, historian Jill Lepore (2014, n.p.) explains:

> Ever since 'The Innovator's Dilemma', everyone is either disrupting or being disrupted. There are disruption consultants, disruption conferences, and disruption seminars. This fall, the

> University of Southern California is opening a new program: 'The degree is in disruption', the university announced. 'Disrupt or be disrupted', the venture capitalist Josh Linkner warns in a new book, 'The Road to Reinvention', in which he argues that 'fickle consumer trends, friction-free markets, and political unrest', along with 'dizzying speed, exponential complexity, and mind-numbing technology advances', mean that the time has come to panic as you've never panicked before.

In my interviews with consultants regarding how they saw the global economy, nearly everyone noted that not only were economies UNSTABLE SUBSTANCES[9] but this instability had increased in recent years. Here a former MBB partner, who later founded his own boutique consulting firm, describes the 'fragmentation' of the economy:

> You no longer have as robust an economy worldwide. Right? I'm not saying it used to be super easy, but it was an easier environment and you could afford to be a little bit flabby and slow. You used to have a very concentrated mass market . . . I don't mean to pick on them in particular, but if you're Kraft Mac & Cheese, the blue box that most of us grew up with, you're getting creamed, right? Because that old model doesn't work. You're getting creamed by Annie's White Cheddar Bunnies Organic in Whole Foods. And, then you're getting creamed by a private label knockoff–that, by the way, is every bit as good as your product–at Aldi's. So, you've got **fragmentation** of media and you've got **fragmentation** of channels for purchasing.

While most were optimistic that consulting would capitalize on these changes by offering advice to ailing firms, some did apply this same notion reflexively to their own field. In particular, here an MBB senior partner sees the instability as moving through the substance, much like a wave, and therefore as something that consulting firms must stay 'ahead of':

> We're always on the leading edge or the bleeding edge of trying to innovate and deliver more, faster, better. Are we vulnerable to disruption? Sure . . . I mean just the fact that I used to do things 25 years ago that people can Google today, and be done in a few hours. You know, the ability to analyze, to use technology to identify opportunities and so forth . . . it compresses the timeframe on things a tremendous level. That bar continues to rise and so companies have to continue to innovate and be on the front, on that leading edge. That's a challenge for any firm: how do you stay relevant in a world where technology and knowledge and information is **flowing at an ever increasing pace**.

As a final demonstration of the centrality of unstable substance as a conceptual metaphor for organizing their thoughts about the economy and organizations among consultants, consider just two examples from dozens of books, articles, and reports produced by McKinsey. In the report, 'The five trademarks of agile organizations' (Aghina et al., 2018), the authors identify four trends: Quickly evolving environment ('All stakeholders' demand patterns are evolving rapidly'); constant introduction of disruptive technology ('Established businesses and industries are being commoditized or replaced'); accelerating digitization and democratization of information ('The increased volume, transparency, and distribution of information requires organizations to rapidly engage in multidirectional communication and complex collaboration'); and the new war for talent

('As creative knowledge- and learning-based tasks become more important, organizations need a distinctive value proposition to acquire – and retain – the best talent, which is often more diverse'). Similarly, as a final example, consider a 2015 book produced by the McKinsey Global Institute (McKinsey's in-house think-tank):

> No Ordinary Disruption: The Four Forces Breaking All the Trends is a timely and important analysis of how we need to reset our intuition as a result of four forces **colliding** and **transforming** the global economy: the rise of **emerging** markets, the **accelerating** impact of technology on the natural forces of market competition, an aging world population, and **accelerating flows** of trade, capital, people, and data.[10]

NO GAPS, NO OVERLAPS in the consulting backstage

James McKinsey, the founder of McKinsey & Company, was known for being able to quickly diagnose a company's ills. When asked how he did it, he supposedly replied, 'You have to learn to think right' (Massarik, 1995, 74). This proved to be a significant issue when training new staff. His partner, Tom Kearney (the namesake of A.T. Kearney), urged him to write down his way of thinking, and give other staff a 'guide' to 'right thinking'. Although reluctant, McKinsey attempted to convert his tacit know-how into a six-page, written outline. This became 'A General Survey Outline', which new consultants would memorize: 'By going through the entire outline in this way, the consultant was provided with an organized approach to his study, continuity in asking questions, and a framework within which the client's critical information could be remembered' (Massarik, 1995, 75).

