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A framework to study strategizing activities at the field level: The example of CSR rating agencies

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ABSTRACT

This paper responds to recent calls to bridge strategy and organization research by combining Strategy-as-Practice and Neo-Institutional Theory through re-theorizing the notion of strategic actor. We problematize the notion of strategic actor at the field level, and rely on insights from management and organization studies and sociology to advance a theoretical framework that conceptualizes organizations as social actors at the field level. We demonstrate our theoretical framework by drawing on corporate social responsibility rating agencies. We see corporate social responsibility rating agencies as supra-individual, social actors that are predisposed to assume an active role in defining and revisiting structural parameters within the society through their purposeful, meaningful actions and interactions. Our main contribution is to the development of the Strategy-as-Practice literature, achieved by re-theorizing the notion of strategic actor at the field level. This contribution responds to the micro-isolationism critique, and proposes a new focus for Strategy-as Practice research.

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1. Introduction

In the past decade, Strategy-as-Practice research (SaP) had moved away from a view of strategy dominated by micro-economics, and conducted research into individuals' roles in strategizing (Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008). Strategy, according to this strand of research, is the doing of social actors (Balogun, Jarzabkowski, & Seidl, 2007; Johnson, Melin, & Whittington, 2003). SaP research has therefore been preoccupied with strategizing praxis at the individual level (Carter, Clegg, & Kornberger, 2008) leading to research papers criticized for their micro-isolationism (Seidl & Whittington, 2014), i.e. a self-imposed limitation to the individual, micro level.

In their recent call, Suddaby and colleagues invited researchers to adopt complementarities from Neo-Institutional Theory (NIT) to balance the SaP research agenda towards macro-level issues (Suddaby, Seidl, & Lê, 2013). In this paper we take up this invitation and ask: how could we combine NIT and SaP to address the long-standing micro-isolationism critique of SaP? Our response involves seeking complementarities from NIT to challenge one of the taken-

for-granted assumptions within SaP that strategizing activities are carried out by individuals. The present paper re-theorizes strategic actors as a way to combine the two perspectives (Suddaby et al., 2013), thus responding to the micro-isolationism critique of SaP (Carter et al., 2008; Seidl & Whittington, 2014).

Our re-theorization relies on recent developments in management and organization studies (King, Felin, & Whetten, 2010) and on sociological perspectives (Bhaskar, 1979; Cohen, 1989; Geser, 1992, 2002; Giddens, 1984; Stones, 2005) to argue that many organizations act as social actors, separate from the individual social actors who constitute them. We support the SaP thesis in believing that strategy is not a static property possessed by organizations, but is continuously created in strategy work (Jarzabkowski, Spee, & Smets, 2013) and embedded in the actions and interactions of social actors (Jarzabkowski, 2004). However, we propose that strategy could be seen as something that organizations, not solely the individuals belonging to them, do (King et al., 2010). In order to understand strategizing activities of organizations, we mobilize the work on supra-individual actors (Geser, 1992, 2002) and the notion of position-practices (Bhaskar, 1979; Cohen, 1989; Stones, 2005) at the 'field' level (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). By doing so, we unravel the characteristics of organizations as social actors (King et al., 2010) as opposed to economic actors who seek profit maximization above all (Chandler, 1962; Porter, 1980). To explicate our conceptual framework, we use the

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example of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) rating agencies revealing how these agencies can be seen to engage in strategizing behaviors with other social actors within the society. This application is not meant to be an empirical investigation, but rather as a way to exemplify our conceptual framework.

Recently, a handful of papers have combined the two perspectives (SaP and NIT) by simultaneously borrowing concepts from both sides to study a phenomenon of interest (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013; Smets, Jarzabkowski, Burke, & Spee, 2015; Smets, Morris, & Greenwood, 2012). This paper, by contrast, combines the two approaches to take a critical stance on a taken-for-granted assumption in SaP. Our main contributions to the SaP literature are: 1) re-theorizing the notion of strategic actor at the field level, proposing a new focus of research; 2) offering a response to the long-standing criticism of SaP of being absorbed by the individual level; and 3) elaborating a theoretical framework to combine SaP and NIT in a way that goes beyond borrowing concepts from both sides. NIT scholars may see our conceptual development as one way to explain how some organizations escape isomorphism. We also believe that the exemplification of our theoretical development opens interesting perspectives for studying CSR rating agencies, as social actors, from different aspects. This new proposition stands in contrast to the current focus in the literature on CSR rating agencies' data to operationalize the Corporate Social Performance (CSP) construct.

