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Robert Chia and Brad MacKay

ABSTRACT

The recent turn to 'strategy practice' offers a genuine opportunity for establishing an alternative perspective that is clearly distinct from the traditional strategy process view. The challenge is to clarify and articulate an alternative set of ontological and epistemological premises for founding this new approach to theorizing strategy. What has been called the 'practice turn' in social theory provides this alternative basis for a 'post-processual' approach to theorizing strategy-as-practice. This 'practice turn' involves a radical reformulation of the intractable problem of agency and structure that enables us to bypass the 'micro/macro' distinction so intimately tied to the social sciences in general and to strategy research in particular. Already, there are signs that the discourse of the strategy-as-practice research community reflects this awareness and are thus straining towards some form of 'trans-individual' explanation that is not restricted to the mere 'activities' of strategy actors nor to the traditional emphasis on macro-structures and processes. This article contributes to the clarification of some of the underlying premises of current strategy theorizing and shows how the strategy-as-practice perspective can further differentiate itself from the strategy process view. From the social practices viewpoint, everyday strategy practices are discernible patterns of actions arising from habituated tendencies and internalized dispositions rather than from deliberate, purposeful goal-setting initiatives. We term this epistemological

stance 'post-processual'. Such a post-processual world-view offers a revised understanding of strategy emergence that has profound explanatory implications for the strategy-as-practice movement.

KEYWORDS dwelling ■ immanent logic ■ methodological individualism ■ post-processual ■ sociality of inertia ■ trans-individual

Introduction

Strategy researchers have become increasingly interested in getting into the 'bowels' of strategy-making. This interest shifts the focus of strategy research to a close scrutiny of the micro-processes, practices and activities that have been surreptitiously overlooked in traditional strategy research. Arguably, Pettigrew (1985) and Johnson (1987) planted the seeds of this new paradigm with their strategy process work in the 1980s. Extending this earlier work, Johnson et al. (2003) and Jarzabkowski (2004) have more recently articulated the research priorities of a strategy-as-practice (s-as-p) perspective that emphasizes a micro-'activities-based' approach to understanding strategy and how managers strategize. This shift in attention reflects a steady stream of scholarly research that has increasingly directed attention to the importance of attending to the micro-social practices within organizations (Knights & Morgan, 1991; Barry & Elmes, 1998; Oakes et al., 1998; Hendry, 2000; Levy et al., 2003; Whittington et al., 2003; Ezzamel & Willmott, 2004) and the micro-practices of strategy-making analysed in this article (Whittington, 2002, 2006; Balogun et al., 2003; Hendry & Seidl, 2003; Regné, 2003; Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Jarzabkowski, 2004, 2005). Some of the key elements of the emerging s-as-p approach include focusing on: 'where and how is the work of strategizing and organizing actually done; who does this strategizing and organizing work; what are the skills required for this work and how are they acquired?' (Whittington, 2002: 119). According to these s-as-p advocates, strategy process studies have tended to view strategic decision-making as whole processes and have thus tended to be less attentive to the mundane micro-activities that constitute the actual doing of strategy (Whittington, 1996).

S-as-p advocates are to be applauded for insisting on probing into what has been called the 'black box' (Nelson, 1991: 64) of the organization and for thereby redirecting attention to the internal life of organizational micro-processes themselves (Brown & Duguid, 1991, 2000). To sustain the momentum of this initiative, we argue here that more secure theoretical

grounding, both philosophically and methodologically, is needed to further clarify and differentiate the practice perspective from the strategy process research agenda. At present, activities, practices, and processes are sometimes treated interchangeably and viewed as ultimately epi-phenomenal and hence reducible to the actions and intentions of individual agents. Such a sharing of a basic philosophical presupposition with the process approach creates a number of conceptual tensions for the s-as-p perspective. First, there is, at times, a basic lack of clarity about what practice really is in relation to processes and individual activities. Second, because practice, like micro-processes or activities, are conceptually construed as epi-phenomena of individual/organizational agents, the presupposition is that practices are what actors 'do'; individual agents are initiators of practices rather than themselves products of social practice. The tendency, therefore, is for the basic locus of analysis in strategy-making to remain the individual, or the individual organization rather than the social practice itself. Third, it is not clear whether the s-as-p approach is seeking to assert itself as a unique perspective in its own right or whether it is merely seeking to extend the strategy process perspective. Whilst it ostensibly seeks to differentiate itself from the strategy process perspective, the 'theory-in-use' (Argyris & Schön, 1974: 6–7) of the s-as-p perspective contains residual philosophical inconsistencies with that of the former. At the present state of its theoretical development, the s-as-p perspective has now an opportunity to progress strategy scholarship clearly beyond being a mere extension of the process perspective. This is something that several of the studies reviewed in this article have already begun to do.

This article seeks to contribute to the furtherance of this s-as-p perspective. It does so by firmly re-grounding this approach in a social theory of practice that eschews *methodological individualism*, and that unwaveringly focuses on social practices themselves as the basis for explaining strategy emergence. In its most elemental form, methodological individualism presumes that every individual is a discrete, bounded entity that relates to its environment along lines of contact that 'leaves its basic, internally specified nature unaffected' (Ingold, 2000: 3). The argument builds on recent work (Chia, 2004; Chia & Holt, 2006) that has sought to import sensibilities from the practice turn in philosophy and social theory into the emerging s-as-p perspective. Extending this work, the term *post-processual* is developed here as a reference point for a view of practices, which deems events, individuals and doings to be manifest instantiations of practice-complexes; ontological priority is accorded to an *immanent logic of practice* rather than to actors and agents. For us, it is this immanent logic emerging through practice which constitutes what we mean by strategy. As such, a genuine practice-based

theory of strategy emergence must put these practice complexes at the centre of theoretical analysis.

