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Strategy-as-practice research at a crossroads

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Abstract

Strategy-as-practice research is now entering its second decade with the same enthusiasm and openness that it had when it emerged at the beginning of the second millennium. This current decade is crucial for ensuring the development of strategy-as-practice research since further improvement and growth will depend on its capacity to channel or consolidate its promises and creative energies. In this essay, we seek to advance the following reflections on the future of strategy-as-practice research. First, the essay contrasts and compares the multiple meanings of “practice” in strategy-as-practice research. It then explores how the arguments of leading contributors have been combined to create a new knowledge project. Finally, it discusses the theoretical and methodological challenges that must be faced in the future of the perspective and provides some knowledge production avenues that could be used to consolidate its development.

Keywords: strategy-as-practice research, practice, knowledge project, metaphors, theoretical and methodological challenges

INTRODUCTION

In its first decade, strategy-as-practice research experienced an energetic and promising phase of emergence and grew rapidly. All of the main international conferences in strategy and management now hold interest groups on strategy-as-practice, and special issues of several journals have been published on the subject (Journal of Management Studies, 2003, 2014; Human Relations, 2007; Revue française de gestion, 2007; Long Range Planning, 2008; British Management Journal, forthcoming). Four books have also been published on the topic (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Golsorkhi, 2006; Johnson, Langley, Melin & Whittington, 2007; Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl & Vaara, 2010). While the roots of the movement are mainly European (with contributors hailing from the United Kingdom, France, Scandinavia, Germany and Switzerland), a dynamic international network has helped it to develop (see www.sap-in.org).

Prominent strategy-as-practice scholars have regularly taken stock of the progress of the research stream, doing so contemplatively and optimistically, as is necessary when a new area of theory is still emerging (Jarzabkowski, Balogun & Seidl, 2007; Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). This essay follows the same vein but also adopts a reflexive view of the knowledge production process that underlies the development of this research perspective. Strategy-as-practice research is now at a crossroads; this essay aims to provide some insights into how to further its advancement. More specifically, the following questions underlie this essay: what is meant by practice? Why has this research perspective been so popular? How can we build on the momentum created during the emergence of this research perspective to pursue and consolidate the work that has been done thus far? This essay comprises three parts. It first contrasts and compares the multiple views of practice in strategy-as-practice research. Then, it explores how the arguments of leading contributors have been combined to create this new knowledge project. Finally, it discusses some challenges for the future of the perspective.

THE MULTIPLE FACES OF STRATEGY-AS-PRACTICE RESEARCH

Strategy-as-practice research is generally presented as a perspective, within the broader field of strategic management, that considers strategy not as something that a firm has but rather as something that people do (Johnson, Melin & Whittington, 2003; Johnson et al., 2007). As such, strategy-as-practice is supposed to focus on the concrete activities carried out by strategy practitioners. It looks at the ways in which people (whether they are, for example, business leaders, middle managers, consultants or professionals) mobilize the tools of practice or adopt specific skills and roles when engaging in strategic activity. Also of interest is the performance of different strategic practices (Whittington, 2006): the routines, interactions and conversations that lead to the definition and enactment of strategy, as well as the linkages between these practices and their organizational and institutional contexts. In this view, strategy concerns all levels of the organization, and as such is not viewed as a practice that is necessarily the exclusive domain of top managers. Even though there is a certain homogeneity in the way the strategy-as-practice

perspective is generally introduced and presented, as can be seen from the above, this area of research is nevertheless built on multiple theoretical and methodological influences. When looking at strategy-as-practice research, we find little agreement on what “practice” really is or about how the notion is used in this stream of research. There are at least five different underlying views of practice. These have coexisted since the foundation of strategy-as-practice research and have had some influence on each other. Table 1 provides a summary of these different views of practice and offers a brief sketch of strategy-as-practice research.

