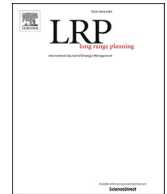




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The point of no return: Ritual performance and strategy making in project organizations

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Organization scholars call for a more critical approach to the field of Strategy-as-Practice. Particularly, more interpretive and micro-level analyses of strategy from a performative perspective are endorsed. This paper addresses this call with an ethnographic study of rituals that mark kick-offs, launches, milestones, and deliveries in project organizations. Using a performative approach, the aim is to investigate how rituals are sociomaterially orchestrated and the implications this has for strategy making. To collect data, fieldwork was conducted during eight ritual events in four infrastructure projects in the Netherlands, and 46 in-depth interviews were held with ritual participants. Our study reveals the often overlooked strategic role of rituals in terms of (1) engaging an audience, (2) legitimizing project plans, and (3) catalyzing transitions via a 'point of no return'. The contribution of this paper is a performative analysis of rituals offering insight into the understudied aesthetic, corporeal, and material nature of strategizing.

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Introduction

The practice-turn in organization studies has directed our attention to the importance of social practice in strategy research, elaborated in the research domain of Strategy-as-Practice (Vaara and Whittington, 2012; Carter et al., 2008; Jarzabkowski, 2003, 2005). While strategy theory originated from a positivist, economic tradition, Strategy-as-Practice offers another perspective by drawing from social theory (e.g. Giddens, 1990; Goffman, 1959; Foucault, 1982; Bourdieu, 1991). Despite its advancement, scholars still call for more interpretive, in-depth, and critical analyses of strategy to unleash the full potential of Strategy-as-Practice (e.g. Carter et al., 2008; McCabe, 2010).

Taking this call as a point of departure, this paper will focus on the practice of rituals and their implications for strategy making. Prior research has underlined the value of studying rituals in organizations to indicate the episodic, purposeful, and transformative nature of strategizing. Precisely, scholars have shown how meetings, workshops, 'away days', and business dinners are ritualized to enhance their strategic potential (e.g. Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008; Peck et al., 2004; Johnson et al., 2010; Johnson, 2007; Sturdy et al., 2006). Most of these studies draw from classical ritual theory (e.g. van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969) to inform research and develop theory in the field of strategy. In line with this, we utilize theory from the field of anthropology and conceptualize rituals as ceremonial events performed in demarcated time and space, with pre-determined actors and audiences, and particular words, gestures, and materials to create meaning and reality (van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1977, 1982; Bell, 1992).

To study rituals, we utilize a performative approach which regards social and material processes, structures, and entities as entwined agencies in a world's becoming (Barad, 2003; Dale, 2005; Orlikowski and Scott, 2008). In simpler terms, we understand rituals as sociomaterial practices where the amalgamation of social and material factors constructs certain meanings and realities (Gond et al., 2016; van den Ende et al., 2015). Consequently, a performative approach addresses how social and material entities are interrelated, and how and why they matter in practice, also referred to as sociomaterial mattering (Barad, 2003, 2007; Gond et al., 2016). The field of Strategy-as-Practice has yet to address strategizing through sociomaterial mattering. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the sociomaterial constitution of rituals and the strategic impact this might have in practice.

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In accordance with our aim, the central research question addressed in this paper is “How are rituals sociomaterially constituted and what strategic effects do they have?” To answer this query, an in-depth ethnographic study of eight ritual events in four infrastructure projects in the Netherlands has been conducted including two project kick-offs, two project phase launches, two milestones celebrations, and two project deliveries. Findings demonstrate how rituals in projects are sociomaterially orchestrated and performed to produce the strategic effects of engaging an audience, legitimizing project plans, and actualizing transitions.

The contribution of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it adds to the Strategy-as-Practice debate an empirically grounded analysis of rituals offering insight into their thus far overlooked strategic role. Secondly, this paper mobilizes a performative approach that exhibits and integrates social and material facets of strategy making. Specifically, our study reveals how the sociomaterial composition of rituals expresses meaning, (re)constructs reality, and catalyzes transitions.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First we conceptualize rituals, followed by a clarification of the performative approach used. Subsequently, we outline the methodology employed including a description of the research sites and context, our research techniques, and data analysis. We then outline the findings to unpack the strategic effects of rituals, based on observations in the field and supplemented with interview accounts. Next, we offer a critical analysis and discussion of the findings to disclose the implications of ritual practice for strategy making. Finally, the main conclusions are drawn and the research contributions are provided.

