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Business advice assemblages - a process - theory lens from the adviser's viewpoint

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The adviser's viewpoint on organizing business advice - a process – relational lens on micro-exchange practices

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Abstract

This research asks how business advisers organise situated business advice processes applying a process-relational lens. The research conceptualizes business advice exchange situations as temporal and continuous processes enacted via micro-exchange processes of adviser, advice taker and socio-material environment. External advisers, paid or unpaid by the advice taker, provide external input into business development processes, from pre-start-up to firm growth. The research centres on how business adviser practices for strategic advice organize micro-exchange processes with clients. To offer a more fine-grained explanation, the analysis draws on absorptive capacity and symbolic interactionism to make visible the details of advice processes. The research analyses 27 semi-structured interviews with business advisers and business advice experts applying thematic analysis. Findings focus on several complex sets of practices - making contextual sense, judging absorptive capacity and sequencing of advice processes. Policy implications address the need to provide adviser training. The paper contributes to the business advice and the strategic entrepreneurship literature.

Keywords: business advice; strategic entrepreneurship; entrepreneurship-as-practice; organizing.

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Introduction

Strategic entrepreneurship as a domain of research (Ireland et al., 2023) and organisational studies research have investigated how senior decision makers seek advice and apply it to their ventures (Alexiev et al., 2020; Alexiev, Jansen, Van den Bosh, & Volberda, 2010) to gain insights into fundamental business development. Advice (henceforth, short form for 'business advice') is known to add to a firm's knowledge, improve strategy decisions and reduce risks (Mole, 2011, 2021). Governments around the world have supported advice to boost business performance (Mole and Bramley, 2006). However, the role and behaviour of the adviser for these processes has been largely overlooked. Advice from now on used as a short form for 'business advice') has been defined as 'the pursuit of recommendations from others, either inside or outside the organisation on the best course of action to take when faced with important strategic decisions' (Alexiev et al., 2020, p. 471). This research focuses on strategic advice, including marketing and exporting advice, from firm outsiders conceptualising advice taking predominantly as an information seeking and processing process, often seen as an act to reduce the burden and time use associated with information management (Alexiev et al., 2020; Heyden et al., 2013).

While the importance of contextual factors (within the firm, or external) and their perception have been acknowledged as vital in their influence on individuals/firms advice seeking, these aspects have scarcely been studied and linked to the actual advice seeking processes and the individual advice recipient (Alexiev et al., 2020) or firm outcome focus (Mole, 2021). The role of the adviser and the dynamic exchange process that advice situations constitute have been largely taken for granted in this research. Our research homes in on situated interlinked sets of adviser activities enacted in situ in business advice situations. Given this context, the aim of this research is to make visible the practices of the adviser and their contingent nature. Hence, this research asks: How are advisers organising business advice processes? To answer this question, the research analyses how business advisers narratively constitute these dynamic exchange processes based on 27 adviser interviews conducted in the UK.

This research analyses the interplay of the agencies of human and non-human agents for business support practices. The paper makes three contributions. This research applies for the first time symbolic interactionism to investigate micro-exchange and meaning creation processes in advice situations. This application enables a more granular investigation into how advice processes unfold. Secondly, applying a process-relational lens and strong process theory, the research unveils how advisers evaluate clients' absorptive capacity, allowing conclusions to be drawn on *how* guidance processes could be efficiently organised. Thirdly, the research links for the first time the research strands of business advice research with strategic entrepreneurship research via applying the concept of 'strategic fit' (Hill, 2018) to advice processes.

Literature background

Due to limited space in this conference paper, a discussion of economic and business policy is not possible. The full article discusses the spatial blindness of economic policies and their implicitly urban focused nature and assumptions (Hill and Mole, 2022; Phillipson et al., 2019). The section then highlights how the policy focus on administrative units (districts etc.) often does not support in capturing *how* business pathways are enacted beyond different administrative units.