Table 1. Five views of practice in strategy-as-practice research

	Practice as managerial action	Practices as a set of tools	Practice as knowledge	Practices as organizational resources	Practice as global Discourse
Main research question	How do managers and others strategize?	How do managers and others use the tools of strategy?	How do managers and others perform strategy?	How do organizational practices shape strategic competitive advantage?	How does strategy Discourse produce managers and organizations?
Main theoretical influences	Management and organization theories	Communication and language theories	Social sciences theories	Management and organization theories	Critical theories
Seminal authors	Mintzberg, 1973	Barry & Elmes, 1997	Hendry, 2000	Mintzberg & Waters, 1985	Knights & Morgan, 1991
Typical works	Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Paroutis & Pettigrew, 2007; Nordqvist & Melin, 2008; Angwin, Paroutis & Mitson, 2009; Whittington, Caillaud & Yakis-Douglas, 2011	Hodgkinson, Whittington, Johnson & Schwarz, 2006; Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008; Giraudeau, 2008; Pälli, Vaara & Sorsa, 2009; Kaplan, 2011; Jarzabkowski, Spee & Smets, 2013	Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Rouleau, 2005; Mantere, 2008; Clarke, Kwon & Wodak, 2011; Whittington, 2006	Salvato, 2003; Stensaker & Falkenberg, 2007; Ambrosini, Bowman & Burton-Taylor, 2007; Regné, 2008	Samra-Fredericks, 2005; Laine & Vaara, 2007; Whittington, Jarzabkowski, Mayer, Mounoud, Nahapiet & Rouleau, 2003; Carter, Clegg, Kornberger, 2010;
Unit of analysis	Managerial activities	Strategic plans, tools and meetings	Routines, conversations and interactions	Organizational routines, capabilities and processes	Extra-organizational discourses
Main methodologies	Interviews, shadowing, diaries	Interviews, observation, video ethnography	Ethnographic research (participant observation)	Case studies	Documents
Main contributions	A deeper comprehension of managerial roles, skills and abilities related to strategizing	A stronger comprehension of the informal procedures of strategic planning	A better interpretation of contextual and hidden characteristics of strategizing	A renewed understanding of the organizational level	A critical understanding of the institutional and disciplinary role of strategy

One of the earliest to emerge and most popular views of practice in strategy-as-practice research is anchored in the work of Mintzberg. In his seminal work on managers, Mintzberg (1973) observed the daily routines of five managers in order to better describe “what do managers do”. Strategy-as-practice research is in part dedicated to the analysis of the managerial practice, looking at how top and middle managers strategize or participate in strategy-making. Here, “practice” refers to the action through which managers recurrently accomplish their strategy work (Jarzabkowski, 2004). For example, Paroutis and Pettigrew (2007) identified seven activities carried out at different organizational levels

which together make up the practice of strategy work (executing, initiating, coordinating, supporting, collaborating and shaping context). In her research on strategic change, Balogun (2007) considered middle managers' strategy work as an act of editing, in the sense that they have to manage evolving interpretations by balancing the content and process of strategic changes (Balogun & Johnson, 2004, 2005).

Studying managerial practices in this way not only informs us of what constitutes the professional practice of strategizing (Whittington et al., 2011) but also provides a better view of the skills and abilities that managers at different levels draw upon when doing strategy. According to Nordqvist and Melin (2008), "strategic planning champions" need to understand and respect the specific values, interests and concerns that form the "rules of the game" of the work done by strategy practitioners. The strategic skills and abilities described are generally less related to the strategists' formal roles than to their informal activities through which they make sense of changes, influence them or use their networks. Nonetheless, strategy-as-practice research that takes this view of practice generally emphasizes the role of the *individual* and its conscious and purposeful action related to strategy-making.

Second, some authors are less interested in managerial practice and more concerned with the various sets of relational, discursive and material tools related to strategy formation. Here, "practices" (generally used, in this view, in the plural, in contrast to the previous view in which the singular form was used) are mainly associated with the procedures, norms and traditions by which strategy is actively accomplished. Barry and Elmes (1997) were among the first authors to attract attention to the narrative nature of strategy texts and the authoring processes of strategic sensemaking tools. In the wake of their inspiring paper, some authors in strategy-as-practice research have started to look at the role of workshops and meetings in shaping stability and change (e.g. Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008; Hoon, 2007). Others have investigated the discursive practices of strategic planning in order to better understand how plans are discursively constituted and negotiated (e.g. Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011; Pälli et al., 2009). There is also currently a burgeoning interest in the study of strategy tools and their facilitation of the work of strategists (e.g. Kaplan, 2011; Jarzabkowski et al., 2012).

The view of practices as a set of tools provides a stronger comprehension of the informal procedures of strategic planning and of how standardized sets of practices are produced within particular settings. For example, we know, as Spee and Jarzabkowski (2011) showed, that strategy texts are negotiated through a cumulative cycle of talk and texts. We also know that strategy texts have a specific genre (Pälli et al., 2009). They are future-oriented, as they are anchored in a directional discourse, and they tend to optimistically portray a bright future (Cornut, Giroux & Langley, 2012). Rather than showing how being a strategist is a matter of individual accomplishment, the view of practices being a set of tools proposes to explain how these practices (workshops, plans, tools) draw upon, interpret and sometimes challenge the organizational strategy.

