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Citation: Jarzabkowski, P., Balogun, J. & Seidl, D. (2007). Strategizing: The challenges of a practice perspective. Human Relations, 60(1), pp. 5-27. doi: 10.1177/0018726707075703

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Link to published version: https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726707075703

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Published in Human Relations. Please cite as:
Jarzabkowski, P., J. Balogun & D. Seidl. 2007. 'Strategizing: The challenges of a practice perspective'. *Human Relations*, 2007, 60.1: 5-27.

Strategizing: The challenges of a practice perspective

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Abstract

While the strategy-as-practice research agenda has gained considerable momentum over the past five years, many challenges still remain in developing it into a robust field of research. In this editorial, we define the study of strategy from a practice perspective and propose five main questions that the strategy-as-practice agenda seeks to address. A coherent approach to answering these questions may be facilitated using the overarching conceptual framework of praxis, practices and practitioners that we propose. This framework is used to explain the key challenges underlying the strategy-as-practice agenda and how they may be examined empirically. In discussing these challenges, we refer to the contributions made by existing empirical research and highlight under-explored areas that will provide fruitful avenues for future research. The editorial concludes by introducing the papers in the special issue.

Jarzabkowski, P., J. Balogun & D. Seidl. 2007. 'Strategizing: The challenges of a practice perspective'. *Human Relations*, 2007, 60.1: 5-27.

Strategizing: The challenges of a practice perspective

Introduction

The field of strategy-as-practice research has grown rapidly in recent years with a virtual community of over 2,000 members, an official website (www.strategy-as-practice.org), popular conference tracks at major European, North American and Australasian conferences, two special issues, books and a growing number of publications in reputable journals. This rapid growth may be attributed to a general unease with the way that strategy research has developed over the last three decades. Since the landmark contributions by Michael Porter strategy research has largely been based on the micro-economics tradition. As a consequence, research has typically remained on the macro-level of firms and markets while reducing strategy to a few causally related variables in which there is little evidence of human action. As many researchers have pointed out, strategy research seemed to have lost sight of the human being (Bettis, 1991; Ghoshal and Moran, 1996; Jarzabkowski, 2004; Lowendahl and Revang, 1998; Tsoukas and Knudsen, 2002; Whittington, 2003). In order to understand human agency in the construction and enactment of strategy it is necessary to re-focus research on the actions and interactions of the strategy practitioner in doing strategy. This reinstatement of agency in strategic action is located within the wider 'practice turn' (Orlikowski, 1992; 2000; Orr, 1996; Schatzki et al, 2001) or 'linguistic turn' (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000; Grant et al, 2003) in the social sciences, which has arisen in response to a general dissatisfaction with the prescriptive models and frameworks arising from normal science modes of research. Strategy-as-practice may thus be seen as part of a broader concern to humanize management and organization research (Pettigrew et al, 2002; Weick, 1979).

An initial special issue on micro-strategizing (Johnson et al, 2003) took up this challenge by emphasizing the myriad of micro-actions through which human actors shape activity in ways that are consequential for its strategic outcomes. The editors called for contributions to strategy that would be explicitly based on human activity. Strategy, according to this view, is not something that an organisation *has* but something its members *do*. Johnson et al. in this sense also speak of 'strategizing' as the 'doing of strategy'. They suggested the label 'Activity Based View' to express this micro-focus. A further important aspect of the strategy-as-practice approach, however, was only implicitly addressed in this special issue: the contextualisation of these micro-actions (Whittington 2006). Micro-phenomena need to be understood in their wider social context: actors in their micro-situations are not acting in isolation but are drawing upon the regular, socially defined modes of acting that arise from the plural social institutions to which they belong. Much of the social infrastructure, such as tools, technologies and discourses, through which micro actions are constructed has macro, institutionalised properties that enable its transmission within and between contexts, whilst being adopted and adapted differently within micro contexts (Seidl, 2007; Wilson and Jarzabkowski, 2004). The strategy-as-practice approach emphasizes explicit links between micro and macro perspectives on strategy as a social practice (Jarzabkowski, 2004; Whittington, 2006). The term 'Activity Based View' has thus been subsumed within the broader research agenda for 'Strategy-as-practice', where 'practice' refers both to the situated doings of the individual human beings (micro) and to the different socially defined practices (macro) that the individuals are drawing upon in these doings. This re-conceptualisation of strategy as 'doing' at multiple social levels solves some of the broader contextualisation problems associated with a research agenda that focuses primarily on micro-actions (Contu and Willmott, 2003; Jarzabkowski, 2005).

Key questions and a conceptual framework for researching strategy-as-practice

Despite considerable progress over the past four years, some consistent questions continue to arise in conference tracks and workshops about strategy-as-practice[1]. These questions are important theoretically in establishing the conceptual orientation of any piece of research, practically for informing different aspects of strategy practice, and analytically for defining the level and unit of analysis for empirical research (Schatzki et al, 2000; Whittington, 2003):

1. What is strategy?
2. Who is a strategist?
3. What do strategists do?
4. What does an analysis of strategists and their doings explain?
5. How can existing organization and social theory inform an analysis of strategy-as-practice?

