Strategy as Practice:

Micro and Macro

Richard Whittington
University of Oxford

3 June 2019

Strategizing Activities and Practices Interest Group
Academy of Management
Strategy as Practice – Many Varieties

‘Strategy as Practice research focuses on the micro-level social activities, processes and practices that characterize organizational strategy and strategizing.’

An Agenda

• Micro and macro as theoretical categories

• How to relate micro-activities and (more) macro-practices?

• What are we trying to explain?

• How to connect with other theoretical traditions?

• What kinds of methodologies might we adopt?

Please do send questions as we go along: I shall try to collect questions and respond to common themes both around half way and at the end.
A Personal Trajectory: from Micro-Strategizing to Macro-Practices


Jarzabkowski, Balogun and Seidl, 2007 *Human Relations S.I.*

Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl, Vaara, 2010/2015, *Cambridge Handbook of Strategy as Practice*
‘Micro’ and ‘Macro’ as theoretical categories

• Micro happens *inside* organizations
  – e.g. a strategy retreat, a strategic planning process, a strategy conversation

• Macro happens *across* organizations
  – e.g. strategic planning practices, strategy retreats, strategic discourses in general

‘Meso’ is sometimes used with respect to outcomes at the level of the organizational unit as a whole.
Macro-SAP: Avoiding ‘micro-isolationism’

Abstract
Taking perspectives from papers published previously in *Organization Studies*, we argue for progress in strategy-as-practice research through more effective linking of ‘local’ strategizing activity with ‘larger’ social phenomena. We introduce a range of theoretical approaches capable of incorporating larger-scale phenomena and countering what we term ‘micro-isolationism’, the tendency to explain local activities in their own terms. Organizing the theories according to how far they lean towards either tall or flat ontologies, we outline their respective strengths and weaknesses. Against this background, we develop three broad guidelines that can help protect against empirical micro-isolationism and thereby extend the scope of strategy-as-practice research.

Many Ways of Doing Macro-SAP

Two Basic Activities/Practices Relationships:
from Macro to Micro and from Micro to Macro

Herepath, 2014, In the loop: A realist approach to structure and agency in the practice of strategy, *Organization Studies*

NHS and Welsh politics and discourses

Strategizing activity in an health authority


Global insurance markets

Strategizing activity in multiple insurance businesses
A Reciprocal Relationship between Micro and Macro

Practitioners: e.g. strategy consultants and strategy managers; Practices: e.g. strategic planning or strategy discourse
Profession: i.e. the field of strategy consultants, academics and managers; praxis: specific episodes of strategy activity.
Strategy’s Macro Practices:
Strategic Planning, Strategic Management and Open Strategy

Figure 1.1. The rise of openness: strategic planning, strategic management, and open strategy

Macro-SAP: the development, spread and use of macro-practices, occurring across many organizations

Strategy with a capital S: the professional field of Strategy, i.e. corporate strategists, consultants, managers, academics etc.
A Reciprocal Relationship between Micro and Macro

Figure 2.1: Practices, Praxis, Practitioners, and Profession

Practitioners: e.g. strategy consultants and strategy managers; Practices: e.g. strategic planning or strategy discourse
Profession: i.e. the field of strategy consultants, academics and managers; praxis: specific episodes of strategy activity.
Any questions so far?
What is SAP trying to explain?
Practitioner effectiveness, new practices, practice impacts and more...

**Figure 1.** A schematic model of strategy practice.
Jarzabkowski, Kaplan, Seidl and Whittington, 2016, On the risk of studying practices in isolation, *Strategic Organization*
Relationships with Other Traditions 1: Strategy Process

COMBINATORY FRAMEWORK FOR STRATEGY AS PROCESS AND PRACTICE (SAPP)

Organizational field

Actors: e.g. managers, consultants, employees

Issues:
- Short-term
- Long-term

Trigger

other influences on realized strategy

enable/constrain

Practices:
- Macro/micro
- Discursive/socio-material

Time

Realized Strategy

Strategizing Episode

Realized Strategy

Strategizing Episode

Realized Strategy

Strategizing Episode

Issues:
- Short-term
- Long-term

Trigger

other influences on realized strategy

enable/constrain

Practices:
- Macro/micro
- Discursive/socio-material

Actors: e.g. managers, consultants, employees

Burgelman, Floyd, Laamanen, Mantere, Vaara & Whittington, 2018, Strategic Management Journal, Introduction to Special Issue
‘Practice-driven institutionalism (PDI), in which the everyday work of practitioners ‘on the ground’ is the engine room of social order and the practices by which jobs get done – its driving force. In this sense, we reconnect institutional theory with its practice-theoretical roots in order to (i) foreground the collective performance of institutions through situated, emergent and generative practices, (ii) acknowledge the institutional significance of praxis, the everyday work performed by and in organizations, and (iii) draw attention to the role of frontline practitioners, ordinary people doing ordinary work in the constitution of institutional orders. PDI differs from practice-based studies in general because it engages them specifically in relation to institutional theory and the supra-organizational orders that it attends to.
What Kinds of Methodologies?
- it depends on what you are trying to explain...


Any more questions?
An Agenda

• Micro and macro as theoretical categories
• How to relate micro-activities and (more) macro-practices?
• What are we trying to explain?
• How to connect with other theoretical traditions?
• What kinds of methodologies might we adopt?

Number of References to ‘Strategy as Practice’ (Google Scholar)