

# Strategy as Practice:

## Micro *and* Macro

Richard Whittington  
University of Oxford

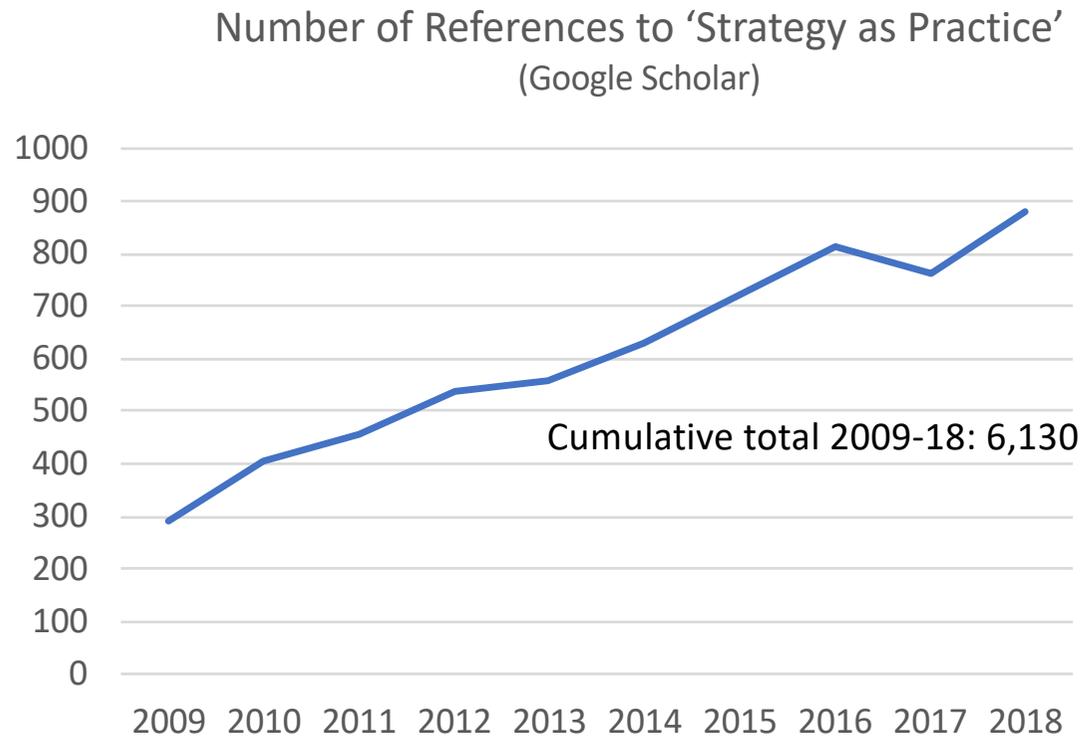
3 June 2019

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.’

Golsorkhi, Seidl, Rouleau, Vaara, *Cambridge Handbook of Strategy as Practice* (2015)



# 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?

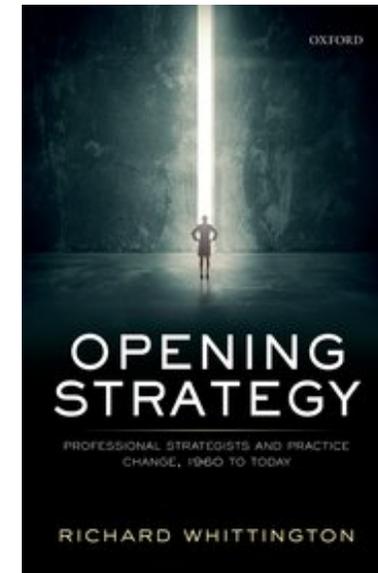
Please do send questions as we go along: I shall try to collect questions and respond to common themes both around half way and at the end.