If the field is to build momentum, it is important to develop some cohesive frameworks for addressing these questions. This section provides a definition of what 'strategy' is from a practice perspective, which establishes the broad theoretical approach within which the other four questions may be considered. We then build on our theoretical approach by developing an overarching conceptual framework of praxis, practices and practitioners (Whittington, 2006) and using this framework to discuss the relationships between our research questions.

[1] For example, see summaries of conferences and workshops over the past four years under 'News and Events' on www.strategy-as-practice.org

What is strategy?

From a strategy-as-practice perspective strategy is conceptualized ***as socially accomplished activity, constructed through the actions, interactions and negotiations of multiple actors and the situated practices upon which they draw*** (Jarzabkowski, 2005) The problem with such a broad definition is that it encompasses all types of social activity, to the extent that it is difficult to determine what activity is not strategic. One proposition for dealing with this problem is to focus on those activities that draw on strategic practices. As several authors have pointed out (e.g. Barry and Elmes, 1997; Knights and Morgan 1991; Hendry 2000) strategy is a particular type of activity that is connected with particular practices, such as strategic planning, annual reviews, strategy workshops and their associated discourses. Hence, just as science may be defined as those activities that draw on scientific practices (e.g. methods, tools, scientific language) (Latour 1987), strategy might be defined as those activities that draw on particular strategic practices. While this definition is beneficial and incorporated within our concept of strategy-as-practice, it tends to narrow the analytic focus to how practitioners interact with and deploy particular strategic practices, which may not address the broader implications and aims of the strategy-as-practice agenda. Therefore, we adopt the view that activity is considered strategic to the extent that it is consequential for the strategic outcomes, directions, survival and competitive advantage of the firm (Johnson et al, 2003), even where these consequences are not part of an intended and formally articulated strategy. Extending this view, we suggest that strategic activity might be consequential for direction and survival at multiple layers from groups, and organizations to industries and their supporting institutions more broadly, depending upon the level of analysis adopted. 'Strategizing' refers to the 'doing of strategy'; that is, the construction of this flow of activity through the actions and interactions of multiple actors and the practices that they

draw upon. In order to operationalize these definitions of strategy and strategizing empirically, we propose a conceptual framework that may be used to separate out their key elements and provide potential entry points into their study.

A conceptual framework of praxis, practices, and practitioners

One of the challenges for the strategy-as-practice perspective is identifying the phenomena under investigation. Whittington (2006) proposes that three elements of a theory of practice may be isolated, praxis, practices and practitioners (see Figure 1), each of which comprises a different analytic choice and entry into the study of strategy-as-practice (Jarzabkowski, 2005). While many practice theorists have identified one or more of these elements as discrete but interrelated social phenomena (e.g. de Certeau, 1984; Giddens, 1984; Schatzki, 2001; Sztompka, 1991; Turner, 1994), Reckwitz (2002) provides a helpful summation that identifies their common theoretical principles and that may be used to define each term. First, ***praxis*** is "*an emphatic term to describe the whole of human action*" (p.249). Clearly, such a broad definition is too all-encompassing and ambiguous to study, requiring some further explanation. Sztompka (1991) helps to delineate the more micro and macro properties of praxis by proposing that it unfolds as the nexus of what is going on in society and what people are doing. Praxis comprises the interconnection between the actions of different, dispersed individuals and groups and those socially, politically, and economically embedded institutions within which individuals act and to which they contribute. This definition is important, as it indicates that praxis is both an embedded concept that may be operationalized at different levels from the institutional to the micro, and also dynamic, shifting fluidly through the interactions between levels. For example, praxis might be studied at the institutional level as a particular type of widely diffused activity, such as merger and acquisition behaviour

within an industry, or at the micro level of a particular individual or group of individuals engaged in merger and acquisition activity (Vaara et al, 2004). Both of these studies examine the praxis of merger and acquisition as a socially accomplished strategic activity, operationalizing practice at different levels of analysis that are interconnected over time.

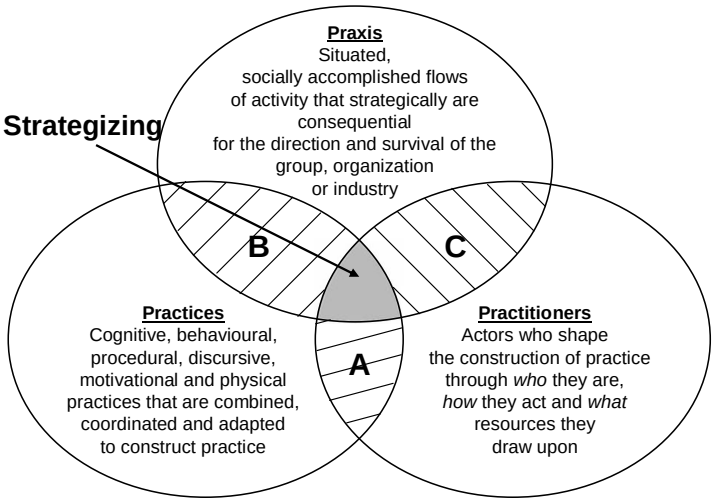
Of course, flows of activity are not only singular. Given the innately pluralistic nature of society, with its competing legitimacies, activity might be studied as parallel, intersecting, divergent or competing flows that impact upon each other (Denis et al, 2007). For example, Jarzabkowski and Fenton (2006) show how globalizing professional service firms accomplish multiple, potentially divergent streams of activity and how the actions and interactions of actors enable mutual adjustments between these flows of activity. Praxis may thus be understood at the wider social level as a patterned and textured flow or flows of activity over time, while at the more micro-level, its accomplishment may be analysed through the actions, interactions and negotiations of multiple actors and the situated practices that they draw upon.

