Long Range Planning xxx (xxxx) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Long Range Planning

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/lrp

The performativity of strategy: Taking stock and moving ahead

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Performativity
Strategy
Strategy as practice
Research agenda

ABSTRACT

This special issue groups a set of contributions that together question and extend the boundaries of strategy research by examining strategy work as a performative pursuit. In this introduction, we position the special issue papers within the broader context of performativity studies in organization and management theory. To do so, we ground the analysis of the performativity of strategy in the recent developments of strategy-as-practice research, clarify the ambitions of a performative turn in the study of strategy, introduce the plurality of performativity meanings and uses in prior research and specify the conceptualizations of performativity mobilized in the seven contributions that form this special issue. Taking stock of their rich insights, and reflecting on our editing of this special issue, we then identify key challenges underlying the constitution of the body of studies on the performativity of strategy, and propose three avenues of research that together sketch a research agenda for advancing the study of strategy as a performative endeavour.

From strategy practice to the performativity of strategy

Since strategy research undertook something of a practice turn (Whittington, 2006) dominant economics-framings of strategy and strategy work have been complemented, and in certain cases challenged, by ideas and conceptualizations drawn from theorists who see with more of a "sociological eye" (Whittington, 2007). Where these thought-provoking and insightful works have succeeded is in highlighting the importance of understanding how it is that strategy is accomplished (Burgelman et al., 2017; Vaara and Whittington, 2012). Scholars who have adopted this stance have centered their efforts on learning more about "the doing of strategy; who does it, what they do [and] how they do it" (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009: 69). And their efforts have been largely successful in helping us appreciate the importance of, for example, the role of middle managers in strategy work (e.g. Rouleau and Balogun, 2011), how different material affordances are drawn from by strategists (e.g. Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015), how spaces where strategizing is accomplished matter in how it is produced and experienced (e.g. Jarzabkowski et al., 2015), and how strategizing practices shape firm- and industry-level competitive dynamics (Burgelman et al., 2017). All of which, it is reasonable to say, would have been unlikely to have been considered worthy of study had the practice turn not been taken.

While we are more familiar with who strategists are, what they do and how they do it, there are still a number of strategy-related phenomena that we have not yet fully explored. For instance, we are less knowledgeable about why strategy is accomplished in the ways that it is; where the theories, ideas, models, and assumptions informing strategy work emerge from; or how and why strategy practice, populated by entwined human and non-human actors, manifests in the forms we observe.

These questions call for scholars to examine the practice of strategy as a performative endeavor and for mobilizing the concept of performativity to further investigate strategy, strategy work, strategy making and strategy knowledge as a set of puzzling social phenomena. While performativity is not a single construct universally agreed upon by those who contribute to its development, its multiple conceptualizations share two common underlying characteristics (Gond and Cabantous, 2016; Muniesa, 2014) that are useful in understanding what performativity studies of strategy can bring to the table of strategy scholarship. First, all performativity conceptualizations invite strategy scholars to embrace the post-structuralist paradigm (Hassard and Cox, 2013; Law, 2008). A performative analysis:

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lrp.2018.03.002

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> "argues that *realities* (including objects and subjects) and representations of these realities are being enacted or performed simultaneously. It is (…) post-structuralist in inclination, albeit in a particular and materially oriented mode (…). Shift the verb from making to doing – to doing *realities* – and we catch what is at stake. To put it in formal language, what is at stake is not simply epistemological. We are also in the realm of ontology." (Law, 2008: 624; original emphasis)

Such an analysis of strategy therefore invites scholars to question the ontology of strategy. Strategy research thus far has tended to focus on epistemological questions (Wright, 2017) and as a consequence the ontological status afforded to strategy has gone unaddressed. This means that while sociological eyes have been cast onto strategy work, they remain only half-opened and in need of further stimulus. What is needed is a reconsideration of the material agency of strategy practice, by showing, for instance, how the worlds that strategists navigate "are always being constituted, de-constituted and reconstituted through the sayings and doings of the multiple actors who become [materially] entangled with one another over multiple issues, thereby generating overflows" (Garud et al., 2018: 5).