Two dimensions of the research stream 'strategic entrepreneurship' are a domain of study and a construct. Strategic entrepreneurship denotes investigations that combine advantage-seeking and opportunity exploitation behaviours by firms to create wealth (Ireland et al., 2023). While predominantly applied to large firms and MNEs, increasingly SMEs have become the unit of

analysis (Ireland, Hitt and Sirmon, 2003) with research rooted mainly in the resource-based view and more recently dynamic capabilities literature (Teece et al., 2014). This paper's research follows the call to integrate other theoretical perspectives, topics and firm sizes in the study of strategic entrepreneurship (Felin and Foss, 2005; Ireland et al., 2023; Zahra, 2007).

The large majority of past entrepreneurship, training and advice literature has had a resource-based view (RBV) lens for analysing entrepreneurial activities (Wernerfelt 1984), with 'advice taking' constructed as an external knowledge input to small business strategy. Business advice, according to the resource-based view (RBV), is a "sticky" resource that cannot be easily shared or imitated for the firm to appropriate its results and gain a competitive advantage (Chrisman and McMullan 2004, Bennett and Robson 2005, Chrisman et al. 2005). If advice content is codified using easily accessible tools, then, in the RBV based view it would not produce a competitive advantage (Wernerfelt, 1984). This research lens prioritises face-to-face advice and emphasises the transfer of tacit information (Griffiths, Boisot et al., 1998), which may improve knowledge co-production (Rice 2002).

What we know about advice taking and its effects is based mostly on survey-based research and panel studies (Adomako, et al. 2016; Mole, 2021; Mole et al., 2022). An adviser's relationship with an entrepreneur as advice taker is a two-way process; advisers need to develop an understanding of the business and the advice taker while gaining their trust so that advice takers consider advice trustworthy and helpful. Advisers that make suggestions not fit for the businesses' situation can undermine the entrepreneurs' confidence (Mole 2016). Synchronous interactions enable the creation of a shared understanding of the company's viewpoint and enable the business owner to respond to a challenge set by the adviser (Wright et al. 2012).

Exceptions include research combining conceptual considerations with hypotheses setting (Alexiev et al. 2020), where information processing is seen as a management constraint, or employing solely qualitative research. Within the context of advice-giving in family business, Strike (2013) used a grounded theory perspective to uncover the counselling role of the most trusted adviser in family business. Similarly, employing semi-interviews with advisers and clients rooted in the resource-based view Arshed et al (2021) discuss the organisational context of advice to understand the tensions within the role of advisers. Arshed et al. (2021) build on Mole's (2002) study, which identified some of the difficulties in entrepreneur-adviser relationships, by merging organisational paradox constitutive theory (Putnam, Fairhurst et al. 2016) with business advice theories (Mole 2002, Strike 2013) and policy implementation analysis (Lipsky, 2010). Arshed et al. (2021) created a dynamic model that shows how tensions and response approaches are interrelated and cyclical. By employing this approach, Arshed et al (2021) highlight the agency of business advisers and show how and under what conditions this agency is exercised. Many of the tactics that Arshed et al (2021) identified reflected the agency of the business advisers irrespective of the institutional constraints of funded programmes they had identified. For example, advisers undertake a 'mindset evaluation', where advisers have a number of assistance packages or 'products' to offer advice takers and are looking for organisations.

The effect of existing research mostly rooted in the resource-based view is that the findings have only added limited insights to our understanding of processes constituting 'advice taking' (with the exception of Arshed et al., 2021, and Alexiev et al., 2020). This research lens seems to portray business advice as a nearly static interaction that does not affect the adviser and the advice taker. Units of analysis are usually firm behaviour changes and/or firm economic results, for example, measured in increased turnover or staff in-/decrease, discussed as an impact of the advice intervention. Causal relationships are expressed in economic terms that might allow insight into what effect the presence of certain variables has. The actual micro-exchange processes constituting 'advice taking' are not captured, treating the interactive project of business advice as a 'black box'.

The effect of this research is that findings are only of limited value for policymakers and business support professionals.

Many adviser roles have emerged to provide advice and resources to businesses. These advisers are classified into two types: formal and informal advisers. This article's research is only interested in formal external advice processes. Formal advisers are individuals who have been hired or are accessed by publicly funded programmes free-of-charge to the firm. These experts come from various backgrounds and offer a variety of guidance and support services. The family business literature classifies formal advisers into two types: issue specialists and process consultants (Kaye and Hamilton 2004). Content experts are experts in a specific field, such as tax, law, or investments, where services are commonly needed but often transactional (Gooderham, Tobiassen et al. 2004). Process consultants work on the design structures that allow the management to develop and implement their own solutions (Beer et al., 2005). The services they provide are frequently intermittent, occurring over time (Grubman and Jaffe, 2010). Informal advisers are those who are not technically related to the company, such as family members, friends and competitors.