Practices provide a range of possible entry points into the phenomena of practice. Practices are defined as "*routinized types of behaviour which consist of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge*" (Reckwitz, 2002: 249). The use of such practices is intrinsically connected to 'doing' because they provide the behavioural, cognitive, procedural, discursive and physical resources through which multiple actors are able to interact in order to socially accomplish collective activity. As these resources are utilized in routinized ways that form patterns, they may be studied to understand how

strategic activity is constructed. For example, we may study how different actors employ particular forms of language in their social practices of interaction in order to socially accomplish the restructuring of an organization over time (e.g. Balogun and Johnson, 2004) or rhetorically to construct coherence between multiple contradictory strategies (e.g. Jarzabkowski and Sillince, 2007). Such studies emphasize that, despite their routinization, practices are not immutable. That is, they neither form rigid patterns nor are interconnected in the same ratios, types and combinations all the time. Rather, practices are diverse and variable, being combined and altered according to the uses to which they are put and the way that they alter the flow of activity in which they are used (de Certeau, 1984; Orlikowski, 1996; Seidl, 2007). Indeed, even more materially represented practices – the 'things' to which Reckwitz (2002) refers – such as Gantt charts, whiteboards, and post-it notes, may have relatively routinized properties in the way they are employed but contribute to different forms of strategic activity according to their situations of use (e.g. Blackler et al, 2000; Eden and Ackerman, 1998; Sapsed and Salter, 2004). We might thus use practices as potential units of analysis for studying how strategy-as-practice is constructed; examining what practices are drawn upon, how they are drawn upon, how use alters over time, and the consequences of these patterns of use for shaping praxis at different levels .

Finally, ***practitioners*** are the actors; those individuals who draw upon practices to act. Practitioners are thus interrelated with practices and praxis. They derive agency through their use of the practices – ways of behaving, thinking, emoting, knowing and acting – prevalent within their society, combining, coordinating and adapting them to their needs in order to act within and influence that society (Reckwitz, 2002: 250). Such agency is embodied, being part of who a practitioner is and how that individual is able to act, but is

also always connected to the situation and context in which agency is derived (Balogun et al, 2005). From a strategy perspective, practitioners are obvious units of analysis for study, being active participants in the construction of activity that is consequential for the organization and its survival. However, as we shall discuss below, identifying relevant practitioners and analysing how their actions impact upon strategic activity is a complex issue that opens many new avenues of research. Practitioners shape strategic activity through *who* they are, *how* they act and *what* practices they draw upon in that action.



Strategizing comprises the nexus between practice, practices and practitioners. A, B, and C represent stronger foci on one of these interconnections depending upon the research problem to be addressed

Figure 1: A conceptual framework for analyzing strategy-as-practice

This brief overview of praxis, practices and practitioners provides a conceptual framework that underpins and may be used to link some of the key questions within a strategy-as-practice research agenda. As Figure 1 indicates, these concepts are discrete but interconnected, so that it is not possible to study one without also drawing on aspects of

the others. Strategizing occurs at the nexus between praxis, practices and practitioners. While any research question will unavoidably link all three, empirically there will be different dominant areas of focus, as indicated by categories A, B and C. For example, a study may foreground the interconnection between practitioners and praxis, whilst back-grounding the practices. Based on this framework of praxis, practices and practitioners we will discuss the theoretical underpinnings of our remaining four research questions and identify the potential issues that they bring to the foreground for empirical research.

Who is a strategist?

While the strategist appears to be an obvious unit of analysis for strategy-as-practice research, it is not as straightforward as it first seems. Rather, practitioners shape praxis through who they are, how they act and what resources they draw upon, suggesting a broader conceptualisation of who is a strategist and a more detailed analysis of what that means for strategy research than is traditionally posed in the strategy literature. The literature is still dominated by concepts of strategy as a top-down process of formulation separated from implementation, predisposing a focus upon top managers, their demographics and their decision-making processes (e.g. Hambrick and Mason, 1984; Papadakis et al, 1998; Wiersema and Bantel, 1992). However, this dominant definition of strategists and their impact upon strategy is inadequate to fulfil our theoretical framing of a practitioner from two perspectives.