The article begins by summarizing literature on the strategy process perspective. It then goes on to review and compare the emerging s-as-p perspective with that of strategy process research. This is followed by a clarification of the underlying philosophical presuppositions shaping the process perspective and identifying residual consistencies that the s-as-p perspective shares with the theoretical commitments of the former. The article continues on to examine the philosophical challenges and opportunities for developing a genuine practice view of social phenomena and outlines an alternative set of philosophical presuppositions that are more consistent with the practice turn in social theory and philosophy. We conclude by considering the explanatory implications of this shift for theorizing strategy-as-practice and by showing that the distinctiveness of this s-as-p perspective is best secured in rooting strategy in the logic of practice itself.

The 'strategy-as-process' perspective

The distinction between strategy *content* and strategy *process* research has been well made (Bourgeois, 1980). Whilst strategy content research focuses on the question of *what* strategic decisions are taken, strategy process research examines *how* a particular organizational strategy emerges. Strategy content research has traditionally, although not exclusively, studied organizations from a distance through a reliance on secondary published data of organizations (Chakravarthy & Doz, 1992). It is predicated upon a variance model of explanation (Mohr, 1982) that uses contingency thinking (e.g. Porter, 1980, 1985) and the language of states and positions to conceptualize the 'fit' between the resource base of an organization and its strategic location within a competitive environment (Webb & Pettigrew, 1999). This approach has been criticized for being too 'coarse-grained' (Tsoukas, 2005: 344) to capture the actual goings-on in strategy-making (Chia & Holt, 2006). According to the critics, developing typologies of strategic content (e.g. Ansoff, 1987; Porter, 1980) may provide useful analytic metaphors, but they do not capture the complex and dynamic relationship between strategy content and strategy context (Webb & Pettigrew, 1999).

Strategy process research, by contrast, seeks to capture the internal reality of organizations 'in flight'. Issues relating to 'time, agency, structure, context, emergence and development' (Pettigrew, 1997: 337) are central to

this ostensibly 'processual' approach to strategy theorizing. In seeking to capture the dynamic and evolving qualities of human conduct in organized settings the process perspective is underpinned by the premise that it is the basic strengths of everyday operations that drive strategy process and emergence (Whittington, 2001). In an earlier article, Van de Ven (1992) examined three senses of what 'process' might mean within the context of strategy research. First, it may confusingly describe a causal logic used to explain relationships in variance theory. Second, it may be used as a category to describe the 'activities' of individuals or organizations. Third, it may be construed as a sequence of events that describe how things *change* over time. Both the second and third of these categories of explanation are adopted in the strategy process approach. Pettigrew, for instance, defines process as 'a sequence of individual and collective events, actions, and activities unfolding over time in context' (Pettigrew, 1997: 337). For him, social reality is not a steady state. Therefore five key analytical presuppositions are to be adopted in researching strategy processes: first, processes are deemed to be embedded in context; second, processes are viewed as temporally interconnected; third, context and actions are taken as interacting with one another; fourth, processes are linked to outcomes; and fifth, holistic, rather than linear explanations of process are to be preferred.

In most cases, processual research is conducted through longitudinal comparative case studies over time and in context. Pettigrew (1985), for example, used such a method to analyse change and continuity in Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI), as did Johnson in his investigation into the complexities of strategic change over time within the internal cultural context of Coopers, a retailing organization (Johnson, 1987, 1988). Indeed, this longitudinal approach to studying the dynamic and behavioural aspects of organizational processes, with some exceptions (see, for example, Chakravarthy et al. [2003] and Floyd et al. [2004] for some recent developments in the field), continues to be a methodological mainstay in process strategy research. From this processual perspective, strategy emergence is deemed to be continuous and changing, patterned and idiosyncratic, individualistic and group oriented (Pettigrew, 1987). It tends to focus on the activities of individuals and organizations, and the sequence of events and causal relationships that lead to organizational change (Van de Ven, 1992).

The strategy process perspective is not without its limitations and criticisms. Researchers such as Pettigrew acknowledge that qualitative research, particularly when it lacks explicitness of a theory of method, can be vulnerable to having the reliability and validity of its knowledge base challenged (Pettigrew, 1997). Further critiques of strategy process research have begun

to emerge from the s-as-p community. Whittington, for instance, contends that the main focus of processual research continues to be the whole organization and not enough is said about the ‘unheroic work of ordinary strategic practitioners in their day-to-day routines’ (Whittington, 1996: 734). Johnson et al. (2003) echo observations made by other s-as-p researchers who charge that despite the contributions made by strategy process studies, not enough is understood about the unique characteristics and micro-level particulars of managerial activity (Balogun et al., 2003; Regné, 2003). To study these practices, Balogun et al. argue, ‘complementary methods providing more breadth and flexibility’ are required (2003: 197). As Whittington puts it: ‘Methodological pluralism will make for faster progress’ (Whittington, 2002: 119; Balogun et al., 2003).

In sum, while recognizing that strategy process research has helped to humanize the strategy field and to resituate strategy as an organizational phenomenon, Johnson et al. (2003) contend that it still glosses over the actual tools and practical activities and consequently the role of managerial agency in these processes. In other words, in strategy process research, the active role of the individual agent in strategy formulation remains understated. Others have tended to view strategy process research and s-as-p in more complementary terms suggesting that whilst strategy process research concentrates on the ‘reciprocal relationships between managerial action and context’, the focus of strategy practice research is on managers and on the routines and procedures used to enact strategy (Jarzabkowski & Wilson, 2002: 356). We can therefore see from this brief overview of the strategy process literature that whilst it clearly distances itself from the strategy content perspective, its relationship with the emergent s-as-p perspective remains unclear.