The third view of "practice" is mainly indebted to the work of seminal theorists associated with the "practice turn" in the social sciences such as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, Michel Foucault, Anthony Giddens. In their view, "practice" refers to the social and tacit knowledge that managers

and others use when they are making strategy. This view is based on the assumption that practice is related to the knowledge frame that actors need to draw on to accomplish their strategy work. Hendry (2000) was one of the first authors to invite researchers to consider strategic decision-making as a social practice instead of a management technique. He stressed the fact that, like any other social practice, strategy takes its meaning from the social context in which it evolves. By analyzing conversations between strategists, Samra-Fredericks (2003) studied the sequential turns and revealed the socio-linguistic procedures by which actors construct a common meaning of markets and environments. Mantere (2008) renewed interest in the role of the middle manager by recognizing the importance their knowledge of the constraints of a given situation and the discretion they have to implement change. In looking at how managers and others perform strategy, the view of "practice" as social knowledge aims to highlight the contextual and hidden characteristics of strategy-making rather than to provide general expertise and proposals for becoming an effective strategist.

Even though a lot of strategy-as-practice researchers use the social practice label, very few of them so far have been able to study the doing of strategy in the real sense of the practice turn in the social sciences. Under the practice turn lens, practice cannot be defined only by the organizational or strategic "doing"; it also has to be defined by the "doing" of society. Whittington (2006) urged strategy-as-practice researchers to connect the detailed activity of individual practitioners with broader societal phenomena, as I did when I examined how strategic sensemaking is produced and reproduced daily and anchored in managers' tacit knowledge of their broader social context (Rouleau, 2005). The view of practice as knowledge invites the strategy-as-practice researcher to redirect attention towards the collective stock of knowledge that is a precondition for action and activities instead of looking at managerial action or the set of activities in which strategy-making is entangled. A view of practice as knowledge looks for the ordinary practical reasoning by which practices are interconnected with one another and re-produce social life in organizations.

The fourth and fifth views of practice are, respectively, turned towards the investigation of strategy-making at the level of the firm and on an extra-organizational level. Instead of asking what strategists do, how they do it and why they do it the way that they do, the fourth view of practice concerns the organizational consequences of strategists' actions and activities during strategy-making. In 1985, Mintzberg and Waters proposed an integrative method of thinking about how strategies are formed in organizations (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). The underlying view of practice is that organizational practices, such as processes, organizational routines and capabilities, are the roots of strategic advantage. For example, Ambrosini et al., (2007) showed how the inter-team coordination in two financial organizations increased customer satisfaction and thus reinforced their competitive advantage. Regnér (2008) examined the micro-foundations of strategy dynamics and demonstrated that, along with organizational practices, socio-cultural embeddedness, social interactions and the inclusion of multiple imaginative strategists are all important in the construction of unique organizational assets. Both papers aimed to complement and hybridize the strategy-as-practice research with the resources-based view.

In adopting this last view of practices, strategy-as-practice research is closer to the mainstream approaches of strategy and organizational research. Of course, there is no denying that strategy-as-practice research might inform content approaches in strategy (Johnson et al., 2003; Floyd, Cornelissen, Wright & Delios, 2011). However, we should be conscious of the fact that the view of practices as organizational resources differs from the three others previously presented. This view of practices involves a micro perspective of organizational processes, routines and capabilities rather than a new angle or approach for conducting strategy research. Put differently, this view illustrates how ordinary activities and processes underpin the resources configuration at the organizational level. Until now, this view of practices has remained marginal in strategy-as-practice research.

The fifth view of practice embraces the idea that strategy is a global Discourse (with a capital D) that subjectively impacts society, organizations and individual life. In the early 1990s, Knights and Morgan (1991) wrote an insightful paper in which they affirmed that strategy is a mechanism that has distinctive power effects which model individuals' subjectivity. Subsequent to this, few empirical works have attempted to better understand the power effects that emerge when managers and others are strategizing. Samra-Fredericks (2005) drew on Habermas and ethnomethodology to analyze the conversations of strategists and found that seven power effects were at play in the extracts examined. Based on interviews with top managers, middle managers and employees in an engineering firm undergoing a strategic change, Laine and Vaara (2007) explored the dynamics of control-resistance to explain how these groups construct their views of change differently.

Complementing these empirical studies, some scholars have adopted a macro-institutionalist view of the strategy field (Whittington et al., 2003; Whittington et al., 2011; Carter et al., 2010) while others have developed a critique of current strategy-as-practice research (e.g. Chia & Rasche, 2009; Carter, Clegg & Kornberger, 2008). Whatever their approach, all writers on the subject agree on the fact that strategy-as-practice research needs to promote critical analysis. In the most recent review of strategy-as-practice research, Vaara and Whittington (2012) suggest developing critical strategy-as-practice research by studying the legitimation and naturalization process of short-term profit-orientation in strategy-making. To do this, one could look at how accountability and responsibility are constructed in strategy discourse, while keeping a sociological eye on the professionalization of strategic management and the industry it has become.