Research has identified styles of advisers. Some advisers provide guidance in a methodical manner, following a set of guidelines or a specific approach. This design could be useful for small firms that need a clear plan of action (Chatterji et al., 2019; Arshed, et al., 2021). Some advisers may choose a more informal approach, such as a "fireside conversation," in which they interact with the leaders of a small organisation in a casual atmosphere (Mole and Keogh, 2009) helping to build rapport and trust with the small firm. The "sounding board" adviser actively listens to the small firm's concerns and provides feedback and solutions based on their experience (Hjalmarsson and Johansson, 2003), useful for small enterprises that need a friendly environment to discuss and explore ideas. Finally, some advisers may pursue a resource-focused method, in which they explore and provide small businesses with information and resources to help them reach their goals (Arshed et al., 2021). By investigating different styles, researchers could in the future identify what style suits what type of business and advice taker. It is easier to understand the particular styles that suit both parties with greater contact between the two parties. Findings indicate that longer periods and more intense interventions of advice taking are more likely to have a positive firm impact than short or one-off interventions (Alexiev et al., 2020; Mole et al., 2011). The ability of the adviser to tailor their advice to the particular idiosyncrasies of the business that they advise increases with more contact (Kautonen et al, 2010). Given these insights, the next section develops a theoretical lens for making visible advice processes from the advisers' viewpoint.

Theoretical framing

Process theory underpins most studies in organisational behaviour (Cloutier and Langley, 2020; Langley and Tsoukas, 2017), offering a lens that is enabling researchers to focus on dynamic aspects of how organisations and projects develop on an ongoing basis. Researchers have focused on capturing and unveiling temporal, change over time, and interconnections between people, people and material working conditions and people and intangible working conditions (from ideas to firm policies).

The enactive approach in process theory conceptualises organisations and projects (we conceptualise advice interactions as projects) as being in an ongoing process of becoming (Langley and Tsoukas, 2017; Mesle and Dibben, 2017). Hence, change is a constant inherent feature and deeply embedded in human actions. In other words, we always change as a result of what we do (Tsoukas, 1994). Inherent in this view is the assumption of temporality and heterogeneity (Langley and Tsoukas, 2017; Robinson, 2017). Agency in these situations is distributed between humans and non-human elements.

This research conceptualises processes as open and continuous encompassing all activities and flows of events that change process participants (strong process ontology, Langley and Tsoukas, 2017). This conceptualisation means that even repeated activities change the engaged participants and hence no event is identical. We regard tangible and intangible process outcomes as temporary instantiations of these ongoing processes.

The process-relational lens, which we apply to business advisory processes, illuminates how the social aspects (between individuals and between individuals and tangible and intangible elements) and material ones are enmeshed and dynamically enacted. The assumption of ongoing becoming in enactive process theory (Cloutier and Langley, 2020; Langley and Tsoukas, 2017) matches the nature of dynamic exchange processes in business advice situations that change both, the adviser and the advice taker, in the process. Taking this lens, it is easier to understand how more intense business support interventions (in terms of hours) and those lasting over a longer period of time seem to generate more impactful results, as relationships develop and solutions are co-created.

The lens of practices is a heuristic device focused on situated, iterative sets of interlinked activities (Gherardi, 2019; Hill, 2018) enacted continuously in similar yet not identical ways. As practices are by nature socio-material, (they are co-created with and by the material, intangible and social aspects of the flow of events), human agency and non-human agency needs to be captured to make practices visible. Business advice processes are by nature messy unorganised micro-interactions in flux, highly dynamic exchanges, happening most often between two individuals (Mole, 2021). These highly complex processes require meaning production on the side of advisers (Arshed et al., 2021) and the advice taker, requiring the advisor to develop a narrative on-the-go.