The ‘strategy-as-practice’ perspective

The s-as-p approach construes strategy as a ‘social practice’ (Whittington, 1996: 731). Although the s-as-p perspective shares many of the insights of earlier processual work (e.g. Pettigrew, 1985; Johnson, 1987), the practice perspective reorients strategy research towards the work, talk, activities and competencies of individual managers as strategists. Rather than focusing on the core competence of the organization *as a whole*, it looks at competence in terms of ‘how managers “do strategy”’ (Whittington, 1996: 732, 2002). The s-as-p perspective and traditional strategy process research are not necessarily incommensurate with one another (Jarzabkowski & Wilson, 2002). Where the practice perspective diverges from the process perspective

is that it calls for greater emphasis on understanding the minutiae of both the micro-processes and practices of strategizing. This has led some to call this emerging approach to the study of strategy as the 'activity-based view of strategy' (Johnson et al., 2003: 3–4; Jarzabkowski, 2005: 4–5).

Strategy-as-practice scholars concentrate their attention on the day-to-day activities of actors and on how these actors and their activities interact with context (Jarzabkowski, 2003). As an alternative to focusing on organizations, change and abstract macro-processes, the practice perspective focuses on people, routines and situated activities (Whittington, 2002). This turn towards practice echoes calls for more research into the organizational practices and routines that constitute 'the internal life of process' (Brown & Duguid, 2000; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Whittington, 2002: 119; Feldman & Pentland, 2003). To this end, several studies have been initiated including research into: the successes and failures in strategizing processes (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2003); the construction of social order and the use of language and discourse in shaping strategic direction (Samra-Fredericks, 2003); a longitudinal case study into an engineering firm, which found that evolutionary processes were driven by a recombination of core micro-strategies, micro-processes and micro-behaviours (Salvato, 2003); and, the development of specific skills and the career patterns of strategy practitioners (Hendry & Seidl, 2003). These contributions reflect the call for a more 'innovative and multidisciplinary approach for the study of everyday practice' (Samra-Fredericks, 2003: 167) and have led to a change of focus, methods and in many cases, unit of analysis of strategy process research. It has also changed the discourse by which strategy research is explained and communicated.

New terms and phrases such as: 'activity-based view', 'core micro-strategies', 'micro-activities', 'micro-behavioural', 'micro-contexts', 'micro-level processes', 'micro-practices', 'micro-perspective', 'micro-sociological', 'practice approach', 'strategic activities', 'strategic practices', and 'nitty-gritty' (Whittington, 1996: 732; Balogun et al., 2003: 198; Hendry & Seidl, 2003: 176, 188; Jarzabkowski, 2003: 23, 2004: 529, 2005: 40; Johnson et al., 2003: 3–4; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2003: 110; Regnér, 2003: 72; Salvato, 2003: 84–5; Samra-Fredericks, 2003: 169) all direct attention away from macro-processes to varying aspects of the minutiae of strategizing. There is clearly a straining towards a revised vocabulary for theorizing strategy practice. Yet, the overall impression remains that practices are essentially micro-processes; the actual activities performed by *individuals* within organized contexts. For instance, in their study of the top management team (TMT) at Warwick University, Jarzabkowski and Wilson analyse both practices and processes through an in-depth case study gathering data from

archival research, diaries, ethnographic research, interviews and observation (Jarzabkowski & Wilson, 2002). They found that Warwick's TMT successes were due, in part, to contextually meaningful and logically case-specific patterns and practices of planning, particularly budgetary planning. Their investigation into the interplay between patterns of action within the organizational context and localized routines at Warwick University is clearly an attempt to extend rather than replace the processual perspective as they themselves acknowledge.

Other s-as-p studies examined strategic process failures in a major British symphony orchestra (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2003), strategy creation at the periphery (Regnér, 2003), the relationship between continuity and change of strategy practices in three university TMTs (Jarzabkowski, 2003), and the relational-rhetorical basis of strategy as 'lived' experience (Samra-Fredericks, 2003). These undoubtedly insightful studies were primarily concerned with how 'strategy emerges from the interactions between actors and their contexts' (Jarzabkowski, 2003: 49). Their main focus is on the micro-activities of individual actors acting in context. However, by overly focusing on the micro-activities the *micro-macro* distinction remains intact and the subsequent problem of linking individual actions to macro-outcomes ensues. Such a theoretical approach is reminiscent of earlier process studies where, for example, Pettigrew constructed multilevel theories and models 'of higher-level factors and processes, lower-level factors and processes, and the manner in which they interact' (Pettigrew, 1987: 657). A reliance on the micro-macro distinction is intimately tied to the presumptions of *methodological individualism* where macro-entities are construed as aggregations of micro-entities: a form of social *atomism* is implied.

The opportunity presented by the recent turn to 'practice' in philosophy and social theory is to encourage focusing on the patterned *consistency* of actions emerging from such interactions rather than on the micro-activities of individual strategy agents. This is the implication of the practice turn in social theory. Such an attempt to progress the s-as-p perspective would rejoin it with the question of strategy that Mintzberg and Waters (1985) first explored when they saw the latter as a *discernible pattern* emerging in a stream of actions. It is precisely this attempt to overcome the need for a micro-macro distinction which has motivated the 'practice turn' in social theory and philosophy. What the practice turn does is to 'flatten' such macro-micro distinctions by insisting on the primacy of a dynamic and emerging field of practices as the starting point for social analysis. Now, both micro- and macro-entities are viewed as secondary stabilized instantiations of practice-complexes: individual agency and/or structure are no longer accorded ontological primacy in this explanatory scheme of things. It is this more philosophically informed notion of social

practice as a genuine viable alternative to the agency/structure debate and hence the micro–macro distinction that we develop and defend in this article.

