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If you aren't talking about practices, don't call it a practice-based view: Rejoinder to Bromiley and Rau in *Strategic Organization*

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If you aren't talking about practices, don't call it a practice-based view: Rejoinder to Bromiley and Rau in *Strategic Organization*

Abstract: In this debate about the value of introducing a supposed "practice-based view of strategy," we respond to Bromiley and Rau's defense of their approach. Coming from a background of two decades of research on strategy-as-practice, we focus on two major concerns about their initiative. The first is that the very use of the term "practice" would seem to obfuscate more than elucidate, especially given their definition of "practice" which strongly deviates from that already established in the social sciences generally. The second is that, by applying the term "practice" to strategy specifically, it becomes incumbent upon Bromiley and Rau to engage with and build upon the extensive practice-related strategy research that has gone before them.

Key words: practice perspective; strategy-as-practice; strategy implementation; strategy practitioners

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We fear that Bromiley and Rau (2016) have misunderstood our critique of their article on the so-called "practice-based view" published in the *Strategic Management Journal*. Their response seems to be caught up in attempting to make minor corrections to what they see as our misunderstandings of their original project. We, instead, would rather focus on two main problems with their argument, both of which relate to the Mertonian scholarly standard that requires us to build on research that has gone before in ways that make further contributions to knowledge. First, their use of the term "practice-based view" obscures rather than clarifies their message given a long-standing alternative use of the term "practice" in the social sciences generally and management research in particular. Second, if they are going to use the term "practice-based view of strategy," then it is incumbent upon them to take on board the two decades of strategy research that has already taken a practice-based view, one much more consistent with the social sciences in general (Whittington, 1996).

Let's start with the term "practice". This term stems from a rich and distinguished practice tradition in the social sciences, associated with Bourdieu, Foucault and Giddens not least (Schatzki, 2002; Nicolini, 2012). In this tradition, practices have a virtual existence as largely unconscious yet recognizable ways of doing things. Such practices are always enacted differently by actors according to their own skills and interests, with regard to changing conditions and in relation to other local practices. Practices as empirically enacted are therefore ontologically-dependent upon the specifics of circumstances and actors. While it has many variants, this concept of practices has been enormously influential in the social sciences and more recently in management research (Ortner, 1984; Rouse, 2007; Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011). Indeed, Corradi et al (2010) explicitly describe the "practice-based view" as a "bandwagon" in management research. It has become common to treat accounting (e.g.

Ahrens and Chapman, 2006), marketing (Skålén and Hackley, 2011), information systems (Peppard et al, 2014), leadership (Carroll et al, 2008) and, of course, strategy (Vaara and Whittington, 2012) all "as practice".

Even while appropriating its term, Bromiley and Rau (2014; 2016) appear oblivious to this larger tradition of practice-based research. Their definition of practice is fundamentally different to the larger tradition. For Bromiley and Rau, particular practices can be extracted easily for examination; in the larger tradition, they are deeply entangled in the practice bundles of each particular context. For them, actors are simply mediating or moderating variables for inclusion at researcher discretion; in the larger tradition, practices are essentially inscribed in actors' bodies and minds. For them, implementation too is just another variable that can be added to the mix; in the larger tradition, practices exist empirically only as they are implemented. To be sure, the larger tradition recognizes the need sometimes for "methodological bracketing", the empirical focus on some aspects more than others (Giddens, 1984). But such a bracketing is imposed by practical difficulties of research. As we underline in our "integrative model" (Jarzabkowski et al, 2016), the larger tradition insists on the theoretical inseparability of practices (what), actors (who) and enactment (how). To separate out practices from actors and enactment is to risk fundamental misattribution: the effects of practices depend essentially on who is involved and how. As established for Total Quality Management and Information Technology, to do otherwise is liable to exaggerate the efficacy of formally-stipulated practices, and to underestimate human improvisation in action (Orlikowski, 2000; Zbracki, 1998).

On the second problem, we suggest that, if Bromiley and Rau are going to apply the term "practice-based view" to strategy, then it is incumbent upon them to take account of the existing literature on practices in the discipline. In their rebuttal, Bromiley and Rau (2016) argue that their theory can accommodate many of the ideas covered in the strategy-as-practice field. But addressing the same ideas does not a contribution make! Much of their claimed

distinctiveness is already well-accounted for in the strategy-as-practice field. We address particularly their claims around internal processes, performance and quantification.