Similarly, advisers use a variety of ‘tools of the trade’ – tangible and intangible - to organise advice processes. These tools vary from forms to fill in, to flip charts (eg. verbal or written case studies, or thought experiments). In line with process-relational theorising, these resources are narratively constructed and often do not materialise in a tangible form, such as verbal case studies or thought experiments. Even forms to fill in need verbal instructions from the adviser on what to do with them and how to interpret results. In other words, they are narratively represented and organised to form part of the advisory processes.

Furthermore, business advice processes are contingent on the socio-material nature of the context they are happening within. These contexts vary from in-person to online or via phone, such as phone or meeting technologies, within business premises, premises of the adviser in a growth hub, or similar to the typical locations for meetings from train stations to hotel lobbies. Unsurprisingly, these socio-spatial contexts enable and constrain verbal and physical interactions and are important to include into the data gathering tools of business advisory processes.

Hence, we are conceptualising the processes of interaction between adviser, advice taker, socio-spatial context and resources as dynamic situated practices. These practices not only materialise in synchronous meetings, in person or online, however, but also asynchronously in email and other online exchanges, using e-tools, such as Whatsapp. While the firm benefits from the advice taken by an individual, we focus on the exchange processes between the process participants (individuals, tangible and intangible resources, social relations outside of the advice situation) in synchronous interactions. Including the socio-materiality or non-human situative elements (Hill, 2022; Gherardi, 2019) of practices into the analysis offers the possibility of a more particular investigation demonstrating *how* exchange processes work.

To enable a lens on the *what* and *how* of advisers’ interpretation advice takers’ actions, we draw on symbolic interactionism (Dionysiou, 2016; Gray, Purdy and Ansari, 2015). Symbolic interactionism is a sociological concept that regards society as the outcome of shared symbols, including language,

visual signs, and is re-created by the shared yet not identical meanings that individuals attach to activities, events and social interactions. As a theoretical perspective it examines how humans comprehend and construct meaning in their social interactions (Carter and Fuller, 2015). Symbolic interactionism homes in on how society members create meaning and make sense from their own perspective, which in turn informs their interactions with others. The concept of 'self' in the Indiana School of thought (Stryker and Serpe, 1982) focuses on an individual's personality, self-image and self-concept as experienced and reflected through the reaction of other people, relevant for the predominant 1-2-1 business advice situations. Relevant for this research here is the identification of and alignment with a role in developing social structures. This relational role can lead to identity formation, and is relevant for professional identity formation and role development in advice situations. In evolving interaction processes in these advice situations advisers react to clues and signals perceived, drawing on sets of patterns of cognitions of their previous experience to choose situational behaviours to continue the interactions at hand.

The ability of advice takers to integrate new knowledge and insights into existing ones is one of the insights advisers seek to gain in early interactions, which can be demonstrated with the concept of 'absorptive capacity' (Jibril et al., 2022; Sancho-Zamora, R et al., 2021). This concept is helpful to label the capabilities of a firm to take and act on advice. While originally developed in relation to processes of firms, Hill et al. (2021) applied the concept to demonstrate how a self-employed dance entrepreneur adjusted his business activities from face-to-face delivery to online.

Methodology

This research applies an interpretive lens focusing on advisers' verbal expressions in re-conceptualising business advice processes. Between January 2022 and February 2023 Researcher 1 (R1) conducted twenty-eight semi-structured interviews with active or former business advisers. R1's positionality includes previous professional experience in strategic business advice delivery, business support programme design and evaluation between 2003 and 2014, hence, providing an insider-perspective to advice processes from the adviser viewpoint. These lived experiences allow R1 to empathise with the adviser role and experiences, and to ask different questions that allow for deeper levels of reflections to emerge in research conversations (Cunliffe and Scaratti, 2017), leading to different forms and levels of theorizing (Cunliffe, 2023).

The interview questions for semi-structured interviews were selected by R1, based on the lived experience of having been an adviser and the knowledge of the academic literature and its gaps regarding the adviser role and advice processes. The starting point was a list of indicative questions, covering these themes:

- Professional biography as adviser and the experiences
- Recent adviser engagements
- Planning and preparation for meeting clients
- Tools used in meetings
- Development of client sessions

Depending on adviser answers, additional questions were asked to clarify answers given. These questions were noted and when needed asked in other interviews.

