



Book Review

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Damon Golsorkhi, Linda Rouleau, David Seidl and Eero Vaara (eds)

Cambridge Handbook of Strategy as Practice

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, xvi + 349 pp. ISBN 9780521517287 (hbk)

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Social science is composed, integrally, of elements of social networks. These are evident in phenomena such as who publishes what in which journals, citing whom in the process. These phenomena have been referred to, unkindly, as ‘citation cartels’, where members of a network cite each other to great effect for enhancing their legitimacy and the institutionalization of their perspective. (The reviewer hesitates to say ‘paradigm’, if only because so many interpretations attach to that signifier – better to keep it simple.)

‘Strategy-as-practice’ is undoubtedly a successful perspective in social network terms. Several specialist websites are sustained associated not only with the ‘movement’ (for the perspective has gained adherents much as a movement might) but also with various ‘academies’ of management. It is also a great deal more open than other approaches to strategy that have flourished in quarters such as the Strategic Management Society, where the emphasis has been less on creating dynamic linkages with cognate social science areas but, much as does the broader economics industry in business schools, denying these opportunities in the name of a rigour that focuses on framing a world of science fiction, largely modelled on economistic assumptions, methods and a narrow resource-based view of the firm disconnected from broader social science currents. The editors connect the perspective with a broader ‘practice’ turn in contemporary social sciences, citing as their oldest reference (oddly) Foucault’s (1977) *Discipline and Punish*, a text from which empirical analysis of observed practice is eschewed in favour of the proper matter of a historian of ideas – documents through which ideas might be traced in their genealogy. By contrast, the real origins of the practice perspective might more properly be credited to Garfinkel (1967), his precursors, and those influenced by his concern with analysis of the methods used by everyday people doing everyday life. The editors understand practice not so much in terms of ethno-methods so much as an opportunity ‘to engage in direct dialogue with practitioners’ (p. 1). However, what practitioners might make of the ‘eclecticism and ambiguity’ risked is anyone’s guess. In fact, the urge to dialogue seems not so serious: if it were then it could only be with those practitioners trained inside the black box of the strategy as practice perspective, as the slightly bemused messages automatically generated from the occasional practitioner who stumbled on the strategy on a practice website at www.s-as-p.org suggest. Indeed, reading the *Handbook*, ‘a unique collection of ontological, epistemological, theoretical and methodological perspectives on Strategy as Practice’ suggests that

the dialogue would need to be with a practitioner far more widely educated than the average manager, even one equipped with an MBA.

The editors suggest that critics (Clegg et al., 2004; Carter et al., 2008), amongst whom the present reviewer is included,

have critiqued the conceptual and methodological bases of much of the research in this area. In a nutshell, they have argued for more theoretically advanced and critically oriented studies to explore the fundamental issues of identity and power ... [which] ... served as a key motivator for the expansion and development of the Strategy as Practice research agenda in this handbook.

To what extent are these aims of simultaneously opening up a dialogue with practitioners as well as advancing an agenda of critically oriented studies that explore fundamental issues of identity and power achieved? The contributions made under each of these terms are reviewed below, using the helpful index as a guide.