To review the argument thus far, an opportunity exists for the s-as-p perspective to establish a strategy paradigm that goes beyond that of a sympathetic extension of the strategy process perspective as construed through Johnson (1987, 1988), Pettigrew (1992, 1997) and Van de Ven (1992). The starting point is a rejection of the tenets of *methodological individualism* as well as the ‘micro/macro’ couplets associated with this dominant paradigm of analysis. Despite the apparent emergence of a practice discourse, the philosophical commitments of s-as-p appear to retain some residual consistencies with a strategy process research view in upholding these deeply entrenched dualisms. We argue here that one way of clearly differentiating theoretically the s-as-p perspective from the strategy process perspective is by renouncing these dualisms in favour of the primacy of social practice. This would make the s-as-p perspective clearly distinct from the process perspective. In what follows, we attempt to pin down the key philosophical presuppositions of strategy process research that we feel present the most challenging obstacles for establishing a genuine practice-based approach to theorizing s-as-p.

Underlying philosophical presuppositions of strategy process research and the strategy-as-practice perspective

As identified in the previous section, there are several philosophical presuppositions that underpin scholarship in strategy process research and, for the most part, the s-as-p perspective. In what follows, we identify four such presuppositions inherent in these accounts.

First, processes and practices are generally construed as purposeful activities *of* individuals/organizations. This ‘process reducibility thesis’ (Rescher, 1996: 27) deems all processes and practices to be reducible to the actions of actors and things. In this way, individual agency is given ontological primacy over activities, processes and practices and the individual is therefore assumed to be the *initiator* of such activities, processes and practices. Causal efficacy is attributed to the former. The forces of change are, therefore, not viewed as *immanent* in things and human situations but rather externally imposed by the will of conscious actors. Changes are only brought about through the active, deliberate intentions and actions of individuals. The flourishing s-as-p perspective appears to subscribe to this ontological posture. For instance, Salvato suggests that organizational processes resulting in strategic variation are a consequence of ‘*deliberate*

managerial acts leading to innovative business projects' (2003: 101, our emphasis). Similarly, Samra-Fredericks, in her very insightful study of strategizing as lived experience, focuses on a community of *six core strategists*, their talk, acts of persuasion and a number of specific decisions and outcomes (2003). In all this, however, her focus remains the actions of individuals who are taken to be the authors of strategic change. The possibility that strategic change and the directions taken may be brought about by culturally and historically shaped tendencies and dispositions acquired through social practices internalized by the actors remains relatively unexamined. In a final example, Maitlis and Lawrence, in their study of a failure in organizational strategizing, highlight the role of assigning blame for an organization's problems 'as well as (the) search for *someone* to move the process forward' (2003: 129, our emphasis). The idea that there may be an immanent logic of a situation, a 'propensity of things' (Jullien, 1999: 27) that provides an element of directionality and that moves things along in a more-or-less predictable manner; what Bourdieu (1990) calls a 'sociality of inertia', is not entertained in this explanatory schema. Such an immanent logic that gives consistency to the flow of actions that ensues is what we might begin to re-construe as the essence of strategy-as-practice.

Without the incorporation of this insight from the 'practice turn' when s-as-p scholars use terms such as micro-processes or micro-practices, they refer mainly to the purposeful activities of conscious agents and not so much to these *trans-individual* social practices. When they do so, they remain within the realms of *methodological individualism*; the individual is viewed as a self-contained, self-motivating human agent who *acts* on its external environment. Most explanations of strategic behaviour can be traced back to this conception of individual agency; individual actions constitute practice and this produces events, situations and outcomes. However, as a number of social theorists including de Certeau have emphasized this theoretical approach to explaining social practices is unwarranted:

The examination of . . . practices does not (require nor) imply . . . individuality. The social atomism . . . on the basis of which groups are supposed to be formed . . . play no part in this (his) study . . . each individual is a locus in which an incoherent (and often contradictory) plurality of such relational determinations interact.

(de Certeau, 1984: xi)

For practice theorists it is the internalized practices or *schemata of action* (or what Bourdieu, 1990, calls *habitus*) that are the real 'authors' of everyday coping action. This kind of practical intelligence is defined by an absence of

a proper locus of agency; individuality is construed as a secondary effect of primary practice. The s-as-p perspective, we argue, can be better grounded theoretically by adopting such an understanding of practice.

Second, and consistent with this emphasis on individualism, process theorists and s-as-p researchers are particularly attentive to the explicit and articulated character of the social world, and to the manifest aspects of processes and practices. It is organizations and individuals that are seen to change so much so that change is construed as an epi-phenomenon of social entities. Viewed as such, phenomena are characterized by 'descriptive fixity' (Rescher, 1996: 35): they can be linguistically captured and accurately represented through established categories, concepts and representations. The epistemology of representationalism prevails. From this perspective, it makes every sense to study strategy process and strategy practice by longitudinally tracking the actual visible activities agents engage in organizational settings, as each study reviewed here does. Archival documents, ethnographic data, interviews, observation of proceedings at meetings, and records of talk and conversation form the basis of this form of ethnography. To capture the embodied capacities, the dispositions, know-how and tacit understanding that reside within practices themselves (Schatzki, 2001), however, requires a cultivated sensitivity to the less visible but detectable propensities and tendencies of human situations intimated above. This is because practices are not so much the visible doings of actors per se, but culturally and historically transmitted *regularities* detectable through the patterns of activities actually carried out. They are 'temporarily unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings' (Schatzki, 1996: 289) organized around 'shared practical understanding' (Schatzki, 2001: 2). It is the observed historically and culturally shaped regularities of such activities and not the activities themselves that constitute what is meant by strategy-as-practice. As such they imply *trans-individuality*; cultural transmission, socialization, institutionalized constraints, embodied mannerism, etc., play a crucial role in explaining human doings.

As an example of such a historically and culturally transmitted disposition, take the notion of regional speaking 'accents' transmitted and acquired unconsciously through immersion in a specific local community. The individual is constituted, defined and identified by his/her accents, predispositions and mannerisms and this may either prove to be strategically advantageous or disadvantageous depending on the inherent directionality of the situation he/she finds him/herself in. The individual is predisposed to behave in a particular manner and to react to strategic circumstances in a manner that is congruent with his/her own sense of upbringing and identity. In this way strategy and identity are intimately co-constitutive of each other.