This was the predecessor to the consulting 'framework' or 'model'. With the subheading 'Expect to be modeling', a recent *Independent* article on getting a job in consulting puts the matter frankly: 'Consultants often attempt to solve the problems their clients are facing by using a model – an established structured approach to a business issue' (Langworth, 2015, n.p.). One early and notorious example is BCG's Growth Matrix. According to a critical history of this framework: 'The application of the "Boston Box" became a powerful means of simplifying and "boxing up" complex issues of marketing strategy' (Morrison and Wensley, 1991, 105). Numerous other 'standard frameworks' now exist (e.g. Cheng, 2012; Cosentino, 2010).

A prospective consultant usually encounters these frameworks when preparing for the case interview, which is so notorious that a cottage industry has emerged around it (see Table 1). Victor Cheng of Caseinterview.com states in a marketing email, 'As a former McKinsey interviewer, I thought I would comment on what we interviewers are looking for in candidates'. The first being: 'Do you think like a consultant?' According to one MBB partner I interviewed (2018), and commensurate with each prep course,

> The interviewer is genuinely interested in how you solve problems, how you **structured** it, how you thought about it. It is very close to what we do, day in and day out, it is a way to show us how you think . . . because this is the job. What we just did is the work.

Similarly, in an interview with another MBB partner (2019), in the context of discussing the need for 'talent' in consulting, the partner stated that 'the core structured

Table 1. Consulting interview preparation workshops.

Company	Key people	McKinsey	BCG	Bain	Other
Management Consulted	Jenny Rae Le Roux			X	
	Kevin Gao	X			
Consulting Prep	Filipe Leal	X			
	Beat Brägger		X		
	Adrien Craeninckx		X	X	
MConsulting Prep	Kim Tran	X			
Caseinterview.com	Victor Cheng	X			
Crafting Cases	Bruno Nogueira	X			
	Julio Tarraf Fernandes			X	
My Consulting Coach	John Delvin	X			
	Giovanni Braghieri				X
Firms Consulting	Kris Safarova				X
	Bill Matassoni	X	X		X

problem-solving skills are always required', to which he responded to my request for elaboration:

> It may approach some type of religion – which I should be careful I don't put too much into it. It's 'How do you think about a practical problem?' Like 'How do I take 30 percent of cost out of my 1.6 billion dollar marketing business and still grow the company?' You know, that's a concrete, specific problem. Well that spiders out into PV, and pricing, and products. Were you to spend a week looking at that problem, you're gonna be just swimming in complexity, and swimming in the sheer number of choices. So what consultants have relied on for a long time is to define a problem statement, branch it out into its core issues. And, if you walk around, I'll use [MBB Firm] as an example, if you go to Munich or you go to Abu Dhabi or to the Columbia office, whatever those teams are working on, you'll see them define the problem statement, drawing an issue tree on whiteboards, and use that to structure the problem . . . It's not an approach to innovation, it's an approach to 'How do I navigate the messiness of the world and the messiness of the problem to get to the things that are most critical and most important?' And it rolls up into a way of **structuring** the work, and getting it done, but also a way of communicating in a top down fashion.

One of the most consistent pieces of advice offered in consulting interview prep courses: 'Don't rely on standard frameworks'. The simultaneous pervasiveness of, and skepticism toward, *structured* problem-solving raises the question: if a recognizable framework is discounted, what does it mean to think like a consultant?

The underlying pattern uniting these various frameworks, and the key aspect of the interview that the interviewer intuits, is the presence of the conceptual metaphor NO GAPS, NO OVERLAPS, and this is in no small part due to Barbara Minto. Minto was among the first women to attend Harvard Business School, graduating in 1963, and

becoming the first woman to be hired by McKinsey. According to an interview conducted by her employer, she excelled in writing and was tasked with overcoming the lack of clarity in consultants' writing: 'People were starting to write without working out their thinking in advance. But how does one go about figuring out one's thinking in advance?' In the interview, she credits several scholars with inspiring her: Jean Piaget, Levi Strauss, the Bourbaki mathematicians, Talcott Parsons, Mortimer Adler, and Jacob Bronowski. In the book, she mostly credits Aristotle.