# A Personal Trajectory: from Micro-Strategizing to Macro-Practices



Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl, Vaara, 2010/2015,  
*Cambridge Handbook of Strategy as Practice*

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



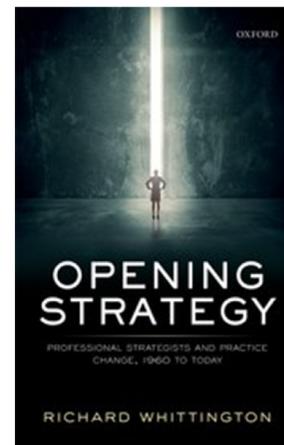
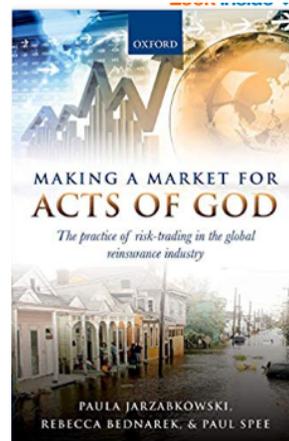
Whittington, 1996, *Strategy as Practice*,  
*Long Range Planning*, 29, 5, 731-35

Whittington, 2019, *Opening Strategy: Professional Strategists and Practice Change, 1960 to Today*, Oxford University Press.