In explaining strategy-as-practice, therefore, we need to be more cognizant of how such *trans-individual* forces shape outlooks and orientations and hence predispose actors towards particular strategic choices of action. The explanation of how particular strategic practices and 'choices' are arrived at can then be moderated through this understanding.

Third, coupled with the emphasis on individualism and on the observable and manifest is an epistemological assumption regarding the essential purposefulness and intentionality of human action. This is a legacy of the Enlightenment. Descartes, in particular, emphasized that for us to perceive, act and relate to objects around us there must first be some internal mental representations in the form of an image, a map or a plan. Moreover, choice of action is a central feature of this cognitive model of human action. Actors are deemed to be conscious, deliberate, goal-directed and intentional in their actions. This is especially the case with regards to strategy-making. After all, how could a strategy be called so if it is: a) unconsciously motivated, or non-deliberately formulated; b) immanent rather than transcendent and goal-oriented; c) not explicitly articulated in some representational form and hence providing a useful and observable guide to action? As Hendry and Seidl suggest, 'We cannot escape the fact, however, that even in its routine aspects strategy is explicitly concerned with the creation of *intentional, often radical change*' (2003: 177, our emphasis). As we shall show, these eminently reasonable assumptions may be overturned if we adopt a radically different set of philosophical presuppositions regarding agency and action. Deliberate intentionality is not a prerequisite for the articulation of a strategy; strategy may emerge as a consequence of the inherent predisposition of an actor to unselfconsciously respond to external circumstances in a manner that we may *retrospectively* recognize as being consistently strategic. Such a view, as with the practice turn in social theory and philosophy puts the transmission of practices rather than agency at the centre of strategic analysis.

Finally, there is an implicit or explicit subscription by both strategy process researchers and s-as-p theorists to the presuppositions of 'theoretical holism' (Dreyfus, 1991a: 5) in terms of explanatory efficacy. This posits a holistic network of intentional states, tacit belief systems and values that provide explanatory adequacy for accounting for the meaning of action. It is what inspires the rise in ethnographic studies and on the emphasis on understanding the meaning of action in context. Advocates of theoretical holism, including Pettigrew (1997), view it as being opposed to linear explanations. But this is to obviate yet another more radical possibility associated with the practice turn in philosophy and social theory; that is an alternative '*practical holism*' that eschews the primacy of mentalism, cognitivism or even intentionality in engaging with the day-to-day affairs of the world. According

to this practice view, there is no need to have recourse to beliefs, values and abstract principles in order to explain social behaviour and practice. The counterfactual implications of this practical holism for the Samra-Fredericks ethnographic study, for instance, would be to treat the activities of the six core strategists and their 'beliefs, opinions, values, assumptions, feelings, perceptions, meaning and so on' (2003: 152) as secondary retrospective rationalizations, and to go beyond the talk of strategists to show how the organizational history and situation, cultural mediation, individual socialization, internalized habits, mannerisms and tendencies shape predispositions and hence the character and direction of strategic outcomes. It is this insistence on the primacy of practice over individualities that allows us to consider s-as-p in a way that evades the trappings of methodological individualism.

Shifting the focus away from studying exclusively individual activities/events and situations, such as the actions, talk and work of strategic practitioners in workshops, strategy away-days and strategic episodes, for example, does not imply removing agency from the equation altogether. What it does mean is to assume a post-processual stance which: 1) places ontological primacy on practices rather than actors; 2) philosophically privileges practice-complexes rather than actors and things as the locus of analysis; and 3) makes the locus of explanation the field of practices rather than the intentions of individuals and organizations (see Table 1 for a comparison of processual and post-processual s-as-p perspectives on strategy and practice).

Table 1 Towards a post-processual strategy perspective

<i>Strategy perspective</i>	<i>Ontology</i>	<i>Philosophical commitment</i>	<i>Locus of engagement</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Processual	Processes are subordinate to actors	Processes are important, but ultimately reducible to things/actions	Micro–macro activities of individuals and organizations	Time, agency, structure, context, operations
Post-processual strategy-as-practice	Actors and processes are subordinate to practices	Actions and things are instantiations of practice-complexes	Field of practices	Social practices, knowledge, language, intimation, power as collective entities

This post-processual stance manifests itself in what Schatzki (2001: 3) calls a 'distinct social ontology'.

A post-processual social ontology of practice

The recent rise in interest in phenomenologically based research in strategy ostensibly points to the need to capture the subjective *lived* experiences of actors themselves through ethnographic studies (Balogun et al., 2003; Samra-Fredericks, 2003). The ethnographic study of strategizing as lived experience in a manufacturing firm by Samra-Fredericks, for instance, is both a specific example and also represents a wider call for these sorts of multidisciplinary studies into strategy (Samra-Fredericks, 2003). Yet, even in phenomenological approaches there is a vast difference between, for instance, the *transcendental* Cartesian phenomenology of Husserl with its emphasis on the detached, meaning-giving, knowing subject and the *immanent* phenomenology of Heidegger with its emphasis on *being-in-the-world*; the embodied, doing, *coping* subject (Dreyfus, 1991a). Heidegger, with his emphasis on 'Dasein', existence (1962: 42), and persistent calls to 'abandon all superficial scanning' (Lovitt, 1977: xii) sought to show that the basis of intelligibility is not mental representation, but a kind of mindless *dwelling* that precedes any subject/object distinction and hence any reliance on mental content (Dreyfus, 1991a). As such, knowing-in-practice is a more primordial form of practical engagement than the detached, abstractive form of knowing associated with mental cognition. Heidegger's philosophical expression is thus sympathetic with the recent practice turn in philosophy and social theory in its radical break with Husserl's phenomenology and the methodological individualism tied to it (see Table 2 for a broad, but by no means exhaustive, overview of contemporary theorists associated with the practice turn in philosophy and social theory).

