

Making connections: Harnessing the diversity of strategy-as-practice research

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Abstract

Strategy-as-practice (SAP) has become one of the most vibrant areas of contemporary strategy research in the past two decades. As the field has grown significantly, we have witnessed an emergence of distinct streams of research within the SAP research community. Thus, it is time to take stock of this body of work to better understand the structure of the field and provide a refreshed agenda for future research. Our review is based on bibliometric analysis and a systematic review of 340 articles. As a result, we identify the following six clusters of research: praxis, sensemaking, discourse, sociomateriality, institutional and process. Co-citation analysis shows significant disconnects between some of these clusters. Building on our review, we identify various ‘crossing strategies’ for connecting across four disconnects: (i) micro and macro; (ii) sociomaterial and discourse; (iii) critical and more mainstream; and (iv) practice and process perspectives. By harnessing diversity, these crossing strategies suggest rich agendas for future SAP research, ranging from digitalization to gender inequality.

INTRODUCTION

Strategy-as-practice (SAP) research has nearly trebled in the number of publications since the last major literature review (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). This growth is both a success and a challenge. SAP research has significantly enhanced our understanding of who strategists are, what they do and the tools they use (Golsorkhi et al., 2015; Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007; Johnson, Melin & Whittington, 2003; Whittington, 2006, 2007). However, the volume of research presents challenges in terms of complexity and coherence. The field is characterized by very different notions of practice, with some studies treating practice as a simple phenomenon, some as a theoretical perspective and others as a fundamental ontological building block (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). SAP research is even accused of theoret-

ical ‘promiscuity’ (Carter et al., 2008; Rouleau, 2013). Langley (2015) warns that the field’s diversity is liable to handicap progress through cumulative research. Moreover, SAP faces blurred or contested boundaries with other strategy research traditions, particularly strategy process (Burgelman et al., 2018).

This review uses co-citation analysis to identify five clusters of SAP research, each drawing on relatively distinct bodies of literature. These clusters reflect streams of research concerned broadly with the themes of praxis, sensemaking, discourse, sociomateriality and institutionalism. In addition, we find a sixth adjacent cluster of predominantly process research that is extensively referenced in the SAP literature. Amongst the five SAP research clusters, two—sociomateriality and institutional—are substantially new since Vaara and Whittington (2012), while the original core cluster of praxis has become less

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dominant. We shall argue that the diversity of SAP research can be seen as fruitful for research rather than just a source of concern. In terms of growing diversity, SAP research is little different to the strategic management discipline as a whole (Durand et al., 2017; Nerur et al., 2008; Rabetino et al., 2021). Moreover, many of its divergences reflect those common to the management literature more generally. Indeed, diversity is something that can be productively harnessed: connecting currently disconnected streams can generate new opportunities for research.

For SAP researchers, strategy is fundamentally ‘something that people do’ (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Whittington, 2006: 613). As such, SAP research is more about a phenomenon, strategy as it is done, than a coherent body of theory, for example, practice theory. Like any significant activity in complex organizations, strategy is inherently a multifaceted phenomenon (Vaara, 2010). Diversity in perspectives is a natural consequence of this multifacetedness. SAP’s diversity is not to be lamented, therefore, but rather to be welcomed as a source of additional insight. Researchers can reach out beyond practice theory per se—as many build on Weick’s (1979) work on sensemaking, for example. They can moreover draw on many varieties of practice theory—from Foucault to Giddens—each capable of offering insights of their own (Nicolini, 2012). We are not anxious, therefore, about whether some bit or other of SAP research draws fully upon practice theory, or some favoured variant of it (Carter et al., 2008; MacKay et al., 2020). The primary criterion is the additional understanding of the underlying phenomenon. In this respect, we propose various ‘crossing’ strategies for connecting distinct research streams, even those following different ontological paradigms (Schultz & Hatch, 1996; Shepherd & Challenger, 2013). These crossing strategies aim not to suppress diversity but to harness it. It is this that motivates our argument for future research that cuts across the five streams of SAP research identified here.

We shall focus on research opportunities generated by establishing four connections between clusters which patterns of co-citation suggest are relatively far apart. Although our analysis identifies other disconnects between clusters, we select these four because they reflect challenges that have been raised either in SAP research or in management theory more generally. Making these four connections therefore responds directly to existing tensions in the literature. The first of these connections is between micro-praxis and macro-institutional foci of research, made salient both by SAP’s relatively new institutional orientation (Suddaby et al., 2013) and by concerns about so-called ‘micro-isolationism’ (Seidl & Whittington, 2014). The second is that between the discursive and the sociomaterial, prompted by the emergence of the latter as another new theme in SAP research and reflecting

broader debates in management theory on the relationship between discourse and materiality (Hardy & Thomas, 2015; Wenzel & Koch, 2018). The third is between core praxis research and those critical researchers, situated mostly on the further edges of the discursive cluster, concerned about power relations within strategy practice (Carter et al., 2008). The final connection is between SAP research as a whole and process research, where discussion centres on whether the two traditions are fundamentally separate or should be combined (Burgelman et al., 2018; Whittington, 2007).

Drawing on Schultz and Hatch (1996), we shall explore various ‘crossing strategies’ for making these connections, each potentially fruitful for research. In particular, practice-driven institutionalism (Smets et al., 2017) underpins a bridging strategy to connect micro-praxis and macro-institutionalism, overcoming micro-isolationism (Seidl & Whittington, 2014). Multimodal approaches (Asmuß & Oshima, 2018) offer a sequential strategy that adds sociomaterial perspectives to existing discursive ones and addresses urgent questions raised by information technologies and the new virtual world. Critical insights into exclusionary discourse (Vaara, 2010) can be combined with practical managerial concerns via an interplay strategy, with implications especially for intendedly ‘open’ strategy processes (Dobusch & Kapeller, 2018). Finally, the earlier divide between practice and process approaches can be crossed both by sequential strategies and by a bridging strategy drawing on ‘strong process’ ontology (Burgelman et al., 2018).

REVIEW METHODOLOGY

We followed standard methodology for systematic literature reviews by selecting critical keywords to identify a sample of relevant articles, and then searching for these selected keywords in peer-reviewed scholarly articles (published and in press) (Pittaway et al., 2004; Tranfield et al., 2003; Zupic & Čater, 2015) available in Elsevier’s Scopus, often considered the best tool for literature searches (Börner et al., 2010; Falagas et al., 2008). In selecting our keywords, we were initially inclusive. Particularly in the early stages of the literature, many SAP studies did not use strategy-as-practice as a keyword, often preferring a term such as ‘strategizing’: the first special issue is indeed an example of such (Johnson et al., 2003). We therefore used a range of keywords. Following Newbert (2007), we required that selected articles contain at least one of the following keywords in the title, keywords or abstract, as the SAP studies often use these keywords: ‘discursive strategizing’, ‘strategy as practice’, ‘strategy-as-practice’, ‘Strategy-as-Practice’, ‘Strategy-as-practice’,

'S-as-P', 'S as P', 'S-A-P', 'strategy discourse', 'practice-theoretic' and 'activity-based view'. To ensure substantive relevance, we also required that each of the selected articles include at least one of the following supplementary words in the full text to avoid unrelated articles: 'micro-practice*', 'micro practice*', 'middle managers', 'middle management', 'middle management involvement', 'critical management studies', 'strategizing and organizing', 'structuration theory', 'strategic practice', 'practice lens', 'strategy work', 'practice perspective', 'social practice', 'praxis', 'strategic practice', 'strategy discourse', 'As-practice', 'strategy tools', 'practice perspective', 'strategy workshops', 'strategic sensemaking', 'Foucauldian', 'strategizing' and 'practice theory'. This approach was aimed at incorporating all potentially relevant articles to the field, including those that might not primarily identify with SAP, while excluding those without substantive relevance.

