

Taking Stock of Research Methods in Strategy-as-Practice

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Abstract: Strategy-as-practice research provides understanding of a complex phenomenon in language rich and holistic *process* terms, rather than statistically significant but limited *variance* terms. It requires mapping individual and organisational activities in the process of strategizing. This article assesses four research issues in strategy-as-practice research and their impact in advancing this field: challenges in bounding the scope of the research question, issues with the unit of analysis, difficulties in defining the dependent variable of outcomes and finally the challenge in specifying a particular level of analysis, all of which present complexities in the design of data collection. We suggest two broad alternative approaches that have the potential to push the frontiers of methodology to greater rigour in strategy as practice research. First, quantification methods that can capture practice can be a valuable tool, a paradigm that has been ignored in much of strategy-as-practice research. Second, better process data may be revealed by organizations that voluntarily initiates a consultation process with a researcher as it benefits by doing so, so we suggest that clinical research methods, that include such intervention, provide better understanding of the phenomena of strategizing. We make a case for why these methods must be considered for acceptability in strategy-as-practice research.

Keywords: strategy-as-practice, research methods, strategy research, clinical research, review

1. Introduction

Research methods are an 'intricate set of ontological and epistemological assumptions that a researcher brings to his or her work' (Prasad 1997 quoted in Mir and Watson 2000). Strategy-as-practice research subsumes a plurality of interests and research methods mainly with the lens of sociology (Jarzabkowski 2004; Whittington 2007). It draws upon sociological and philosophical developments related to practice theory, such as the well known works of Bourdieu, de Certeau, Giddens, Schatzki, Sztompka and others (see Jarzabkowski 2004 for an overview). Johnson et al. (2007) believe that the pragmatist tradition of philosophy, in highlighting the importance of the practical, is winning attention (Egginton and Sandbothe 2004 quoted in Johnson et al. 2007) in recent years. Basically, strategy-as-practice simply requires one to "go out and look" so as to find ways to capture such activity as it occurs, so that it can be examined closely and understood, similar to a 'direct research' approach proposed by Mintzberg (1979). Epistemologically, most strategy-as-practice studies have taken different positions, ranging from post-positivist to interpretive (Johnson et al. 2007). Strategy-as-practice research provides understanding of a complex phenomenon in language rich and holistic *process* terms, rather than statistically significant but limited *variance* terms. The orientation towards 'action research' complicates research conclusions due to the close proximity between the observer and the observed (Johnson et al. 2007). This article assesses *four* major research issues in strategy-as-practice research and their impact in advancing this field.

2. Scope of the research question

The *first* issue is the broader scope of strategy-as-practice research – studies of the strategizing process must go beyond the organisation (Whittington 2003, Jarzabkowski and Spee 2009) as it is influenced by policy makers, competitors, consultants and business schools as well as organisational members adapting practices from other organisations whose strategies they analyse, critique, enact, develop or change (Whittington 2003). Also strategic practice could be bottom-up or emerging from middle managers, consultant, senior executives, intrapreneurs and even members outside the organization, thus encompassing a plurality of actors. Johnson et al. (2007) explain that there is a move from the relatively unitary perspectives that have characterised strategy research in terms of levels of analysis, explanatory variables and theoretical perspectives, to greater plurality. Hendry and Seidl (2003) admit that strategy, as an activity, is not well defined, with the result that the empirical net is cast impracticably wide.

3. Unit of analysis

The scope of the research question directly impacts the *second* issue – ambiguity in the unit of analysis in strategy-as-practice research. The unit of analysis refers to the precise object of the