In seeking to formulate the primacy of unconscious background practices over the deliberate, conscious intentional agent, Heidegger developed the distinction between two possible modes of existential engagement with the world, which he called *dwelling* and *building* (Heidegger, 1971; see also Chia, 2004; Chia & Holt, 2006) and emphasized the primacy of the former over the latter. Dwelling involves an intimate encounter, a *being-in-the-world* that suggests immediate *unreflective* familiarity, habit and custom. As Heidegger writes: 'Being-in . . . is an existential . . . "In" is derived from "*inn*" – "to reside", "habitare", "to dwell"' (Heidegger, 1962: 80). More simply put, being-in-the-world implies an intimate familiarity that one has 'inhabiting a home' (Thévenot, 2001: 61). Like Nietzsche (1974),

Table 2 Contemporary theorists and practice

Genre	Social theorist	Work	Analysis of practice
Philosophical practices	Wittgenstein	1958	• Emphasize non-propositional knowledge
	Dreyfus	1991a/b	• Practices underlie objects and subjects
	Taylor	1985	
Social theory and practice	Bourdieu	1977/90	• Activity is viewed as free from objectified systems and structures
	Giddens	1979/84	
	Lynch	1993	• Questions whether individual actions are the building blocks of social phenomena
	Schatzki	2001/05	
Cultural theorists	Foucault	1976/80	• Practices as non-structuralist discursive activity
	Lyotard	1984/88	• Practices are the immediate context in which social life is constituted

Source: Adapted from Schatzki (2001: 1–3).

Heidegger believed that it is through this everyday dwelling activity that we achieve some form of intelligibility and not through having ideas and mental images as Descartes presupposed and Husserl upheld (Dreyfus, 1991a). In a similar manner, Polanyi (1969) emphasizes the importance of personal knowing when he writes of the significance and primacy of *indwelling* in his discussion of tacit knowledge.

It is this insight on the primacy of *being-in-the-world* that better accounts for Bourdieu's (1990) attempt to develop an internal *logic of practice* that is alien to the transcendent logic of observation that the researcher typically employs. For us to truly understand practice, Bourdieu insists, we need to 'return to practice, the site of the dialectic of the *opus operatum* and the *modus operandi* . . . the incorporated products of historical practice', which produce systems of durable transposable dispositions that he calls 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1990: 52–3). More recently, Dreyfus (1991a), also following Heidegger, has re-emphasized the primacy of this form of mindless *non-thematic* everyday practical coping skills over mental representation. Similarly, Shotter and Katz (1996) talk of articulating practice from within practice itself and Shotter has recently made a useful distinction between 'witness thinking' and 'aboutness thinking' (Shotter, 2005: 2), the former being reminiscent of Heidegger's 'dwelling' mode. Finally, in social anthropology, writers like Ingold (2000) have attempted to use the Heideggerian notion of dwelling to develop a more internally sensitive way of understanding livelihood and skilled everyday activity. Each

one of these distinct (and somewhat dense) concepts shares one important characteristic that has implications for the s-as-p movement; they all suggest that it is agents and processes that are subordinate to, and constituted from practices and practice-complexes. Consequently, it is the unconsciously acquired practice-complexes that generate the possibilities for strategy, not so much individual consciousness and intentionality.

This focus on practical knowing, from the viewpoint of the absorbed practitioner, is what has precipitated the practice turn both in philosophy and in social theory. Bourdieu (1990), for example, maintains that practices can be better understood internally in terms of acquired habituations and predispositions that unreflectively shape our everyday responses. Notions such as 'habitus' and 'predispositions' reflect Bourdieu's concerted attempts to explain this form of non-thematic knowing-in-practice. Likewise, for Dreyfus (1991b: 27), practices are patterns of saying and doing that are 'passed on by society through individuals without necessarily passing through consciousness'. They 'do not arise from beliefs, rules or principles'. Rather, they are 'shared know-how and discriminations' (Dreyfus, 1991a: 22).

Practices orient and educate our attention, and shape our dispositions. We understand what it means to be human and how to act, not by having mental images or representations but through being socialized, often unconsciously, into certain social practices. Practices are social skills that enable us to come to know 'what it is to be a person, an object, an institution' (Dreyfus, 1991a: 17). Moreover, to ask what is our relation to the practices is to pose the question the wrong way: 'since it suggests that there is us, and then there are practices. Rather we *are* the practices. They set up a . . . space of possibilities (which) is not something that we have a relation to but, something *embodied* in us' (Dreyfus, 1991b: 27–8, emphasis in original). These background practices are like water to a fish swimming in it and a practice-oriented research must be sensitized to this transmission of background practices that give rise to the materialization of both strategy and individual identity.

Such an *internalist* way of understanding the emergence and evolution of practice is based fundamentally on a practice-sensitive set of philosophical presuppositions. First, the causal efficacy of actions is attributed to historically and culturally shaped internalized propensities and dispositions rather than to individual choices. Practices are constitutive of agency and identity and individuals, organizations, institutions, societies and *strategy* are secondary stabilized effects of such culturally transmitted social practices.

Second, human action must be understood in terms of a *sociality of inertia* – cultural transmission, socialization, institutionalization, disciplinary regimes, etc., play a crucial role in shaping an actor's *modus operandi* and hence strategy outcomes. By this we mean that hidden unconscious social forces shape and direct human intentions and actions so much so that the

idea of deliberate choice is problematized. Practices are carry-overs from a cultural tradition and so infused into our very ways of thinking, acting and knowing that they often resist cognitive conceptualization. They form the background of skilled coping capabilities that enable us to act appropriately, but not necessarily consciously in specific cultural contexts. Most of human action takes place through this form of mindless practical coping and it is only when a breakdown of coping occurs that we then become aware of the cognitive boundaries between the actor and the object of action. For instance, when pouring a glass of water from the office water cooler, or switching on our computer, we do so without being necessarily thematically conscious of this activity. Only when the water cooler is empty or the computer does not boot-up do we become thematically conscious of the problem we are faced with. Only then are our actions deliberate.