With regard to the first, Bromiley and Rau (2014) appear to confuse strategy-as-practice with an exclusive focus on detailed studies of internal firm processes. We surmise that the problem here lies chiefly in their misunderstanding of the underlying practice-theoretical basis of the strategy-as-practice field and their limited reading within it. By the time Bromiley and Rau wrote their 2014 piece, there was a substantial body of peer-reviewed articles, special issues, research monographs, review articles and handbooks, to which they could have turned for the state of the art in strategy-as-practice research. In fact, they only cited one early paper in the strategy-as-practice tradition (the other citation was to a partisan critique), while ignoring others appearing in the same journal as their own piece (e.g. Paroutis and Heracleous, 2013; Mirabeau and McGuire, 2014). The paper they do cite does exactly what they claim the field does not do: develop a practice theoretical framework for strategy-as-practice, grounded explicitly in the broader practice literature, to explain how the strategy-as-practice agenda "spans multiple levels from macro-institutional and competitive contexts to within-firm levels of analysis to individual cognition" (Jarzabkowski, 2004: 529). A key benefit of a practice ontology is precisely that it can show how institutions (Smets, Morris & Greenwood, 2012), industries (Vaara, Kleyman & Seristo, 2004) and markets (Jarzabkowski, Bednarek & Spee, 2015) are constituted via the practices of their actors (Nicolini, 2012). This "macro" aspect of strategy-as-practice has been further explored in many key papers in the field (e.g. Seidl & Whittington, 2014; Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Whittington, 2006; 2007; Herepath, 2014) and, indeed, in the *Handbook* introduction that Bromiley and Rau (this issue) cite in their critique of strategy-as-practice research. In other words, strategy-as-practice already goes well beyond the detailed study of internal firm processes.

Similarly, Bromiley and Rau (2016) claim that strategy-as-practice is neither much concerned with, nor able to explain, performance consequences of practices. Yet, the current

special issue of the *Strategic Management Journal* on Strategy Processes and Practices explicitly calls for "analyses of the performance consequences of strategy processes and practices" and studies of both "micro and macro-level consequences of strategy processes and practices". Furthermore, recent publications such as Kaplan and Jarzabkowski (2015) develop an extended consideration of the different performance outcomes arising from strategy tools, including such outcomes as the institutionalization of tools at the field level and their diffusion across organizations.

Finally, Bromiley and Rau (2016) are mistaken in attempting to make a point of distinction around quantification. In fact, quantification is an acknowledged method in strategy-as-practice research (see Laamanen et al, 2015; Vaara and Whittington, 2012). Published work of this kind includes, for example, examining the effects of strategy workshops (Healey, Hodgkinson, Whittington & Johnson, 2015), and even developing predictive models of adoption based on quantitative analysis of the use of strategy tools (Jarzabkowski, Giuletti, Oliveira and Amoo, 2013).

Quantification and performance are, however, always approached cautiously by strategy-as-practice researchers, aware of the ontological interdependency of "what", "who" and "how". Bromiley and Rau (2016) are too blithe in claiming similarity with strategy-as-practice by proposing the "who" and the "how" as moderators or mediators for possible addition to analysis. Where strategy-as-practice researchers do "bracket" for methodological reasons, this is a reluctant subtraction. In our integrative model (Jarzabkowski et al, 2016), practices are essentially tied to the "who" and the "how", whereas Bromiley and Rau present practices as if free-floating and, indeed, easily transferrable between firms in an a-contextual way. Again, this suggests that they are not actually talking about practices as understood in the social sciences more generally. The Bromiley and Rau (2014; 2016) concept of practices is a radically-truncated one, closer to the explicit policies and procedures prescribed in consulting manuals or accounting rulebooks.

In conclusion, if Bromiley and Rau wish to generate conversations that can enrich the field of strategic management, they would do better to embed their claims within the literature, rather than asserting an unfounded novelty. We worry that their "practice-based view" of strategy does more damage than good, in particular because it does not contribute to the scholarly ideal of building on existing research foundations to develop new contributions to knowledge.

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