The selection of interview partners started off with convenience sampling with three starting points rooted in R1's networks: existing contacts to an enterprise hub, participants in a regional economic development network and contacts to independent advisers. Research participants were then asked to recommend one of their contacts for a research interview, applying a snowball sampling strategy. The sample includes economic development directors or managers at local authorities, private sector advisers with a variety of specialisms (strategy, marketing strategy, financial strategy, and

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generalists), three employed advisers working on government or European funded business development programmes (see Table 1).

The majority of interviews were carried out online, apart from two, of which one was conducted in-person in an enterprise hub and not recorded. Interviews lasted between 40 and 150 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The overall raw data collected comprises over 264,000 words from transcripts. The analysis applied thematic open coding to identify themes in the advisers' narratives. Analysis applied the Gioia approach (Gioia et al., 2013), developing second order themes, which are further aggregated (see Table 2).

Table 2 Interview partners

Adviser type (lead adviser, L, frontline adviser, F, also programme manager (P) or company owner, C)	Organisational type (private sector, P, Council or government organization C, social enterprise (S))	Full (F) or part-time (p) as adviser
P	S	P
F	S	P
P	S	P
P	S	P
L, C	P	F
L, C	P	F
L, C	P	F
L, C	P	F
L, C	P	P
L, C.	S	P
L	S	P
P, L	S	P
F	S	F
C, L	P	P
C, L	P	P
C, L	S	P
P	S	P
P	S	P
L	S	P
L, P	C	P
P, C, L	S	P
L	S	F
F	S	F
P, L	C	P
P	C	P
P, L	S	P
L, C	P	F

Findings

The research findings discuss three sets of practices found across the interviewed advisers: Making contextual sense, sequencing of business advice processes and judging clients' capabilities and capacity to implement the advice.

‘Making contextual sense’ denotes iterative patterns of thinking, verbal and overt actions and ways of drawing conclusions by advisers during the dynamic exchange processes. Pre- and during the advice session advisers draw on a variety of information sources and re-organise insights gathered based on clues provided by the advice taker. First order concepts include clues advisers look for to be able to gain insights into how advisers frame their business activities and their assumptions on how a business should work.

‘Sequencing’ denotes structuring practices employed by the adviser that materialise in actions they engage in during, before and after live sessions with clients and asynchronous advice activities. They organise the tools and information in ways that allow them to guide the advice takers in their reflections and own insight gathering processes as well as checking the appropriateness of the narratives offered by the advice takers.

‘Judging client absorptive capacity’ denotes iterative adviser activities enacted in situations to establish the capabilities of advice takers and their firms to implement advice given. These practices are based on experience based patterns of behaviours and cognitions of advisers.

Table 2 **Coding scheme for business advice processes (shortened)**

Themes for micro-activities	Second order themes	Aggregated concepts / Practices
Identifying clues on the reality of doing business in contrast to the advice taker’s narrative	Information sources for understanding the entrepreneur’s viewpoints	Making contextual sense
Gathering and interpreting information from various sources (website, social media, company accounts etc.)	Re-organising the information and clues	
Establishing contact and rapport	Relationship management	Sequencing business advice processes
Maintaining the relationship		
Ending the relationship		
Establishing issues the business has;	Weighing business challenges to discuss with entrepreneur	
What advice takers bring to the process	Content / topic management	
Topics / business areas advisers identify as needing discussion		
Asking question for clarification of things said and	Gaining insights into beliefs and assumptions and knowledge of advice taker / senior manager(s)	Judging clients’ capabilities and capacity to implement advice
Gathering views of entrepreneurs/advice taker		
Collecting insights into ways of thinking and selection actions / prioritising	Challenging the advice taker	

The indicative quotes below illustrate these above three sets of practices, which are found with most interview participants. Interview quotes are highlighted below to support the analysis. Each numbered quote is from one single adviser. It is chosen as it is indicative of what many other

advisers say, sometimes in longer and more elaborated ways and distributed over several parts of the interview. The quotes were selected to illustrate the practices in the richest possible way.

