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# RESEARCHING STRATEGY PRACTICES – A GENEALOGICAL SOCIAL THEORY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

This paper explores the meaning and significance of the term ‘social practice’ and its relation to strategy-as-practice research from the perspective of social theory. Although our remarks are also applicable to other practice-based discussions in management, we discuss strategy practices as a case in point and thus contribute to the strategy-as-practice literature in three ways. First, instead of simply accepting the existence of a unified ‘practice theory’, we outline a genealogical analysis revealing the historical-contingent conditions of its creation. This analysis shows that social practices in general and strategy practices in particular can be approached from either a neo-structuralist and/or neo-interpretative perspective. Second, based on this theoretical argument, we discuss different characteristics of strategy practices and emphasize those aspects not yet fully considered by strategy-as-practice research (e.g., the physical nature of practices). Third, we show that when studying strategy practices, given an understanding of the alternative theoretical approaches available, the practice of strategy research itself needs to be adjusted so as to accommodate a stronger emphasis on an ethnographic approach that is directed towards uncovering the contextual and hidden characteristics of strategy-making.

*Keywords:* strategy practices, practice theory, strategy theory, strategists, ethnography

Embedded in a wider practice turn in management research affecting such diverse fields as project management (Pitsis et al. 2003), accounting, (Ahrens and Chapman 2006), learning (Lave and Wenger 1991) and marketing (Holt 1995), the strategy-as-practice movement has gained momentum over the last few years (Jarzabkowski 2003, 2004, 2005; Johnson et al. 2003; Whittington 1996, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2007; Regnér 2008) with a growing number of publications in reputable journals (for an overview see Jarzabkowski et al. 2007). Strategy-as-practice theorists reverse the conventional assumption that strategies are what organizations *have* and instead emphasize strategy as something that people in organizations *do* (Whittington 2006: 613). This conceptual re-orientation offers the possibility of a deeper level of explanation regarding the nature of strategic activities in organizations (e.g., the incorporation of strategic concepts into everyday strategy discourse) because it focuses research attention on the situated social practices that are enacted and re-enacted in the ‘doing’ of strategy.

Despite its success in re-directing attention to the mundane everyday activities that make up this ‘doing’ of strategy, the strategy-as-practice movement can do more to realize the full potential of its theoretical affiliations. Although single studies have shown the usefulness of social theories of practice (Jarzabkowski and Wilson 2002), sensemaking theory (Rouleau 2005), actor-network theory (Denis et al. 2007) and situated learning theory (Jarzabkowski 2004), there still is unexploited theoretical potential when considering the bulk of work and ideas that is related to each of the practice traditions that we identify here. Further elaboration of these practice theories is therefore necessary to facilitate future empirical work in the strategy-as-practice domain and to enable it to produce more insights on the nature of everyday strategizing. Considering this, we offer a comprehensive discussion of the contribution that social

theories of practice (e.g., those of Bourdieu and Goffman) can offer to further clarify the notion of ‘practices’ in the strategy-as-practice research agenda.

In this paper, we make three main contributions to the field of study. First, we contribute to the literature on strategy-as-practice by explaining how the turn to practices emerged out of the transformation of two traditions in social theory (*viz.* structuralist and interpretative theories), and how this has resulted in a theoretical convergence along the lines of practice theory (Reckwitz 2000). This genealogy of social practices helps strategy-as-practice scholars to understand *how* and *why* the term ‘practice’ has gained currency in the recent social theory literature. It also helps strategy practice scholars to better understand what theoretical traditions they often work in and in which ways prominent practice theorists differ and are alike. Even though we do *not* use the term genealogy in the specific sense employed by Foucault (1977) or Nietzsche (1887/1996), a genealogical analysis, nevertheless, enables us to unravel the theoretical pedigree of practice approaches without necessarily looking for a *singular* foundation. Such a genealogical investigation requires the searching for the various root ‘tributaries’ of practice discourse that have shaped what we now label ‘practice theory’.

Second, based on this theoretical discussion, we show that strategy-as-practice scholars can be more precise regarding the question of *what* is researched when investigating strategy practices. Drawing on our genealogy of practice-based social theory, we highlight four elements of social practices which can guide empirical investigations: the routinized behavior of the body, the use of objects, the application of background tacit knowledge *in situ*, and the constitution of practitioners’ identity through practices. We show that research on strategy practices is worthwhile because it directs our attention to often neglected phenomena like the physical nature of strategizing and the way objects enable and limit bodily and mental activities.

Third, we contribute to strategy-as-practice research by showing that the application of practice-based social theory requires the practice of research *itself* to change considerably. Considering Jarzabkowski et al.'s (2007) claim that the methodological consequences for doing practice-based strategy research need to be taken seriously, we emphasize the need to 'get closer' to strategy practices by an 'in-depth' ethnographic approach using extended participant observation and other innovative methods (e.g., photography and videos). In this way, the situatedness of strategy practices can be better appreciated rather than by relying primarily on detached observation and documentary approaches such as interviews and questionnaires.

Our argumentation focuses on the practice turn in *social theory* because the work of practice social theorists (e.g., Bourdieu, Foucault, Giddens) is extensively drawn upon in the strategy-as-practice community to justify their approach. Hence, focusing on social theory increases the connectivity of our arguments to the ongoing discourse. Within the broader sphere of social theory, our focus is on the emergence of practice theory out of a critique of structuralism and interpretative theories. This is because from a genealogical perspective it cannot be neglected that the critiques of social theorists such as Bourdieu have, in large part, given rise to the preoccupation with practice in social theory (see also Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982; Reckwitz 2000, 2002; Schatzki 2005). Practice-based social theory represents just *one possible* way of theorizing strategy practices; it is neither the best nor the only way to research strategy practices. Jarzabkowski (2004), for instance, uses the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) on learning theory to develop an understanding of practice. Each theoretical focus is, to use Whittington's (2007: 1577) terminology, just one part of the 'sociological eye' that studying strategy demands. Thus, we are *not* arguing for conceptual closure of the strategy-as-practice field.