research, the entity about which one is trying to draw conclusions. Thus the focal unit of analysis could be very narrow (e.g. individual strategy retreats, workshops, managers, meetings, discourses, conversations etc.) or it could be broader (strategic decisions, strategic issues etc.). Hendry and Seidl (2003) have introduced the notion of 'strategic episodes' where an episode is a sequence of events with a structured beginning and ending during which normal communicative practices are suspended and alternative communicative practices are explored. Similarly, analysing strategy off-sites and away-days as rituals could also provide interesting units of analysis (Bourque and Johnson 2008). In strategy-as-practice research, the unit of analysis has ranged from strategic episodes – such as strategic planning meetings, to implemented strategic decisions over a limited period of time – such as an acquisition, to the evolution of the firm's strategy over a long period of time – such as international expansion. To decide what is and what is not included under the entity of *strategizing*, is an open-ended task. The emerging consensus in strategy-as-practice research is to look at 'a practice' as a unit of analysis but lack of clarity on what constitutes 'a practice' may lead to such research being labelled a 'study of everything'. Johnson et al. (2007) quote Wildavsky (1973) that if strategizing is everything, including any activity that might contribute to the orientation of the organization, then maybe it's nothing. Since such an approach is extremely ambiguous, the emphasis on activity suggests a unit of analysis being defined in micro terms. Chia and Mackay (2007) argue that it is the theoretical unit of analysis that must be revised. Instead of individuals and organizations and their processes, activities and practices, they argue that it is practices and the transmitted regularities associated with them that draw the attention of strategy-as-practice researchers.

Even recognising only one unit of analysis in a study may pose challenges according to Johnson et al. (2007). Langley (1999) studied the role of formal analysis in strategic decision making and was confronted with the difficulty of identifying the two main units of analysis: what constituted 'an analysis' and a 'strategic decision', and how could these be clearly identified from other analysis-like instances or other decisions, and hence she had to draw up a set of criteria for the study. Hence, apart from deciding on the logical unit of analysis, bounding the unit of analysis operationally is also a challenge (Johnson et al. 2007). Two possibilities arise here. One is to adopt positivist perspectives that can provide a clear and well bounded unit of analysis. This would mean drawing up a list of exclusion criteria to bound the operational unit of analysis. The issue with such positivist approaches is that they typically tend to take a reductionist direction, because of the efforts to isolate focus on narrowly defined objects and eliminating any ambiguity. Therefore this deprives us of the opportunity of capturing the richness of the whole process. The second approach is to adopt interpretive or ethnographic approaches. These approaches, while certainly offering to capture the richness, may end up leaving the unit of analysis ambiguous. Johnson et al. (2007) cite Van Maanen (1995: 139) in representing the essence of this tradeoff, 'to be determinate, we must be indeterminate': the research itself must reflect the ambiguity present in the empirical situation. A middle range tactic is advocated by Johnson et al. (1999) wherein one may explicitly admit the possibility of variation in the study and incorporate it within the research design. This basically means that the researcher will have to provide an explicit report of the extent to which several issues are interrelated.

4. Dependent variable

The *third* issue in strategy-as-practice research is the choice of the dependent variable or the outcome of strategizing process. The study of 'outcomes' (performance) has traditionally been a dominant theme in strategy research. There has also been an increasing attention called towards better focus on outcomes within strategy-as-practice (Jarzabkowski and Spee 2009). However outcomes in strategy-as-practice research cannot be firm level performance alone, as is common in strategy research, as the strategizing process also directly impacts the individuals, groups, institutions and practice communities involved – each of whom may be seeking different types of outcomes. Thus the 'straightjacket' of performance measurement prevalent in the traditional strategic management literature is deliberately avoided by strategy-as-practice, given the focus on multiple levels.

For instance, Ambrosini et al. (2007) have looked at the outcomes from micro-level activities in strategy-as-practice. Organizational performance is considered at a disaggregated level with a plurality of dependent variables. The strategy-as-practice perspective argues for explaining the performance of people as they interact and enact institutional and organizational practices. Such disaggregated dependent variables include levels at the individual, group, tools, systems, episodes as well as the contribution that these variables make towards strategic outcomes (Johnson et al. 2007). However the notion of outcomes is still not fully mature, and appears to be closer to the concept of praxis.

Some of the outcome related questions that are currently discussed by strategy-as-practice researchers in the strategy-as-practice website (accessed on 9-May-2009) are: What outcomes may be consequential to the firm at all levels of an organization? (see Jarzabkowski et al. 2007)? How could we study outcomes at a more micro level without losing focus of wider social factors within which such outcomes emerge? What other outcomes could there be in addition to those listed in Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009)?