First, while demographics such as age, tenure, educational and functional background, ethnicity and gender do furnish some characteristics of the strategist, these tend to be proxies for behaviour; an end in themselves, rather than a starting point from which to study actual behaviour (see also Pettigrew, 1992; Priem et al, 1999). Such approaches fail

to deal with individual experiences of agency, in which *who* a person is, is innately connected to how that person acts and the consequences of that action. For example, how strategy is defined is affected by the identity of individuals. In their paper "The Mayor, the street-fighter and the insider-out", Beech and Johnson (2005) show how individuals' identities, and the (potentially different) identities imposed on them by others, have an impact on what they do and how. They also show how individuals' identity may shift through time and the impact of this on their actions. Similarly, Rouleau (2003) shows how gender impacts on how strategists act and how they respond to others' actions. The identities that strategists bring to their work may thus constitute fundamentally different experiences in the way those actors shape strategy, which can complement existing knowledge. For example, while research into managerial demographics may reveal that executive boards comprise few women members, a practice approach can reveal how and why gendered workplace identities and experiences may be antithetical to the experiences of being a board member. Demographics research may reveal a problem in who is a strategist, but practice research can provide in-depth illumination of why the problem occurs. However, strategy theory has not tended to go beyond the demographic characteristics of practitioners to identifying the nature of *who* they are or what this means in terms of the way they exercise agency in shaping strategy. One important avenue for analysing strategy-as-practice thus involves identifying who is a strategist in terms of the agency and experience of being a strategist that individuals bring to their role in constructing strategy.

Second, a practice perspective on who strategists are goes beyond truncated views of strategy as a deliberate, top-down process, identifying a much wider group of actors as potential strategists. This does not mean that top managers should be abandoned, since

some valuable empirical work in a practice vein indicates that there is still much to be learnt from studying these actors as participants in strategy making rather than as its formulators (e.g. Jarzabkowski, 2003; 2005; Pye, 1995; Samra-Fredericks, 2003; 2004). However, increasingly strategy-as-practice studies indicate that middle managers and lower level employees are also important strategic actors. Given that these middle and operational level employees typically lack a formal strategy role, practice research has focused upon the social, interpretative, linguistic and personal knowledge bases through which they shape strategy (e.g. Balogun, 2003; 2006; Balogun and Johnson, 2004; 2005; Regner, 2003). While their actions and influence on strategy may be unintended at the firm level, they are significant for firm survival and competitive advantage. Hence, it is important to identify these actors as strategists, opening a research agenda that goes beyond top managers to studying other levels of employee as strategic actors. In particular, given their lack of formal strategy authority, it is important to identify what other practices provide such actors with agency in shaping strategy (Mantere, 2005).

Of equal importance but less addressed is the question of those actors outside the firm who also influence strategy. While a nascent literature increasingly draws attention to external actors, such as non-executive directors (McNulty and Pettigrew, 1999), consultants, business gurus (Clark, 2004; Schwartz, 2004; Whittington et al, 2003), and customers (Lowendahl and Revang, 1998) who are outside the formal structure of the firm but shape its strategy indirectly, there remains little empirical work on who these actors are and how their professional identities, relationships to, and engagement with the firm shape its strategy. Through a broader definition of who is a strategist, incorporating lower level employees and external actors as well as top managers, we may be able to discern a wider range of practices, such as the specific know-how (Balogun et al, 2006; Lowendahl

and Revang, 1998; Regner, 2003), interpretative behaviour (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; 2005; Rouleau, 2005), discourses (Jarzabkowski and Sillince, 2007; Vaara et al, 2004; 2005) and motivations (Mantere, 2005) that practitioners embody and engage in shaping strategy. The question of who is a strategist thus opens new avenues of research, particularly focusing on section A of Figure 1; strategizing at the nexus between practitioners and the practices that they draw upon in order to shape the praxis of strategy.

What do strategists do?

A recurrent question in the strategy-as-practice research agenda is what do strategists do? While some early work has classified things that managers do, such as making telephone calls and having meetings (Mintzberg, 1973), this question goes beyond such classificatory schemes. It focuses upon what doing strategy involves and, most importantly, how that doing shapes strategy. This question, which aims to understand what constitutes doing, is theoretically underpinned by the above concept of practice**s**; that is, it focuses upon those specific, situated practices that practitioners engage when they are doing strategy. Such a question, while it might classify specific practices such as meetings, workshops, analytic tools, management processes and rhetorical or discursive forms, goes beyond simple classifications of what practitioners do to how they go about that doing, incorporating their situated and person-specific knowledge. For example, practice researchers wish to understand how the conduct of a meeting (Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2006), the discursive interactions within that meeting (Samra-Fredericks, 2005), or the way actors deploy vested interests and intentions in the meeting (Vuorela, 2005) shape the social accomplishment of strategy, rather than simply to classify the types of practices in which strategists engage.