The first round of searching returned 268 hits. First, we eliminated 17 mishits by analysing the titles, abstracts and keywords of the 268 articles. This analysis resulted in 251 articles, which were reviewed and complemented by relevant SAP studies that were not initially included in the 251 studies. Moreover, the reference lists of the 251 studies, Google Scholar and Web of Science uncovered some journals that are not included in Scopus but, based on keywords, have published large numbers of SAP studies over the years, such as *Advances in Strategic Management*. After discussion between the authors, we ultimately added 89 studies to the 251, resulting in the 340 articles finally used to structure the field. Overall, the articles were drawn from 124 journals, with 20% of the journals covering 67% (228) of the 340 studies: 25 of the articles were published in *Organization Studies*, 24 in the *Journal of Management Studies*, 23 in *Strategic Organization*, 16 in the *Strategic Management Journal* and 15 in *Long Range Planning*. The search covered studies until the end of August 2020. After considering the journals and authors included in our database of references, we are confident that the selected items accurately represent the full scope of SAP research (see Figure 1).

This study used author co-citation analysis to structure the field, which is an objective bibliometric method that diminishes the expert subjectivity inherent in traditional literature reviews (Acedo et al., 2006; Di Stefano et al., 2010; Zupic & Čater, 2015). The method is utilized to map citations (Nerur et al., 2008) to determine the structure and variety of approaches within a field (Acedo et al., 2006; Zupic & Čater, 2015). Despite being aware of and testing the opportunities for other types of textual analysis methods, such as Leximancer (Wilden et al., 2016), we used the VOSviewer software (Waltman et al., 2010) to implement an author co-citation analysis and provide an initial structure of the field (Nerur et al., 2008; Rabetino et al., 2018).

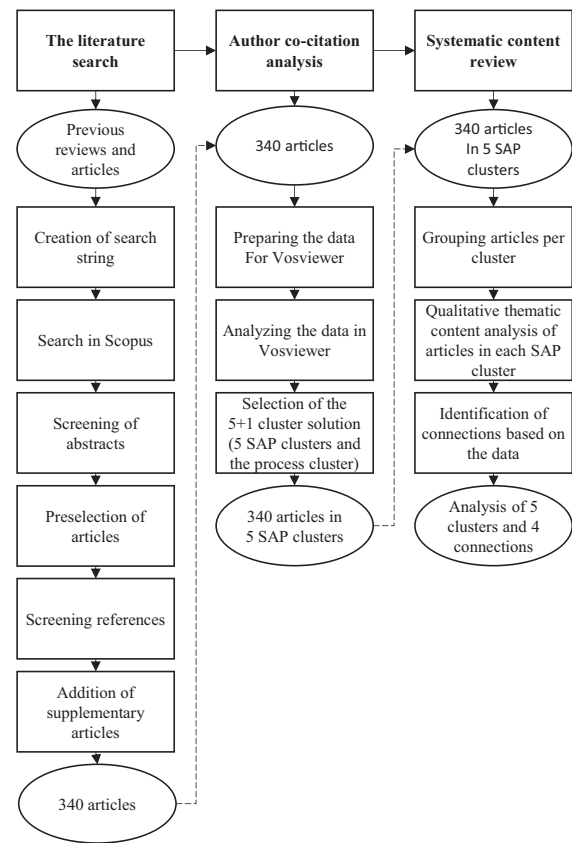


FIGURE 1 Review process

Author co-citation analysis, which counts the number of times a pair of authors are cited together, allows identifying contributors who present broadly similar or consistent ideas (Nerur et al., 2008; Vogel & Güttel, 2013; Zupic & Čater, 2015). The bibliometric analysis was conducted using the final sample of 340 articles and was followed by a systematic review of the selected articles to investigate each cluster and identify relative disconnects between them (Zupic & Čater, 2015). As a robustness check, we also repeated the co-citation analysis for only top-tier articles published in AJG3 (Academic Journal Guide) (CABS, 2018) and AJG4-level journals, and received results closely aligned with the results from all journals.

After identifying clusters using author co-citation analysis, we classified the articles into clusters based on their titles, keywords, abstracts and the entire article. We read, analysed and coded the full articles cluster-by-cluster to identify the central research themes and contents of each cluster. This review work resulted in Table 1, which synthesizes the clusters. According to these central research themes, we labelled the clusters as follows: (1) praxis, (2) sensemaking, (3) discursive, (4) sociomaterial, (5) institutional and (6) process. These clusters are broad and fuzzy-edged. There is considerable diversity around central themes. For example, some discursive articles are highly

TABLE 1 Comparing the clusters of SAP studies

	Strategy-as-practice			Process		
	Praxis	Sensemaking	Sociomaterial	Institutional		
Central themes	The 'doing' of strategy; (micro) strategizing; strategy as activity.	Sensemaking and sensegiving; subjective interpretation; thinking and feeling.	Discourse in strategy work, emphasis on sayings, text, narratives and discourse; power and legitimacy, the polyphonic and dialogical. Performativity.	The interplay between material, social and the actor. The interplay and entanglement of human and the material in strategy work, the role of sociomateriality.	Interplay between environment and strategy, role of institutions. Emphasis on the micro-macro interplay in strategy, agency and structure.	Strategy process and its antecedents and effects.
Key theoretical influences	Activity theory; structuration theory.	Social psychology; the Carnegie School cognitive tradition.	Discourse analysis. Narrative analysis. Critical discourse analysis.	Technology at work. Actor-network theory. Activity theory. Situated learning.	Institutional theory. Structuration theory.	Strategy process research. Variance theory. Carnegie school. Dynamic capabilities.
Characteristic methodological approaches	Comparative and single case studies, episodes (e.g. retreats), interviews, documents, ethnography, video ethnography.	Case studies with emphasis on ethnographic observations and extensive quotation and vignettes to capture detail.	Talk and other textual data analysed as discourse, rhetoric or narrative.	Ethnography & direct observations, photos, videos and drawings being used as data.	Multi-level perspective connecting micro-, meso- and macro-levels through correlation, instantiation or progression.	Quantitative studies.
Examples of studies (five most cited in each cluster, order based on the number of citations)	Whittington (2006); Feldman and Orlikowski (2011); Johnson et al. (2003); Jarzabkowski et al. (2007); Whittington (1996)	Balogun and Johnson (2004); Kaplan (2008); Rouleau (2005); Balogun and Johnson (2005); Rouleau and Balogun (2011)	Barry and Elmes (1997); Samra-Fredericks (2003); Vaara (2002); Vaara et al. (2006); Mantere and Vaara (2008)	Kaplan (2011); Jarzabkowski and Kaplan (2015); Spee and Jarzabkowski (2009); Peppard et al. (2014); Arvidsson et al. (2014)	Jarzabkowski et al. (2012); Smets et al. (2015); Smets and Jarzabkowski (2013); Suddaby et al. (2013); Frølich et al. (2013)	Not applicable, because these are not available in SAP paper database.