The goal-directed, deliberate strategizing that takes place in a strategic episode, as with Maitlis and Lawrence's investigation into the failure of a British symphony orchestra to develop an artistic strategy (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2003), represents an exception to the more mundane everyday practical coping that takes place. In setting the research context, for instance, Maitlis and Lawrence report that the few years prior to the study 'had been marked by considerable upheaval' (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2003: 113) thus resulting in a breakdown in practical coping. The study's focus on the strategic episode is, consequently, consistent with the s-as-p perspective's interest in the stabilizing effects of activity (Hendry & Seidl, 2003; Jarzabkowski, 2005). These attempts to conceptualize strategizing in terms of episodes with distinct and identifiable stages are, however, inconsistent with the practice turn in philosophy and social theory which are more concerned with the generation and transmission of practice complexes and the immanent regularity (or strategy) associated with them.

Third, 'the field of practice' (Schatzki, 2001: 6) is to be construed as the locus of engagement, not individual actions. Even the seemingly enduring identities and characteristics of persons are explained as the effects of the 'condensation of histories of growth and maturation within fields of social relationships' (Ingold, 2000: 3). Becoming skilled in a practice, therefore, is not simply a question of deliberately acquiring a set of generalized capabilities that can be transmitted from one individual to another, as the model presented by Salvato in a study into the role of micro-strategies in firm evolution in two companies suggests (Salvato, 2003). Rather, skills are 'regrown . . . incorporated into the *modus operandi* of the developing organism through training and experience in the performance of particular tasks' (Ingold, 2000: 5). Hence, the study of practice demands a perspective which situates the practitioner, right from the start, in the context of an active engagement with the constituents of his or her surroundings. Practices are

'non-individualistic phenomena'; a practice is not a 'collection of properties of individual people' (Schatzki, 2005: 480). They are the accomplishments of competent members of a collective (Barnes, 2001). The practice of 'acupuncture' (Barnes, 2001), for instance, is one such example of how a set of predispositions, skills and *modus operandi* are transmitted through examples, techniques, postures and acquired mannerisms, often without recourse to cognitive representation.

Having expertise in a particular field of activity in no way presupposes the ability to articulate what it is that one actually knows (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 2005). Indeed, pressing an expert practitioner for an explanation of his/her action or decision may actually be counterproductive: 'if one asks an expert for the rules he or she is using, one will, in effect, force the expert to regress to the level of a beginner and state the rules learnt in school.' Thus, when challenged to account for his/her actions or decisions, the expert strategist is 'forced to remember rules he or she no longer uses' (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 2005: 788). What this implies is that neither interviewing strategy practitioners about the reasons for their actions nor asking them to reflect on their actions, as with the use of diaries for tracking a change programme in a recently privatized utility (Balogun & Johnson, 2005), can give us assurance of the actual character of a practice. What is needed to truly appreciate 'the close understanding of the myriad, micro activities that make up strategy and strategizing in practice' (Johnson et al., 2003: 3), is a sympathetic grasping of the internal logic of this practice and this can only be done through following the apparent patterned consistency of everyday absorbed practical coping, not through retrospective reasons and meanings offered by actors themselves.

Post-processual implications for strategy-as-practice research

The articulation of a distinct social ontology consonant with the 'practice turn', contains a broader challenge and opportunity for those who would purport to speak on behalf of strategy practitioners. For those who subscribe to the practice turn in philosophy and social theory, there is an economy and logic of practice whose origins 'lie neither in the decisions of reason understood as rational calculation nor in the determinations of mechanisms external to and superior to the agents' (Bourdieu, 1990: 50). What drives practical action is not so much deliberate, conscious intention but an *embodied* 'durable transposable set of dispositions' (Bourdieu, 1990: 52, 1998: 8). Through these *embodied* dispositional tendencies skilled actions appear as a style of engagement: a generic 'strategy-generating principle' that operates *despite* and not *because of* a 'conscious aiming at ends' (Bourdieu, 1990: 53). In his fascinating study of the practice of Chinese calligraphy, for

instance, the sinologist François Jullien (1999) convincingly shows how the efficacious dispositions of the hand holding the brush and the multifarious techniques for employing the brush tips with great effect, are central to the art and practice of calligraphy and how those very same dispositions provide the basis for the strategic thinking exemplified by Sun Tzu's *Art of war*. It is such embodied dispositions; propensities to act in a manner congruent with an emergent situation that generate everyday strategic outcomes rather than deliberate goal-setting activities.

Strategy *subsists* in each and every mundane and seemingly isolated act we perform. What, oftentimes unconsciously, gives consistency and hence apparent *purposefulness* (i.e. the impression of consciousness, deliberateness, planning) to our action is this internalized style of engagement acquired through immersion into and absorption of a particular set of practices. Actions may therefore be *purposive* without there necessarily being an overall purpose in mind. To act purposively is to mindlessly cope and resolve an immediate demand at hand. To act with a purpose in mind, on the other hand, is to act according to a pre-defined desired outcome and this requires the mental act of representation (Chia & Holt, 2006). Regné's (2003) helpful uncovering of two modes of strategizing – at the periphery and at the centre of organizational attention – helps us to emphasize this distinction between purposive mindless coping and purposeful goal-directed action. Within the context of the periphery of corporate reach, strategy-making is entirely dependent on internalized efficacious dispositions rather than on any deliberate intent; they occur on-the-hoof so to speak. Because the periphery represents as-yet-uncharted terrain the only form of meaningful response that practitioners can offer to local situations are improvisations that draw from historically and culturally shaped tendencies and predispositions. In this case, strategy is immanent in such improvised coping actions. This is unlike at the centre of organizational attention where strategy-making has become relatively institutionalized and thus involves the use of deductive methods based on well-defined representations, orthodox understanding and the emphasis on exploiting known situations. At the periphery, it is based on spontaneous, heuristic and exploratory action. Here, the strategy practitioner is more akin to a football player totally immersed and caught up in the game who instinctively adjusts and responds to an:

overall assessment of the whole set of his opponents and on the whole set of his team-mates, seen not as they are but in their impending positions. And he does so 'on the spot', 'in the twinkle of an eye', 'in the heat of the moment', that is, in conditions which exclude distance, perspective, detachment and reflection.

