Book Reviews/Recensions de livre
Reviewed by Véronique Ambrosini, Professor of Strategic Management, Cardiff Business School

Strategy as Practice Research Directions and Resources
By G. Johnson, A. Langley, L. Melin, and R. Whittington (2007)
New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 258 pp.
ISBN: 9780521862936

The Strategy as practice (SAP) approach is receiving increasing attention as is evidenced by the flurry of papers, books, and conference sessions it has garnered. This book is timely in that it provides a useful "state of the art" view of this perspective while providing directions for future research. It also provides guidance to doctoral students as well as challenges the paradigms of experienced strategy scholars.

Preface, Part 1, Chapter 1

The preface and introduction of the book are essential readings. These sections give a brief history of SAP and underline that such an approach is in itself not new. What is new is that SAP has become the focus of a growing number of academics from different theoretical backgrounds and that it offers a fresh perspective on the implementation of strategy in organizations.

The introduction makes crystal clear what *strategy* means for SAP (i.e., it is what people DO and not about what organizations HAVE). The authors explain that SAP is concerned with "strategy as activity in organizations, typically the interaction of people, rather than strategy as the property of organizations" (p. 3). From the outset, then, readers can identify whether or not their research interests are consistent with the SAP perspective and are challenged to question their own perception of what strategy actually is. These first few pages may be more for the reader not familiar with this field, however it is compellingly discussed and highlights that the SAP perspective is a broad field that does not exclude any research questions, and focuses on the "how" or the practice of strategy. Subsequent sections provide a rationale for SAP and discuss the need for plurality (in terms of unit of analysis or variables).

Above all, page 7 is a must read in particular for SAP scholars using the original definition of SAP (i.e., the definition proposed by Johnson, Melin, & Whittington, 2003, p. 3 in the introduction to the *Journal of Management Studies* SAP special issue: "an emphasis on the detailed processes and practices which constitute the day-to-day activities of organizational life and which relate to strategic outcomes"). While not rejecting this definition, the authors of this text argue that instead of this somewhat narrow view, SAP should instead be defined as "a concern with what people do in relation to strategy and how this is influenced by and influences their organizational and institutional context" (p. 7). I believe that most SAP scholars would agree with this new definition as it is difficult in practice to examine organizations ignoring the meso- and macro-contexts. Moreover, "day-to-day" indeed is quite restrictive as many practices related to strategic outcome, while regular and routine, do not occur daily.

Before page 15, the authors principally focus on explaining the basics of SAP and, in some ways, on selling the principles and rationale for SAP. In mapping the domain, the discussion centres strictly on SAP and develops an academic research agenda. I am purposely using the term academic here, as while SAP is about practice, by the end of the introduction and for the remainder of the book, the focus is clearly academic. The focus shifts to theoretical development and does not consider the development of managerial practice.

The research agenda section is presented as a series of research questions that are linked together in a summarizing framework. The authors suggest questions dealing with (a) the "link between people's activities and organizational level processes" (p. 17); (b) how people's activities underpin organizational strategies (p. 20); (c) "the relationship between institutionalized strategic

management processes and people's activities within organizations" (p. 22); and (d) how institutionalized strategies are actually pursued, not only at the organizational level, but in terms of people's activities within organizations (p. 22). These suggested research questions demonstrate that the SAP agenda is multilayered and that traditional strategy dichotomies such as content versus process or formulation versus implementation need to be challenged.

Part I, Chapters 2 and 3

Chapter 2 "Practical theories" (I would guess this is either an allusion to Lewin, 1945 or an encouragement to make the reader think of whether there is such a thing as a practical theory and whether the dichotomy between practice and theory is also to be challenged) reviews some theories that are relevant to SAP studies. This chapter could be a turn-off to readers expecting the SAP literature to be of direct use for consulting work or teaching MBA classes. Instead, the chapter discusses meta-theories reflecting the practical and linguistic turn in management research.

This chapter is divided into three main sections. The first speaks of theoretical orientation and review pragmatism (e.g., Dewey, 1938) as well as social theory (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977). These theories are traditionally drawn upon in sociology or philosophy research. The second section is about theoretical resources and summarizes the situated learning and Carnegie tradition as well as the institutionalist and action-network theories. The last main section highlights the relevance of these theories and illustrates how they could inform our understanding of strategic planning. The declared aim here is to "underline the importance of translating theory into practical empirical inquiry. The title of this chapter affirms that theory should be useful" (p. 31). Chapter 2 is very interesting and useful to anybody not conversant with these theories and perspectives. It provides a quick "ABC" run-down and is mind-opening. It may inspire researchers to widen their traditional literature and allow them to envisage their research differently.

Chapter 3 addresses methodological issues. The recommendation is clear from the outset as the authors state, "we begin this exploration by arguing that in-depth and largely qualitative data are a central requirement for developing the Strategy as Practice perspective" (p. 52) and continue by discussing the advantages and challenges related to conducting qualitative work. This discussion, which is arguably relevant to anyone interested in qualitative research, is nicely focused on SAP by using SAP papers as examples. This chapter is very pragmatic

as it deals with all issues that come to mind when undertaking qualitative research (e.g., unit of analysis, sampling, data collection, etc.), and it also provides a rare discussion with its clarity and focus on the different types of contribution SAP qualitative research can make. The content of this chapter is a gem and one could suggest that it should be used for any papers of this type as a check point before submission to journals.

Part II—Illustrative papers

The illustrative papers' section is recommended for academics and in particular management doctoral students interested in SAP. It offers a range of excellent papers that should be seen as exemplars. They are real illustrations of how academic papers can be rigorously written, theoretically developed, and well argued, while remaining lively and interesting.

The summary of these above mentioned papers is useful in setting the scene and enabling readers unfamiliar with the papers' theoretical backgrounds and contexts to increase their familiarity. Considering that many of the papers chosen were not written with SAP in mind, the authors' introductions are judicious. They explain how each paper can be seen as an SAP paper and which aspects of SAP they focus on. Finally, the commentaries provide a review of the strengths of each paper and develop in some detail how they each contribute to the SAP perspective.

Part III—Reflections

This section was refreshing as the four authors give their personal view of SAP and how they believe it should or could develop. While it is s clear that they all agree SAP is the way to go, there are some tensions about how pluralistic the field should be and how much one should concentrate on the applied side of SAP. The choice is an individual one and the stance adopted will very much depend on one's background or occupation.

The book is fluently written and each part is well introduced and concluded. Through their style, the authors show their enthusiasm and this is contagious! I may be biased as I strongly believe that carrying an SAP research agenda is one of the best ways of producing rigorous, relevant, and meaningful research, however, I also believe that even the most sceptic believers in the view that firms *have* strategy may be inclined to see the pertinence of SAP, especially now, as many in academia are increasingly concerned about the relevance of academic work and its impact on the practitioners' world (Cummings, 2009).

References

Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline Of A Theory Of Practice.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cummings, T. (2008). Presidential Address: Quest For An Engaged Academy, *Academy of Management Review*, *32*, 355–360.

Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience And Education*. New York: Touchstone.

Johnson, G., Melin, L., & Whittington, R. (2003). Micro Strategy And Strategizing: Towards An Activity-Based View? *Journal of Management Studies*, *40*(1), 3–22.

Lewin, K. (1945). The Research Center For Group Dynamics At Massachusetts Institute Of Technology. *Sociometry*, *8*, 126–136.