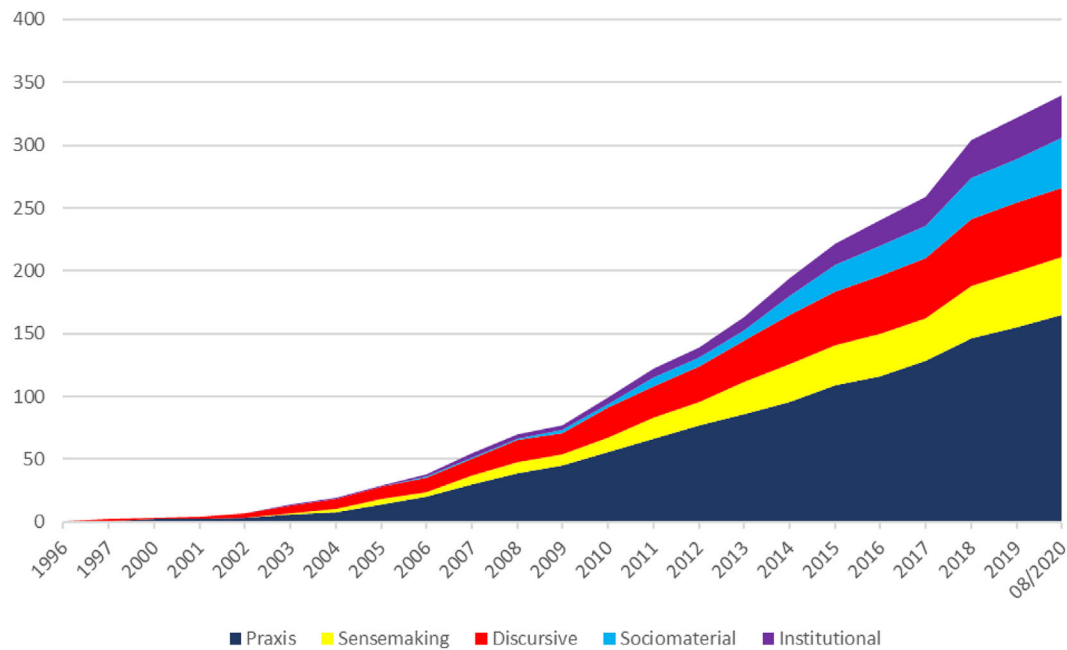


FIGURE 2 Number of articles per cluster [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

micro-orientated (e.g. Samra-Fredericks, 2003), while others take a societal perspective on popular strategy discourse (e.g. Kornberger, 2017). Articles sometimes transcend boundaries. For example, Rouleau and Balogun's (2011) article refers to both sensemaking and discursive competence in its title (the article was finally attributed to the sensemaking cluster). Moreover, although authors are attributed to particular clusters based on the relative frequency of co-citations, some scholars are in the borderlines between certain clusters. For example, David Seidl is classified as a member of the sociomaterial stream, although he is also a frequent co-author of Paula Jarzabkowski and Richard Whittington, both in the praxis cluster. The cluster labels should therefore be understood as convenient summarizing devices reflecting common citation patterns rather than describing each constituent definitively. In the following, we shall use the terms 'streams' and 'clusters' synonymously, though the first will generally be associated with central research themes, while the second will generally be associated with the underlying co-citation analysis.

MAPPING THE STRUCTURE OF THE SAP FIELD

The origins of the SAP literature are often traced to Richard Whittington's 1996 article entitled 'Strategy as practice' in *Long Range Planning* (Whittington, 1996). Since then, the SAP community has achieved a variety of significant milestones, including formal streams at the Academy of Man-

agement and the Strategic Management Society and special issues in journals such as the *Journal of Management Studies* (2003, 2014), *Human Relations* (2007), *Long Range Planning* (2008), *British Journal of Management* (2014) and *Strategic Management Journal* (2018). Figure 2 demonstrates the increase in SAP publications in the quarter of a century since Whittington's (1996) article. In terms of the annual rate of publication, the field took off around 2007, the year of the *Human Relations* special issue. Since the December 2010 cut-off date of the last major review (Vaara & Whittington, 2012), the cumulative number of publications has been 241, with the annual publication rate nearly quadrupling in the last 9 years. The six most frequently cited publications in SAP research are Whittington (2006), Feldman and Orlikowski (2011), Barry and Elmes (1997), Balogun and Johnson (2004), Johnson et al. (2003) and Jarzabkowski et al. (2007).

Figure 2 also provides an overview of the growth of the five specifically SAP clusters identified by the co-citation analysis. All clusters record a higher publication number since Vaara and Whittington's (2012) 2010 cut-off, but there is also growing diversity within the field. Whereas in the period 1996–2010, praxis research accounted for 60% of all publications, in 2011–2020 this cluster had fallen to 49%. Two clusters of research that barely existed in 2011, sociomateriality and institutional, account for, respectively, 15% and 12% of publications in the second period. The sensemaking and discursive clusters have been significant currents of research through both the earlier and the later periods.

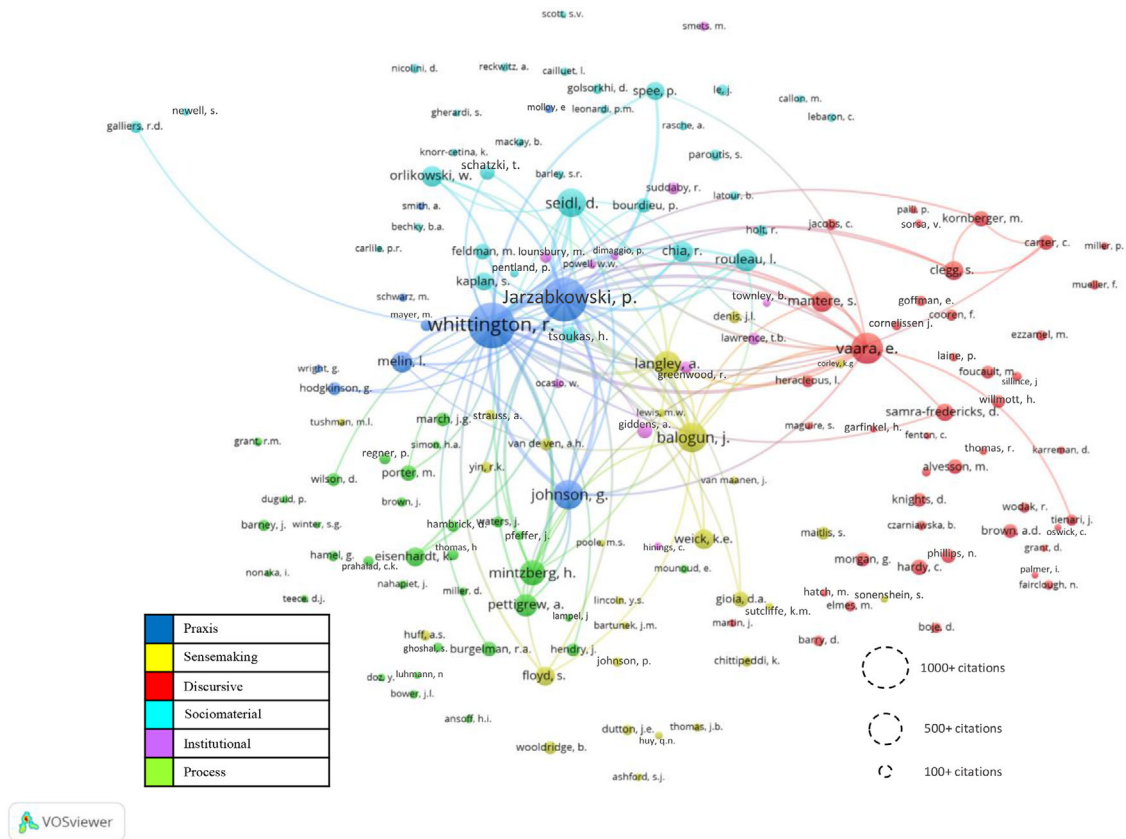


FIGURE 3 Identification of the main clusters of research (colour marks the cluster; size of the circle the number of citations in this data; often co-cited authors are located closer to each other; the 100 most often co-cited authors are indicated by lines; thicker lines mean more co-citations in this data) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Figure 3 examines all six clusters (including process) more deeply. The praxis cluster builds around Whittington and Jarzabkowski (in the middle of the picture), sensemaking around Balogun and Langley (also in the middle), discursive around Vaara and Mantere (right side), sociomaterial around Seidl and Orlikowski (upper left), institutional around Giddens and Suddaby (upper right) and process around Mintzberg and Pettigrew (lower left). The colours indicate the cluster membership while the size describes the number of citations each author has received in SAP research, and the distance between circles reflects the frequency of co-citation. For instance, Seidl is cited more than 500 times and is often co-cited with Jarzabkowski, less so with Whittington and still less so with Vaara. In contrast, Galliers is remote from others in the sociomateriality cluster, being rarely co-cited due to the publication of his SAP-related papers in specialized information systems journals such as *Strategic Information Systems*.