Empirically, the question of what strategists do will be tied to how researchers define their interests in who is a strategist. For example, research that problematizes how the doing of strategy is shaped by the identity of the strategist (e.g. Beech and Johnson, 2005), indicates an analysis of what strategists do that is very proximal to who a strategist is. By contrast, research that aims to uncover what happens in strategy workshops (e.g. Hendry and Seidl, 2003; Hodgkinson et al, 2006; Seidl et al., 2006) or how administrative procedures are used (Jarzabkowski, 2005) and their implications for shaping strategy, is less concerned with who the strategist is and more focused upon how specific practices are used in the doing of strategy. These positions represent different choices for analysing what strategists do, which indicate different interconnections between who a strategist is, what a strategist does, and the implications for strategy praxis. Proximity to who a strategist is suggests stronger analysis of Section A in Figure 1, the interconnection between practitioners and practices, whereas proximity to the practices by which strategy is done suggests stronger focus upon Section B, the interconnection between praxis and practices. Relationships between praxis, practices and practitioners will also be guided by the next key research question; what an analysis aims to explain.

What does an analysis of strategists and their doings explain?

This question is motivated by two challenges. First, that strategy-as-practice studies, with their strong focus on the empirical detail through which strategy is constructed, may lack an outcome; the 'so what?' problem. Second that the drilling deep approach taken by much strategy-as-practice research, which has been labelled 'micro' (Johnson et al, 2003), leads to explanations that are inconsequential in any wider sense than the specific situation to which they pertain. These are important challenges that the strategy-as-practice agenda must address in order to be credible within the field of strategic

management research, which is dominated by an economics-based focus on outcome measures at the firm and industry level. Strategizing research does not need to adopt the same outcome measures as traditional strategy research. However, it does need to address these challenges by specifying the strategizing foci highlighted in Figure 1 and clearly demarcating what the analysis seeks to explain. In order to explain how strategizing research has and may further respond to these challenges, we shall draw on existing empirical research within this burgeoning field, which is summarized in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Outcomes for strategy-as-practice research need to be related to the definition of strategy as a situated, socially-accomplished flow of activity that has consequential outcomes for the direction and/or survival of the group, organization or industry. The objective of strategizing research is, then, plausibly to explain some aspect of activity which may be considered consequential at the chosen level of analysis. While such outcomes are distinct from the firm-level outcomes that typically characterise much strategy research, frequently dealing with more micro-level situations and actions, they are nonetheless consequential outcomes of strategizing research. For example, the explanation of how a single strategic decision is constructed through the talk-in-interaction between strategists (Samra-Fredericks, 2003) is consequential to the decision outcome. The conduct of a meeting is consequential to how strategic issues arise and gain momentum (Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2006), which is important for shaping the outcomes of the specific meeting, as well as shaping the wider social accomplishment of strategic activity over time. For example, Regner's (2003) longitudinal study of inductive strategizing behaviour by actors at the periphery of firms explains outcomes as consequential as Ericsson's recognition of, entry into and development of the mobile telephony marketplace. Thus, the outcomes of strategizing studies, rather than focusing upon the firm level, may be explanations of

some aspect of shaping activity that is a 'micro mechanism' in transforming wider strategic activity (Hedstrom and Swedberg, 1998; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002).

This leads to the second challenge regarding what strategizing research explains; whether it simply exposes the micro situations that frequently comprise its object of study and whether these explanations may be considered consequential in any wider sense. As strategizing research may be plausibly linked to more macro explanations, such as firm direction and/or survival, strategizing research does have macro consequences. However, this challenge raises a more fundamental issue of analytic choice, which involves identifying which of the interconnections between practitioners, practices or praxis are brought to the foreground (see Figure 1, A, B, C). As discussed above, research that focused on section A of Figure 1 is concerned with explanations that foreground the practitioner and the practices through which that practitioner derives agency in the doing of strategy. Such studies are likely to develop micro-level explanations, with more macro outcomes primarily being inferred as components of a larger picture of practice (e.g. Mantere, 2005; Samra-Fredericks, 2003). However, studies that have their focus in section B or C of Figure 1, have greater proximity to strategy as a wider activity, developing explanations of how and why certain types of activity are consequential. Many such studies, as indicated in Table 1, are concerned to explain more macro consequences, such as the evolution of strategies (Jarzabkowski, 2005) and capabilities (Salvato, 2003) that underpin organizational direction and survival, or, more macro again, some organizational-level aspect of practice, such as the implementation of major change (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; 2005; Rouleau, 2005) or firm renewal (Regner, 2003). Even more macro explanations, resonant with industry levels of practice may be found in strategizing research that examines practices of institutionalization and their consequences

for firms within an industry. For example, Vaara et al's (2004) study of the interconnection between the discursive practices of key players within the airline industry and the institutionalization of alliance-based activity indicates how strategizing research may focus upon the micro details of using discursive practices in order to explain wider consequences, such as the institutionalization of alliances within an industry.

Strategy-as-practice research may, therefore, rise to the challenge of explaining outcomes that are consequential at more macro levels of the firm and industry. Indeed, we suggest that strategy-as-practice research may explain outcomes that are consequential to the firm at all levels from the most micro details of human behaviour to the broader institutional levels, depending upon the focus of research. The challenge for strategy-as-practice research is, therefore, not whether it can develop outcomes that go beyond description and that might be consequential at the more macro levels of firm and industry, but to clearly identify the focus of the research and develop research designs that can adequately address these foci.

How can existing organization and social theory inform an analysis of strategy-as-practice?