In the first section, we explain the practice turn in social theory by demonstrating how neo-structuralist practice theories (Foucault and Bourdieu) and neo-interpretative practice accounts (Goffman and Taylor) have shaped the conceptual counters of the debate. In the second section, we draw on this theoretical discussion to explain what elements must be considered when conceptualizing and researching strategy practices from a social theory perspective. We also reflect on the practice of research itself and argue for a stronger consideration of extended ethnographic participant observation. Although we believe that our remarks are also applicable to other practice-based discussions in management, we focus our attention on strategy-as-practice research as a case in point. The third section develops a broader agenda for researching strategy practices through practice social theory.

## **The Practice Turn in Social Theory**

### ***The Social Constructivist Tradition***

The turn towards social practice developed as a consequence of the *critique and transformation of social constructivist theories* (Bernstein 1976; Rabinow and Sullivan 1979; Reckwitz 2000, 2002, 2003). The social constructivist tradition can be best contrasted against different versions of action theory. Goal-oriented action theory (e.g., Coleman 1990) argues that social meaning is a product of the sum of actions by individuals, while norm-oriented action theory (e.g., Durkheim 1982) claims that social rules and conventions constrain the acts of individuals and thus help produce social order and hence meaning. Social constructivist theories, by contrast, propose that meaning exists only insofar as it is an ongoing accomplishment; socially constructed on the basis of knowledge orders (Berger and Luckmann 1966). These collectively constructed orders make the world meaningful and enable actors to act accordingly.

Individual goals and social norms are thus not at the beginning of the analysis but are themselves the outcome of a prior collective construction process. The social interaction of actors is a crucial element of social constructivism and it is this aspect which has inspired the practice turn in social theory.

If the practice turn in social theory is a result of the *transformation* of social constructivist theories, we need to know *how* these theories were transformed and in what ways. In line with Schatzki (2005), we distinguish between two traditions within social constructivism: structuralism and the interpretative tradition. The prototypes of these traditions are reflected by the cultural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss (1963) in terms of structuralism and the social phenomenology as worked out by Schütz (1967) in terms of interpretative theories. Both theory traditions share a ‘*mentalist*’ heritage (Reckwitz 2003: 288) – i.e. they ‘locate’ the production of social order in the minds of people. Knowledge orders, which produce social order, are thus primarily the outcome of cognitive acts (interpretative theories) or trans-subjective mental codes guiding human action (structuralism).

Drawing on Reckwitz’s (2000, 2003) fine-grained discussion of the transformation of social constructivist theories into practice theory, we now explain how the practice turn in social theory eschews the described ‘mentalism’ in both structuralism and interpretivism for a more direct focus on material human doings. It will become obvious that the transformation of these two theoretical traditions has resulted in their convergence to a mode of explanation along the lines of practice theory (see Figure 1). Since the overall theoretical work of practice social theorists is quite substantial, we focus here on those parts that relate to their conception of social practices.

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### ***From Structuralism to a Theory of Practice***

The central concern of structuralism is an analysis of the universal knowledge codes that *unconsciously* influence human action. The codes that structure human action are ‘objectively’ given and actors habitually rely on these codes to guide their actions without even contemplating their existence. Lévi-Strauss (1957), for instance, refers to the phenomenon of ‘reciprocity’ as an example of an unconscious knowledge code guiding what is perceived to be appropriate action. Whereas actors unthinkingly rely on these codes and thus are not aware of them, they can be uncovered by an external observer with a trained disposition for detecting hidden structures (e.g., a researcher). Structuralism in its traditional form favors a clear separation of the ‘objective’ structures and knowledge codes that underlie action from the action itself.

Historically speaking, *Pierre Bourdieu* and the ‘late’ *Michel Foucault* criticized structuralism and thus paved the way for a neo-structuralist practice theory (Reckwitz 2000). Foucault and Bourdieu transformed structuralism from a *mentalistic* preoccupation, with its focus on the ‘objective’ knowledge codes underlying human action, to an analysis of the *materiality* of social practices. This is not to say that these two scholars were the only ones who contributed to the practice turn through their critique of structuralism (see, for instance, also Oevermann 1993). However, we focus on their contribution since strategy practice research has very much referred to their analyses (Chia 2004; Chia and Holt 2006; Jarzabkowski 2004; Jarzabkowski and Wilson 2002; Ezzamel and Willmott 2008).

**The Contribution of Michel Foucault.** Whereas the ‘early’ Foucault (1966/1990a, 1969/1982) still operated in the tradition of Lévi-Strauss’ structuralism by assuming that discursive practices were autonomous (and their reproduction detached from the subject), the ‘late’ Foucault (1984/1992, 1984/1990b) rehabilitates the subject by

assuming that actors appropriate and incorporate these practices using them to engage with the world. In this sense, the ‘late’ Foucault contributes importantly to a theory of practice. In *The Use of Pleasure* (1992) and *The Care of the Self* (1990b), Foucault outlines his practice-based theory by altering two key assumptions of his early work. First, practices are now not only restricted to discursive processes but may also, importantly, be non-discursive in character. As a result, practices may also be *physical* phenomena and not necessarily purely mental ones. Second, knowledge codes are not (re)produced ‘beyond’ the subject through autonomous discourses, but *through* the subject who actively embeds this knowledge code into her everyday routinized practices. Foucault, thus, emphasizes the necessity for interpretations on the part of the subject concerning the environment (How do I understand the world?) and the subject itself (How do I understand myself?).