5. Level of analysis

This leads to the *fourth* issue in strategy-as-practice research – specifying the level of analysis. While articles are increasingly developing the theoretical level of strategy-as-practice research, comparatively little has been written on the methodological level with the exception of Balogun, Huff and Johnson (2003). They explain that the growing need for researchers to be close to the phenomena of study, to concentrate on context and detail, and simultaneously to be broad in their scope of study, attending to many parts of the organization, clearly creates conflict. Johnson et al. (2007) explain that strategy-as-practice may be concerned with more plural levels of analysis, and importantly, the relationship between them. “It not only goes *beneath* organization-level processes to investigate what goes on inside organizations; it also goes *above* these processes to interrogate how the practices and tools originate from a wider business environment outside the firm” (Molloy and Whittington, 2005 quoted in Johnson et.al. 2007). Hence both contexts and the people who enact them are of interest to strategy-as-practice researchers. This is difficult as such research must cover multiple levels of analysis to be adequately holistic in scope and sufficiently nuanced in insight. The linkage of level of analysis through to strategic outcomes is an important component of practice research, as the ultimate need is to be able to link the outcomes of strategising activities by various practitioners within the firm, to more macro organisational, institutional and, possibly, even broader social contexts and outcomes (Jarzabkowski and Spee 2009). Outcomes of studies are likely to depend on the analytical focus and unit of analysis. Based on current strategy-as-practice research, Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009) distinguish between *personal/individual*, *group*, *strategising process* and *organisational* as well as *institutional* outcomes. How strategists’ actions construct particular outcomes; as well as how differences in what strategists do can be explained through variations in the outcomes that are observed.

6. Data collection

Balogun, Huff and Johnson (2003:197) argue that ‘today’s large, multinational, and highly diversified organizational settings require complementary methods providing more breadth and flexibility’. They suggest three particularly promising approaches (interactive discussion groups, self-reports, and practitioner-led research) that fit the increasingly disparate research paradigms now being used to understand strategizing and other management issues. Interestingly, they also stress the importance of working with organizational members as research partners rather than passive informants. At one level the solution appears to be about innovation of methods, but if we pursue to its logical conclusion the argument that issues of depth, breadth, relevance and diversity are inter-linked, then it becomes apparent that we actually need to re-conceive the way we conduct research. Johnson et al. (2007) also call attention to the physical artefacts or objects in strategy as practice as such, such a power point presentations, flip-charts, other texts, photographs. Even the physical arrangement of participants at a strategy offsite meeting and their body language could be highly useful for understanding strategizing. Strategy-as-practice research provides rich scope in including the ‘respondent’ as a research partner, rather than only as a subject of research, as the respondent is often an experienced strategist who has a more nuanced understanding of the phenomena and the organisation’s domain than the researcher. An in-depth knowledge of practice may be acquired only through participation, even by becoming a practitioner (Johnson, et al. 2007). Some academics are also strategy consultants, but their knowledge may again be unconscious. A potentially valuable approach suggested is to find a ‘master’ and become an ‘apprentice’. Balogun, Huff and Johnson (2003) focus in particular on the importance of working with organizational members as research partners rather than passive informants. Johnson et al. (2007) also cite a work by Stronz (2005) who videotaped naturally occurring strategy implementation meetings over a period of several months. Based on the video data and an ‘action science framework’, she then chose excerpts from the meetings to present to the implementation team members and further interview them. This captured both strategizing as it happened, as well as the recall value of interviewees as they reviewed their reactions. Such research can benefit by designing effective methods to capture this nuanced understanding. However one must be aware of the pitfalls of such action research approaches that