Of course, these views of practice may not be as distinct from one another as we have assumed in the previous lines. Each of these views of practice represents one possible way to study the "doing" of strategy. None of them are either the best or only way to research strategy practices. The strategy-as-practice approach has until now displayed a high degree of theoretical pluralism and ambiguity (Chia & Rasche, 2009; Carter et al., 2008). Indubitably, this pluralist view of the notion of practice has been extremely helpful in ensuring the emergence and the success of this new knowledge project.

STRATEGY-AS-PRACTICE RESEARCH, A NEW KNOWLEDGE PROJECT?

The emergence of strategy-as-practice research and its growing success are intriguing. In a previous paper, Eva Boxenbaum and I looked at how new theories are conceived and presented by organizational scholars. We suggested that a new knowledge project is generally eclectically produced, in part by connecting pre-existing metaphors, which are assembled along with theoretical concepts and empirical material (Boxenbaum & Rouleau, 2011). The metaphors' ambiguous applicability to the object of study encourages creativity in interpretation and facilitates the generation of new ideas. We illustrated this argument by taking the example of institutional theory. Analysis of the foundational institutionalist texts showed that they contain a wide range of metaphors that already existed in organizational theory. Put differently, part of the popularity of institutional theory resides in the fact that the first scholars to use the notion were creatively engaging with everyone in organization theory.

In this second part of this essay, I would like to explore these ideas in the context of strategy-as-practice research. At first glance, one might think that the notion of practice is similar to the notion of institution. They both have been defined in multiple and substantially different ways, Scott (1987) reviewed four formulations of the institutionalization process, each of which provides a specific variant of institutional theory. I conducted the same textual analysis for strategy-as-practice foundational texts as for institutional theory (Boxenbaum & Rouleau, 2011). I chose six strategy-as-practice foundational texts based on the number of citations in Google Scholar (see Table 2). Among these papers, two are theoretical articles, two are empirical articles and two are editorial essays from a strategy-as-practice special issue.

All metaphorical images were independently selected in the six texts and grouped under their root metaphor (e.g.: actor, role and performance under theater; resource, environment and resource under biology, etc). I highlighted the terms that appeared more than ten times in one of the texts as an indication of frequent appearance (Boxenbaum & Rouleau, 2011). Table 3 gives a visual overview of the frequency of terms and of the most commonly appearing metaphors in the strategy-as-practice foundational texts.

Table 2. Foundational papers in strategy-as-practice research

Papers (authors, year)	Citations in Google Scholar (May 2013)
Whittington, R. (1996)	489
Johnson, G., Melin, L., & Whittington, R. (2003)	649
Balogun, J., & Johnson, G. (2004).	483
Jarzabkowski (2004)	427
Whittington (2006)	634
Jarzabkowski, Balogun & Seidl (2007)	380

Strategy-as-practice research, as reflected in the foundational texts, contains a wide range of metaphors that span the domains of stratagem, construction, theater, market and know-how. As the table reveals, some metaphors are widely used in all the texts (e.g., work, inter/action, activity, social, knowledge, actors), whereas others appear frequently in one or two texts and rarely or never in others (e.g., recursiveness and competence). Despite the variety of metaphorical domains evoked in the conception of strategy-as-practice research, few of them were new to the strategy field. It appears that the reuse of metaphors from other strategy schools of thought created a bridge that facilitated the adoption of the practice notion. More specifically, I found four metaphorical types that are used to sustain the practice notion. These four metaphorical types correspond to the four basic forms of strategy discourse that Francine Séguin and I identified in the mid 1990s (Rouleau & Séguin, 1995). A "form of strategic discourse" corresponds to a particular arrangement of underlying representations concerning the individual, the organization and its environment. The four forms were labelled the classical, the contingent, the socio-cognitive and the socio-political forms of strategic discourse (Rouleau & Séguin, 1995).

At first, the metaphorical domains of stratagem, market and biology found in the strategy-as-practice foundational texts connected this knowledge project to the classic works in the strategy field. Decades before strategy-as-practice research began, academic researchers had referred to direction, competition and adaptation, just as these foundational texts do. In reusing these metaphors with the practice notion, strategy-as-practice researchers connect themselves to the classic form of strategic discourse in which strategy has to do with the purposeful positioning of an organization by its managers in a competitive economic environment.