## '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

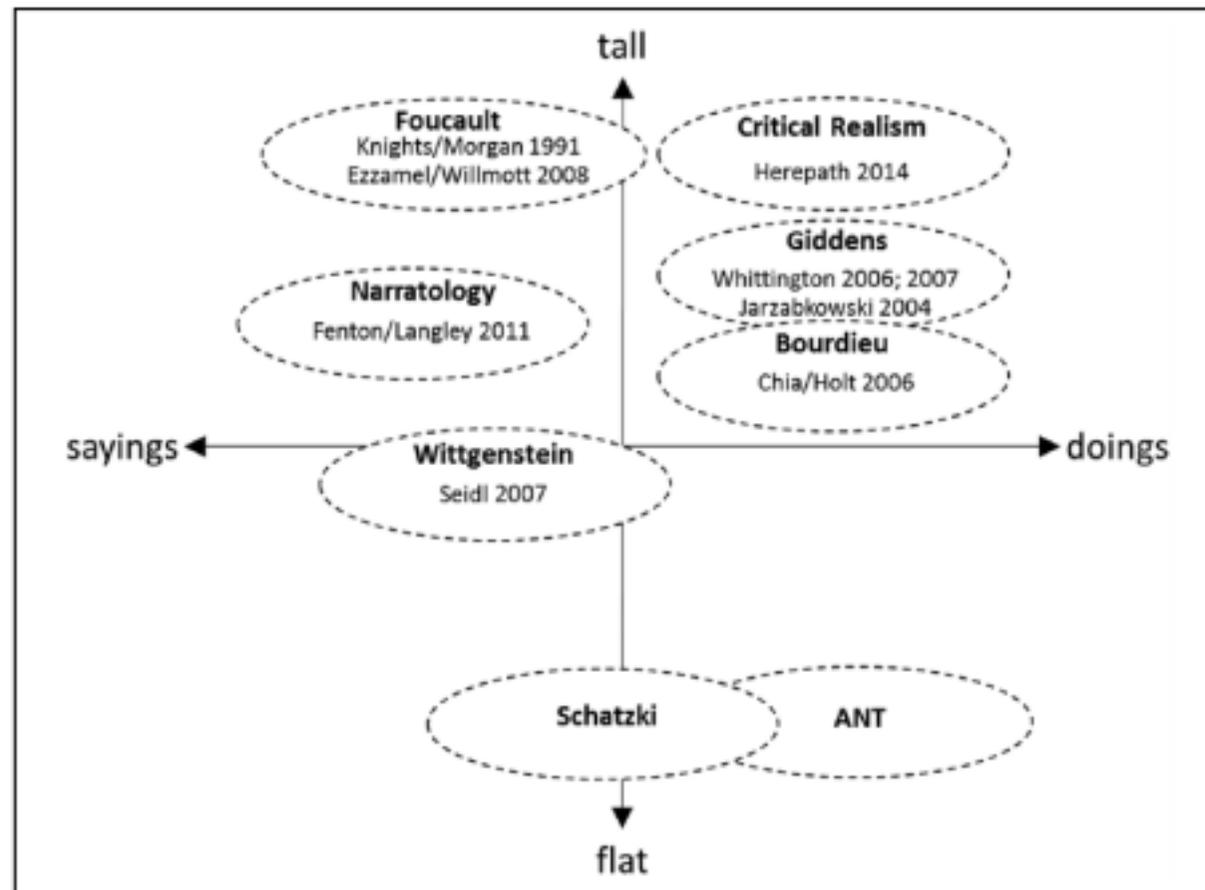


Figure 1. Spectrum of Theoretical Resources as Represented in Key Papers.

Seidl and Whittington, 2014, Enlarging the Strategy-as-Practice Research Agenda: Towards Taller and Flatter Ontologies, *Organization Studies*