Making contextual sense (and sequencing)

Questions asked:

*Quote 1: **No, it's just basically following the lead of the client and getting in when you can at the right time. Questions like what's your long-term objective with this business? And they'll immediately say, oh, I want to do this.** No, I don't mean like next week or next year. Where are we going? **Are you building to sell? Is this a family succession business? Is it a lifestyle business? Because we need it. We need to build a plan.** If you're going to aim to exit we need to build a plan to get you in the position to exit. So it's just picking up the leads and As W said yesterday, one of my colleagues, asking them about their business and not talking about accounting and tax asking them about their business.*

*Quote 2: Let you have to think clearer on the things that by listening and by asking really good questions. **It's the onion you start to peel away and get to the real core of what the challenge is.** And I think if you if you create that space, that's basically us talking about where, you know, our principles are around being non-judgmental, there's no bad idea. (...) And so I think it's about that. That's it's clear said that space and that conversation, but hopefully by the end of it in most cases, you've actually got to whatever the problem is, so if the conversation started with, right, I'm needing some funding for a new website. And by the end of the conversation, you're just really not articulating the USP properly.*

*Quote 3: It typically it starts with an introductory meeting, usually on Zoom or something like this. **I think I always ask them to go back to the basics and and give me the story of their company almost almost like showing me a pitch deck you know, even though they're not pitching to me but but give me the basic story.** (...) So really, really go back to the basics and then really explore what what their specific needs are and what I might be able to help them with. **And I think until I've got that kind of overview and a feel for where they are and where they're trying to go I think it's then it's quite hard to give the right advice without that.***

Sequencing

*Quote 4: And you know, it is like, anything can come at me like, I have everything from fundraising advice on how to manage boards, how to convert customers, how to do everything from workplace culture, to hiring well to how to define goals, strategic, you know, strategic goals for the year, making introductions, introductions to people within my network. PR, marketing Chinese I mean, it is anything, so it's really fun for me because I get to meet all these amazing, you know, entrepreneurial people that are doing this really important work. And I get the it's very it suits me well because I've always like been across a lot. So I like variety. **And I like connecting the dots.***

*Quote 5: I'm very much driven by questions, listening and allowing space for a client to articulate **what it is they're really looking for in the time that they have with me to then figure out the pathway** that is going to you know, **give them the best possible outcome at this moment in time that they need.***

*Quote 6: And but my philosophy is never assume listen **take moments of reflection during the conversation to clarify,** and and I know I'm very confident in the further resource and support because I can signpost them to which happens as well. It may be that another touch point you know, I might refer them to one of our peer support learning sessions or might think about something else that we've got coming up.*

Judging clients' capabilities and capacity to implement advice

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Quote 7: I realised they needed help with pitching because it was so you know, so technical. So full of the research they've been doing for years, which is great, but for the sales pitch, or for someone who doesn't understand that space so much. It was really impossible to understand what they were talking about what they were saying their business actually does. So a lot of it would really be about distilling their message.

*Quote 8: Now we might meet someone and from **that first two or three sentences think that's going to be a real challenge to make that work.** However, once you start questioning and asking and helping them to feel very safe to talk about their ideas. **You either start to go hang on, there is a great idea here. You're just you're just packaging it wrong or they start to realise for themselves that maybe they're going down the wrong route.***

The analysis below offers a process-relational 're-telling' of the advisers' narrative making visible how advisers organise business advice sessions within the contingencies that both enable and constrain their actions due to programme limitations affecting number of hours, numbers of meetings the clients pay for, and the locations of adviser and advice taker.

In quote one in highlight one, the adviser makes explicit what other advisers express in similar yet more indirect ways, which is how much the client meeting is *client led* and how important focused sharp questions are. Highlight one illustrates how business advisers aim to establish the business purpose and the long-term business development outcome, not practical goals, and hence, finding the meaning making framework the client employs / draws upon. Similarly, quote two offers an image of how the adviser works - and the function of questioning: using the image of the onion and the layers and the core it consists of the adviser parallels how the real challenge a business faces is hidden under a lot of symptoms the owner / manager or advice taker might not have taken off to identify the real problem themselves. Applying symbolic interactionism (Dionysiou, 2016) to this onion image we can see how the adviser sees some advice taker answers as symbols of business issues or advice taker illusions and not as an adequate representation of the facts. In quote three, the second highlight adds to the meaning making process in that the adviser compares the company information they are being given with the facts they collected and the meaning they make bringing these elements together: 'the kind of overview and a feel for where they are' indicates the meaning making by the adviser – feel for is an expression for meaning making, combining logical thinking, fact analysis with drawing conclusions from these two based on the experience with other businesses and the mental comparisons drawn. In this quote three all this information and personal meaning making is needed to identify the issues the business needs to address in their view.