Table 3. Metaphors from Strategy-as-Practice Foundational Texts

	Whittington (1996)	Whittington (2006)	Balogun, Johnson (2004)	Jarzabkowski (2004)	Johnson, Melin, Whittington (2003)	Jarzabkowski, Balogun, Seidl (2007)
Stratagem						
Direction/ing/al	10	2	0	1	2	5
Plan/planning	10	14	15	9	1	1
Effective/ effectiveness	6	12	2	1	5	0
Performance/ing/ mer	9	17	4	7	15	1
Market						
Competition/ competitive	0	1	2	36	17	5
(Re)produce/ producing/ product/production	0	17	1	7	2	0
Biology						
Resource	0	3	5	26	30	12
Adaptation	0	2	0	27	1	1
Environment/al	0	3	5	27	6	0

Behaviour	1	4	12	14	2	8
Construction						
(Re)structure/ing/						
structuration	2	3	73	65	33	2
Build/building	0	3	7	9	7	2
Process/ual	10	16	77	41	81	9
System						
Recursive/	0	0	0	72	1	0
recursiveness						
(Inter)Connect/	0	6		1	2	18
connection						
Interaction	0	1	19	33	1	9
Theater						
Actors	2	15	0	46	16	26
Roles	9	14	17	4	6	2
Interpretation	0	3	13	7	2	2
Know-how						
Knowledge/						
knowing/						
knowledgeable	13	1	8	30	10	6
Competence	8	0	0	12	1	0
Experience/	3	2	22	12	0	6
experienced						
Action						
Work/working	9	20	85	14	25	11
Activity	3	42	1	8	51	37
Capacity/capability/	1	5	0	20	6	4
capable						
Collectiveness						
Society/societal/						
social/						
socially	2	54	21	111	8	41
Institution/al/	0	5	1	62	21	11
alization						
Context/	0	12	7	79	7	8
contextualization						

*Appearing at least ten times in one text (Boxenbaum & Rouleau, 2011)

The notion of practice in these foundational texts is also related to the metaphorical domains of “construction” and “system”. The metaphorical domain of construction brings back the concept of structure that has always been important to strategy research. First introduced in the work of Chandler (1977), it was central to the development of what Mintzberg (1973) called “the configurational school of thought” in which the links between strategy and structure need to fit together. References to buildings also existed in strategy

research decades before the birth of strategy-as-practice. The metaphorical domain of system was not new either. Interaction, connectedness and recursiveness are systemic properties that are central to the contingency form of discourse that pervaded the strategy field during the 1980s. In both cases, strategy, organization and environment are linked together in a complex and systemic interaction. In reusing metaphors related to other domains, the authors of the foundational texts enabled the transfer of theoretical concepts from the strategy field to strategy-as-practice research.

In a similar way, foundational texts of strategy-as-practice research borrowed metaphors from adjacent disciplines, such as sociology and cognitive sciences. What have been called here the metaphors of theater and know-how are close to the socio-cognitive forms of strategic discourse that were developed in the nineties. The theater metaphor explores the world of shared meanings (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) while the know-how metaphor emphasizes the cognitive arrangement that is at work in the process of experimentation and learning (Weick, 1995). The socio-cognitive form of discourse considers the organization and the environment as subjectively constructed realities that are constantly being renewed through experimentation and the interpretation of daily events by competent actors. By adopting metaphorical domains that were also used in other disciplines, the authors of the strategy-as-practice foundational texts enabled a transfer of theoretical concepts and propositions from those disciplines into strategy-as-practice research.

Lastly, the metaphorical domains of "action" and "collectiveness" constitute further important building blocks of the strategy-as-practice foundational texts. They both appear amongst the most used metaphors in these texts. In fact, they contribute to extending the distinctiveness of the practice notion. The action domain is composed of diverse images all of which indicate some form of agency and accomplishment and the ability to make a difference in the course of events. The metaphorical domain of collectiveness represents the outcome of these multiple accomplishments. These two metaphorical domains are central to the practice perspective even though they have multiple definitions depending on the view of the practice notion they support (section 1). As these metaphorical domains allow the representation of strategy in terms of interplays between individual or collective actors that have a power to change the course of events, they share something in common with the socio-political form of strategic discourse.

Through this complex bridging, the strategy-as-practice foundational texts succeed in merging multiple metaphors to form a coherent construct of practice. The composition of the perspective appears to be a recombination of metaphors that were readily available in strategy and in other disciplines. None of the metaphors were novel to strategy even though their specific combination was distinct. Interestingly, the source of the perspective's success lay not only in the introduction of new notions such as practice (that we could also consider as a metaphor) but also in the unique combination of metaphorical domains into a different theoretical assemblage. In the long term, should this metaphorical combination be reviewed to ensure the future development of strategy-as-practice research?

CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

After more than a decade of strong development and fruitful contributions, strategy-as-practice is now at a crossroads. The theoretical metaphorical pluralism behind the notion of practice has been extremely helpful for generating a community of ideas, activities and researchers promoting divergent agendas (Whittington, 2011; Carter et al., 2008). However, although this diversity benefited the dissemination of strategy-as-practice research, it may impede its future theoretical development. Should strategy-as-practice research continue to be developed in the same way as it has emerged or should it start to seek consolidation to become a more mature field of knowledge?

The episodic reviews of the perspective (Jarzabkowski, Balogun & Seidl, 2007; Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Chia & Rasche, 2009; Vaara & Whittington, 2012) provide future avenues or directions for the field but rarely (and timidly when they do so) question the triggers of its rapid and growing development. Consequently, strategy-as-practice could possibly continue its advancement by investigating new territories and by bridging new disciplines as has been the case until now, but it might also want to strengthen its model of knowledge development. The questions and ideas that first made the field extremely popular and successful need to be discussed again. The paper will now explore the theoretical and methodological challenges that must be faced to ensure the growth of strategy-as-practice research.

Theoretical challenge

While it is largely agreed that strategy-as-practice research aims to facilitate the understanding of multiple actors' practices and activities in their contexts, the famous question of knowledge accumulation remains an issue. According to Langley (2010), the pluralism specific to strategy-as-practice research raises questions about the extent to which a truly cumulative body of knowledge is emerging. Until now, strategy-as-practice research has been more dedicated to developing situated knowledge in order to differentiate itself from traditional strategy research than it has been to producing cumulative knowledge that will both ensure the development of strong research streams and help practitioners. To be taken seriously in the long term, strategy-as-practice research faces the challenges of knowledge accumulation and of gathering fresh theoretical contributions.

In their chapter in the Cambridge Handbook of Strategy-as-Practice (Golsorkhi et al., 2010), Golden-Biddle and Azuma (2010) studied how strategy-as-practice researchers construct their contributions when presenting their results in peer reviewed journals. They noticed that most strategy-as-practice researchers tend to construct their papers by drawing on theories and methods that have been advanced cumulatively over time, thus showing a high level of what they called "progressive coherence". The paper by Jarzabkowski (2004) is an example of this way of constructing contributions to the strategy-as-practice field. According to Golden-Biddle and Azuma (2010), this positioning is relevant for gaining legitimacy when a new stream of research is emerging. In the longer term, they suggest that instead of constructing their contributions through progressive coherence or based on an "evolution script" (Boxenbaum

& Rouleau, 2011), strategy-as-practice researchers could develop further opportunities for contribution by differentiating from or disagreeing with prior literature. But will such differentiation be beneficial or not for the development of a peripheral approach based on what Floyd, et al. (2011) called an “umbrella construct”?

Floyd et al. (2011: 935) suggest that practice is an “umbrella construct” in the sense that such notions “encompass multiple constructs and phenomena.” The problem with umbrella constructs is that, along with integration and inclusiveness, they also bring issues of validity and operational challenges. Being broad in scope, umbrella constructs such as practice do not easily provide theoretical formulations that are translatable into more specific plausible proposals or even testable implications. As a broad concept that has different uses and definitions, the notion of practice certainly provides a general set of commitments, a perspective from which strategy-as-practice research has to be made.

But behind this large and inclusive view, strategy-as-practice research thus far seems to be offering few possibilities for sustaining the development of theoretical contributions. Langley (2010) suggests that strategy-as-practice research offers knowledge of conceptual value based on thick empirical descriptions of how to rethink strategic issues. It does not, however, provide a cumulative knowledge model of development. In this sense, she suggests that a good way to contribute to knowledge development is by focussing on empirical phenomena (strategic meetings, strategic plans and so on).

Yet, it is not the first time in organization theory that a research program has been built around an umbrella construct. For example, the notion of “institution” is an umbrella construct and yet institutional theory has successfully grown out of what Scott (1987) called its “adolescence”. Institutional theory is now the most prevalent organization theory worldwide. When examining the development of institutional theory, it can be seen that theorists have been able to develop a series of bridging constructs around the notion of institution, such as institutional logics, institutional entrepreneurs and institutional work. As Floyd et al. (2011) remarked, institutional researchers were able to develop an equilibrium between umbrella and bridging constructs that ensured the maturation of the institutionalist body of knowledge. How an equilibrium like this would be achieved in strategy-as-practice research is less obvious.