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

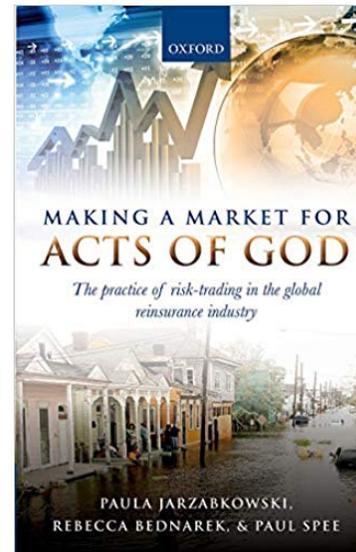


NHS and Welsh politics and  
discourses



Strategizing activity in an  
health authority

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



Global insurance  
markets



Strategizing activity in multiple  
insurance businesses

Jarzabkowski, Bednarek, and Spee, 2014, *Making  
A Market for Acts of God*, OUP

## A Reciprocal Relationship between Micro and Macro

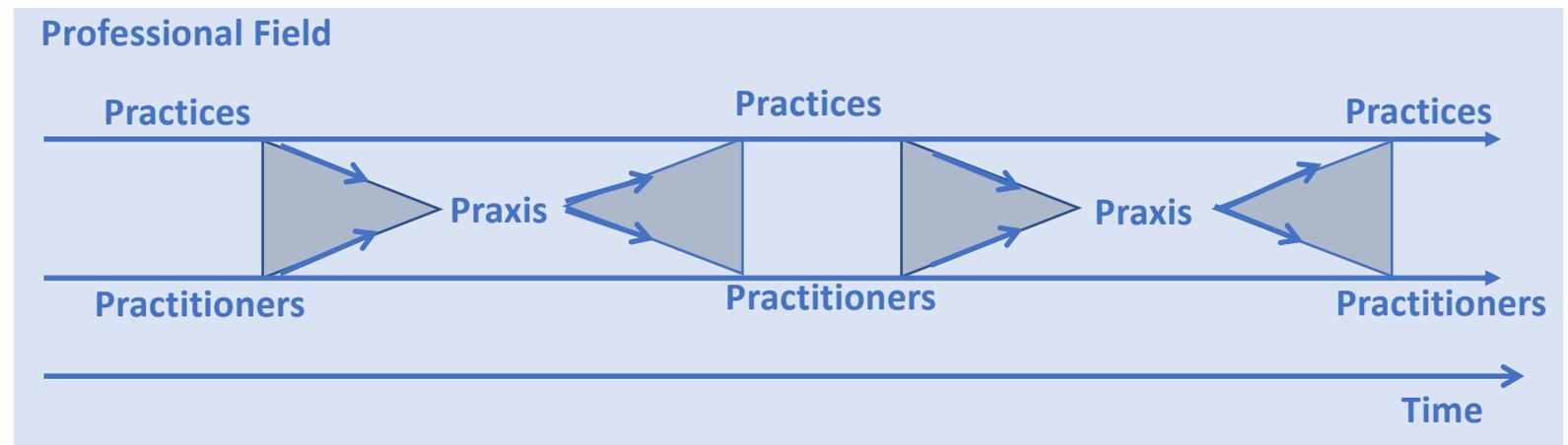
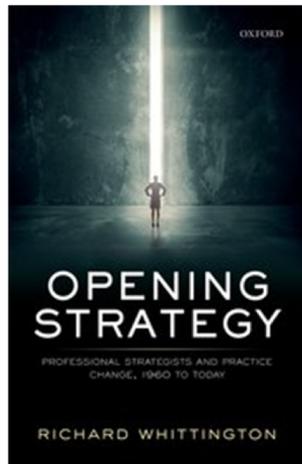
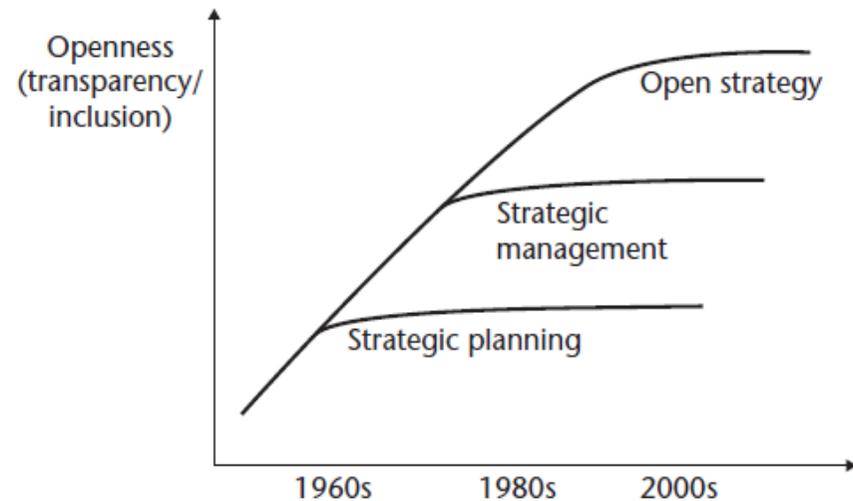
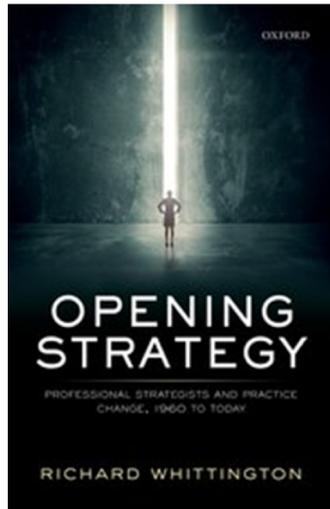


Figure 2.1: Practices, Praxis, Practitioners, and Profession

*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.

# 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

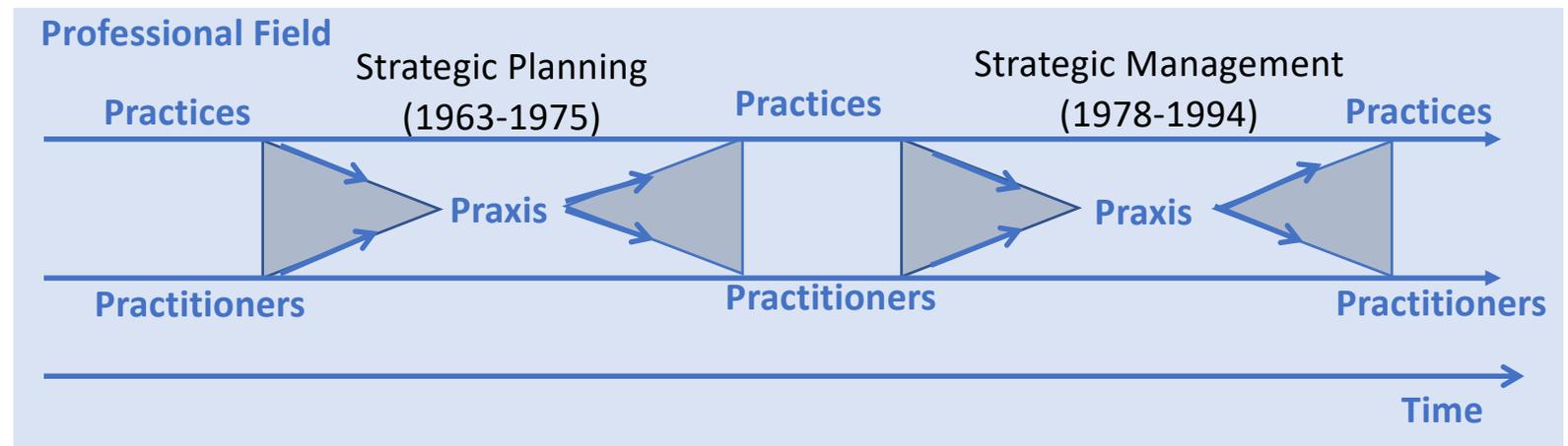
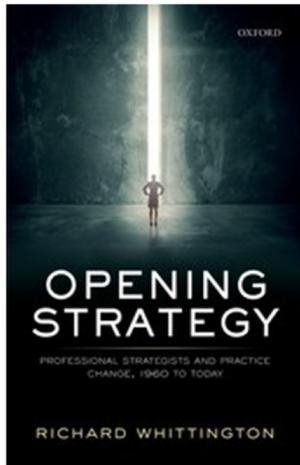