The relative distances between clusters in Figure 3 hints at some of the disconnects within the SAP field. For example, the sociomateriality and discursive clusters sit predominantly at opposite ends of the east–west axis, indi-

cating little co-citation. Critical authors within the discursive cluster, such as Clegg and Kornberger, are at some distance from core praxis authors, such as Jarzabkowski and Whittington. The process cluster is relatively disconnected, particularly from the sociomaterial cluster and some of the key institutional authors (e.g. Smets).

Praxis

Central themes

As the largest stream of SAP research, the praxis cluster (dark blue in Figure 3) is particularly internally diverse. However, our reading of the articles suggests as a central theme what is often referred to as the ‘doing’ of strategy (Whittington, 2004: 62). We capture this theme with the label ‘praxis’, which, as opposed to practices, ‘refers to actual activity, what people do in practice’ (Whittington, 2006: 620). Consistent with this focus on praxis is a conceptual turn from the noun form to the verb form: SAP researchers frequently describe their interest as

'strategizing' rather than strategy per se (e.g. Deken et al., 2018; Jarzabkowski & Fenton, 2006). Strategizing has also been given a more specific prefix, 'micro-strategizing' (Johnson et al., 2003; Morton et al., 2020). This subsidiary theme of the micro implies an intense focus on particular moments of strategizing activity, captured in detail: for example, brief interactions at board meetings, committee meetings or strategy retreats (Clarke et al., 2012; Hendry et al., 2010; Hoon, 2007). This micro-strategizing research tends towards one extreme in the contrasting ontological positions concerning practices (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). In this praxis cluster, practices are typically treated as the simple empirical phenomenon of observed activities: actual instances of strategizing. This contrasts with 'strong' ontological views that treat praxis as an epiphenomenon of practices (Chia & MacKay, 2007; Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). In this stronger view, practices are the fundamental building block and have a continuity that is partially autonomous from the particular instances of activity represented by praxis.

Key theoretical influences

The focus on doing within the praxis stream lends itself to the activity theory perspective of Engeström (2001), with its emphasis on 'activity systems' that relate particular activities to the historical and cultural contexts and the tools and technologies that make them possible. For example, in her study of three British universities, Jarzabkowski (2003, 2005) draws on the activity system concept to show how strategizing was shaped by the distinctive histories and cultures of each organization and the various planning systems and committees that were available as tools for strategic change. This embedding of activity within broader systems is also supported by practice theorists more generally; for instance, Bourdieu (1990) or Giddens (1984). Thus, for Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, activity is both the product and the source of the structural rules and resources of actors' social systems. This 'structurationist' insight into the reciprocity of structure and action is used by Jarzabkowski (2008) to show how, in the same three universities, strategizing activities were not only shaped by the structural rules and resources of their specific social systems but also the source of change over time.

Characteristic methodological approaches

Many praxis studies have used organization-level case studies of strategizing activities, either of single cases

(Mirabeau & Maguire, 2014; Paroutis & Pettigrew, 2007) or comparative ones (Jarzabkowski, 2008). However, the concern for a micro-level understanding often motivates deeper dives below the organization level. Thus, some studies have gained greater granularity by structured comparisons of particular units or initiatives within the same organization (Paroutis & Heracleous, 2013). Another fine-grained approach is to focus on time-delimited 'episodes' (Hendry & Seidl, 2003) of strategizing praxis, both within and across organizations: for example, strategy retreats or client interactions (Jarzabkowski et al., 2015b; Johnson et al., 2010). These studies have typically relied on a combination of interviews, internal documents and ethnographic observation, with the last particularly suitable for the intense examination of time-delimited episodes. Video ethnography has particular promise in capturing the full richness of strategizing praxis in the moment (Bencherki et al., 2019; Gylfe et al., 2016).

Sensemaking

Central themes

The second research cluster (yellow in Figure 3) often takes a sensemaking approach, zooming into the two themes of cognition and emotion in strategy work (Weick et al., 2005). Sensemaking is a broad and evolving concept that emphasizes how activity relies upon actors' subjective interpretation (Glynn & Watkiss, 2020). While SAP studies vary in their approach to strategic sensemaking, they do share a focus on social construction, where strategies are made and remade through interactive episodes of thinking and feeling (Weick et al., 2005: 415). Sensemaking has been utilized to understand how strategies are constructed both retrospectively and prospectively within organizations through processes of managerial interpretation (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013); to show how middle managers interact in order to reinterpret and then enact strategies that may differ significantly from the original intent (Balogun & Johnson, 2004); and to uncover the ways middle managers draw on discursive and sociocultural contexts in order to do the sensemaking necessary for effective strategic conversations (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). Closely related to sensemaking is the concept of sensegiving, as managers have to interpret strategy (give sense) for key audiences such as employees or clients on the ground (Rouleau, 2005). Emotions are also involved in sensemaking: for example, fear affected how Nokia's managers interpreted the threat of the smartphone early this century, inhibiting what might otherwise have been a superior strategic response (Vuori & Huy, 2016).

Key theoretical influences

The sensemaking concept developed from Karl Weick's (1979) work on the social psychology of organizing, a use of the verb-form that anticipates the use of strategizing. Weick (2020) insists that his own inspirations were 'generalist', but they can be situated within a broader intellectual reaction during the 1960s and 1970s against economic decision-making models that portrayed organizations as unproblematically coherent and rational (Glynn & Watkiss, 2020). In this period, scholars such as March and Simon replaced economists' unitary and rationalistic approach with a conceptualization of organizations as fluid coalitions of cognitively biased and boundedly rational actors (Gavetti et al., 2007). Weick et al.'s (2005) sensemaking concept accordingly shifted the focus of research from detached evaluation and choice towards the continuous interplay of action and interpretation in the moment. Cognition happens 'in the wild', an inseparable part of everyday activity (Chia & Holt, 2006; Hutchins, 1995). The cognitive process of sensemaking is essential to organizing and strategizing, providing as it does the interpretations necessary to mobilize otherwise incoherent groups into action. Weick et al. (2005: 419) also recognizes the place of emotions in sensemaking, with hot attitudes displacing cold rationality. This recognition reflects the general insight from psychology that emotions link cognitive, physiological and motivational systems (Huy, 2005).

Characteristic methodological approaches

Sensegiving research in SAP typically seeks out cognition and emotions in the wild and so often adopts similar field approaches to those of the praxis cluster. Thus, many studies focus on particular case organizations and use interviews and ethnographic observation (Rouleau, 2005). Participant observation and audio recordings are also used to gain greater intimacy (Whittle et al., 2020). A characteristic of many sensegiving studies is the extensive use of quotations, respecting how actors make sense of their strategizing activities in their own words (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013). Some researchers provide extended vignettes of particular episodes or individuals in order to capture sensemaking efforts in the round and with sufficient detail (Garreau et al., 2015; Mantere & Whittington, 2020). Distinctive methods for illuminating sensemaking include Garreau et al.'s (2015) reproduction and analysis of actors' own strategy visualizations (e.g. maps or two-by-two diagrams) and Balogun and Johnson's (2004) use of personal diaries to access actors' internal and contemporaneous sensemaking.