Ritual as theory and as practice

In the field of anthropology, the study of ritual is comprehensive and enduring. Renowned scholars such as Lévi-Strauss (1944), van Gennepe (1960), Turner (1969), Goffman (1967), and Geertz (1973) are among its most important theoretical pioneers. When reviewing ritual theory, two main issues emerge. Firstly, there has been a strong inclination to view ritual as a magical, sacred, or symbolic activity as opposed to practical, utilitarian, or strategic activity (Bell, 1992). Conversely, with the support of various studies (e.g. Alexander, 2006; Bell, 2009; Martin, 2002; Schechner, 2012; Smith and Stewart 2011; Turner, 1982), we contend it should be seen as possessing both symbolic and pragmatic aspects simultaneously. A second issue is that it has been (and still is) exceptionally difficult to define what ritual is or is not in theory. While some scholars view it as an extraordinary activity, others see it as part of all activity and basic to all social life making it almost impossible to define (Bell, 1992). Therefore, it is suggested scholars should focus on what ritual *does* to distinguish itself from other activities, rather than on what it means in theory (Bell, 1992, 2009; Islam and Zyphur, 2009; Smith and Stewart, 2011).

In line with this, we draw from the work of anthropologist Bell (1992, 2009) who understands ritual as practice; as something that actors do. She terms this ‘ritualization’, defined as a *strategic* way of acting, appropriated and orchestrated to distinguish what is being done compared to other, more ordinary practices. Thus, rather than focusing on what ritual means or represents, ritualization underlines what ritual does to privilege itself and on how it does it. This requires a shift from looking at ritual activities as the expression of meanings, to what constitutes and anchors such meanings. A ritual is then understood as a practice for differentiating between acts, for constructing qualitative distinctions between the ordinary and extraordinary, and for attributing such differentiation to reality (Bell, 2009).

The means for privileging and differentiating ritual include performance, such as the scripts, props, and actors on a stage; formalization, meaning it is premediated and organized rather than spontaneous; repetition, as it is recurrent according to cycles; and symbolic action comprising bodies, materials, and speech that constitute meanings (Alexander et al., 2006; DeMarrais et al., 1996; Goffman, 1959; Johnson et al., 2010; Turner and Schechner, 1988). Rather than being structural features of rituals, these are mechanisms to give them a privileged and authoritative status over other practices, enabling them to preserve or transform social conditions (Bell, 1992, 2009).

A performative approach to ritual

To further conceptualize and analyze rituals in projects we utilize a performative approach. In our performative approach, performance refers to the embodied practice or ‘acting’ of ritual whereas performativity refers to the meaning or reality it (re) constructs (Loxely, 2007; Gregson and Rose, 2000; Butler, 1988). A performative understanding of ritual is not novel. Goffman (1959, 1967) already showed how individuals frame and socially construct their reality, performing roles as social actors on ‘stage’ and during their daily ritualized interaction with others. van Gennepe (1960) and Turner (1969) studied how ‘rites de passage’ were performed in traditional communities to enable the shift of an individual or group from one social status to the next, marking important transitions and milestones during a lifecycle. Furthermore, Moore and Myerhoff (1977) emphasized how a ritual is formally enacted like a play, involving the manipulation of materials and symbols to attract the attention of an audience and generate sociopolitical consequences. In a similar vein, Turner (1977) describes a ritual as a performance in a sequestered place, with a stereotyped sequence of activities involving speech, gestures, and artefacts designed to influence forces on behalf of the goals and interests of ritual actors. In short, through its framed and scripted performance, a ritual can establish, effect, or bring about something (Bell, 2009; Tambiah, 1981). In this sense, a ritual does not merely manifest something, but rather it accomplishes something as part of its process (Turner, 1982; van Gennepe, 1960; Rappaport, 1999).

A performative approach gives insight into the strategic and carefully orchestrated performance of rituals. Through their appropriation, rituals can exercise persuasive power and are thus essentially rhetorical, using materiality, aesthetics, and poetics to sway an audience (Giesen, 2006; Kornberger, 2013; Sillince and Barker, 2012). This typifies them as situated

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