Although Foucault moved from the ‘mentalism’ of structuralism to an action-based theory of practices that gives appropriate consideration to the subject, he is still predisposed to a structuralist tradition. The trans-subjective knowledge codes, such as *epistemes* (Foucault 1990a) which are evident in his early works, remain present. But, in contrast to his early work, these codes now need to be activated and contextualized through the discursive and non-discursive practices that actors engage in. Knowledge codes, for instance, need to be activated by strategists within and through the practices performed by them (e.g., strategic planning). Without the necessary interpretative work required by actors in the conduct of their practices, the knowledge codes remain unrealized. Foucault (1982, 1990a), thus, defines practices as consisting of routinized interpretations of the self and the environment, the belonging habituated bodily behavior as well as the necessary trans-subjective knowledge codes that enable these interpretations and behaviors to be carried out.

**The Contribution of Pierre Bourdieu.** Bourdieu's point of departure is a critique of the reliance of traditional social analysis on the mental and cognitive domains. For him structuralism's search for transcendent knowledge orders and the scientific obsession with discovering an overarching 'Logic of Logic' fails to acknowledge the existence of an alternative 'Logic of Practice' (Bourdieu 1990). Structuralism's preoccupation with a 'Logic of Logic' can only be overcome if a theoretical space is created for explaining how actors employ trans-subjective codes in everyday practical action. To address this problem, Bourdieu integrates elements of the subject-centered interpretative tradition into structuralism without relinquishing the basic idea of structuralism (i.e. that trans-subjective knowledge orders exist 'beyond' the subject). Whereas Foucault referred to these knowledge orders as 'knowledge codes', Bourdieu introduces the concept of *habitus*: a system of structuring dispositions which operates beyond an actor's consciousness and thus beyond her deliberate control (Bourdieu 1979, 1992; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1996). These structuring dispositions shape and organize social practices and are built qua socialization: they are a collective phenomenon that is relevant for a particular social group or culture (Bourdieu 1985). The *habitus* is an *opus operatum* which makes it appear *as if* the actor is following explicit rules or a rational calculus whilst performing social activities (Bourdieu 1979, 2001). As a system of structuring dispositions the *habitus* also demarcates the insuperable scope of an actor's activities. *Habitus*, for instance, resides in codes of behavior that strategists learn and internalize (encompassing their beliefs and rituals); it is something tacit and unspoken but yet well understood and followed.

For Bourdieu, only a focus on how the shared scheme of *habitus* is employed *in situ* by actors within their specific social practices will enable us to gain access to the 'Logic of Practice' (Reckwitz 2000: 325). Social practices become stable and allow for a comparable apprehension of objects and the environment only because they are based

on a shared habituated scheme. Whereas structuralism looked for universal and ahistoric codes guiding action, Bourdieu's *habitus* portrays social action as being historical-contingent and always embedded in a particular social context. The 'Logic of Practice' brings back the actor into social analysis, yet, unlike agency theories, it does not overemphasize this position. Actors are often not conscious about their *habitus* which they nevertheless rely on to make sense of the world. The routinized activities necessary to perform social practices are thus based on a practical understanding of the world which is attained through acquisition of a *habitus*. Similar to Foucault, Bourdieu (1990) stresses the physical nature of practices; the *habitus* is incorporated into the body of actors and shapes the performance of social practices.

### ***From the Interpretative Tradition to a Theory of Practice***

Based on the phenomenological philosophy of Husserl, the traditional subject-centered interpretative tradition in social theory was mostly, yet not exclusively, developed in the early writings of Alfred Schütz (1967). Contrary to structuralism, Schütz (1967) believed that a description of knowledge orders that transcend the subject is unhelpful in explaining human action, and that, instead, the focus needs to be on the acts of meaning production by knowledgeable subjects. According to his social phenomenology, subjects assign meaning to the world by referring ambiguous experiences (i.e. those in need of interpretation) to pre-existent mental schemes that each *individual* possesses based on her prior experience. Thus, mental schemes are not trans-subjective phenomena existing independent of the subject, but belong to the subject and are realized through the active process of interpretation.

From a genealogical perspective, a different stream of practice theory, drawing from Schützian phenomenology, emerged out of *Erving Goffman's* and *Charles*

*Taylor's* critique of the subject-centered mode of explanation favored by interpretative theories. Without doubt, other significant scholars have also added important insights to the practice turn based on interpretative social theory. Following Reckwitz (2000), we focus on the writings of Goffman and Taylor since both sought to move beyond an individualistic cognitive orientation without neglecting the importance of the individual in the performance of social practices, while authors like Geertz (1983) favor a 'textual' approach towards social analysis highlighting the autonomous character of discourses but undervaluing the importance of mental phenomena (see also Schneider 2000).

**The Contribution of Erving Goffman.** Although Goffman (1977) bases his thoughts on social phenomenology, he also redefines some of its central assumptions. Most importantly, Goffman understands mental schemes (i.e. 'frames' that are necessary for the interpretation of a situation) as a *collective* phenomenon. These adopted frames allow actors to follow social practices to create social order and *at the same time* the identity of the individual. Social practices, thus, 'frame' actors who, because of this framing, know who they are and how to act in an adequate and socially acceptable way.

Although Goffman (1969) still focuses on how a *subject* produces meaning, the trans-subjective frames reflect the background conditions necessary for this meaning production to take place. The frames, however, do not determine the performance of social practices. Rather, while performing social practices, 'framing' allows an actor to understand how to engage with her world and thus make it meaningful. As a consequence, engaging in a social practice means to enact a situation through a frame to make use of the available stock of knowledge. For instance, a manager who enters a strategy meeting to give a presentation needs to 'frame' this situation in order to competently perform the practice of strategy making. Of course, the same needs to be

done by other participants of the meeting (i.e. ‘the listeners’) who also need to refer to the frame that tells them how presentations are supposed to function.