Discursive

Central themes

The third cluster (red in Figure 3) is concerned with discourse, representing what SAP studies often refer to as 'sayings' (Vaara et al., 2010). This cluster is also diverse, including post-structural perspectives, critical discourse analysis, narrative, rhetoric, conversation analysis and metaphor analysis (Balogun et al., 2014). However, a central theme is the significance of language for strategy work, including both text and talk. For example, Wenzel and Koch (2018) in turn analyse the keynote speeches employed by Apple's Steve Jobs in the launch of new products, uncovering characteristic discursive practices such as demarcating or mystifying in order to establish novelty. Strategy discourse is also recognized as potentially 'performative', bringing about the reality it purports merely to describe: simply terming certain activities 'strategic' invests those activities with strategy's characteristic properties, often exclusionary (Cabantous et al., 2018; Carton, 2020). Related themes are power and legitimacy. Thus, Vaara et al. (2010) explore how strategy jargon such as SWOT analysis, scenarios, vision and key success factors enhanced the authority of managers in a Finnish city while tending to marginalize sceptical or dissenting voices. Dalpiaz and Di Stefano (2018) show how the Italian company Alessi legitimized successive strategic changes by publishing more than 30 books on its design strategy, using these texts to memorialize, revision, sacralize and anathemize the past. These themes of power and legitimacy lend themselves to a 'critical' approach in which strategy discourse is seen as disciplinary, an instrument for the control of managers and employees rather than a neutral set of techniques (Carter et al., 2008; Knights & Morgan, 1991). Another important theme is the rejection of strategy as the product of a single voice, particularly the voice of the management team (Brown & Thompson, 2013), and, instead, the reflection of organizations as polyphonic and dialogical arenas (Boje et al., 2015; Vaara et al., 2016).

Key theoretical influences

The many approaches within the discourse cluster can be broadly distinguished according to whether they take a 'little d' approach to discourse or a 'Big D' approach (Gee, 2015). 'Little d' discourse analysis studies the flow of language-in-use across time and its effects on actors' interpretations and activity. As such, it is close to the praxis and sensemaking clusters. 'Little d' discourse analysis often takes its inspiration from the ethnomethodological and

conversation-analytic tradition of Garfinkel (1967), leading to a close focus on talk-in-interaction; for instance, the precise words, pauses and interjections of senior managers in board meetings or strategy discussions (Neyland & Whittle, 2018; Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Whittle et al., 2020). ‘Big D’ discourse analysis (or Discourse with a capital D) situates discourse within larger societal and historical contexts (Knights & Morgan, 1991). As such, it sometimes comes close to the institutional cluster that we shall discuss later. For example, Tienari et al. (2003) analyse the cross-border acquisition of a Norwegian bank by a Swedish–Finnish one, involving nationalistic discourses rooted in the three countries’ long-connected histories. Many of these ‘Big D’ SAP studies draw on Foucault’s (1980) insights in order to explore the power effects of language, illuminating how strategy discourse can be deployed in order to reinforce the power of managers or the interests of capital (Ezzamel & Willmott, 2008; Knights & Morgan, 1991).

Characteristic methodological approaches

Essential to discursive research is the capture of words, in text or talk. Types of text range from internal documents or histories (Dalpiaz & Di Stefano, 2018; Vaara et al., 2010) to external media reports (Tienari et al., 2003). Talk comes from interviews (Ezzamel & Willmott, 2008; Ma et al., 2020; Vaara et al., 2004) or audio/video recordings (Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Wenzel & Koch, 2018). These words are analysed through various frames, for instance, those of rhetoric (Sillince et al., 2012; Sorsa & Vaara, 2020) or narratives (Dalpiaz & Di Stefano, 2018; Fenton & Langley, 2011) or performativity (Gond et al., 2018). Researchers taking a critical approach are often inspired by critical discourse analysis, linking the minutiae of discourse to the societal structuring of power and subjectivity (Vaara, 2015; Wenzel & Koch, 2018).

Sociomaterial

Central themes

The fourth cluster (light blue in Figure 3) recognizes the role of materiality in strategy work, specifically the interplay between the material and social worlds. The material is broadly defined, including tools, technologies, built spaces and even human bodies (Dameron et al., 2015; Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015; Whittington, 2015). Conceptual tools such as strategy frameworks are sometimes included, especially as they take material form through their representations on flipcharts or PowerPoints (Burke & Wolf, 2020; Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015; Vuorinen

et al., 2018). Information technologies are increasingly prominent (Heavey et al., 2020; Morton et al., 2020). There is conceptual diversity, too. Thus, Dameron et al. (2015) note three different conceptualizations of materiality’s relationship to social activity. The weak view emphasizes how physical materials may impact behaviours: an example in SAP would be the physical layout of strategy workshops, tending to enhance the control of the senior manager while suppressing contributions from other participants (Whittington et al., 2006). The moderate view considers the interplay between material objects on the one hand and social activity on the other; for example, the evolution of strategy through the interactions between successive PowerPoint representations and managers working in strategy groups and workshops (Werle & Seidl, 2015). The strong view assumes a deeply entangled relationship between the material and the social, where the two cannot be seen as separate.

Key theoretical influences

Both activity theory and practice theory, in general, support a concern for sociomateriality. Thus, Engeström’s (2001) activity systems highlight the role of artifacts and tools, while Schatzki (2010) insists that social phenomena are essentially nexuses of human practices and material arrangements. Sociologists of science and technology have also influenced some researchers. From the sociology of science, Knorr Cetina’s (2001) notion of ‘epistemic objects’ has variously inspired Burke and Wolf (2020), Jarzabkowski et al. (2013) and Werle and Seidl (2015). As in Werle and Seidl’s (2015) evolving strategy PowerPoints, these epistemic objects can have a representational incompleteness that is actually motivational and generative. From the sociology of technology, a common reference point is Latour’s (2005) actor network theory, which gives equal status to the agency of human and non-human actors. Substantial empirical work here is still rare (Cabantous et al., 2018; Chapman et al., 2015), but this equality of the human and non-human is exemplified by Callon and Law’s (1997) concept of ‘Andrew-the-strategist’, combining work laptop, commuter train and senior manager into a single network, and by Sergi’s (2016) attention to the role of documents as well as people in providing ‘leadership’.

Characteristic methodological approaches

The multifaceted nature of many material technologies is hard to capture through interviews: subjects tend to take everyday materiality too much for granted for explicit discussion, and its complexity is difficult to describe fully in

words in any case. SAP researchers taking a sociomaterial perspective therefore frequently favour ethnographic approaches, often using their direct observations as the basis for vivid and detailed vignettes of materiality in action (Burke & Wolf, 2020; Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015). Photographs of strategists interacting through technologies are also valuable, especially for those taking a moderate or stronger view of relationships between the material and the social (Werle & Seidl, 2015). Diagrams and drawings can also be used, for instance, to bring out archetypal elements of sociomaterial practices, rather than the details of particular strategizing episodes (Knight et al., 2018). In general, video ethnography is a promising route for capturing the richness of sociomateriality in action (Balogun et al., 2015; Gylfe et al., 2016).