The first insight of her book involves an analogy to the pyramid: 'The mind automatically sorts information into distinctive pyramidal groupings in order to comprehend it . . . Any grouping of ideas is easier to comprehend if it arrives presorted into its pyramid' (Minto, 2009, 5). The second insight is MECE. It is often said as 'mee-see', but it should be pronounced like 'niece', because according to Minto 'I invented it, so I get to say it how to pronounce it'. This refers to the acronym for 'Mutually Exclusive, Collectively Exhaustive'. Minto (2009, 96) describes:

> When you divide a whole into its parts – whether it be a physical whole or a conceptual one – you must make sure that the pieces you produce are: (1) Mutually exclusive of each other. (2) Collectively exhaustive in terms of the whole.

MECE, by one name or another, is ubiquitous in consulting discourse. It occurred in nearly every interview, in numerous articles and books written by consultants, and in every case interview preparation workshop I attended: 'no gaps, no overlaps'. While there are several frameworks, all purported to be MECE. Consider a very common example, the profit framework: Profit is decomposed into cost and revenue, and revenue into price and volume, while cost is decomposed into fixed and variable costs. The simplest framework was described by the former MBB consultant running MConsulting Prep: 'When you need an instant structure, or when you're not sure which approach to use, breaking down factors into external and internal groups is a great place to start'. Thus, the factors that go into solving a case are grouped into two containers, with no intersections.

A recruiting video offered by Bain provides an example. The interviewer in the video asks what is the size of the market for 3D televisions in the United States. How one begins is to 'segment' markets. First, the interviewee guesses the size of the U.S. population at 300 million. Next, they assume each household has three people and this becomes 100 million – a more manageable figure. Then the interviewee assumes only 10% of households are looking to replace their television in any year, further reducing the number to 10 million. The question becomes, among those 10 million households in the United States looking for new televisions, what percentage will be interested in purchasing a 3D television? The next step entails further modularity: what segment of this group are early adopters?

During a consulting interview workshop I attended, the group tried to solve a Market Size case that challenged each attendee to 'size the market for hot tubs in Canada'. The leader, a former MBB consultant (2019), explained:

> I want to answer a question that some of you had: 'But what about all the other things? What about services and chlorine and all those kinds of hot tubs?' My answer to you is 'Don't do it!' Here's why: From the case interview, I'm looking for people who want to make things more

> simple versus more complex. What are firms looking for from you in the cases? Number one, can you do the work of consulting and, not just can you do it, but do you seem to enjoy it? The second thing is to understand how a consultant thinks. Which means, that you take big things and narrow them down. The people that don't do well on cases always want to add complexity instead of taking away . . . you go into a business and you're going to look left and there is going to be a huge disaster and there's gonna be another one to the right, and another one a level deeper than you're required to go. And your job is to just focus and fix the one thing that you've been assigned to do.

In one of the workshops, I partnered with a PhD student finishing a humanities degree who decided to attend on a whim, without knowing anything about consulting. We were given a basic Profit case – a budget airline saw its revenue decline – and we took turns playing interviewer and interviewee. He went first and, as I had done this many times before, I was very surprised by his approach. He engaged in what most would call 'brainstorming', listing out as many possible reasons as he could conjure – even those that might be implausible at first glance. Our facilitator, noticing, was adamant that if we just listed items without imposing a clear structure, or if we listed more than four items within a category, we would fail the interview.

Creativity – at least, how it is typically operationalized in the social sciences (Baer, 2014) – was not what consulting firms were looking for. Advisory firms preach about the inherent complexity and instability of economies and organizations on the frontstage, and they recruit people who are able to bracket this complexity and presume the opposite from the start. Firms presented themselves as readymade stock of creativity, often bolstered by the pedigree of their recruits. And, advisory firms argue, this stock of creativity was necessary to stay ahead in the rapid, unstable, difficult competitive landscapes. In turn, they offer consultants who impose simplifying assumptions and clean segmentations atop messy problems.