Goffman’s practice turn shares many assumptions with neo-structuralist beliefs. Like Foucault and Bourdieu, Goffman (1977, 1983) emphasizes the physical nature of social practices which are, first of all, based on observable movements of the body. However, the theoretical transformation that underlies this turn towards an analysis of patterned activities is a different one. Unlike Foucault and Bourdieu, Goffman starts from the subject-centered interpretative tradition and moves to ‘de-center’ the subject and, consequently, shifts attention from purely mental activities to material social practices. The subject is not the ultimate locus of meaning production anymore, but understood as a participant of social practices who draws on certain shared cognitive presupposition (i.e. ‘frames’) to understand the world.

**The Contribution of Charles Taylor.** The main objective of Taylor’s (1985a, 1985b, 1995) theoretical work is to explain human agency and, in the interpretative tradition, how actors make sense of their world and thus gain the capability to carry out meaningful actions. His contribution to practice theory is based on an explicit critique of what he calls the conception of the ‘disengaged subject’ – i.e. the notion that the subject is first of all a *detached* thinking subject and not an *engaged* acting subject. This presumed disengagement creates a sharp distinction between the ‘inner’ (mental) and ‘outer’ (action) sphere (Reckwitz 2000: 485). For Taylor (1985a), however, the subject is always already an ‘engaged agent’ – i.e. an actor who is intimately immersed in human activities and thus an unwitting carrier of social practices. Interpretative acts are needed to perform these practices, but have no explanatory power in and of themselves: that is, they may seem obvious and reasonable to the actor but not to a detached external observer. Similar to Goffman, Taylor attempts to integrate the routinized practices that

actors perform and the *collective* stock of knowledge (in his words the ‘background understanding’) that is necessary for this performance.

The background understanding that enables practices is a stable stock of knowledge. Similar to Goffman’s frame conception, this understanding is bound to the performed practices and creates a framework which is used by actors within the practices to interpret their world *and* themselves. For instance, if a strategist participates in the social practice of ‘negotiating’, she needs a certain background understanding (e.g., knowledge about how to present valid arguments and what methods of persuasion are legitimate). Although this knowledge has an implicit character, it can partly be made explicit once actors start reflecting on it. Taylor’s background understanding contains a strong normative character; it not only provides a scheme for sensemaking, but also tells agents what is valuable and thus attractive. As a result, Taylor (1989: 4) argues that “‘strong evaluations’ [...] involve discriminations of right or wrong, better or worse, higher or lower.” Like Goffman, Taylor stresses that the background understanding of actors is *embodied* in their actions and thus not solely a mental phenomenon.

### ***The Practice Turn in Social Theory – A Resume***

Neo-structuralist social theorists (i.e. Foucault and Bourdieu) modify key assumptions of classical structuralism in such a way that a focus on social practices emerges. Although both authors follow different foci of analysis, their theoretical frameworks shift the analytical focus from a discussion of universal and ahistoric knowledge schemes guiding human action to an investigation of the local practices that are situated in time and space. The actor is reintroduced into the analysis of the social as a ‘carrier’ of practices rather than as an initiating, and thus largely detached, agent. By contrast, neo-interpretative social theorists (i.e. Goffman and Taylor) transform the

subject-centered, interpretative tradition of social theory into a theory of practice. This theoretical move is based on the insight that *collective* knowledge schemes are a precondition to the constitution of the actor and her environment within social practices. Practices need to be based on knowledge schemes that transcend the individual because different actors perform social practices at different points in time-space.

## **Implications – Researching Strategy Practices**

Given that the objective of this paper is to improve our understanding of how to research strategy practices, our implications primarily address two questions which are of fundamental importance during any research process (Dubin 1969; Sutton and Staw 1995; Whetten 1989) and thus also throughout the process of investigating strategy practices: *What* factors/elements should be considered when researching strategy practices? *How* can we conceptualize the research process itself in adequate terms? Obviously, whereas the first question deals with one possible unit of analysis of strategy-as-practice research (i.e. strategy practices), the second question is methodological. We look at both questions from the perspective of the discussed practice turn and give explicit reference to the literature on strategy-as-practice.

### **What Do We Research When Investigating Strategy Practices?**

**Strategy Practices as Routinized Bodily Performances.** Neo-structuralists and neo-interpretative practice theories understand practices as a nexus of *routinized* performances of the body (Bourdieu 1990; Foucault 1992; Goffman 1977; Taylor 1985a). Thus, strategy practices are first of all an observed patterned consistency of bodily activities; coherent clusters of activities that are condensed through repetition



and that reflect a specific strategic disposition. By ‘performances of the body’ practice theorists mean ‘bodily doings’ (e.g., walking, shaking hands, gesturing, taking notes, keeping to time, etc.) and ‘bodily sayings’ (i.e. speech acts). In this sense, the use of language is one form of bodily performance. This leads to a first important insight: research on strategy practices, does not deal with ‘strategic’ activity per se, but with the *patterns* of bodily doings and sayings that strategists perform. This distinction is vital since focusing on ostensible strategic activities may increase the amount of phenomena that can be investigated empirically, but it may tell us little about how such activities cumulatively amount to strategy practices.