Second, all conceptualizations of performativity invite strategy scholars to adopt a pragmatic take (Austin, 1962) on strategy discourses by considering that they do not mirror (or represent) a reality that pre-exists, but co-construct (or bring about) that reality through their performation. A performative analysis of strategy therefore foregrounds the close examination of the performative power of strategy discourse and knowledge. But, beyond the vital study of the intended and unintended effects that strategy discourses and theories can have on strategy and organizational practice, it is most importantly an invitation to study how strategy knowledge and practice are co-constituted during strategy work.

For performativity scholars, the concept of strategy is intriguing for the high status it enjoys in management and organization theory. It is accepted that strategy is important for firms and further that it matters to society more broadly (Gond et al., 2017; Knights and Morgan, 1991; Whittington et al., 2003), not least for the effects it has on organizations and markets, so studying the processes and practices needed for it to be formed, constituted, de-constituted and re-constituted, promise greater insight into the work of strategy and its place and space in society. Those few strategy studies that have examined the performativity of strategy have succeeded in providing novel insights into how: the doing of strategy constitutes its subjects and shapes its objects (Carter et al., 2010; Kornberger and Clegg, 2011); how strategy theory, valuation metrics, and a rhetoric of justification cohere in the performing of strategy practice (Ottosson and Galis, 2011); and, how strategic discourses are absorbed and resisted in the way strategist subjectivities are formed (Laine et al., 2016).

With this special issue, our aim is to further leverage the generative—if not 'magic' (Bourdieu, 1991; Butler, 1999)—social properties of performativity in order to construct novel insights on strategy that other practice-related constructs fail to grasp. We want to develop a broader research agenda focused around the following questions: ***What new conceptions of strategy (and organizations more broadly) does the performativity programme offer? How does a performative understanding of strategy push or question current boundaries of strategy thinking and knowledge? How can researchers analyze and develop the performative power or potential of strategy work?***

We regard this special issue as a first step in this direction. It is designed to bring together scholars interested in the performativity of strategy, and more broadly those who want to question what we know about strategy work and the assumptions that underpin it by adopting a "performative mindset" (Garud et al., 2018). In the following sections, we present the plurality of performativity meanings and uses in prior research and specify the conceptualizations of performativity mobilized in the seven contributions that form this special issue. We then identify some of the challenges associated with performative studies of strategy, and offer a research agenda for moving ahead.

Acknowledging the variety of performativity conceptualizations

The concept of performativity, which originates in Austin's thinking about performative utterances – i.e., utterances that are not describing a state of affair, but instead are bringing it about, such as 'I pronounce you husband and wife' – has generated much fruitful work in philosophy (Derrida, 1979; Lyotard, 1984 [1979]), economic sociology (Callon, 1998; MacKenzie et al., 2007), gender studies (Barad, 2003; Butler, 1997), and organization theory (Cooren et al., 2011; Gond et al., 2016).

In their review of the uses and abuses of performativity in organization and management research, Gond et al. (2016) identify five foundational conceptualizations of performativity, developed in philosophy, linguistics and sociology used in management research. *Performativity as doing things with words* – the first perspective that these authors identify – builds on Austin and Searle's work to explain how discourses, such as strategy discourses, can, in some circumstances, bring about the reality they describe. Kornberger and Clegg's (2011) analysis of the Sustainable Sydney 2030 strategy project exemplifies this perspective, by showing the performative effects of strategizing.

Second, Lyotard's perspective, which approaches performativity as a search for efficiency, has been mobilized to critically denounce management scholars' "intent to develop and celebrate knowledge that contributes to the production of maximum input for minimum input" (Fournier and Grey, 2000: 17). Third, organization scholars have used Derrida and Butler's concept of performativity that focuses on *actors' subjectivities and constitution of the self* to explain how gender and organizational identities are constituted through a myriad of repeated 'acts' that reiterate norms. Tyler and Cohen (2010) for instance, rely on Butler to develop a performative analysis of gender in the workplace in relation with organizational space.

Finally, organization scholars have imported two other conceptualizations of performativity: *performativity as bringing theory into being* that relies on Callon's (1998) performativity of economics thesis according to which economics does not describe the economy but performs it; and Barad's conception of *performativity as sociomaterial mattering.* While Callon's concept of performativity has been

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