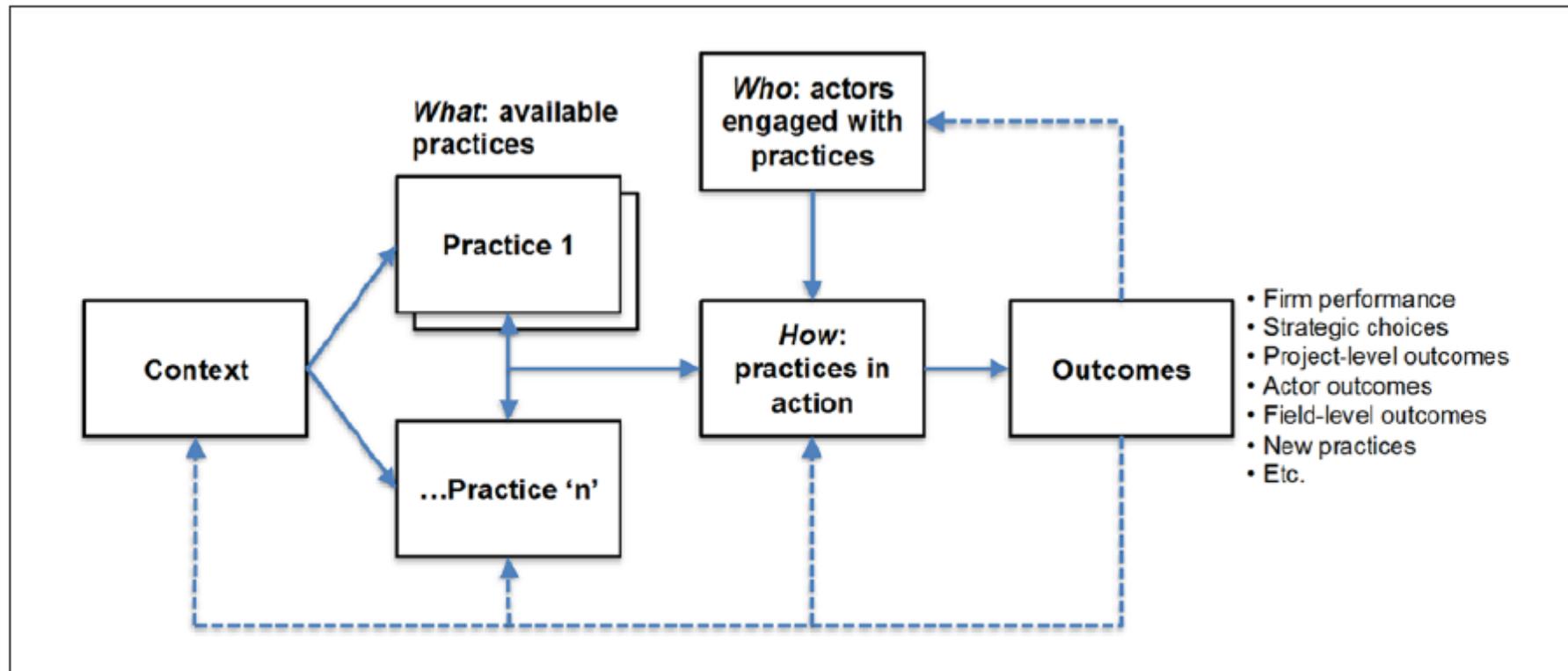
Figure 2.1: Practices, Praxis, Practitioners, and Profession