Whenever a strategist learns a practice, she learns to dispose herself and to move her body in a certain way (including activities such as talking, reading and writing). This means more than simply deploying the body in order to perform the practice. Rather, body movements and tendencies already are the practices themselves. Although strategy-as-practice scholars have focused on the role of bodily sayings, and particularly verbal communication, they have put less emphasis on the bodily doings and dispositions related to strategy practices. Empirical contributions to the strategy-as-practice agenda are often based on what people *say* they do or have done (Mantere 2005; Paroutis and Pettigrew 2007) rather than on a direct observation of oftentimes unconscious physical tendencies and styles of engagement. Even when observations are used (Jarzabkowski 2003; Stensaker and Falkenberg 2007), we usually find no explicit discussion of such bodily doings and non-verbal bodily sayings involved in strategy practices. An observation of the habitual gestures used by strategists within their practices, the rituals contained in strategy presentations, and the employment of tools of persuasion can add novel insights about strategists’ role within strategy practices and thus complement the existing analysis of speech acts (see also Callon and Law 1997).

Making our claim more precise requires differentiating three interdependent aspects by which the body expresses itself in strategy practices (Schatzki 1996). First, studying strategists' body movements can mean investigating how the body *manifests* the collective knowledge schemes that surround strategy practices. Here, the question is how this knowledge is 'made present in the world' through material practices. For instance, the belief that strategy is somehow different and perhaps more important is manifested by the deliberate spatial removal of strategy workshops from day-to-day operations (Whittington et al. 2006: 489). But it can also be studied from the perspective of how strategists use their bodily demeanor to manifest the seriousness of strategy activities. Second, the body can also be a *signifying* body. This implies that bodily activities signify to others that a person is engaged in the practice of strategy-making. For instance, a strategist's performances may involve invoking and appealing to reason and rationality as the basis for justifying an argument, or alternatively she can non-verbally convey 'incredulity' or contempt at alternatives raised in strategy discussions. Third, the body of a strategist can also be treated as an *instrumental* body. This does not imply that the body is an instrument, but that bodily performances are often constitutive for further actions (of the same, but also other persons). For instance, giving a budgeting presentation through bodily doings and sayings may lead to further actions such as phone calls or meetings.

**Strategy Practices as Based on Objects.** Neo-structuralist and neo-interpretative practice theories emphasize that a focus on bodily movements also requires studying the objects that are handled through the body. Most prominently, Foucault's (1973) study of subjectivation shows how the self participates in relation to other selves and with material objects. Just as playing soccer requires a ball and special shoes, the practice of strategy involves objects that are not much researched to date (e.g., computer and various software packages, telephones, flip charts, Lego-based strategy models which

are used during workshops), but that are vital to the process of making and legitimizing the strategy process. Gabriel (2008), for instance, shows that the mere existence of PowerPoint alters the way knowledge is presented and legitimized in organizations. Similarly, Whittington (2007: 1583) remarks that “[t]he PowerPoint strategy presentation is not an innocent thing.” Without these objects a strategist would not be a strategist and the practice of strategy an impossible endeavor. Taking strategy practices seriously means that subject-object relations should be treated as important as subject-subject relations (Reckwitz 2002: 253).

Researching how objects ‘participate’ in strategy practices involves studying how they both *facilitate* and *limit* bodily doings and sayings and thus influence outcomes. Whereas we have partial empirical insights into how objects enable strategy practices by acting as symbolic artifacts (Whittington et al. 2006: 622-624), strategy-as-practice research also needs to study how objects limit the performance of practices. For instance, examining how the use of PowerPoint presentations or Lego models constrains the discussion of strategic issues can be interesting. Discussing the enabling and limiting effects of material objects sheds light on the question of how these objects are ‘made meaningful’ while performing strategy practices. From the perspective of practice theory, objects do not possess any meaning apart from strategy practices. Rather, their meaning is already part of the practice and also shaped by the latter.

For strategy-as-practice scholars, the research challenge is to *make these objects talk*. Here, we see a difference between neo-structuralist and neo-interpretative practice theory. Strategy practice scholars working in the neo-interpretative tradition would focus more on the individual strategist and how she uses the stock of knowledge at hand to make sense of a novel object. Goffman’s (1977) frame analysis, for instance, would be interested in how individuals use objects according to the frames they possess; the

focus, here, is more towards the individual. By contrast, neo-structuralists would aim at finding out how the handling of objects shapes and is shaped by ‘hidden’ knowledge schemes; the primary focus here is on how objects are internalized into the shared set of dispositions. Bourdieu (1990), for instance, would study how certain material objects are incorporated into strategists’ *habitus* and how the resulting internalized dispositions shape the practice of strategy-making.

**Strategy Practices as Routinized Subjective Interpretation.** Strategy practices are not only routinized performances of the body, but also include a routinized understanding of the world based on shared knowledge schemes. During the performance of a strategy practice actors draw upon collective knowledge schemes. Although practice theorists use different terms to describe these schemes – ‘codes’ (Foucault 1992), ‘*habitus*’ (Bourdieu 1990), ‘frames’ (Goffman 1977), ‘background understanding’ (Taylor 1985a), there is a common ground insofar as these knowledge schemes, albeit tacit, are broadly acknowledged to exist. Strategy-as-practice scholars have, to varying degrees, alluded to these schemes in their conceptual writings (Chia 2004; Jarzabkowski et al. 2007; Whittington 2002, 2006) and empirical studies (Jarzabkowski 2003; Regnér 2003). However, from the perspective of practice theory most studies have failed to explicitly emphasize the *collective embeddedness* of the investigated knowledge schemes.

According to practice theory, these schemes do not exist in individual minds (Reckwitz 2002: 254). Instead, such schemes transcend the individual subject and are already part of the practice; they are a cultural phenomenon and not an outcome of individual sensemaking. This aspect of practice theory is largely overlooked by the strategy-as-practice research community since many contributions tend to overemphasize the role of the *individual* process of meaning construction (see e.g.