In quote eight highlight one, the adviser indicates a conclusion drawn from the first few sentences uttered by a new client. This example is indicative of how advisers detect beliefs and attitudes of clients underpinning statements made in conversations. These client statements create an alert with the experienced adviser and trigger patterned conclusions drawn in the past when similar or identical statements were made and sets of questions to ask. The adviser then engages in sequencing the next questions to establish if the conclusions drawn in the past indeed apply to the client in front of them, as sentence two indicates. Some advisers, however, might not engage in further questioning, as sentence three suggests with 'you either start to go hand on'. The questions asked then are also aimed at capturing how firm the underlying beliefs are and to what extent the client is able to adjust his/her way of thinking. The last sentence indicates that the adviser aims to steer the client to realise that some conclusions and actions might not be appropriate ('maybe they're going down the wrong route') and/or are not presenting ideas appropriately for the most suitable target customers.

Public sector funded advice is mostly free-of-charge for advice takers at the point of delivery (Arshed et al., 2021). However, funded business support most often has a set of outcomes and

outputs advisers and companies need to report on (jobs created, turnover changes, profit changes, new products / services, new clients won etc.). These outputs impact on the issues advisers select for discussion, and align those with the issues entrepreneurs as advice takers bring to them. Similarly, depending on the numbers of hours available within publicly funded programmes (usually between three and 12 hours), advisers sequence possible topics to discuss achieving programme related outputs and outcomes (Arshed et al., 2021). Hence, funding policies, programme guidance and internal funding governance by government funded agencies or delivery partners form an essential part of the business support activity sets and are enacted in business advice situations through the ways advisers sequence topics. These funding arrangements are implicitly addressed by advisers (see for example in quote five), the adviser indicates the limitations with ‘ the time available with me’, that is between them and the client.

The process-relational lens (Gherardi, 2012) that this research applies provides the framework to show that the meaning of the business development is created in the flux and during the verbal and non-verbal exchange processes and hence is temporary and limited to the information offered in the moment. The advisers combine these insights with the research done prior to the meeting and they might collect during the meeting and the conclusions drawn. The above discussed image of peeling the onion indicates these processual meaning creation activities. Sentences said by the advice taker are taken as symbols indicative of beliefs or attitudes, and ways of describing a business situation offer indications of the advice taker’s understanding of business issues. The meaning creation in flux in situations and the agency of the adviser also highlights the agency of the advice taker, shedding light upon co-creation processes of meaning making in advice situations. Without advice taker input the advisers cannot create meaning, yet, they go beyond just taking as given business information shared by the advice taker as outlined above.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper discussed how business advisers organise business advice processes with the aim to highlight how this agency is inextricably enmeshed with complex multi-layers of governance systems, the particular context of their client businesses and the fluid socio-material nature of advice processes.

This analysis applied symbolic interactionism (Dionysis, 2016) to capture the fluid contingent nature of the situated practices of business advice. This lens allows research focused on micro-interpretations by advisers to identify (in more fine-grained ways) *how* they interpret advice taker narratives, information in informal documents (websites, social media, emails etc.) and formal ones (e.g. on companies house). Applying this perspective to business advice interactions emphasises the need to consider the contexts in which advice is delivered and accepted. These contexts include specific social, cultural, and historical context of a programme and the policy situation in a council area or federal / national country at a given point in time; adviser and advice taker enact their partial understanding of this external context and the business of the advice taker in advice practices. This situatedness indicates that the meanings and interpretations of business advice are temporal and contingent to the specific conditions in which it is delivered. By considering situatedness, we can gain a better understanding of how business advice is received and implemented, as well as develop more effective communication and implementation approaches.