may cause issues of methodology acceptance. Three risks are well known – the risk of contamination (where the researcher ends up influencing the phenomena), risk of going native (researcher getting socialised and hence failing to maintain an external perspective) and the risk of political alignment (researcher getting used as a tool by some faction). While research methods currently used in strategy-as-practice are largely borrowed from ethnography and anthropology, where the researcher is trained to avoid these three risks, practice studies need to ensure sensitivity to these risks as well. The literature on process consultation such as Schein (1995, 1999) or on making sense of the organizational ‘mess’ as advocated by Ackoff (1981, 1999) provide valuable directions in this regard. Such literature provides researchers with practical tips and highlights appropriate techniques on data gathering that can minimise biases due to these risks. For instance, Ackoff (1999) explains that the person who should prepare the reports on organizational status should be chosen to have an optimal number of years of experience in the organization to reduce biases and yet know the context sufficiently, Schein (1995) distinguishes between pure, diagnostic, action-oriented and confrontative modes of inquiry with members of the organization that corresponds to different levels of intervention. Such an approach provides support for active sense making processes from intra and inter-individual perspectives. We believe that there is scope for better process data being revealed by an organization that voluntarily initiates a consultation process with the researcher as it directly benefits by doing so as described in Schein (1999).

7. Quantification and variance theorizing

Apart from descriptive contributions from rich qualitative datasets, or process theorizing drawn out of understanding of phenomena based on temporal evolution, a third but relatively unexplored possibility is that of middle range theories that link strategic practices to some form of outcome. The outcomes relevant for micro-strategy may remain at a micro or meso level. Eisenhardt’s (1989) study of decision making strategies and its relation primarily to decision speed and corporate performance is held up as an exemplar. The systematic way of replicating findings across eight cases provides a strong basis for a credible theory, providing *analytical generalizability*. Johnson et al. (2007) also explain that there is room for other nomothetically driven work that relates practices to their context.

While it is argued that qualitative data is essential to understand the ‘doing’ of strategy, Johnson et al. (2007) allow a role for quantification primarily towards summarizing and categorizing observations. They also warn about the dangers of quantification that hide the detailed understanding acquired about the actual “doing” of strategy. Balogun, Huff and Johnson (2003) argue that that ‘deep’ data gathering around the unique characteristics of organizations, rather than their generic attributes, is needed. At the same time, however, there is a need for research designs that give priority to breadth. In a globalizing world, strategizing research must reflect large-scale strategizing activities in several places simultaneously.

We suggest that it is possible to draw inspiration from works in domains like software engineering that seek to link practices to performance. For instance, Cusumano, MacCormack, Kemerer and Crandall (2003) have reported the wide range of software development practices and the differences in practices and performance levels around the world. Their article reports descriptive results from a global survey of completed software projects that show international differences in the adoption of software development practices. Similarly, Cusumano and Kemerer (1990) did a comprehensive literature review that analyzes existing comparisons of Japanese and U.S. practice in software development and summarize the major proposed differences in performance. Similar studies could be attempted about strategizing practices in organizations across the world - promising insights into strategizing processes as the field matures and as practices are more or less identifiable in a relatively standard manner.

On similar lines, Whittington and Cailluet (2008: 243) highlight quantitative research possibilities “strategic planning remains a pervasive and influential phenomenon in the world, perhaps more so than earlier. Since 1996, Bain & Co’s survey of management tools has regularly reported strategic planning being used by around 80 per cent of its responding companies, and in 2007 (as in many years before) found it the most popular tool of all, with an eleven-year record of 88 per cent of companies using it. Accenture describes the rise of the ‘the Chief Strategy Officer’, with supporting departments, in large multinational companies around the world. Job advertisement analysis shows a significant increase in the number of formal strategy roles in the United Kingdom during the 1990s, with a major increase in the public sector especially.” They argue that if strategic planning is taking

new forms and entering new domains it deserves scholarly attention (Whittington and Cailluet 2008: 243).

