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# On the dynamics of fluidity and open-endedness of strategy process toward a strategy-as-practicing conceptualization

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## KEYWORDS

Strategy-as-practice;  
Process;  
Temporal relationality;  
Lived experience;  
Entwinement

**Abstract** The paper aims to contribute to the advancement of our understanding of how strategy practice processually unfolds. It directs attention to temporal relationality, accounting for a philosophical contextualization of practice in the application of the lived experience perspective. As pointed out, practitioners entwine with activities that constitute a nonlinear fluid and open strategy process. It accords to future-oriented movements a dimension of a past, and a dimension of a future to past-oriented movements. What is crucial are not linearity, event, cause, and an entity that moves but present future-oriented and present past-oriented movements, chiseled out by nouns and verbs and their interlinks. Present–future and present–past orientations also account for the iterational, projective and practical-evaluative dimensions of temporal relationality.

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## Introduction

The strategy-as-practice field has attracted a rich body of empirical and theoretical work (Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl, & Vaara, 2010; Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Vaara & Whittington, 2012) but largely unattended are processual dynamics of fluidity and open-endedness (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) with a concern for temporal relationality and existential entwinement. To contribute to the advancement of our understanding of how strategy practice *processually* unfolds, the paper builds on a lived experience perspective and elaborates on temporal variability, exposed through the ways in which practitioners intimately entwine with a world of practice.

The aim of the paper is threefold. First, to philosophically contextualize practice, clearly presenting the ontological viewpoint from which process dynamics of fluidity and open-endedness are elevated and ensure that it permeates the entire study presented in the paper. Second, to illustrate empirically temporal movements inherent in practice (activities) with which practitioners entwine and highlight temporal-relational dimensions. Third, to suggest a conceptualization of strategy practice that accounts for a philosophically contextualized temporal relationality.

As pointed out, temporal relationality refers to practitioners' variable orientations within flows of time (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Entwinement entails a focus on the practitioner's experience as *lived* – as an ongoing integrative process in which the practitioner always relates to others and a cultural past (Gadamer, 1989). Endowed with an existential entwinement dimension (Sandberg & Dall'Alba, 2009), temporal relationality thus conveys the notion of *lived*, unveiled in

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future-oriented as well as nonlinear, simultaneous and overlapping temporal orientations as the paper exhibits.

The practice turn in contemporary social theory and the concomitant interest in strategy as activity mainly adhere to a view of time that devoid of the 'lived' dimension suggests purposiveness and future orientation with a focus on practitioner, praxis and practice (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007; Whittington, 2006, 2007). The practitioner is a strategist who performs praxis and carries practice. Praxis refers to micro-daily activities with 'strategy-making' used as an umbrella term, and practice to the socio-historical and macro-institutional embeddedness of activities (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Predominantly the organization serves as the locus of strategy (Tsoukas, 2010).

This paper calls for a view of practice as a nexus of activities (Schatzki, 1996) extending from the practitioners' existential situations (Chia & Holt, 2006; Chia, 2004) and as sustained by a mutual concern among the practitioners by their responses to one another as they interact (Fichtner, 1999). No analytical division is made between practitioner, praxis and practice as activity is regarded as a dimension of practice and human coexistences (sociality). 'The variable-ness and complexity of these coexistences ensure that sociality writ large is a vast *Zusammenhang* of lives that modulates across social space and time', as Schatzki (1996: p. 173) posits. In other words, this *Zusammenhang*, which nearest refers to a context-forming hanging-togetherness, according to Schatzki, conveys that practitioners are historically cultural and temporally constituted.

There is no organization 'out there', pre-defining a context *within* which strategic activities are performed but a world of practice with which practitioners entwine (Ericson, 2007, 2010). It conveys the relational idea concerned with how people come to be and interactively know a world (Fletcher, 2007). Relationality is a distinctive feature of practice, entailing 'the latent primacy of relations and practices over the individual or organization', Chia and Holt (2006: p. 638) maintain. 'Relationality invites us to see the world as the movement of relationships between things rather than the things themselves as static or quasi-static structures', adds Cooper (2005: p. 1708).

The paper is organized as follows. The next section focuses on how process is portrayed in previous research on strategy practice and devotes special interest to philosophical contextualization. Then, the lived experience perspective is outlined, opening up to temporal relationality, followed by the presentation of the method. Thereafter the empirical example elevates process dynamics of fluidity and open-endedness in connection with theory that directs attention to nouns and verbs, and temporal dimensions. The concluding discussion further elaborates on temporal relationality, proposing a strategy-as-practicing conceptualization.

## Process in research on strategy practice

Strategy-as-practice research contributes with important insights into practice, praxis, and the role and identity of practitioners. It enriches traditional strategy research by drawing on sociological theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens, extending the range of outcomes beyond economic performance to the performance of

individual practitioners such as executives, middle managers, board members and consultants, and their crafting skills (Nordqvist & Melin, 2008), using a variety of qualitative methods (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). To further enrich strategy-as-practice research, emergent strategies must gain a more central role, Vaara and Whittington remark. It is important to address the unceasing transformation of process in the articulation of a non-sequential and dynamic conceptualization (Nayak, 2008) and, as argued in this paper, consider temporality in its variability under the assumption that practitioners entwine with the world (Sandberg & Dall'Alba, 2009). The emergent character of strategy practice has been analyzed to some extent (e.g. Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Dougherty, 2004; Giraudeau, 2008; Hendry, Kiel, & Nicholson, 2010; Jørgensen & Messner, 2010; Stensaker & Falkenberg, 2007) but studies explicitly addressing the time dimension are rare and notably lacking are studies that attend to temporality in its sense of lived time (Van Manen, 1990). Studies have incorporated time explicitly in relation to structures, and interpretations of the past, present and future, and in a less explicit manner with a focus on the historical embeddedness of practice and on different dynamics, including dynamics constituting in discourse. This section points to these studies and closes with a note on philosophical contextualization

Adopting a practice-based perspective on time, Orlikowski and Yates (2002) relate to temporal structures such as weekly meeting schedules, project deadlines and people's daily rhythm of participation in a project, highlighting linear and cyclical time aspects. Kaplan and Orlikowski (2013) direct attention to time in consideration of temporal embeddedness (e.g. Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). They focus on a dynamic set of strategy-making practices called temporal work produced in the course of everyday organizational action. Their development of chronologies reveals that managers negotiate and resolve differences in interpretations of the past, present and future. The past is seen as 'a resource for actors' negotiations across interpretative differences', and as 'a cage of constrains' (p. 31).

This section further exhibits that there is awareness of the influence of a historically embedded temporality on present strategic activity. This is especially apparent in studies of socio-cultural codes (Rouleau, 2005), sedimentation of social praxis into practices of replicating routines (Campbell-Hunt, 2007), learning dynamics in terms of practicing attempts embedded in practice (Antonacopoulou, 2006), and with regard to an organization's predisposition to act path-dependently (Jarzabkowski, 2004). An additional example is Gomez and Bouty's (2011) study on habitualized trajectories, promoting an understanding of emergence as the encounter between the history of a practice and the personal history of an agent. Following Bourdieu (1990), they build on the notion of *habitus*, stressing the relationships between agents and the agents' dispositions and beliefs developed in the field. 'Field' designates a social microcosmos in the macrocosmos of society, structured and organized through time.

Without taking the notion of time explicitly, practice-based studies probe into dynamics with a focus on strategy process, the practical activity and tools that make strategy process happens. Regnér (2003) directs attention to the dynamics of purposive mindless coping of managers at the periphery of the organization and purposeful goal-directed

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