*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...

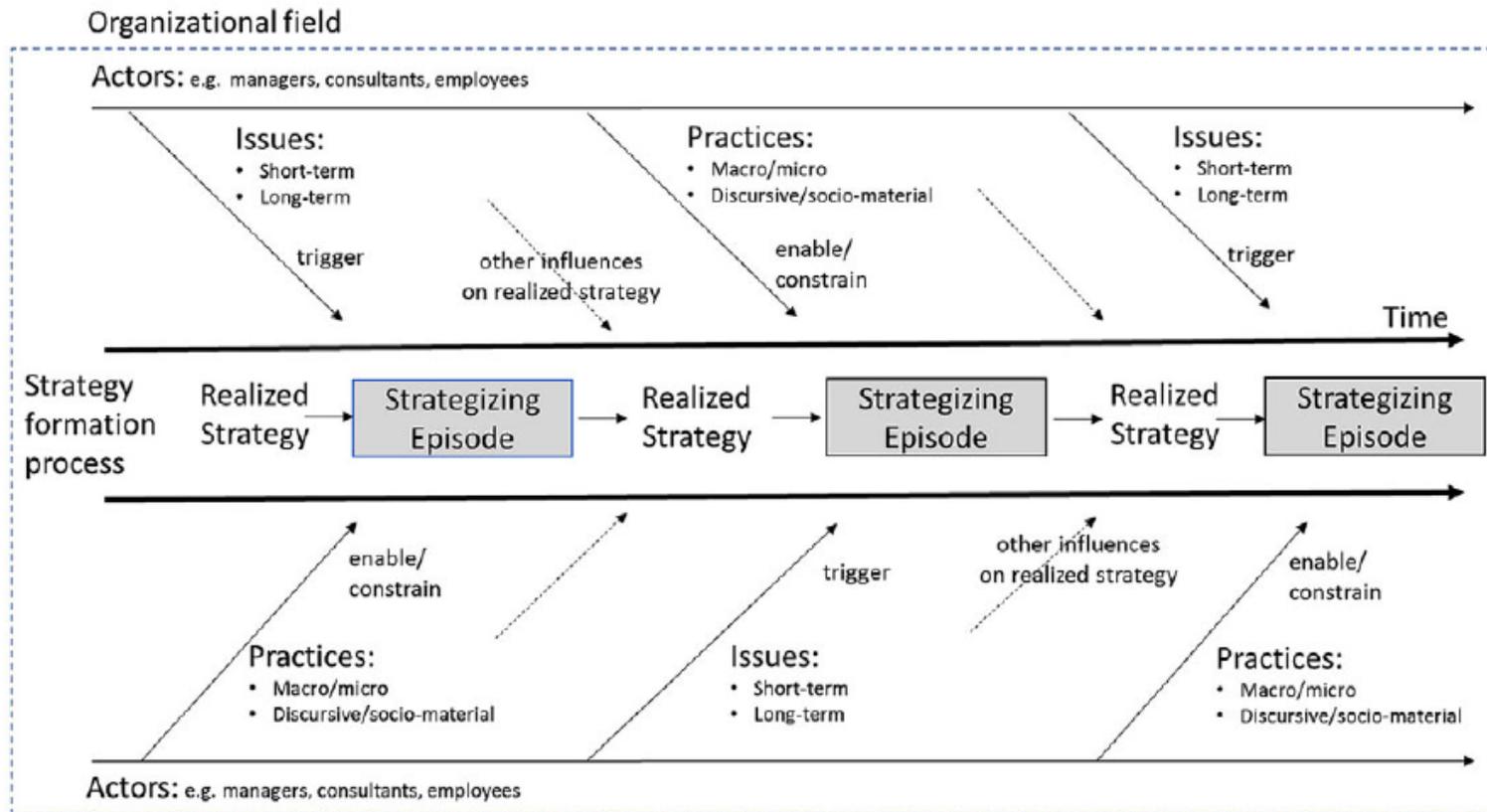


**Figure 1.** A schematic model of strategy practice.

Jarzabkowski, Kaplan, Seidl and Whittington, 2016, On the risk of studying practices in isolation, *Strategic Organization*

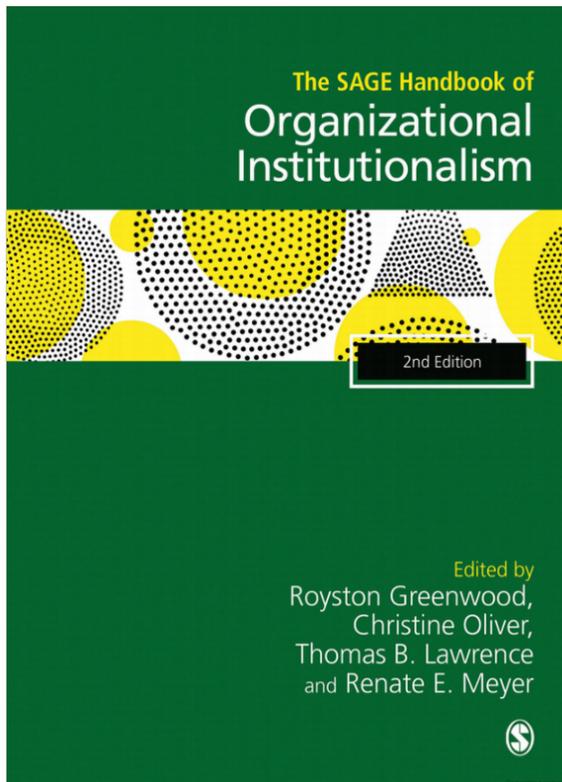
# Relationships with Other Traditions 1: Strategy Process

## COMBINATORY FRAMEWORK FOR STRATEGY AS PROCESS AND PRACTICE (SAPP)



Burgelman, Floyd, Laamanen, Mantere, Vaara & Whittington, 2018, *Strategic Management Journal*, Introduction to Special Issue