Furthermore, Golden-Biddle and Azuma (2010) noticed that a large number of strategy-as-practice researchers locate their contributions in a literature other than that of strategy-as-practice. For example, Balogun and Johnson (2004) situated their contributions in middle management and strategic sensemaking literatures rather than in strategy-as-practice research. The researchers who adopt this strategy construct their contributions by invoking the inadequacy in problematizing the situation. In these kinds of papers, generally not published in special issues, the contributions related to strategy-as-practice generally appear at the end of an argument and seek to sustain the development of the perspective instead of proposing some specific theoretical contribution.

Should strategy-as-practice research embrace a more mature model of knowledge development or expand itself through a transdisciplinary project? It is probably more in the nature of the strategy field as a cornerstone discipline to favor a wide-reaching development over a robust knowledge project. One

thing is sure: whatever the answer to this question, there is a need to draw on existing theories (in strategy, management or social sciences) in order to be acknowledged by our peers in the publication process while finding an original way to produce some theoretical notions that will be associated with the strategy-as-practice research program.

Methodological challenge

To date, strategy-as-practice research has mostly used qualitative methods. More specifically, the first generation of strategy-as-practice researchers used data gathered from traditional longitudinal case studies to address different strategizing and strategic issues. As Table 1 shows, empirical strategy-as-practice research tends to be based on strategy meeting observation (Stensaker & Falkenberg, 2007), interviews (Paroutis & Pettigrew, 2007) and practitioner diaries (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). In his research paper, Vesa (2012: 4) examined the methodologies used by strategy-as-practice researchers and found that “the use of robust participation-based ethnography in the field of strategy remains quite rare”. From the very beginning, many strategy-as-practice researchers have advocated the need to use methods other than ethnographic ones to address more accurately the strategy-as-practice research agenda. Balogun, Huff and Johnson (2003) argued in their seminal methodological paper that today’s complex organizational settings require diversified methods that can provide more breadth and flexibility. Huff, Neyer and Möslin (2010) suggested using a broader range of methods that can offer more robustness in theory building than solely ethnographic methods.

Without any doubt, these suggestions are relevant for developing new ways of gathering data in order to strengthen the relationships between empirical evidence and the range of interpretations related to the practice notion. In the longer term, should strategy-as-practice research continue to favor the pluralism associated with mixed methods approaches or consider more seriously the extension of ethnographic participant observation? Put differently, should we opt for critical reflexivity or knowledge validity and plausibility to better understand how managers and others are doing strategy? Of course, critical reflexivity and knowledge validity are both required to seriously advance a knowledge project. However, both will have their respective consequences for the development of this project. Furthermore, they both depend on the way the notion of practice is defined when researching. A compromise option would be to return to ethnographic research while simultaneously renewing the genre.

Ethnographic methods constitute the most powerful methods for investigating what managers and others “do” when they are strategizing (Chia & Rasche, 2009). However, their potential for advancing strategy-as-practice research has remained underestimated in comparison with methods that at first glance seem to be more rigorous and generalizable. Drawing on methods that do not give real access to the practices, routines and conversations of managers and others dilutes the distinctiveness of strategy-as-practice research. In this sense, ethnographic methods offer a lot of potential for theorizing and developing deeper strategy-as-practice contributions. Of course, traditional ethnographic methods present a certain numbers of limitations (bounded and

single-site communities, time consuming for the researcher, do not always attain the standard of the academic writing process and so on) that need to be overcome in order to push forward strategy-as-practice research.

These difficulties might also be reduced by endorsing the transformation of the ethnographic research genre. In the last two decades, the organizational ethnography field has taken a turn and new forms of ethnographies have emerged. Researchers have developed ethnographic studies in new areas (extreme situations, artistic squats, medical organizations working in Third World countries and so on) and used new ethnographic methods (for example, cognitive, institutional, artefactual, visual and virtual or cyberethnographic). It would be advantageous for future strategy-as-practice researchers to introduce these new ethnographies that would allow them to deal with complex, ambiguous and volatile contexts while providing a strong set of publishable data.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AVENUES

This essay first reviews the multifaceted use of the notion of practice in strategy-as-practice research. Different definitions, units of analysis and theoretical and methodological influences are employed under the general label of practice. Second, this essay looks at the metaphorical arrangements that characterize the strategy-as-practice knowledge project. It shows that under the practice notion, the metaphorical domains of the traditional strategy field have been rearranged to compose a distinctive knowledge project. By emphasizing the pluralistic character of strategy-as-practice research, the aim of the essay is not to condemn or promote one view of practice over the other but to reflect on the consequences of facilitating clarification and orderly development.