Balogun and Johnson 2005; Rouleau 2005; Stensaker and Falkenberg 2007), while the *collective* background understandings which enable such sensemaking to take place is undervalued. Strategy practices such as ‘resource allocation’ (Jarzabkowski 2003) or ‘strategy meetings’ (Jarzabkowski and Seidl 2008) are based upon implicit knowledge schemes that provide strategists with an understanding of how the practice needs to be performed. Although such schemes have an implicit character and are thus hard to research (e.g., Bourdieu’s *habitus*), they are also publicly expressed within strategy practices (e.g., via the handling of objects) and hence observable. While strategy practice scholars working in the neo-structuralist tradition would put more emphasis on investigating the formation of these knowledge schemes over time (e.g., by studying the system of acquired dispositions), scholars who adopt a neo-interpretative perspective would ask how these schemes are routinely ‘realized’ by individuals through adherence to their conventions.

The kind of implicit and historical-contingent knowledge anchored in collective schemes includes knowing-that and knowing-how, but also extends to overall dispositions, demeanor and tendencies as well as emotions towards objects and others. Particularly strategists’ demeanor and emotions are only rarely part of the discussion (see e.g. Samra-Fredericks 2004) and deserve more explicit research attention from the perspective of practice theory. Although such aspects are publicly expressed through individuals, they need to be conceptualized as being integral to strategy practices (e.g., fear when negotiating the budget) since they are part of the knowledge schemes that the practice rests on.

**Strategy Practices Entail the Ongoing Constitution of the Strategist.** Although strategy-as-practice research has put a lot of emphasis on investigating strategy making on the level of the firm (Jarzabkowski and Wilson 2002) and also the extra-

organizational-level (Grandy and Mills 2004), the identity-constitution of the individual strategist herself through strategy practices remains unaddressed (for an exception see Mantere 2005). Ezzamel and Willmott (2008: 197) even argue that “SAP [strategy-as-practice] analysis incorporates little consideration of how, for example, engaging in practices is constitutive of practitioners as subjects.” Practice theory emphasizes that the identity of an actor is not something that is given, but is constructed and realized through her engagement in social practices (Foucault 1992). What constitutes a strategist as a subject (e.g., the language used, the objects handled) can only be answered by acknowledging the embeddedness of her identity in the performance of strategy practices. Thus, strategy-as-practice scholars have to consider the immanent recursiveness between strategy practices and strategists’ identity. On the one hand, the ability to perform strategy practices depends on how a strategist perceives her own identity. On the other hand, the identity of a strategist is continuously shaped by the practices she successfully performs (Rasche 2007). Hence, the role concept that is applied by strategy-as-practice scholars needs to reach beyond the traditional view that a role rests on ‘externally’ imposed expectations (Biddle 1979). Rather, as indicated by Giddens (1984), there are certain external expectations on the individual agent but also subjective volitions.

Particularly interesting to strategy-as-practice scholars is the Goffmanesque concern with how practitioners shape their social identity by performing their work as *credible* strategists (Whittington 2007: 1580). For Goffman (1959), credibility is a ‘front-issue’. The ‘front’ is “that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance.” (Goffman 1959: 22) Studying strategy practices means showing how strategists *manage* their ‘front’ in such a way that credibility emerges. Research needs to show how strategists attempt to present an *idealized* version of their ‘front’ (i.e. one

consistent with the socially expected behavior of a strategist), what methods they use to strategically enhance or sustain their credibility, and how the idealized version of the ‘front’ has changed from the early days of strategic management until today.

### **How Do We Research Strategy Practices?**

**Towards Ethnographic Strategy-as-Practice Research.** So far, the majority of empirical strategy-as-practice research is based on attending strategy meetings as a guest (Jarzabkowski and Seidl 2008; Stensaker and Falkenberg 2007), interviews (Mantere 2005; Paroutis and Pettigrew 2007), and practitioner diaries (Balogun and Johnson 2005). These methods rely on reported accounts and thus make it hard to understand and unravel the tacit and deeply embedded nature of strategy practices. Social practice theory calls for researching the contextual, detailed, ‘deep’ and unique characteristics of strategy practices. The strategy-as-practice scholar is now not merely an interpreter of actor meanings and intentions but is one highly attuned to the minute, often unnoticed and seemingly insignificant moves, mannerisms and dispositions of the strategist herself. Even though practice theory does not imply a singular and consistent methodological frame, the ethnographic character of the fieldwork done by practice theorists such as Bourdieu and Goffman cannot be overlooked (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Goffman 1989; Wacquant 2004). Based on this, we argue for a stronger consideration of ethnography within strategy-as-practice research.

Although ethnography does not reflect a unitary method (Brewer 2006: 312), we see it as a process where the researcher “*participates*, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an *extended period of time*, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions; in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned.” (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983: 2;

emphases added) We are *not* suggesting that extended participant observation is the only technique strategy-as-practice scholars should employ, but regard such kind of research activity as a *necessary* complement to existing methodologies, especially when using neo-structuralist and/or neo-interpretative approaches as a theoretical lens.

The strategy-as-practice scholar doing ‘in-depth’ ethnographic research oscillates between involvement *and* distance (Grenfell 2007) moving from direct immersion in the life-worlds of practitioners to the theoretical distancing needed to cleanse herself of the apparent neat coherence of ‘native accounts’ (Bourdieu 1990). The ethnographic strategy-as-practice researcher must also acknowledge that she is thoroughly implicated in the production of research and is only able to offer a partial and predisposed account of what has happened. The scholar, thus, is moved to the heart of research activity and the conventional question of how data is broken down and made meaningful – a question that is raised in several strategy-as-practice studies (see e.g. Paroutis and Pettigrew 2007) – is not at the centre of interest anymore. Rather, the question is how the researcher represents herself in the research context (e.g., regarding the roles she performs; Tamboukou and Ball 2003). Such strategy-as-practice research requires a self-reflective research practice that discusses the role of the author (Foucault 1998).