This paper proceeds in four main sections. First, we briefly revisit SaP and NIT to iterate their primary focus on the individual and institutional levels respectively; this revisit doesn't therefore aim to provide a comprehensive review of these two literature streams. The discussion then shifts to current studies that combine the two perspectives. Second, we discuss the core theoretical concepts underpinning our conceptual framework (Fig. 1). We turn to the work of King et al. (2010) to establish the ontological foundations of theorizing organizations as social actors. We then elaborate these ontological foundations by turning to social theory, particularly the notions of supra-individual actors (Geser, 1992, 2002) and position-practices (Bhaskar, 1979; Cohen, 1989; Stones, 2005). The third section exemplifies our framework by drawing on the actions and interactions of CSR rating agencies. The last section offers a discussion of our theoretical development and a conclusion.

2. On combining strategy-as-practice and neo-institutional theory

2.1. Strategy-as-practice

Recently, strategy research has paid more attention to the 'doing' of strategy (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Mantere, 2005; Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Whittington, 2003). Thus, the SaP perspective uses the term 'strategizing' to refer to the actions and interactions related to strategy work (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007), seeing strategy as a "situated, socially accomplished activity" and a "goal-oriented activity within an organization" (Jarzabkowski, 2005, pp. 7–8). Strategizing comprises the continuous, purposeful movement towards and along organizational strategies and goals that involves meaningful actions carried out by social actors (Whittington & Melin, 2003, p. 35). Strategizing, then, can be viewed as a "culturally shaped accomplishment attained through historically and culturally transmitted social practices and involving dispositions, propensities and tendencies" (Chia & MacKay, 2007, p. 23).

SaP has been considered as a welcomed move from an economics-based to a social-based view of strategy (Vaara &

Whittington, 2012). When SaP scholars investigate strategizing within organizations, they draw extensively on social practice theories such as structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), Foucault's (1982) work, and the works of Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Nice, 1977; Bourdieu, 1990). Through its focus on social actors and their roles in the strategizing process, SaP has been naturally preoccupied with the practices and praxes of individuals, or aggregates of individuals, at different organizational levels (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009).

First, SaP empirical research has been looking at traditional strategy actors, such as top managers and consultants. We are now more informed about the roles and interactions of senior management teams to formulate strategy (e.g. Angwin, Paroutis & Mitson, 2009; Jarzabkowski, 2008), how managers develop and deploy issue-selling techniques during strategy formulation (Howard-Grenville, 2007), the engagement of top managers and external consultants during business dinners (Sturdy, Schwartz, & Spicer, 2006), the discursive movements of consultants to influence strategy (Laine & Varra, 2007), and how managers' use of presentation slides influences the outcomes of strategy meetings (Kaplan, 2011). SaP scholars equally paid a special attention to the roles, actions and interactions of these important strategic actors during strategy formulating episodes, such as meetings and strategy away days (e.g. Bourque & Johnson, 2008; Hendry & Seidl, 2003; Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008).

Second, SaP shed an important light on the strategic practices and praxes of previously-neglected social actors. An impressive body of work has been produced on the roles and activities of middle managers in strategy formulation and implementation, as champions of strategy (Mantere, 2005), skillful sellers of strategic change (Rouleau, 2005) and skilled interpreters of strategy (Suominen & Mantere, 2010). Researchers in this stream have unearthed some conditions under which middle managers become more active participants in strategy (Hoon, 2007; Mantere, 2008). Furthermore, strategic actors at the peripheries are attracting more attention from SaP scholars. A recent study discussed how the day-to-day practices of museum guides play a role in delivering the strategy of their organizations (Balogun, Best, & Lê, 2015), and another illustrated how insurance brokers drew on institutional logics in their day-to-day practices (Smets et al., 2015).

SaP studies overall share a fascination with the detailed, nitty-gritty work of managers as they go about their daily routines. Even when studying an aggregate of individual actors, SaP researchers tend to stay within organizational boundaries. For example, Balogun and Johnson (2005) study looks at sensemaking among a group of middle managers within the company, describing how existing organizational schemata are altered, reinforced and merged as middle managers enact their agency, and Herepath's study (2014) examines the influence of political landscape on the strategizing practices of a group of top managers within the National Health Service. As a result, SaP has been accused of overwhelmingly focusing on the individual, and the micro level of analysis. Positioned too close to the managers and their conduct, SaP research risks losing connections with the wider societal context; and the ability to reflect on the overall value and consequences of the organization strategy (Carter, 2013). This fascination with the micro level could perhaps be seen originating from an early turn in SaP, when Johnson et al. (2003, p. 14) declared in a seminal work "it's time to shift the strategy research agenda towards the micro", thus inviting studies that examine micro-activities that have strategic outcomes. More recently, this tendency has been described as 'micro-myopia' (Vaara & Whittington, 2012, p. 28) or 'micro-isolationism' (Seidl & Whittington, 2014). These terms capture how SaP researchers zoom in on the micro level without sufficient consideration for macro level impact and

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