Institutional

Central themes

The fifth ‘institutional’ cluster (purple in Figure 3) is not yet as strongly represented as the others, but has gathered momentum in the last decade. A foundational statement for this cluster is Suddaby et al.’s (2013: 331) claim that ‘SAP and NIT [New Institutional Theory] are evolving toward a common theoretical and empirical space’. A central theme derived from NIT is the influence on activities of social practices drawn from the wider organizational fields in which actors are embedded. Thus, the institutional cluster shares with ‘Big D’ discourse studies a concern for the societal context, broadening the focus beyond specific organizations. For example, Elbasha and Avetisyan (2018) explore how the rise in Europe of corporate social responsibility agencies provides a new institutional framework within which strategizing activities must be undertaken. This concern for fields prompts an interest in historical and regional contexts. For example, Whittington (2019) shows how the whole field of strategy evolved in three broad epochs since the 1960s, each setting norms for the strategizing activities of consultants and managers worldwide.

Key theoretical influences

NIT emerged about four decades ago to assert the importance of sociological as well as economic pressures on organizations (Scott, 2013). Thus, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) emphasize how organizational fields tend to exert isomorphic pressures towards conformity with standard practices, while Thornton and Ocasio’s (2008) notion of ‘institutional logics’ points to the influence of socially con-

structed and historically embedded patterns of material practices, values, beliefs and rules. In this view, strategy practices are about social legitimacy more than economic rationality. Mitigating this powerful sense of sociological pressures, institutionalist researchers have latterly endeavoured to introduce a stronger sense of agency into their theorizing (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019), hence for example the frequent citation of Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory. This conjuncture of human agency with societal context provides the ‘common theoretical and empirical space’ between SAP and NIT referred to by Suddaby et al. (2013). An emergent outgrowth of this space is practice-driven institutionalism, a theoretical effort to show how the everyday work of practitioners ‘on the ground’ generates the practices by which jobs get done (Smets et al., 2012, 2017). As we shall explore later, practice-driven institutionalism recognizes that strategizing practices institutionalized at the field level are ultimately the product of local praxis.

Characteristic methodological approaches

Suddaby et al. (2013: 331) suggest that their blend of institutionalism and SAP ‘cuts across multiple levels of analysis, aiming to connect the micro-level of individual activities to the meso-level of the organization and the macro-level of the organizational field’. In other words, analyses of micro-level praxis within particular organizations need to recognize its relationship to broader macro-level practices outside. Kouamé and Langley (2018) provide three approaches to linking the micro and the macro empirically: correlation, whereby researchers trace macro outcomes to associated micro-level variations; progression, where the focus is on temporal and sequential relations between micro and macro phenomena; and instantiation, where the micro and the macro are related simultaneously, being mutually constitutive. Progression and instantiation approaches are most relevant for those taking an institutional perspective in SAP. Progression studies often rely on retrospective interviews or historical documents to reconstruct how practitioner activity and institutional forces have inter-related over time, as in Pratap and Saha’s (2018) study of evolving strategy practices in liberalizing India or Whittington’s (2019) history of strategy practices in Western organizations. Instantiation studies are less dependent on retrospect, but the subtleties of how macro-level institutions are instantiated in micro-level activities may demand deep immersion in immediate action. For instance, Jarzabkowski and Bednarek (2018) used practice theory to study unfolding competitive dynamics. Kornberger and Clegg’s (2011) study of planning for the Sydney Olympics broadly took an instantiation approach, relying

on both interview and documentary sources and ethnographic observation of key events.

Process

Central themes

Finally, the sixth cluster (green in Figure 3) is different from the other clusters, being made up of work from various theoretical traditions frequently cited by SAP researchers; for example, the resource-based view of Barney, the dynamic capabilities theory associated with Teece, the industrial economics tradition associated with Porter and the Carnegie School of March and Simon. Sometimes these authors are proposed as consistent with a SAP perspective, as, for instance, the Carnegie School is by Ocasio et al. (2018); sometimes they are cited only to be pronounced as incompatible, as, for example, the resource-based view is for Carter et al. (2008). Amongst all the various perspectives, the most frequently cited are classic strategy process scholars, hence the cluster's label 'process'. Influential process work includes that of Burgelman (1983) on corporate venturing, Eisenhardt (1989) on strategic decision-making, Mintzberg (1978) on strategy emergence and Pettigrew (1985) on strategic change. For these process researchers, the key questions concern how organizational strategies are formed and implemented (Sminia, 2009). As we shall see later, here again, there is debate about consistency between SAP perspectives and this tradition of process research: the focus on organizations as a whole seems sometimes at once detached from micro-strategizing activity and neglectful of societal context (Burgelman et al., 2018).

Key theoretical influences

The classic process tradition of Burgelman, Eisenhardt, Mintzberg and Pettigrew has diverse theoretical origins. However, an important influence is the Carnegie School of March and Simon, whose concepts of bounded rationality, cognitive bias and coalition bargaining introduce the complexity into organizational processes that makes them worth studying in the first place (Gavetti et al., 2007). Complex organizational processes are relevant to SAP scholars inasmuch as they form the immediate contexts in which strategizing occurs. Pettigrew (1985) also draws on Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, analysing the inter-relationship of context (both internal and external) and managerial action in the achievement of strategic change. This recognition of action in context motivates some detailed accounts of strategizing activity, though Pet-

tigrew's (1985) main interest remains the change process of his case company (ICI) as a whole.

Characteristic methodological approaches

Process researchers have particularly developed the case study method, typically based on interviews with key decision-makers and archival sources (Sminia, 2009). Two approaches stand out. First, there is the longitudinal case study of individual organizations tracked over very considerable periods of time, an approach particularly developed by Pettigrew (1985) for ICI and Burgelman (1994) for Intel. This basic approach has been adopted by SAP researchers as well; for instance, in Pratap and Saha's (2018) study of the evolution of an Indian steel company over 25 years. Second, there is the comparative case study approach associated particularly with Eisenhardt (2021). While the intimate research methods favoured by many SAP researchers are hard to scale up to the comparison of whole organizations, the comparative analysis of more delimited strategizing episodes in the same or different organizations is a feasible methodological approach; for example, in Johnson et al.'s (2010) comparison of strategy retreats.

CONNECTING STREAMS

We have discussed so far five distinct streams of SAP research, each based on clusters of co-citation. In addition, we identify a sixth cluster of research cited frequently in SAP work that comes predominantly from the process tradition. Two of the five SAP clusters—sociomaterial and institutional—have emerged as independent research streams in the last decade. Although some authors publish in more than one cluster, publications in each cluster tend to draw on more or less discrete bodies of literature: there is not much cross-citation between the discursive and socio-materiality clusters, for instance (Figure 3). Where there is cross-citation between clusters, some is merely orientational, establishing affiliation with SAP by reference to key authors such as Jarzabkowski, Johnson or Whittington. Indeed, some cross-citation is to assert difference; for example, between SAP as a whole and the process tradition or between critical SAP researchers and more mainstream ones. Thus, there is tension as well as separation between clusters. To this extent, our analysis confirms the diversity noted by Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) or Langley (2015) at the beginning.

However, differences are neither unproductive nor insuperable. Each stream has distinctive approaches which are potentially relevant to other streams. Moreover, as

Schultz and Hatch (1996) propose, researchers have available a repertoire of ‘crossing’ strategies that allow for learning from different research ‘communities’, even those that are paradigmatically opposed. Crossing strategies respect differences but permit translation. Accordingly, researchers do not need either to submerge distinctions through superficial integration or to refuse connections on the grounds of paradigmatic incommensurability. Rather, crossing strategies allow researchers to translate selectively from independent and continuing communities of research. The internal diversity of the five SAP clusters—for instance, between different kinds of discursive research—particularly offers opportunities for connection. Clusters are not homogeneous in fundamental assumptions. The ontological differences identified by Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) need not be a barrier to productive interchange.