**Why Study Strategy Practices via Ethnography?** Although some strategy-as-practice scholars have followed an ethnographic perspective (Jarzabkowski and Wilson 2002; Rouleau 2005; Samra-Fredericks 2003), extended participant observation is not a much-used instrument for research yet. There are, however, good reasons to adopt an ethnographic perspective, especially within, yet not limited to, research projects that draw on social practice theory. First, if strategy practices are shaped by the unconscious nature of the *habitus* (Bourdieu) that actors draw upon during their performance, we cannot realistically expect to uncover these practices through interviews and/or self-



reports. Bourdieu (1990: 53), for instance, claims that the *habitus* expresses itself in practices “without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them” and Goffman (1977) suggests that social practices cannot be discovered in the consciousness of its participants. Ethnographic description differs from ‘ordinary’ descriptions (e.g. via interviews) in that the scholar’s aim is to access beneath surface appearances and uncover the hidden realities shaping strategy practices (Tamboukou and Ball 2003: 14).

Second, ethnographic study over extended periods of time allows the strategy-as-practice researcher to note even the smallest and seemingly insignificant goings-on including the suppressed, the marginalized and the unacknowledged. Tamboukou and Ball (2003: 6) insist that “ethnography is often deeply concerned with giving voice to the unheard and oppressed.” This seems to be important for strategy-as-practice scholars who have mostly focused their analyses on top managers (Salvato 2003) and/or middle managers (Balogun and Johnson 2005) so far. The kind of ethnographic research that is in line with practice theory would give stronger consideration to peripheral managers (Regnér 2003) as well as non-managerial staff (Floyd and Wooldridge 1994; Regnér, 2008).

Third, if strategy-as-practice research really is about the ‘everyday doings’ (Johnson et al. 2003: 3) within the process of strategy making, being in the field for an extended time and doing participant observation allow us to *experience* the accomplishments of everyday strategy practices at various levels within an organization and not merely the talk about such practices. As Goffman (1989: 125) notes in an interview: “[Y]ou are in a position to note their gestural, visual, bodily response to what’s going on around them and you’re empathetic enough – because you’ve been taking the same crap they’ve been taking.” Ethnography allows strategy-as-practice scholars to get closer to the non-

formalized aspects of doing strategy – the everyday problem-solving, the opportunistic making do's and the ingenuity and guile displayed at every level in the organization.

**Doing Ethnographic Strategy-as-Practice Research.** 'Doing' ethnographic strategy-as-practice research implies constructing written accounts and descriptions (i.e. fieldnotes) that bring to life the embedded concerns, fears and main tasks of practitioners of strategy. Capturing the micro-behaviors of strategists means to collect and record the everyday stories strategists share and to focus attention on the pieces of apparently unconnected incidents (e.g., informal meetings). The richness of fieldnotes is well reflected by Bourdieu's (2002) early ethnographic research in his native region of Béarn as well as in Algeria where he tried to expose the tacit knowledge of the rural lifeworld.

Ethnographic strategy-as-practice research can also involve more visual documentary methods such as photography and video ethnography. These methods capture and save many details of the work of strategizing (e.g., the use of tools, the physical arrangement of people and the atmosphere of a room) which would otherwise escape the awareness of an ethnographer. Heracleous and Jacobs (2008: 316- 317), for instance, use photographs to illustrate how workshop participants have constructed embodied metaphors through Lego modeling of strategy, while Whittington et al. (2006: 624) picture a cube that was produced to communicate strategy throughout an organization. Goffman's (1979) photo ethnography – *Gender Advertisements* – even arranges a whole variety of pictures into categories to look into the way that advertising constantly treats women as being subordinated to men.

While photography has been increasingly used to picture the work of strategizing, video ethnography has only made tentative steps towards informing scholarly research (see e.g. Stronz 2005). Video ethnography, as for instance used by Engeström (1999),

can enrich strategy practice research in multiple ways: (1) it allows describing the complexity of strategy practices (e.g., the interplay of strategists' body movements, emotions and used artifacts) by reviewing strategic episodes multiple times, (2) it permits scholars to share these episodes with practitioners to gather feedback and enhance reflexivity and (3) it can also better capture the dynamic aspects within and across strategy practices (e.g., the formation of alliances during meetings).

**Focusing Ethnographic Strategy-as-Practice Research.** Based on our theoretical discussion, we suggest three *exemplary* foci for ethnographic strategy practice research. First, ethnographies can focus on the embodied character of knowledge used within strategy practices (Foucault 1977). Studying the role of the body opens strategy practice research to issues such as: the body as the medium in which power is inscribed, the self-presentation of strategists via the body, and the control of the body in strategic episodes. Hodgkinson and Wright (2002: 961), for instance, tell of a CEO who “began pacing up and down the room” during a meeting and then “physically seized control of the marker pen, insisting that several of the elements in the diagram had been misplaced”, while Heracleous and Jacobs (2008) illustrate how strategists physically construct tangible (i.e. Lego-based) metaphors of their strategy. Rouleau (2005: 1428) even shows how a strategist used new clothing to ‘sell’ a new strategic orientation to a client.

Second, ethnographic studies can also focus on the spatial context in which strategy practices happen. By this we mean, for instance, the conference or office rooms and the general atmosphere of the location in which strategizing occurs. Jarzabkowski and Seidl (2008), for example, note that the strategy meetings observed by them were usually conducted in a location where participants could be physically remote from their work context. Choosing such a location allowed for reaching beyond established organizational structures and detaching participants from departmental concerns.