8. Methodological innovations

Jarzabkowski, Balogun and Seidl (2007) consider it necessary to consider the methodological implications of different theoretical approaches. However, little empirical work conducted in the strategy-as-practice perspective has developed innovative methodology specific to the perspective, with the exception of anthropological (e.g. Johnson et al., 2007) and ethnomethodological (Samra-Fredericks, 2003) approaches. There is therefore an opportunity for methodological innovations in the area of strategy as practice. One inspired direction that we were suggested to explore was in Schein (1995, 1999, 2004). Schein (2004) used clinical research to study organizational culture, where the data comes voluntarily from the members of the organization because either they initiated the process and had something to gain by revealing themselves, or if the researcher/consultant initiated the project and if they had something to gain from cooperating with him/her. The clinical model makes two explicit fundamental assumptions – one that it is not possible to study a human system without intervening in it, and two one can fully understand a human system by trying to change it. In this regard, clinical research and ethnography differ sharply as ethnography generally aims to leave the system as intact as possible. Schein (1995) makes a clear distinction between formal data driven action research on the one hand and client driven clinical inquiry on the other hand. Action research as defined by researchers involves the client in the data gathering but is driven by the researcher's agenda. Action research as defined by the clinician involves the helper consultant in the client's inquiry process and the process is driven by the client's needs. What makes the clinical method more powerful than other methods, is that if the researcher/consultant is helping the organization, they have the licence to ask all kinds of questions, hang around and observe almost in an ethnographic fashion, all this with due consideration of the risks involved of going native, contamination and political alignment as may be addressed from the extensive literature on ethnographic methods or anthropology. Another profitable direction to obtain such data is highlighted by Bednar (2000), who examines constructive dialogue as a means of gaining access to the existing but unreleased individual and group competencies. Bednar (2000) mirrors Schein (1999) in recommending an interventional approach that regards individual perspectives while focussing on situations, and engages the actors in reflecting on their experience when problem-solving is involved. Strategy-as-practice may like to consider a clinical research approach as it is in alignment with what strategy consultants do.

9. Implications for research

The notion of strategizing spans a wide scope that goes beyond the organization boundaries and what constitutes strategizing remaining undefined, at several levels, the challenges in research design are numerous, Connecting micro level activities to macro level outcomes is a key challenge going forward in strategy-as-practice research. Large, multinational and diversified organizations require complementary methods providing more breadth and flexibility. While descriptive and process studies are the dominant paradigm in strategy-as-practice research, we suggest that quantitative studies is one much ignored approach that may provide greater insights. Using practitioners who are repositories of tacit knowledge more actively in research may provide significant benefits. Therefore another approach that we propose is that of clinical methods, inspired from process consultation techniques of Schein (1998). This potential approach has the promise to balance several tradeoffs in the field between richness of data and the traditional challenges in ethnography. Strategy-as-practice research has untapped scope for creative researchers to innovate on research methodology and possibly even to reconceptualise how research itself is conducted.

10. Conclusions

Although it has its beginnings in the late 1990's, the strategy-as-practice field is yet to come of age, and the track record of its presence at the Academy of Management¹ suggests that it is still viewed as a nascent body seeking to establish itself. While there could be several challenges to its grounds for legitimacy, research methodology is one enormous point that deserves attention. This article has explained the four challenges in strategy-as-practice research. First, defining the scope of the research question is an issue given that the definition of strategy itself is not unambiguous and strategizing can happen in many ways in and even outside an organization. Second, the theoretical

¹ The strategy-as-practice group had not gained its foothold at the Academy of Management as late as 2010, although 2011 seems to be more promising with a new interest group being formed.

unit of analysis of individuals and organizations and their processes, activities and practices must be revised. Third, the notion of performance measurement prevalent in the traditional strategic management literature is purposely avoided by strategy-as-practice, instead organizational performance is considered at a disaggregated level with a plurality of dependent variables. Fourth, the level of analysis merits attention as strategizing activity spans individual, group, organization, institutional and practice community levels.

Beyond enumerating these challenges, we have also proposed new avenues that can further the frontiers of strategy-as-practice research, particularly on the methodological front. After summarizing the tradeoffs in data collection, we propose a relook at quantification or variance theorizing as a potential methodology for studying practice at a macro level. We derive inspiration from fields such as software engineering, where macro level studies of practices have provided valuable insights. Another exciting possibility is clinical research whose established methods have the promise to provide the right level of access and richness to strategy-as-practice studies.

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