Discussion

In *Imagined Futures*, Jens Beckert demonstrates how *expectations* are necessary in order for economic action (and social action more generally) to unfold. These expectations, he argues, are necessarily *fictions*: they cannot be real, because the future is not yet real. Beckert (2016) generally relies on a pragmatist conception of cognition to make this argument, but at key points evokes (perhaps inadvertently) an untenable epistemological assumption that there is a 'bifurcation between the objective world and our perception of it' (p. 244).

This 'disembodied theory of mind' haunts many interpretative analyses in sociology. Cropping up not only in Beckert's economic sociology but also in Ann Swidler's cultural sociology. Such a theory of mind leaves analysts with a flimsy foundation to answer an important question: *If all predictions about the future are neither true nor false, what curtails the range of fictional expectations?* This is because, it offers no 'center' or 'ground' from which the process of building knowledge begins (Harnad, 1990, 335). Furthermore, it provides 'no way to adjudicate between conflicting statements regarding the constitution of the world other than authoritative pronouncement' (Martin, 2011, 112).

Building on Beckert's fictional expectations, and following the work of cognitive anthropologist Naomi Quinn and others, I outline a theory of imagination founded on the fundamental embodiment of cognition. I draw on methods from the cognitive sciences – cognitive linguistics and cognitive anthropology, in particular – and build on the growing body of sociological literature using metaphor analysis. Applying metaphor analysis to interviews with participants, participant-observer notes, and the writings of participants, sociologists can draw out the fundamental cultural models within a body of imaginative discourse.

In particular, embodiment structures abstract thinking via conceptual metaphors. As certain analogical mappings become conventionalized within a given group of people, we can begin to speak of coherent cultural models. Furthermore, these conventionalized mappings become durable in individuals – slowly habituated, but difficult to change on a whim, guiding abstract thought much like tire ruts in a dirt road.

Using these methods on data derived from interviews with consultants, writings by consultants, and recruitment workshops offered to potential consultants, I extract the cultural model of economies and organizations from the frontstage and the backstage. In the frontstage, consulting discourse presents economies and organizations as UNSTABLE SUBSTANCE. Often the substance is the ground or landscape which organizations are atop and the instability is like an earthquake, other times organizations are the substance and the instability is a wave coursing through it like water, or the substance is the flow of resources and the instability is in their speed (slowing or quickening), size (increasing or decreasing), or direction (often moving away from established sources of profit). In the backstage, we find consulting discourse presents economies and organizations as divided into discrete entities with NO GAPS, NO OVERLAPS. Such structures can be cleanly segmented, re-arranged, and simplified so as to present clear and tidy solutions to messy problems.

Despite an ethos built around disruptive innovation and divergent thinking, elite professional advisory firms aim to quickly simplify the complexities of economic situations. Like Ann Swidler's interviewees in *Talk of Love*, the discourse of elite advisors seemed to suggest conflicting accounts. Consultants imagined the economy and organizations as, on the one hand, UNSTABLE SUBSTANCES, and on the other, as consisting of clean parts with NO GAPS, NO OVERLAPS. It was the appearance of conflict that led me to identify two cultural models, deployed in distinct contexts, for different purposes. This is an example of how culture can be broadly shared and unconsciously organized within people, while at the same time appearing contradictory (Strauss and Quinn, 1997, 9:210–230).

This approach to imaginative labor, more generally, also means institutional processes in education and labor markets are likely to sort people with certain embodied experiences and habits of thought (Bourdieu, 1998). Beyond cultural matching channeling working-class people into working-class jobs, and upper-class people into upper-class jobs (Rivera, 2016), the downstream consequence is that, *ceteris paribus, it* reinforces the homogeneity of thinking within particular domains. This is particularly important in fields like professional advising, marketing, think tanks, government, and academia, wherein imaginative labor is likely to have widespread consequences.