'Dialogue' does not feature in the index, and 'practitioners' make only limited appearances in one chapter by Ericson and Melin, although 'strategy practitioners' make frequent appearances. Orlikowski notes the need carefully to navigate and negotiate the terms of engagement and obligation, but settles for a double hermeneutic position, where the insights of research become picked up and used by practitioners, a position that she advances into a performative *philosophy of practice* (pp. 29–30). Chia and Rasche link this philosophy to the practical wisdom of *phronesis* and *metis* by doing what they term 'dwelling' in the language of the practitioner's approach. (Their practitioner in case is Richard Branson, and they dwell in his approach to strategy for a paragraph or two on p. 43 before moving on to more exoteric strategy thinkers such as von Clausewitz, Machiavelli and Sun Tzu.) Tsoukas mentions strategy practitioners in passing whilst chastising the movement for insufficiently differentiating itself from earlier process approaches and methodological individualism, meanwhile advancing a Heideggerian onto-epistemology approach that stresses the embodiment and embeddedness of different types of coping with ongoing practices – in one or other of practical, deliberate or detached work employing socio-material practices of tacit understanding, embodiment, and language games. These perspectives are usefully used to revisit some well-known studies and to develop a non-tautological definition of strategy – something sorely needed. Practitioners next make an appearance in Anne Langley's chapter, in which she analyses their representation in terms of approaches derived from normal science, strategy as practice, and pragmatic perspectives. It is the latter that she sees as closest to engagement with the strategy practitioners but at the cost of building generalizable knowledge. The challenge is to formalize and generalize strategy as practice knowledge, she says, although how this would engage practitioners is not evident. That's it: strategy practitioners make no other appearance in the index, or, as far as one can see, much of an appearance otherwise, except in strategic development processes dealt with discursively (Laine and Vaara) and the interrelation of institutionalization and strategic agency in the privatization of British Rail (Johnson, Smith and Codling). While each of these chapters makes useful contributions, they do not explicitly address what the editors defined as one of the key challenges: engaging in direct dialogue with practitioners. The exception is Macintosh, Maclean and Seidl's discussions of specific situated events such as strategy workshops, where practitioners were engaged 'in a much more active form of participation in the research process than is often the case' (p. 306).

What about 'power and identity'? 'Power' is certainly featured in the index and the text but largely in theoretical terms, associated with theorizing by Bourdieu (in Gomez), Giddens (Whittington), activity-theory (Jarzabowski), Wittgenstein (Mantere), Foucault (Allard-Poesi),

narrative approaches (de la Ville and Mounoud), and critical discourse analysis (Vaara and Laine and Vaara). While the latter comes some way towards linking power and identity through the analysis of the 'ontological power' of organizational discourses, as if to underscore my opening remarks it is only in the Samra-Fredericks contribution, from an explicitly ethnomethodological perspective, that there is a sense of *analysis* of power being done empirically in practice in mundane yet important ways, rather than systematic redescription.

It is entirely possible that it is the conjunctive 'and' between 'power and identity' that one should focus on; nonetheless, the focus here is on 'identity'. The editors use the term to address various concrete questions about who specific actors engaged in strategy processes are and what they do: middle managers, consultants, regulators, teachers, gurus, gendered people, proactive strategists and performative agents. In the body of the handbook it is left to Johnson, Balogun and Beech to address strategists and their identity explicitly in practice. They do so through 'empirical vignettes' that are taken to illustrate 'the impact of strategists' identity on their work'. This is a strange formulation: it suggests that there is a phenomenon, identity, and there is a practice, work, on which it has an impact. On the contrary, this reviewer would suggest that by one's works one should be known: that is, *doing* identity is integral to the practice of doing work of various kinds. All forms of work entail identity work. Rather than frame things this way the authors ask questions of *being* that they then answer through descriptive analysis of the relationship forged between researchers and researched, which seems, essentially, to have been one of psychotherapeutic executive coaching. Frankly, very little edification is produced around the relationship between 'identity in practice'.

Overall the *Handbook* is probably an apt representation of the state of play in strategy as practice. There are programmatic manifestos for advancing particular ontologies, epistemologies, theoreticians and theories; there is advocacy of particular methodologies, and there are a few empirical studies of strategy in, and as, practice. However, there is not a clear sense of future directions, although the editors do provide a compass reading for one. Unfortunately, as these things are usually done, the editorial neither directs nor orients the contributors, and the contributors have, as one's experience in similar ventures suggests, done their own thing. For future researchers there is a multiplicity of direction available. Huff, Neyer and Möselin attempt to steer the prospective researcher through various approaches to empirical research in the strategy as theory perspective and, for the researcher new to this field, it is probably a useful chapter to start with. Compared to other recent handbooks, such as that of institutional theory (Greenwood et al., 2008), this volume is far less a summation and steering of future research; instead, it scopes some preferred directions, alerts the researcher to issues that remain unresolved, and provides ample opportunity for critics of the perspective to marshal arguments about coherence. However, just as much as correspondence, coherence may be an overvalued currency in the philosophy of science, leading to that rigor mortis which some of the protagonists of the movement that is creating the perspective are resisting.

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