I shall now propose some knowledge production avenues for building on the momentum created during the emergence of strategy-as-practice research. The goal here is less to set some specific directions, as Vaara and Whittington recently did (2012), but to attract the researchers' attention to our own practices in producing knowledge. To consolidate the strategy-as-practice field while cultivating its inherent diversity, four knowledge production avenues need to be addressed: 1) bolstering the use of sociological theories of practice; 2) reinforcing the alternative position of strategy-as-practice research; 3) fostering specific theoretical contributions; 4) building on organizational ethnographic methods.

- *Bolstering the use of sociological theories of practice:* The project behind strategy-as-practice research is based on a commitment to sociological theories of practice (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). However, commitment to the view of "practice as knowledge" remains underdeveloped compared to the view of practice as "managerial action", as a "set of tools" and as a group of "organizational resources." In order to consolidate the strategy-as-practice field there is a need to renew and revitalize this commitment. Basically, social practice theories anchored in socio-political and cognitive metaphorical domains provide diverse views to better understand how strategy is accomplished in action and how it is shaped by contextual elements.

Moreover, most strategy-as-practice research has until now failed to emphasize the social and collective embeddedness of the strategy practitioner's agency (Rasche & Chia, 2009). There is a need to better take into account the institutional and collective trajectory through which the strategy practitioner performs its agency.

- *Reinforcing the alternative position of strategy-as-practice research:* While strategy-as-practice researchers have adopted a diversity of views about the practice notion, the view of strategy has not really been questioned. The debate around what strategy is still matters! The relation between mainstream strategy research and strategy-as-practice research has always been ambiguous and is growing more elusive. Strategy-as-practice research has been developed in order to offer an alternative to the formal discourse on strategy. As Vaara and Whittington (2012) said, this perspective has not yet achieved its full potential. The "alternative" discourse position in strategy needs to be reinforced in the strategy-as-practice researchers' publications. Golden-Biddle and Azuma (2010) invited strategy-as-practice researchers to use differentiation arguments instead of always drawing on a progressive coherence argument. Another way of reinforcing the alternative character of strategy-as-practice research would be to clearly position new research in relation to previous strategy-as-practice knowledge and accept disagreement with strategy-as-practice contributions when appropriate. A more mature strategy-as-practice field of research would need researchers to make an effort to locate their work in strategy-as-practice research instead of contributing to more general and accepted literature. It would also require them to be critical and reflexive regarding the knowledge they produce and its effects.
- *Fostering specific theoretical contributions:* While practices are often embedded in formal activities and processes, the danger for strategy-as-practice researchers lies in highlighting a set of empirical issues without attention to their coherence. There is a need for systematic research into specific empirical issues (strategy workshops, strategy plans, middle managers and so on). This could eventually lead to a cumulative knowledge base. Strategy-as-practice researchers should also address the challenge of building an equilibrium between "umbrella" and "bridging" constructs. In this sense, it might be interesting to assess the findings related to different theoretical lenses (such as sensemaking practices, discursive practices, institutional practices and so on) in order to see whether or not there is any consistency between the strategy-as-practice findings. Similarly, strategic episodes, strategic conversations, strategic competence and so on might serve as bridging constructs which could help strengthen the issues of validity and the operationalization challenges which a knowledge project has to face as it matures.
- *Building on organizational ethnographic research:* To transcend the objectivist view of practice that is pervading the field (Corradi, Gherardi & Verzelloni, 2010) and to reinforce our commitment to

social theories of practice, strategy-as-practice researchers should take more seriously the potential of organizational ethnography for understanding the “doing” of strategy. Such a methodological option comprises a vast array of variants that might better fit with the exigencies of looking at the granularity of strategy-making whether it is accomplished at the top of the organization or the middle or even at the interorganizational level. While organizational ethnographic methods have a strong potential for observing the “hidden” knowledge that supports strategists’ practices, there is nevertheless a need, as the perspective matures, to develop strong and systematic data analysis processes that will help to gather robust and coherent knowledge about strategizing. Furthermore, comparative ethnographic research should be encouraged to sustain the cumulative knowledge production of thick empirical descriptions that will help to better revisit the globalized world’s strategic issues.

Throughout, this essay has attempted to sound both critically reflexive and optimistic about the development of strategy-as-practice research. To end this essay, it seems appropriate to quote Scott in his reflection on the multiple faces of institutional theory in its early stage of development: “adolescents have their awkwardness and their acne, but they also embody energy and promise. They require encouragement as well as criticism if they are to channel their energies in productive directions and achieve their promise” (Scott, 1987: 510). Strategy-as-practice research is still in adolescence but will without doubt reach adulthood. Some choices have to be made in this direction!

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