Acknowledgements

This work emerged out of my dissertation research (Stoltz 2020) and a series of workshops on "Brokering Novel Concepts into Economic Sociology," held at the XX ISA World Congress of Sociology in Melbourne, Australia in 2023. The workshop was organized jointly between two International Sociological Association Research Committees, Economy and Society (RC02) and Conceptual and Terminological Analysis (RC35). I am grateful to Omar Lizardo, Erin Metz-McDonnell, Terence McDonnell, Tamara Kay, Aaron Pitluck, Marshall Taylor, and Mike Wood for their many comments that improved this project.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Dustin S. Stoltz https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4774-0765

Notes

1. Naum Gabo and Anton Pevsner, *The Realistic Manifesto* (1920) (cited in Barbrook and Cameron, 1996, 44).
2. This can be loosely demonstrated by comparing the number of results when searching Google Scholar (as of 2024): 11,300 for structural embeddedness; 17,400 for cultural embeddedness; 5090 for political embeddedness; and 1020 for cognitive embeddedness.
3. Kant would likely reject Beckert's claims regarding cognition and his ontology of time (Kant, 1998, 28–30).
4. Durkheim's theory is heavily debated (e.g. Martin, 2011; Rawls, 1996; Schmaus, 1998). Namely, (1) have contemporary scholars understood Durkheim, (2) did Durkheim understand Kant, and (3) whether these understandings are empirically tenable.
5. All but two interviews were recorded. For those not recorded, I took extensive notes during and after the interviews. I transcribed the recordings roughly following Weiss's (1995) 'Usual Compromise'. All identifying information of interviewees – affiliation in particular – is obscured.
6. Retrieved on February 2023.
7. As a historian, Kantrow argues companies often fail to see that corporate traditions are 'artifices' – social constructions – and when properly understood in the context of the firm's history, the manager is better able to see the constructed, and therefore 'flexible' nature of traditions.
8. The second edition of Weick's most well-known book, *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, was published in 1979.
9. Using uppercase letters to refer to conceptual metaphors highlights that they are not words *per se*, but rather pre-linguistic semantic primitives (Lakoff and Johnson, 2008).
10. Retrieved on June 11, 2019.

References

Abbott A (2001) *Time Matters*. University of Chicago Press.

Aghina W, Ahlback K, De Smet A, et al. (2018) *The Five Trademarks of Agile Organizations*. McKinsey & Company. Available at: https://www.mckinsey.com

Baer J (2014) *Creativity and Divergent Thinking: A Task-specific Approach*. London: Psychology Press.

Bandelj N and Zoeller C (2019) Cognition and social meaning in economic sociology. In: Scott RA and Kosslyn SM (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Sociology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.507–525.

Barbrook R and Cameron A (1996) The Californian ideology. *Science as Culture* 6(1): 44–72.

Barsalou LW (2008) Grounded cognition. *Annual Review of Psychology* 59: 617–645.

Barsalou LW (2016) On staying grounded and avoiding quixotic dead ends. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 23(4): 1122–1142.

Beckert J (1996) What is sociological about economic sociology? *Theory and Society* 25: 803–840.

Beckert J (2003) Economic Sociology and Embeddedness: How Shall We Conceptualize Economic Action? *Journal of Economic Issues* 37(3): 769–787.

Beckert J (2009) The social order of markets. *Theory and Society* 38(3): 245–269.

Beckert J (2016) *Imagined Futures*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Beckert J (2018) The future in economic action: A reply to the reviewers. *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 19(3): 344–352.

Beckert J and Bronk R (2018) *Uncertain Futures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bourdieu P (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu P (1998) *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Bower JL and Christensen CM (1995) Disruptive technologies: Catching the wave. *Journal of Product Innovation Management* 13(1): 75–76.

Bronk R (2009) *The Romantic Economist*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Calnitsky D (2014) Economic sociology as disequilibrium economics. *The Sociological Review* 62(3): 565–592.

Cerulo KA (2015) The embodied mind: Building on Wacquant's carnal sociology. *Qualitative Sociology* 38(1): 33–38.

Chandler A (1962) Strategy and Structure. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Cheng V (2012) *Case Interview Secrets: A Former McKinsey Interviewer Reveals How to Get Multiple Job Offers in Consulting*. Seattle, WA: Innovation Press.