A recurrent question in strategy-as-practice discussions is what the theoretical basis of strategy-as-practice research is and how this aligns with existing organization and social theory approaches. We argue that strategy-as-practice as a field is characterized less by what theory is adopted than by what problem is explained. Our central research interest focuses on explaining who strategists are, what they do and why and how that is consequential in socially accomplishing strategic activity. As such, many problems posed in existing strategy research, such as dynamic capabilities, resource-based view,

knowledge-based view and strategy process theory might be illuminated by a practice based approach to their study (Ambrosini et al, 2007; Jarzabkowski, 2005; Johnson et al, 2003). Therefore, the field does not require 'new' theories *per se*, but to draw upon a range of existing theories to explore the strategy problems defined within our conceptual framework, to develop novel methods and research designs for their study (Balogun et al, 2003), and to advance explanations of how strategy is accomplished using these different levels and units of analysis.

Table 1 reveals how empirical research into strategy-as-practice has drawn upon the diverse theoretical resources available in areas such as practice, sensemaking, cognition, culture, power, narrative and discourse theory. Strategy-as-practice, in common with much other organization theory, draws from the meta-theoretical principles of sociology, social psychology, anthropology and ethnomethodology, among others, to understand the construction of activity within organizations. Table 1 also shows that there is a clear tendency towards those organization theories that adopt a broadly social constructionist approach in framing and interpreting empirical data. Noticeably, these studies display a consistent effort to theorize from rich data, drawing upon theories of strategy and organization in order to frame and explain strategy as a social practice. For example, Salvato's (2003) question about how a firm develops the capabilities that are the source of its competitive advantage is theoretically framed within the field of dynamic capabilities, drawing upon a social theory background (e.g. Giddens, 1984) to explain how such capabilities are constructed. Similarly, studies that aim to understand how strategic change is constructed, implemented and transformed through the day-to-day actions of practitioners are located within organizational theories of sensemaking and narrative (e.g. Balogun and Johnson, 2004; 2005; Rouleau, 2005). Yet other studies examine the use of

ostensibly rational strategizing procedures, such as budget models and monitoring and control systems (Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2002; Jarzabkowski, 2003), using social theories of practice to illustrate these procedures as carriers of interactions, intentions and interests within organizations. Many studies adopt a focus upon discourse, rhetoric and narrative to explain the construction of strategic activity, suggesting that such theories are a particularly fruitful avenue for exploring the construction of strategy-as-practice. It appears, therefore, that there is room to incorporate a diverse range of organization theories within a practice research agenda. The common point of such studies is their concern to explain some aspect of the nexus between praxis, practices and practitioners and its consequences in the social accomplishment of strategy.

Ongoing challenges for strategy-as-practice research: Taking the agenda forward

There has been impressive empirical progress given the nascent state of strategy-as-practice as a field. As shown in Table 1, there is already some work in each of the main analytic foci identified in our framework (see Figure 1). However, contributions of this field may be developed by further exploring the issues raised by our key research questions and grounding these within our conceptual framework of praxis, practices and practitioners and their relationships. We suggest that a key priority is for more empirical research, which has been explicitly framed and designed to address the strategy-as-practice research agenda. With this in mind, the following issues need to be addressed.

1. Practitioners: While there are an increasing number of studies that take a multi-level approach to studying strategists, these studies are still constrained to examination of internal employees, primarily at the managerial levels. There is still little work examining how those outside the firm, such as consultants, regulators, shareholders,

and consumers, shape strategy, which provides a clear avenue for research. Wider definitions of who is a strategist will extend our understandings beyond the predominance of upper-echelon approaches to incorporate those multiple actors who contribute to the social accomplishment of strategy (see Whittington et al, 2003). Such studies might undertake fine-grained analyses that can illuminate how strategists' personal identities and experiences and the social dynamics in which they engage contribute to shaping strategy.

2. Practitioners and Praxis: Linked to the under-research nature of who is a strategist, Table 1 indicates that there is still little empirical work in area C of Figure 1, the interconnection between practitioners and praxis. For example, Balogun and Johnson's (2004; 2005) and Rouleau's (2003; 2005) studies highlight the insightful nature of such a focus, showing how the gendered and functional identities of middle managers accomplish change within the organization. More studies might be framed to foreground this connection, examining not only who is a strategist but how this impacts upon strategy praxis. In order to develop a richer understanding of the engagement between practitioners and praxis it is important to examine strategy not only at the organizational level but also to analyse the social dynamics between practitioners and praxis at the institutional, and, particularly, the sub-organizational levels of activity, which are still weakly operationalized in much strategy research.

3. Practices and Practitioners: As indicated in Table 1, in examining those practices used in doing strategy, the main focus has been on cognitive and interpretative activities, know-how, discourses and, to a lesser extent, use of administrative practices, meetings and workshops. Such studies are insightful and more work in these areas is valuable,

particularly in looking at how and why practitioners engage particular types of practices in order to shape strategy. In particular, research designs might incorporate the emotions and motivations involved in strategizing, which have been under-explored. It is likely that the affective states that strategists bring to their work (Ashkanasy, 2005; Huy, 2002) and their motivations and intentions (Mantere, 2005; Vuorela, 2005) will be relevant to the types of practices that they draw upon, how they deploy them and the consequences of that deployment. Hence, practice research might also address these less tangible practices of emotion and motivation that are innately connected to who strategists are and what they do.