We shall highlight three of Schultz and Hatch’s (1996) crossing strategies: the *sequential* adding of insights from one research community to those of another research community; the *bridging* between communities via common theoretical or conceptual frames; and the *interplay* between communities that builds on similarities while respecting differences. We shall apply these strategies to explore the research opportunities that lie in making four kinds of connection: (i) between micro-praxis perspectives and more macro perspectives particularly associated with discursive and institutional traditions; (ii) between those taking sociomaterial approaches and those more focused on discourse; (iii) critical SAP researchers located mainly in the discursive cluster and more mainstream researchers mainly in the core praxis cluster; and (iv) between practice and process perspectives. With regard to each of these connections, we identify underlying tensions, elaborate possible crossing strategies and identify topics for future research. Table 2 summarizes these tensions, proposed crossing strategies and related research topics.

The micro and the macro

As earlier, an important contribution of the praxis stream of research has been its minute attention to activity. Johnson et al.’s (2003: 3) original call was for ‘the close understanding of the myriad, micro activities that make up strategy and strategizing in practice’. The response to this call has produced a rich appreciation of local initiative and creativity in strategy. There is still plenty of research potential here, fostering the development of practical skill. However, advocates of ‘flat ontologies’ are sceptical of the hierarchical layering of the world into micro and macro, warning against a narrow concern for the local and

a curtailed understanding of broader connections (Gond et al., 2018; Latour, 2005). Indeed, the ‘micro’ focus on empirical detail in much praxis-orientated SAP research has prompted accusations of ‘micro-isolationism’, a tendency to explain activities entirely in local terms (Seidl & Whittington, 2014). Micro-isolationism underplays the influences of practices that extend beyond the particular organization at hand. Neglected thereby are the commonplace tools of strategy, whether stock techniques such as SWOT, ritualized events such as strategy retreats or universal technologies such as the Excel spreadsheet or the PowerPoint presentation. Marginalized likewise are the societal practices emphasized in ‘Big D’ discourse and institutional approaches. Micro-isolationist fascination with the local precludes the comparative study of similar practices across contexts and blocks analysis of the origins, diffusion and effects of dominant strategy practices within society at large.

Here, the concept of practice-driven institutionalism provides the basis for a bridging strategy (Schultz & Hatch, 1996) between the micro and the macro. Practice-driven institutionalism bridges the micro–macro divide by emphasizing how the institutionalized practices of society at large are always the product of micro-level activity (Lounsbury et al., 2021; Smets et al., 2017). For example, German lawyers changed the (macro) national legal profession as they responded to Anglo-Saxon practices through bottom-up (micro) innovations (Smets et al., 2012). A strong emphasis in practice-driven institutionalism is local adaptation in the face of contradictory institutional logics, such as the reconciliation of religious and commercial norms in Islamic banking (Gümüşay et al., 2020). With regard to larger institutions, praxis on the ground can be both adaptive and creative. The micro and the macro are essentially connected.

This insight from practice-driven institutionalism on the connectedness of local activity and larger institutions is potentially fertile for research. In the first place, there are opportunities to understand the praxis of local adaptation, particularly of standard strategy practices to particular institutional contexts. Most challenging contexts for adaptation are likely to be sectors with distinctive and deeply embedded institutional practices of their own, as initially explored in cases such as medicine (Begkos et al., 2020) and the civil service (Noordegraaf et al., 2014). Key concerns here would be how standard strategy practices are originally introduced to such distinctive institutional contexts and the adaptations required for local acceptance and effectiveness: as in the typical institutional theory question, how is legitimacy achieved? Similar issues of adaptation are found in business contexts undergoing change. For example, how are standard strategy practices introduced to the non-managerialist

TABLE 2 Disconnects, crossing strategies and topics for future SAP studies

	Tensions between streams	Crossing strategies	Potential research topics
Micro vs. macro	Focus on the micro level has characterized the praxis cluster, but it has also been salient in the sensemaking and discursive ('small d') approaches. Macro practices are increasingly examined in both discursive studies ('Big D') and NIT.	Bridging: Practice-driven institutionalism, sensitive to the role of praxis in institutionalization.	The praxis of practice adaptation to institutional contexts (e.g. different sectors or business cultures). The creation, evolution and diffusion of strategy practices over time. Digitalization, big data and artificial intelligence in strategy work.
Discursive vs. sociomaterial	Sensemaking and especially discursive studies have typically focused on the role of language but have neglected the tools and technologies by which language is communicated. Sociomaterial studies highlight the embodied and material aspects of strategy work, but usually not linked to more specific analysis of discourse.	Sequential: Multimodal methodologies, capable of capturing the many modes of social life (human and technological).	Multimodal analysis of strategic communication. Discursive or communicative aspects/functions of strategy tools. Interplay of discourses, texts, artifacts and embodied aspects of strategy work. The roles of materiality and embodiment in new virtual means of strategy work.
Practical vs. critical	The praxis cluster has tended to focus on issues of practical relevance while neglecting power issues under the surface. The critical stream of work, especially in the discursive cluster, has tended to self-isolation in critique.	Interplay: Dual interest of power in strategy work, both controlling and emancipatory.	The relative effects of power and practices in explaining outcomes. Inclusion and exclusion in strategy work. Gender and other inequalities in strategy work.
Practice vs. process	Even if initially linked with process studies, many SAP researchers have emphasized distinctiveness, with few linkages to strategy process research. Strategy process studies have typically focused on the organizational level, neglecting societal practices and micro-level strategizing.	Sequential: Temporal perspectives and multi-level studies of activity internal to processes. Bridging: Strong process ontology.	The dynamics of practices within changing organizations. Use of strategy practices 'inside' characteristic strategy processes. The objectifying of strategy processes into distinct and stable things.

cultures of many family businesses (Salvato et al., 2019)?

At the same time, practice-driven institutionalism can inspire more studies of the activities involved in the creation and diffusion of widely institutionalized practices. Initial examples are Whittington's (2019) study of evolving strategy practices in response to societal and technological change, or Carton's (2020) account of the emergence of 'Blue Ocean Strategy'. Given the extended time required for institutionalization in these instances, such studies of practice creation and diffusion could follow the historical methodological approaches outlined by Vaara and Lamberg (2016), for example. However, one pressing contemporary issue of practice-driven institutionalization is how managers and consultants are transforming strategy practices in the face of digitalization, with the consequent mobilizing of social media, importing of big data and harnessing of artificial intelligence (Heavey et al., 2020; Teubner & Stockhinger, 2020; Von Krogh et al., 2021). Today's context is likely to be a period of prolific innovation in strategy practices. Digitalization makes urgent the need to understand the micro praxis involved in the macro-institutionalization of the new tools of strategy work, including creation, trialling, adapting and diffusing.

The discursive and the sociomaterial

As we have seen, SAP researchers have increasingly shown interest in the discursive and sociomaterial aspects of strategy. However, Figure 3 indicates a considerable distance between the two communities of researchers. In particular, SAP's discursive stream of research has tended to focus on practices of strategic text and talk to the neglect of the essential sociomateriality of these activities (Wenzel & Koch, 2018). However, the divide between discourse and sociomateriality is artificial, as text takes material forms and talk is inherently social (Balogun et al., 2014; Cooren, 2020; Cornelissen et al., 2014). A strategic plan is a type of discourse, but it also takes form as a deck of PowerPoints, is communicated bodily in physical presentations and finds meaning in the social interchange of managerial meetings.