Christensen CM (1993) The rigid disk drive industry: A history of commercial and technological turbulence. *Business History Review* 67(4): 531–588.

Christensen CM (2013) *The Innovator's Dilemma*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.

Collet F (2009) Does habitus matter? *Sociological Theory* 27(4): 419–434.

Cosentino M (2010) *Case in Point: Complete Case Interview Preparation*. Burgee Atlantic LLC.

Dequech D (2003) Cognitive and cultural embeddedness. *Journal of Economic Issues* 37(2): 461–470.

Deutschmann C (2019) *Disembedded Markets*. New York: Routledge.

Dreyfus HL and Taylor C (2015) *Retrieving Realism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Drucker PF (1982) Learning from foreign management. In: The Changing World of the Executive. New York, NY: Times Books, pp. 41–45.

Durkheim E (1995) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: The Free Press.

Elder-Vass D (2014) Debate: Seven ways to be a realist about language. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 44(3): 249–267.

Ellis NC (2019) Essentials of a theory of language cognition. *The Modern Language Journal* 103(1): 39–60.
Engman A and Cranford C (2016) Habit and the body. *Sociological Theory* 34(1): 27–44.
Foster RN (1988) *Innovation*. Summit Books.
Foster RN and Kaplan S (2001) *Creative Destruction*. New York: Crown Publishing Group.
Granovetter M (1990) The old and the new economic sociology. In: Granovetter M and Swedberg R (eds) *The Sociology of Economic Life*. New York: Westview Press, pp.89–112.
Guseva A and Mooney H (2018) Time, role of the past and varieties of fictional expectations. *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 19: 336–340.
Harnad S (1990) The symbol grounding problem. *Physica D. Nonlinear Phenomena* 42(1): 335–346.
Hertz R (2013) *Death and the Right Hand*. New York: Routledge.
Hutto DD and Myin E (2012) *Radicalizing Enactivism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Ignatow G (2003) 'Idea hamsters' on the 'bleeding edge': Profane metaphors in high technology jargon. *Poetics* 31(1): 1–22.
Ignatow G (2004) Speaking together, thinking together? Exploring metaphor and cognition in a shipyard union dispute. *Sociological Forum* 19(3): 405–433.
Ignatow G (2007) Theories of embodied knowledge. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 37(2): 115–135.
Ignatow G (2009) Culture and embodied cognition: Moral discourses in internet support groups for overeaters. *Social Forces* 88(2): 643–669.
Kant I (1998) *Critique of Pure Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Kantrow A (1987) *The Constraints of Corporate Tradition*. New York: Harper & Row.
Kharchenkova S (2018) The market metaphors: Making sense of the emerging market for contemporary art in China. *Poetics* 71: 71–82.
Lakoff G and Johnson M (2008) *Metaphors We Live by*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
Lamont M and Swidler A (2014) Methodological pluralism and the possibilities and limits of interviewing. *Qualitative Sociology* 37(2): 153–171.
Langworth H (2015) The insider's guide to working in consulting. *Independent*, 28 April. Available at: http://www.independent.co.uk/student/career-planning/getting-job/the-insiders-guide-to-working-in-consulting-9297304.html
Lepore J (2014) What the gospel of innovation gets wrong. *The New Yorker*, 16 June. Available at: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/06/23/the-disruption-machine
Leschziner V and Brett G (2019) Beyond two minds: Cognitive, embodied, and evaluative processes in creativity. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 82(4): 340–366.
Lizardo O (2009a) Formalism, behavioral realism, and the interdisciplinary challenge in sociological theory. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 39(1): 39–79.
Lizardo O (2009b) Is a 'special psychology' of practice possible? From values and attitudes to embodied dispositions. *Theory & Psychology* 19(6): 713–727.
Lizardo O (2015) Culture, cognition and embodiment. In: Wright J (ed.) *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 2nd ed. Amsterdam: Elsevier, pp.576–581.
Lizardo O, Sepulvado B, Stoltz DS, et al. (2020) What can cognitive neuroscience do for cultural sociology? *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 8(1): 3–28.
McDonnell EM, Stoltz DS and Taylor MA (2022) Multiple market moralities: Identifying distinct patterns in how consumers evaluate the fairness of price changes. *Socio-Economic Review* 20(3): 883–914.
Mandler JM (1992) How to build a baby: II. Conceptual primitives. *Psychological Review* 99(4): 587–604.

