Strategy as Practice
Methodological Challenges

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Summary

• Strategy as Practice is an appealing and successful new area of inquiry

• But it currently relies on a narrow base of empirical evidence

• There are many less familiar methods to broaden understanding of S-A-P
S-A-P’s Attraction

- Balances (and is an alternative to) explanations about strategy based on economic theory
- “Reinvigorates” process explanations
- Introduces micro level of analysis that fits current interest in multiple levels of analysis
- Champions & infrastructure
Results

- Rapid growth in number of scholars writing in this area {2880 members at www.s-as-p.org }
- Money to study (ESRC in UK)
- Opportunities to present (EGOS, BAM, AOM)
- Books published (e.g. Jarzabkowski, 2005; Rouleau, et al., 2009, Cambridge University Press Handbook, etc.)
- Journal special issues (JMS, HR, etc.)
Concern?

- Variations of field study are a deep, but narrow empirical base

- Given realities of time and money for scholarship, field studies carried out are often themselves limited

- Yet, broadly accepted rhetoric supports this practice
Examples from our systematic review
One exception:


- “approach we call the Event Database (EDB) and illustrate it using examples from quantitative analysis of a subset of our data from strategy meetings observed in four organizational divisions over 18 months.”
My only concern is occasional apologetic tone

- Of course we recognise that some interpretists will not agree with the use of a quantitative method in a paradigm that offers qualitative data as rich as strategy-as-practice: “Precisely because the measurement of meaning lies at the boundaries of the more scientific and more humanistic approaches to analyzing social phenomena, it is guaranteed to create controversy (Mohr, 1998; p. 364)”.
- “As such, we also acknowledge that our method is not without challenges and highlight three main areas in our critique: The use of numerical analyses, loss of richness and labour-intensity.”
BIGGER PICTURE: McGrath’s Research Dilemmatics

Point of Maximum Concern with Precision Of Measurement Of Behavior

Point of Maximum Concern with Generality Over Actors

B

Point of Maximum Concern with System Character of Context

A

Lab Experiments

Judgment Tasks

Sample Surveys

Field Experiments

Experimental Simulations

Field Studies

Formal Theory

Computer Simulation

(simplified from McGrath, 1982)
Alternative Methods?


- **Argument**
  1. We need a broader perspective theoretically
  2. We have to find methods that can capture data from large, changing, global organizations

- **Methods discussed include**
  - Diaries
  - Focus Groups
  - Practitioner research
• Almost all S-A-P studies have clustered at 4 o’clock

• Balogan, Huff & Johnson point to the increasing complexity of the organizational context, add alternatives to classic field studies, but still focused on contextual evidence

• Jarzabkowski & Matthiesen made a brave move to 8 o’clock

• Other methods are available!
Chapter by Huff, Möslein & Neyer explores 20 alternatives

Desirable characteristics

- **More Depth**
  (Improve description of system characteristics with new data from current informants)
- **More Variety**
  (Expand understanding of system characteristics with data from new sources)
- **More Breadth** (Sacrifice richness to increase generality of findings via larger samples)
- **More Precise Measurement and Comparison**
  (Sacrifice richness to increase precision of findings)
Some ideas

- Expand capacity by using student inquirers
- Expand capacity via cooperative projects
- Collect data with Web-based (and cell phone) tools (Piller, Möslein)
- Understand the strategist’s world with Storylistening® (Rughase, Huff)
- Collect data from groups rather than individuals. (Roos)
- Observe strategists as instructors.
- Observe interactions within the organization and with outsiders via prototypes (Doll & Neyer, Argote)
- Take advantage of data already collected by the organization (Neely)
• Focus on the accounts of individuals working with strategists as assistants and superiors. (Matthaei, Eisenhardt and Galunic)
• Consider customers and suppliers as co-producers of strategy (Jenkins)
• Collect data from unique contexts
• Collect information on use of time, money and corporate tools (Matthaei)
• Systematically collect data about internal and external events as natural experiments
• Compare data in spider diagrams
Our belief:

- New areas of inquiry benefit from new methods (emphasize methods) of inquiry

- Changing world of networked, large organizations with global reach & changing quickly requires new methods of inquiry

- Theory (gold standard of top level journals) requires *generalizable* information
Not easy!

- New methods harder to carry out
  - Fewer exemplars to follow

- New methods harder to explain to your audience

- Methods often establish a study’s trustworthiness
  - Contribution is typically preceded by
    - “I know the rules”
    - “I followed the rules”
  Thus, harder to publish
Advice

1. Find and cite a “new” method’s use in other fields of inquiry
   {Example: Baogun & Johnson, AMJ}

2. Use multiple methods (one established, one new)

3. Create rules and follow them
   {Example: Stimpert, Barr & Huff, SMJ}

1. Provide other indicators of trustworthiness
Figure 5.1: Design Decisions Connecting Research Purpose and Outcome
Huff, *Designing Research for Publication*, Sage
Summary

• Strategy as Practice is an appealing and successful new area of inquiry

• NEW METHODS ARE REQUIRED FOR THEORY BUILDING!


Jarzabkowski, P.