The paper makes three contributions. This research applies for the first time symbolic interactionism as a lens to home in on micro-exchange and co-creation of meaning processes in advice situations. This lens makes processes visible in a detailed manner and illustrates *how* processes unfold in context and are co-created. We have now a clearer understanding of how advisers approach the advice process through sensemaking, which is followed by sequencing their application of the ‘tools of the trade’ to support advice takers’ knowledge and personal

development. In contrast to previous work which has focused on how the adviser manages the competing pressures upon them by internal policies and external government policies, acting to reframe business challenges (e.g. Arshed et al, 2021), our conception incorporates a set of practices that focus on micro-exchanges to facilitate co-production of new insights in business advice.

Secondly, Buffart et al. (2020) demonstrate that business development programmes are more effective when participants are willing to make changes. Our research builds upon this to show how the interactions in the advice process unfold while uncovering this willingness and positioning the advice to support the advice takers' willingness to make changes. The analysis of the clients' absorptive capacity aims to achieve this assessment. Previous work has highlighted the inconsistent outcomes from advice (e.g. Bennett, 2008; Jibril et al., 2022). Our suggestion is that the practices adopted by advisers in client interactions may reveal the extent to which a firm may be able to develop, and overcome the management challenges it faces. In evaluating together advisers and clients will have inevitably differing outcomes in mind. Rather than seeing the success as a problem to be reframed (e.g. Arshed et al., 2021) we need to regard the co-produced various outcomes as an inevitable part of the process.

Thirdly, for the first time this research links the research strands of business advice with strategic entrepreneurship research via applying the concept of 'strategic fit' (Hill, 2018) to advice processes. The concept of strategic fit was developed to capture and conceptualise mental practices by those developing a business idea and considering beginning to trade for the first time. At a moment in time, when they construct a fit between their own readiness, the development of the organization and both match the perceived external environment, the developing entrepreneurial agents start trading. This concept of 'strategic fit' was extended in its application to capturing the fit of business advice as an external strategic input to a business advice taker's readiness to implement advice in the own organization.

Implications for business practice are manifold. The research on business advice using symbolic interactionism has implications for entrepreneurs. The study's findings highlight the importance of understanding the meaning-making activities in business advice exchanges and the role of multi-level complex contexts, which can be immensely beneficial for entrepreneurs seeking guidance and support and advisers. The impact of policy regimes, values and existing arrangements and contracts with resource providers (eg. from software, rooms and internet) are also important.

One key implication for entrepreneurs is the importance of finding advisers who are familiar with the specific company's specific circumstances and conditions of their company, the advice taker or the context (rural businesses, for example, Hill and Mole, 2022). A multitude of social, cultural, and historical elements influence business advice, and advisers need to be able to tailor their recommendations to the unique circumstances of the individual and the organisation they are advising. Entrepreneurs can benefit from this insight by seeking out professionals who have worked with individuals and businesses in their industry, location or who have dealt with similar difficulties.

The study's findings have significant *policy implications* for government-funded organisations, services and delivery partners who provide advice to small business owners with business advice. According to our study, funding policies, programme set up, and internal governance all have a significant impact on the composition and enactment of business advice projects. As a result, governments need to analyse the impact of their funding policies on business advice delivery and evaluate funding allocation processes, programme design, and guidance to ensure that they are aligned with the specific needs and characteristics of the businesses they seek to support.

Finally, the study's findings highlight the need for more intensive training and support for business advisers. Advisers need to be knowledgeable about the business environment as well as the specific

difficulties that entrepreneurs and small business owners face, demonstrating the need for interpersonal and communication skills, and navigating the complex web of business advice and sequencing issues in ways that benefit the individuals and firms they advise.

The study's limitations include the random selection of advisers and that 'only' 27 were conducted. More adviser interviews might reveal further additional insights into process management of advice sessions. Yet, the random selection ensures that overlap in advisers' ways of working are not based on them having attended the same training or delivering on the same programme. Hence, the three starting points to access the field.

Further research needs to carry out longitudinal studies on business advice processes to identify iterative practices as they unfold with different type of clients over several meetings and in different socio-spatial contexts.

These insights combined then allow for individuals and companies to thrive and develop sustainable businesses for the 22nd century.

Addressing the conference theme

This paper responds to the following aspects of the 2023 conference theme 'Towards Disruptive Sustainability: New Business Opportunities and Challenges': It discusses how advisers manage business advice processes by developing shared practices to offer strategic support to advice takers to run more effective sustainable businesses.

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