Martin JL (2011) *The Explanation of Social Action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Marx K and Engels F (1845) *The German Ideology*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books.
Massarik F (1995) *Advances in Organization Development*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.
Mattson G (2015) The modern career of 'the oldest profession' and the social embeddedness of metaphors. *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 3(2): 191–223.
Mattson G (2020) Weaponization: Ubiquity and metaphorical meaningfulness. *Metaphor and Symbol* 35(4): 250–265.
Minto B (2009) *The Pyramid Principle: Logic in Writing and Thinking*. London: Pearson Education.
Mirowski P (2002) *Machine Dreams: Economics Becomes a Cyborg Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Mische A (2009) Projects and possibilities. *Sociological Forum* 24(3): 694–704.
Morrison A and Wensley R (1991) Boxing up or boxed in? A short history of the Boston Consulting Group share/growth matrix. *Journal of Marketing Management* 7(2): 105–129.
Orru M, Biggart NW and Hamilton GG (1996) *The Economic Organization of East Asian Capitalism*. New York: Sage.
Ouchi WG (1982) *Theory Z*. London: Avon.
Parsons T (1952) The superego and the theory of social systems. *Psychiatry* 15(1): 15–25.
Pascale RT and Athos AG (1981) *The Art of Japanese Management*. New York: Warner Books.
Peters TJ and Waterman RH (1982) *In Search of Excellence*. New York: HarperCollins.
Pragglejaz Group (2007) MIP: A method for identifying metaphorically used words in discourse. *Metaphor and Symbol* 22(1): 1–39.
Quinn N (2005) How to reconstruct schemas people share, from what they say. In: Quinn N (ed.) *Finding Culture in Talk*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.35–81.
Quinn N (2018) An anthropologist's view of American marriage: Limitations of the Tool Kit theory of culture. In: Quinn N (ed.) *Advances in Culture Theory from Psychological Anthropology*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.139–184.
Rafoss TW (2019) Enemies of freedom and defenders of democracy: The metaphorical response to terrorism. *Acta Sociologica* 62(3): 297–314.
Rawls AW (1996) Durkheim's epistemology: The neglected argument. *The American Journal of Sociology* 102(2): 430–482.
Reay M (2010) Knowledge distribution, embodiment, and insulation. *Sociological Theory* 28(1): 91–107.
Rivera LA (2016) *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Rosenzweig P (2008) *The Halo Effect*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
Rotolo M (2020) Religion imagined: The conceptual substructures of American religious understandings. *Sociological Forum* 35(1): 167–188.
Rotolo M (2021) Culture beneath discourse. *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 10(3): 432–460.
Schmaus W (1998) Commentary and debate, Rawls, Durkheim, and causality: A critical discussion. *The American Journal of Sociology* 104(3): 872–886.
Schulz J (2002) Metaphorical and non-metaphorical meaning in ideological discourses: An examination of technocratic discourses and counter-discourses from the Progressive Era. *Culture Theory and Critique* 43(2): 101–121.
Schwartz B (1981) *Vertical Classification*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
Simon HA (1972) Theories of bounded rationality. In: McGuire CB and Radner R (eds) *Decision and Organization*. New York: North-Holland Publishing Company, pp.161–176.