4. Even as the field develops its empirical base, it is important that we develop a deeper understanding of the theoretical resources available to further the field of strategy-as-practice research and the specific implications of different theoretical approaches (Seidl, 2007). Here we suggest that research engages with theories of practice that provide conceptual explanations of the social dynamics involved in accomplishing strategy. Additionally, as indicated in Table 1, researchers might consider how a practice perspective can draw upon and extend existing organization and strategic management theory.

5. Finally, it is necessary to consider the methodological implications of different theoretical approaches. While papers are increasingly developing the theoretical level of the perspective, including three in this special issue (Chia and Mackay, 2007; Denis et al, 2007; Hodgkinson and Clarke, 2007), comparatively little has been written on the methodological level with the exception of Balogun, Huff & Johnson, 2003). Most empirical works cited in this paper have been realized using data from processual and

longitudinal research which does indeed offer many practice insights. However, little empirical work conducted in the strategy-as-practice perspective has developed innovative methodology specific to the perspective, with the exception of some valuable insights derived using anthropological (e.g. Floyd et al, 2005) and ethno-methodological (Blackler and Regan, 2006; Samra-Fredericks, 2003) approaches.It is time to do research with methodological frames thought and designed in a practice perspective.

Introduction to papers in the special issue

As we have not been able to include all the papers worthy of inclusion in this special issue, we have tried to include a range of papers that either contribute to the empirical agenda, provide theoretical resources or raise important topics for debate. The following seven papers meet these criteria and we hope that they will encourage others to conduct further research that can address the challenges of doing strategy-as-practice research.

The first paper, by Vaara and Laine (2007), takes a rare but much needed multi-level approach to actors, examining top managers, middle managers and project managers and the discursive struggles in which they engage in attempting to shape strategy development towards their own interests. The authors' provide insights into who may be considered a strategist and how different levels of strategic actors deploy discursive resources in ways that are consequential for strategy developments within an engineering firm. In particular, this paper addresses our points about the relationship between the agency and identity of practitioners and their consequences for strategy praxis.

Ambrosini, Burton-Taylor and Bowman (2007) have examined how inter-team coordination activities may be a source of customer satisfaction for firms. Their paper links the resource-based view of the firm with a practice perspective, illustrating the value of examining those fine-grained activities through which firms resources are accomplished, and from which firms derive aspects of their competitive advantage, such as customer satisfaction. The authors advance our understanding of how the outcomes of more traditional strategy research, such as competitive advantage and firm performance, may be enhanced using a strategy-as-practice approach.

In their paper on strategizing within the multi-business firm, Paroutis and Pettigrew (2007) undertake a multi-level approach to the question of who is a strategic actor, identifying strategy teams at the corporate centre and in business units and examining the different practices that these teams adopt to shape strategy over time. They draw relationships between practices and praxis, by showing how strategizing practices evolve and shift alongside changes in the strategy process.

Falkenberg and Stensaker's (2007) also examine diverse groups of strategic actors, looking at three different business units during a major corporate change. Their study explains how the different interpretative responses that actors in the different SBUs have to the practice of business process reengineering (BPR) is associated with the adaptation and modification of BPR. The study provides an example of how practitioners interact with, adopt and modify practices according to their own interests and interpretations of a strategic change initiative.

The first theoretical paper, by Denis, Langley and Rouleau (2007), suggests pluralistic contexts, with their potentially fragmented and divergent perspectives and competing legitimacies as a valuable context in which to locate strategy-as-practice studies. They present three different approaches that might illuminate strategizing in such contexts, according to the level of analysis adopted. Their paper provides a comprehensive set of theoretical resources for analyzing strategy-as-practice at multiple levels from conventionalist theory to examine the macro-level to actor network theory as a resource for meso-level explanations and social practice theory to examine the micro-level of practice.

Our penultimate paper illustrates the developing nature of the strategy-as-practice field and the continuing debates that are important to furnish growth and critical reflexivity within our research. Chia and MacKay (2007) encourage the practice field not to focus upon the micro-actions of individuals but rather to examine the patterned consistency of socially complex practice bundles. They draw upon Heidegger to propose that agency is less purposive action than unconscious dwelling within such complex practice bundles. This distinct view on agency and practice extends existing work within the field, which is predisposed to view practices as logically coherent and arising from purposive action. It is important that the field gives place to critical views of action, discourses and practices. Commensurate with this, wider theoretical resources may be needed that go beyond the largely ordered view of everyday life (e.g. Bourdieu, 1990; de Certeau, 1984; Giddens, 1984). The authors, whilst taking a similar socially-ordered view of the complex practice bundle, help to critique a potentially unreflective view of agency within the field.