(Bourdieu, 1990: 82)

The immersed strategy practitioner, by and large, does not have the luxury of the kind of reflective distance assumed by a researcher surveying the unfolding of events from afar. He/she is totally absorbed in the doing of strategy.

In Mintzberg's (1973) original study of five American chief executives, for instance, only 10 percent of their activities exceeded more than one hour, and half of their activities lasted less than nine minutes. There is thus little time for reflection and contemplation of action. In a diary study by Stewart (1967) of 160 British middle and top managers, it was found that they only worked for more than a half-hour without interruption every two days. Other studies (e.g. Guest, 1956; Aguilar, 1967) generated similar findings. For the strategy practitioner time and temporality and the windows of opportunities are very real and very immanent. Responses to situations emerging are taken that follow an internalized predisposition: a *modus operandi* rather than any deliberate conscious intent.

What we have argued in this article is that the recent emergence of a practice perspective is an important development for research on strategizing. Such a promising line of inquiry now requires a clearly defined set of explanatory axioms, concepts and terminology which distances them from the seductions of the *methodological individualism* inherent in the more traditional strategy process tradition. In our analysis we found a number of implicit assumptions consistent with the strategy process view remaining in the s-as-p literature although there is clearly a healthy straining towards a more adequate discourse on practice. Yet, the assumptions that remain include the beliefs that: a) strategy-making is the activity of self-contained, self-motivated individuals; b) strategy is something done deliberately and consciously and is goal-directed; c) strategy-making is a cognitive, representational activity that is directly observable through monitoring activities; d) the sense-making of strategic actors is sufficient for explanatory coherence and adequacy; and e) explanations of strategic actions can be best understood in the context of background values, beliefs and principles. What we have tried to show here is that if we are to take the practice turn in philosophy and social theory seriously, strategy-making must be construed as a collective, culturally shaped accomplishment attained through historically and culturally transmitted social practices and involving dispositions, propensities and tendencies. In this way the locus of analysis shifts from individual strategists to the historically and culturally transmitted fields of practice.

Conclusion

There are several consequences for adopting a post-processual approach to studying practice. The intractable problem remains of how s-as-p researchers

might study and theorize practice if they are fundamentally undeclared, immanent, tacit elements? Garfinkel, for instance, refers to this dilemma as 'the vexed problem of the practical objectivity and practical observability of practical actions and practical reasoning' (Garfinkel, 1991: 11). Both Garfinkel and Lynch (2001: 146) acknowledge that the problem of how to study these practices is the 'constant and unfinished task for social theory'. Both also agree that the solution requires common sense and theoretical elaboration rather than rigid prescription.

This article agrees with the calls in the s-as-p literature for greater plurality of approaches to studying practice (Whittington, 2002; Balogun et al., 2003). Rather than methodological concerns, however, we would argue that it is the *theoretical unit of analysis* that must be revised. Instead of individuals and organizations and *their* processes, activities and practices, we argue that it is practices and the transmitted regularities associated with them that form the primary locus of attention for strategy-as-practice researchers. This is because the consistency of actions taken observed over a period of time belie an *immanent* strategy that has been historically and culturally transmitted through everyday practice. This implies that to understand strategy emergence we are required to develop a certain research sensitivity to the unspoken, the inarticulate and even the oftentimes unconscious aspects of strategy-making. For actors and practitioners are often, like a fish in water, unable to express their inherited understanding and embodied tendencies in terms that are faithful to what they actually do and which is comprehensible to an external observer. Such forms of internalized knowing must therefore be patiently and sensitively gleaned from respondents with an eye on the directionality of historical situations so that the immanent logic of practice, in situ, may be grasped. Such sensitivity, like much of the cross-cultural sensitivity required in anthropological studies, comes from deliberately exposing oneself to a variety of complex social life situations and carefully observing the idiosyncrasies and embedded tendencies of different historical epochs, societies, cultures and institutions. Peripheral awareness and attention to seemingly insignificant details and events are a prerequisite for developing this research sensitivity. Where a post-processual approach furthers the s-as-p perspective is in treating the insights elicited from this cultivated sensitivity as a vital line of inquiry in strategy research. In this way, researchers become more acutely attuned to the variety of ways in which the culturally acquired propensity to act may express itself strategically in different life situations.

The contribution that we hope to have made to the emerging s-as-p perspective is to propose a post-processual practice perspective that is more consistent with the practice turn in contemporary social theory and philosophy and that radically moves the s-as-p perspective beyond a mere

sympathetic extension of traditional strategy process research. A post-processual practice perspective views practices as social skills that have been culturally acquired, and as such, oftentimes unconsciously absorbed. This implies that practices, like strategy-making, are not always directly attributable to individual intentions and purposes but are influenced by materially acquired predispositions. Strategy-making does not always involve the necessary formulation of goals, mental maps or plans. It may well be true that when breakdown occurs, or when routines have been established, deliberate purposefulness strategizing may occur. But this is more the exception than the rule. For the most part, strategy-making on an everyday basis takes place unreflectively, on-the-spot and in the twinkle-of-an-eye. This, in turn, has further implications for future research. To research s-as-p from the position of the practitioner him/herself requires us to focus on the background history and practices from which he/she draws his/her strategic orientation and to understand that such transposable predispositions give us an important clue as to how strategy-making is actually achieved in the round.

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