Small ML (2009) How many cases do I need? *Ethnography* 10(1): 5–38.
Smith C (2011) *What Is a Person?* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
Steen GJ (1999) From linguistic to conceptual metaphor in five steps. *Amsterdam Studies in the Theory and History of Linguistic Science Series* 4: 57–78.
Stoltz, DS (2020) The sociology of elite advisors, PhD thesis, University Of Notre Dame.
Stoltz DS (2021) Becoming a dominant misinterpreted source: The case of Ferdinand de Saussure in cultural sociology. *Journal of Classical Sociology* 21(1): 92–113.
Stoltz DS and Wood ML (2023) Grounding oughtness: Morality of coordination, immorality of disruption. In: Hitlin S, Luft A and Dromi S (eds) *Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research*. Cham: Springer, pp.143–156.
Strauss C and Quinn N (1997) *A Cognitive Theory of Cultural Meaning*, Vol. 9. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Swedberg R (1997) New economic sociology: What has been accomplished, what is ahead? *Acta Sociologica* 40(2): 161–182.
Swidler A (2000) *Talk of Love*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
Thibodeau P, Hendricks R and Boroditsky L (2017) How linguistic metaphor scaffolds reasoning. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 21(11): 852–863.
Vaisey S (2009) Motivation and justification. *The American Journal of Sociology* 114(6): 1675–1715.
Vila-Henninger L (2021) A dual-process model of economic behavior. *Sociological Forum* 36(Suppl. 1): 1271–1296.
Waterman RH, Peters TJ and Phillips JR (1980) Structure is not organization. *Business Horizons* 23(3): 14–26.
Weiss RS (1995) *Learning from Strangers*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
Wilson M (2002) Six views of embodied cognition. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 9(4): 625–636.
Wolfe J (2011) The wizard of innovation: Ex-McKinsey master Dick Foster. *Forbes*, 11 August. Available at: https://www.forbes.com/sites/joshwolfe/2011/05/10/the-wizard-of-innovation-ex-mckinsey-master-dick-foster/
Wood ML, Stoltz DS, Van Ness J, et al. (2018) Schemas and frames. *Sociological Theory* 36(3): 244–261.
Zukin S and DiMaggio P (1990) Introduction. In: Zukin S and DiMaggio P (eds) *Structures of Capital*, pp. 1–36. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Author biography

Dustin S. Stoltz is Assistant Professor of Sociology and Cognitive Science at Lehigh University. His research focuses on cultural change and persistence and the relationship between stratification, language, and thought. He is author, with Marshall A. Taylor, of *Mapping Texts: Computational Text Analysis for the Social Sciences* (Oxford).

Résumé

¿Cómo imaginamos los objetos, procesos y acciones económicos? Y más importante aún, si el futuro es inherentemente incierto, ¿qué limita el rango de imaginaciones posibles para que los actores puedan ponerse de acuerdo y coordinarse? A partir del trabajo de Jens Beckert, se esboza un enfoque de la imaginación y el trabajo imaginativo en la sociología económica basado en la idea de que la cognición encarnada es central para la capacidad de explorar las posibilidades de acción y organizar dominios abstractos. Para

ilustrar este enfoque, se utilizan ejemplos extraídos de un campo cuyas expectativas ficticias tienen un impacto significativo en la economía política global: las empresas de asesoría profesional de élite. Se trata de un campo en que la actividad consiste en la venta de trabajo imaginativo, tanto en la trastienda del trabajo de reclutamiento como en la parte visible del trabajo de venta.

Mots-clés
attentes fictives, avenir, conseil en gestion, linguistique cognitive, métaphores conceptuelles, modèles culturels, sociologie économique, travail imaginatif

Resumen
Comment imaginons-nous les objets, processus et actions économiques ? Et surtout, si l'avenir est fondamentalement incertain, qu'est-ce qui limite l'éventail des imaginaires possibles sur lesquels les acteurs peuvent s'accorder et se coordonner ? En m'appuyant sur les travaux de Jens Beckert, je définis une approche de l'imagination et du travail imaginatif en sociologie économique, fondée sur l'idée que la cognition incarnée est essentielle à la capacité d'explorer des possibilités d'action et d'organizer des domaines abstraits. Pour illustrer cette approche, j'utilize des exemples tirés d'un domaine où les attentes fictives ont une influence importante sur l'économie politique mondiale, à savoir, les sociétés de conseil professionnelles d'élite. Il s'agit d'un domaine dont l'activité consiste à vendre du travail imaginatif, aussi bien dans les coulisses lors du travail de recrutement, que sur le devant de la scène dans le cadre du travail de vente.

Palabras clave
asesoría en gestión, expectativas ficticias, futuro, lingüística cognitiva, metáforas conceptuales, modelos culturales, sociología económica, trabajo imaginativo