Similarly, Hodgkinson and Wright (2002: 961) report about an office room with two very large mirrors which were used by a CEO to control meetings. Ethnographies are likely to capture these contextual elements and thus demonstrate how these aspects shape strategy practices and influence the production (and manipulation) of strategy content.

Third, ethnographic strategy-as-practice research can also focus on how artifacts (e.g., graphs, accounting tables, paper work) are constructed and put into use. The detailed and context-sensitive nature of ethnographic work not only allows portraying how artifacts are created and changed over time (Heracleous and Jacobs 2008; Whittington et al. 2006), but also sheds light on how they are enacted, manipulated and controlled. Giraudeau's (2008) recent study of strategic plans shows that the created documents were used to support strategic imagination and debate to draft new strategies rather than to approve pre-defined strategic programs (see also Yates' 1985 study of graphs as a managerial tool at Du Pont). Likewise, science studies have examined the embodied character of knowledge in scientific papers and the symbolic and political processes around the legitimization of 'facts' (Knorr-Cetina 2003).

The focus of ethnographic strategy practice studies may differ depending on whether scholars follow a neo-structuralist or neo-interpretative research lens. Ethnographic strategy practice research which is based on the neo-structuralist tradition is more directed towards the unconscious knowledge schemes surrounding strategy practices by looking for the underlying, and not necessarily explicit, professional rules shaping strategy practices (see e.g. Rouleau 2005). By contrast, ethnographic strategy practice studies reaching in a neo-interpretative direction would give stronger consideration to the individual strategist and how her social exchanges constitute strategy practices. This is *not* to say that collective knowledge schemes are less

important, but that the primary focus is on the idiosyncratic way in which strategists are constituted by their practices and how strategists identify with each other based on their understanding of a practice.

## **Conclusions**

Aiming at further utilizing the potential of social theories of practice for the conceptualization and empirical investigation of strategy practices, this paper uncovers the nature of such practices by following practice theorists along the lines of neo-structuralism and neo-interpretative theories. Although we do not believe that practice theory, or any particular theorist within it should be privileged, there are three main conclusions from our analysis which help to further define distinctive characteristics of strategy practice research within the larger strategy community and also identify avenues for future research.

First, instead of simply accepting that there is something like a singular ‘practice theory’, a genealogical analysis reveals the historical-contingent conditions of its creation and shows that strategy-as-practice scholars can refer to a neo-structuralist and/or a neo-interpretative approach. Whereas the work of neo-structuralists is used by some strategy-as-practice scholars, there is need to get closer to the work of Goffman and Taylor, both of whom have been largely neglected by strategy-as-practice scholars despite their prominence in sociological discussions on practice (Randall 1988; Giddens 1984). Referring to Goffman and Taylor can be beneficial since both authors allow for linking the performance of strategy practices to the development of strategists’ identity over time (see also Manning 2008).

The second main conclusion deals with the conceptualization of strategy practices from the perspective of practice theory. Although strategy-as-practice scholars often

draw on the work of established practice theorists they do not always use the full potential of these theories. From the lens of practice theory, studying strategy practices means focusing on their physical character (e.g., body movements), the involved objects (e.g., computer), the related ongoing constitution of practitioners' identity, and the *unconscious* background knowledge necessary for performing strategic activities. In particular, the physical aspect of strategy practices and the need to move, use, enact and modify objects remains a research challenge. Giving stronger consideration to the discussed elements of strategy practices also implies studying the *absence* of these elements. Researching the nonexistence of strategy practices (e.g., expenditure reviews) and/or certain elements of these practices (e.g., the use of Excel spreadsheets) highlights the need for multi-sided ethnographies conducting fieldwork that tracks strategists and their practices across organizations and over time.

Our third conclusion is that strategy-as-practice scholars have to give more consideration to those research methods which acknowledge the inherent contextuality and situatedness of strategy practices. Strategy-as-practice scholars need to do more 'dirty work' (Hughes 1964) in order to gain an intimate familiarity with strategy practices. Getting closer to everyday strategy practices means living amongst strategists; learning their language, tendencies and dispositions and participating in their practices and rituals. Such 'depth' ethnography is eminently suited to achieving these goals and thus *complementing* interview-based data. Whereas the eventual outcomes of such studies are familiar concepts to strategy-as-practice scholars (e.g., case studies), the data collection methods can be different (e.g., extended field notes, researcher diaries, photographs, videos). The rapid spread of computer technology even allows strategy practice scholars to use other innovative methods – for example the observation of the gradual editing of strategy documents via the track changes function in MS Word.

Our arguments are based on the idea that in order to advance strategy-as-practice research we have to more seriously consider the implications of practice theories for the strategy research process. As strategy theorists our own research ‘strategies’ are implicated. They reflect (often unexamined) theoretical preferences and culturally-acquired tendencies which predispose us towards particular forms of analysis and explanation and we need to make these more explicit in our writings. This is because it is the theoretical lens we have internalized that affects how we frame what we see and how we act as researchers (Sutton and Staw 1995). Especially the development of mid-range theories (i.e. theories that explain the relationships between concepts in a localized setting) significantly depends on what ‘meta-theories’ (i.e. those discussed in this paper) allow us to see. Since mid-range theories are central in illuminating managerial practice and hence in demonstrating the perceived relevance of strategy-as-practice research, meta-theoretical reflections are not just an end in themselves but a prerequisite to building better theories. An unquestioned answer thus can turn out to be more dangerous than unanswered questions.

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## Figures and Tables

Figure 1:

*A Genealogy of the Practice Tradition in Social Theory (adapted and modified from Reckwitz 2000: 190)*