Our concluding paper is juxtaposed with the critical view presented by Chia and MacKay in the former paper in order to provide a contrast in the potential theoretical resources upon which the field might draw. This shorter conceptual paper by Hodgkinson and Clarke (2007) focuses firmly upon the individual. The authors propose that there is a wealth of theoretical resources in cognitive psychology and social cognition with which to appraise the cognitive characteristics of the strategist. Cognitive theories provide insight into the association between the cognitive style of strategists and their natural tendencies towards some practices over others, which might also explain their potential developmental needs in developing skill as strategic actors.

The papers in this special issue, and others which, for space considerations, will appear in future editions of Human Relations[2] are by no means a definitive statement in addressing the challenges of a strategy-as-practice agenda. Even as this special issue advances the field, the papers within it raise as many questions as they answer. We hope that others will draw upon these papers to develop robust and innovative strategy-as-practice papers that further the research agenda.

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Table 1: A summary of how empirical strategizing research operationalizes key concepts in the s-as-p agenda[3]

Exemplars	Dominant Practitioner Focus. (Who is a strategist?)	Main practices examined (What do strategists do?)	Level of Practice (What does it explain?)	Dominant analytic focus (Figure 1)[4]	What theoretical bases are used
Ambrosini et al, 2007	Middle managers, supervisors and processing teams	Inter-team coordination activities	Firm-level: Variation in customer satisfaction	C	Resource-based view
Balogun & Johnson 2004; 2005	Middle managers in multiple divisions	Sensemaking specific to what role (e.g. Engineer or Services) the strategist occupies Social practices of interaction	Firm-level: Implementation of strategic change	C	Sensemaking/ schema theory
Balogun & Jarzabkowski, 2005	Top, middle and operational managers	Strategic planning as a practice for constructing and distributing strategy knowledge	Activity level: Distributing strategy making within & between levels	B	Perspective-making and perspective-taking; social theory of practice
Falkenberg and Stensaker, 2007	Managers of business divisions	Interpret corporate-level practices, such as BPR, according to divisional interests	Activity-level: Variation in adoption of a practice and its association with strategy chage	A	Sensemaking/ interpretative approaches
Hodgkinson et al, 2006	Multiple organizational levels according to workshop participation	Workshops	Activity-level: impact on strategy development	B	Institutionalization and diffusion of a practice
Jarzabkowski, 2003; 2005	Top managers	Formal administrative practices and face-to-face interaction and their uses in phases of the evolution of activity	Activity-level: Evolution of streams of strategic activity over time	B	Social theories of practice, Strategy process theory
Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2006	Top managers	Strategy meetings	Activity-level: Role of meetings in stabilising or destabilising strategic activity	B	Social theories of practice
Maitlis & Lawrence, 2003	Top managers, board members, other employees	Use discursive resources specific to the context and political practices according to their power bases	Firm-level: Failure in strategy formation	A	Discourse theory Theories of power and politics
Mantere,	Top, middle and	Strategy formation practices;	Individual level: Construction	A	Structuration theory

[3] These exemplars are neither exhaustive nor exclusive but are intended to illustrate how some key studies within this field have addressed the challenges of strategy-as-practice research, as a basis for future research to take the agenda forward

[4] A, B and C relate to Figure 1. A is the interconnection between practitioners and practices. B is the interconnection between practices and practice. C is the interconnection between practitioners and practice.

2005	operational managers	Organizing practices; and Control practices specific to what role the strategist occupies	of the self as a strategist		
Paroutis and Pettigrew, 2007	Corporate and SBU strategy teams	Seven different strategy practices according to teams' perceptions of their evolving role in the strategy process	Activity-level: How practices evolve in association with changing strategy process	A	Strategy-as-practice and strategy process theory
Regner, 2003	Top and peripheral (SBU) managers	Sensemaking practices and localized know-how specific to whether the strategist is a peripheral or top manager	Firm-level: Strategy creation and renewal over time	B	Strategy process theory
Rouleau, 2004; 2005	Middle managers	Engage in sensemaking & sensegiving narratives that are specific to who the strategist is. Gendered embodiment of agency in interpreting and selling change	Firm-level: Implementation of strategic change	C	Sensemaking theory Narrative theory
Salvato, 2003	Top managers	Enable the selection and variation of routinised patterns of action through managerial intent, know-how and networks	Firm-level: Evolution of dynamic capabilities over time	B	Dynamic capabilities Strategy process theory Social theory of practice
Samra-Fredericks, 2003; 2004	Top managers	Talk-in-interaction	Decision-level: Outcome of a specific strategic decision	A	Ethnomethodology/ conversation analysis
Schwarz, 2004	Consultants and clients	Six practices of interaction between consultants and clients	Activity-level: Generation of collective knowledge	A	Knowing-in-action theory
Sminia, 2005	Top managers	Layered conversational practices occurring within deliberate planning practices that emerged an unintended strategy	Activity-level: Emergent strategy formation	B	Social theory of practice Strategy process theory
Vaara et al, 2004	Top, middle and operational managers Organizations Media Government bodies	Discursive practices	Institutional-level: Construction of strategic alliance as a dominant institution	B	Discourse theory
Vaara and Laine, 2007	Top, middle and project managers	Discursive practices	Activity-level: Discursive struggles according to diverse interests in shaping strategy development	A	Discourse theory