## Relationships with Other Traditions 2: Institutional Theory

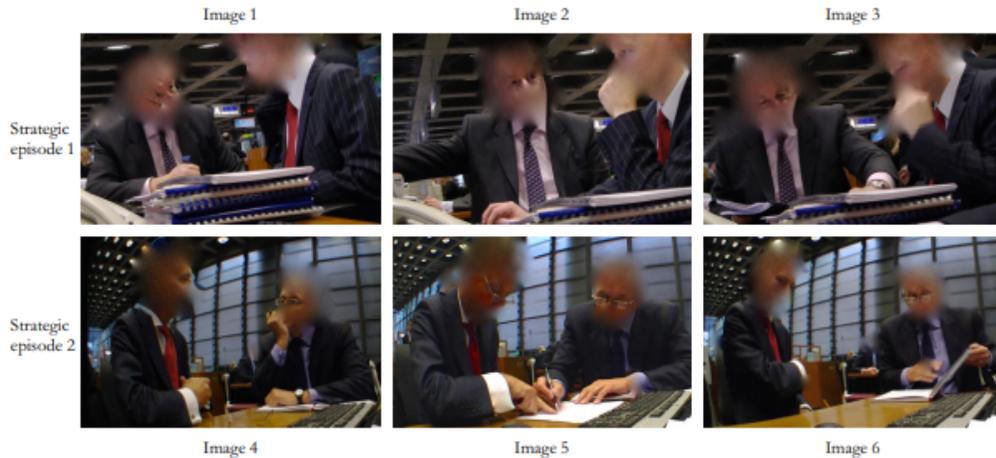


*Practice-driven institutionalism (PDI)*, in which the everyday work of practitioners ‘on the ground’ is the engine room of social order and the practices by which jobs get done – its driving force. In this sense, we reconnect institutional theory with its practice-theoretical roots in order to (i) foreground 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.

Smets, Aristidou and Whittington, 2017, Towards a Practice-Driven Institutionalism, in Greenwood et al (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism*

# What Kinds of Methodologies?

- it depends on what you are trying to explain...



Jarzabkowski, Burke, Spee (2015), Constructing Spaces For Strategy Work, *British Journal of Management*.

Whittington, Yakis-Douglas, Ahn, Cailluet (2017), Strategic Planners in Turbulent Times, *Long Range Planning*.

**Table 4**  
Strategic planner job advertisement characteristics and secular turbulence

DV	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	Forecast		Analysis		Economics		Centralization	
	H1a	H1b	H2a	H2b	H3a	H3b	H4a	H4b
Hypotheses tested	Unadjusted <sup>†</sup>	Adjusted*	Unadjusted <sup>†</sup>	Adjusted *	Unadjusted <sup>***</sup>	Adjusted <sup>***</sup>	Unadjusted <sup>**</sup>	Adjusted *
<b>IV</b>								
Intercept	-0.017 (-0.234)	-0.066 (-0.002)	0.204 (0.347)	-0.058* (-0.2531)	-0.764 <sup>***</sup> (-0.631)	-0.530 <sup>***</sup> (-0.125)	-0.451 <sup>***</sup> (-0.095)	-0.572 <sup>***</sup> (-0.371)
Secular turbulence	-0.128 <sup>†</sup> (-0.191)	-0.132* (-0.091)	-0.075 <sup>†</sup> (-0.102)	-0.172* (-0.0913)	-0.283 <sup>**</sup> (-0.211)	-0.319 <sup>***</sup> (-0.194)	-0.310 <sup>***</sup> (-0.337)	-0.297 <sup>***</sup> (-0.107)
<b>CV</b>								
Cyclical turbulence	-0.107 (-0.097)	-0.118 (-0.068)	-0.194 <sup>†</sup> (-0.078)	-0.217* (-0.0613)	-0.166* (-0.252)	-0.178 <sup>***</sup> (-0.115)	-0.015 <sup>†</sup> (-0.166)	-0.041 <sup>†</sup> (-0.137)
Dynamic Industry	-0.032 (-0.400)	-0.042 (-0.179)	-0.010 (-0.388)	-0.020 (0.572)	-0.024 (-0.472)	-0.034 (-0.467)		
Large Organization							0.372 <sup>***</sup> (0.442)	0.671 <sup>***</sup> (0.235)
Finance Qualification			0.231* (0.156)	0.375 <sup>**</sup> (0.349)				
Financial Reporting			0.361* (0.272)	0.391 <sup>**</sup> (0.213)				
Junior			0.290* (0.216)	0.386 <sup>**</sup> (0.167)				
<b>Time fixed effects</b>	Included (T1 <sup>†</sup> , T2 <sup>†</sup> )		Included (T1 <sup>†</sup> , T2*)		Included (T1*, T7 <sup>†</sup> , T10 <sup>†</sup> , T11*)		Included (T1*)	
R sq.	0.152	0.335	0.236	0.446	0.470	0.470	0.311	0.337
Adj. R sq.	0.150	0.314	0.229	0.438	0.460	0.468	0.299	0.330
RMSE	0.178	0.170	0.289	0.110	0.101	0.100	0.167	0.157

<sup>†</sup> p < 0.10, \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.005, \*\*\*\*p < 0.001. \*Regressions include time fixed effects.

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)