Given this mutuality of different kinds of discourse, one route forward is a sequential strategy (Schultz & Hatch, 1996) in which sociomaterial insights are added to those originating in text and talk. Methodologically, this might entail a multimodal approach capable of capturing additional modes of strategic discourse (Höllner et al., 2019; Jarzabkowski et al., 2015b). Analyses of bodies, gestures, gazes, material artefacts and space can augment the discursive

analysis of strategy work. Capturing all these various modes likely requires the close observation of ethnography, supplemented by audio recordings (particularly for talk) and video or photographic recordings (for bodies, material artefacts and space, for example). Thus, Asmuß and Oshima (2018) take a multimodal approach to the detailed study of a management strategy meeting, carefully linking the discourse of managerial interchange to the incremental typing of a strategy document on a notebook computer, its projection onto a whiteboard and the bodily orientations of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and his Human Resource manager. The Human Resource manager's pauses at the computer, steady gazes at the CEO and silence in talk all work together to communicate resistance to his superior's proposals.

Informed by multimodality, zooming in on the interconnected nature of discourses, texts, artifacts and embodied aspects of strategy work is a particularly promising avenue for future research. In particular, the discursive or communicative aspects and functions of strategy tools warrant special attention (Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015). As Kaplan (2011) has observed, PowerPoint technology projects create a particular 'epistemic culture', consequential for both discourse and outcomes. Other material technologies—such as the Excel spreadsheet and corporate social media platforms (Neeley & Leonardi, 2018)—deserve equivalent investigation for their relationship to discourse. Such investigations lend themselves to multimodal methods, as the evolution of discourse is both influenced by and recorded through the technologies in play. The integral nature of discourse and technology demands the simultaneous scrutiny of each. This returns us to the digital transformation of strategizing work. The current movement of strategy work to a virtual environment, a trend accelerated by the COVID crisis of 2020–2021, raises intriguing questions regarding the role of sociomateriality. In particular, hybrid strategizing teams occupying different positions in the virtual and the physical worlds present a test for the importance of sociomateriality and embodiment.

The increased use of video technologies such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom also presents a powerful opportunity. As Henshall (2020) has recently remarked, these remote methods can help make research more ethnographic, either by recording meetings in vivo or by helping to place interviewees in their natural and most comfortable environments. The multimodality of bodily movements, the intrusions of technology and fluidity of discursive exchange can all be accessed directly and easily in action. With the shift of strategizing work online, video technologies are likely to play a greater part in fusing the discursive and the sociomaterial in future SAP research.

The practical and the critical

From early on, SAP research has been torn between ‘practical’ and more ‘critical’ research (Carter et al., 2008; Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008). The initial strategizing tradition of research in the praxis cluster particularly emphasized practical relevance: Johnson et al. (2003) promised guidance for managers in their routine strategizing activities; for example, the running of strategy meetings and the management of planning processes. ‘Critical’ researchers, typically from the discourse cluster, have frequently argued this approach risks reducing SAP researchers to dissembling servants of organizational power (Carter et al., 2008; Hardy & Thomas, 2014; Vaara et al., 2010). From this perspective, strategy is not an objective set of tools, but a discourse that fetishizes specific kinds of problems as ‘strategic’, while excluding less powerful actors from debate. Rather than exploring the practicalities of micro-level strategizing, critical researchers focus on challenging the underlying power structures. This critical focus has particularly motivated examinations of active resistance to managerial strategizing (Dick & Collings, 2014; Ezzamel & Willmott, 2008). However, as the distance from other clusters in Figure 2 indicates, critical researchers are relatively isolated from the core of SAP research.

The crossing strategy of interplay (Schultz & Hatch, 1996) is one means of reducing the distance between practical and critical. Practical researchers can accept power effects, while skipping the structural challenges urged by critics. Whereas power is an object for emancipatory exposure for critical researchers, it is just an everyday tool for practicing managers. Understanding the power effects of discourse effectively enhances the managerial capacity to navigate the complexities of strategizing and adds to their practical skills (Whittington et al., 2019). Indeed, even the employee resistance highlighted in critical research may have ‘productive’ effects if it means the voicing of alternative views that enrich strategy discussions (Rantakari & Vaara, 2016). Critical exposure of the disciplinary role of discourse in suppressing employee contributions can therefore be both emancipating for employees and constructive for managers seeking a wider range of inputs (Mantere & Vaara, 2008). Accordingly, the interplay of practical and critical streams of research can potentially serve managers while at the same time helping the managed.

Thus, power need not be the special preserve of critical researchers: all SAP researchers should be attentive to power effects. Most strategizing occurs within organizational hierarchies after all. In such conditions, power should be a default factor in explaining patterns and outcomes of strategizing activity. Such an appreciation of

power has particularly important implications for research on the effectiveness of strategy practices. When Johnson et al. (2003) argue for the connection of strategizing to performance outcomes, it is necessary to disentangle the effects of strategy activity and practices from those of simple power: managers as enactors of practices are also the privileged occupants of hierarchical positions. Researchers should be careful not to explain outcomes in terms of strategy practices when hierarchical powers are actually doing the work. Confusing the effects of practices with those of power is liable to exaggerate the importance of the former.

This greater sensitivity to power effects is particularly relevant to the practical management of participative or ‘open’ forms of strategizing (Seidl et al., 2019). In hierarchical organizations, it is important not to applaud limited participation initiatives with incautious talk of ‘democratizing strategy’ (Stieger et al., 2012). The issue of inclusion and exclusion needs critical investigation, with special attention to actual decision and participation rights and the various ways in which social and organizational practices limit participation (Vaara et al., 2019). As Dobusch et al. (2019) found in their analysis of Wikimedia’s open strategy initiative, participation can be highly unequal even in non-hierarchical organizations. At Wikimedia, women were particularly absent. The gendered nature of strategy discourse has been touched upon but is still little explored as a source of unequal relations in strategizing activities (Rouleau, 2005; Vaara, 2010). The marginalization of women and other disadvantaged groups in strategizing activities, even in processes that are purportedly ‘open’, warrants urgent attention. Mitigating the neglected exclusionary effects of strategy discourse may even have practical benefits for organizations, helping to achieve the diversity of ideas and wholehearted buy-in that managers are seeking in open strategy initiatives.

Practice and process

As Figure 3 shows, there is considerable interchange between the SAP community and leading scholars in the process tradition. However, the relationship has been tense right from the start: some of the cross-citations between the two clusters are about asserting difference. Thus, Whittington (1996, 2007) explicitly distinguished SAP research from the processual work of Mintzberg and Pettigrew by emphasizing its focus on human activities rather than organizational strategies, and its adoption of a broader sociological lens. Indeed, the original interest in strategizing as micro-level activity did foreground different analytical units and outcomes to those of the process tradition: the activity of small groups of strategists and their local achievements

rather than the strategic transformations of whole organizations (MacKay et al., 2020).

However, two sequential strategies lend themselves to crossing the practice and process divide. The first is to marry practice and process by adding a temporal lens (Ancona et al., 2001). Practices have dynamics over time that can be analysed processually (Kouamé & Langley, 2018): an example is Jarzabkowski's (2008) study of evolving strategy activities in three universities. A second sequential strategy is to recognize multiple levels, adding internal detail to larger processes. Following Brown and Duguid (2001), strategizing as activity can be reconciled with traditional process approaches by casting it as the activity 'inside' the process. Insights from the micro-level of activity can then be slotted into processes at the organizational level. This immediately suggests a large and still under-exploited research agenda investigating the activities and practices going on inside characteristic organizational processes. Work in this direction has already begun, for example, with merger processes (Sarala et al., 2019) and fast decision processes (Netz et al., 2020). There are many more processes, for example, innovation, alliances and organizational design, where a deeper understanding of internal activities and practices would be valuable.

A more fundamental crossing strategy is to build on the theoretical bridge between practice and process traditions provided by the common philosophical platform of 'strong process' ontology (Burgelman et al., 2018; Whittington, 2017). Strong process ontology characterizes processes, practices and actors as all equally products of ongoing activity (Langley & Tsoukas, 2010). Activity is not simply inside the process: the process is activity too. This bridging strategy brings about an ontological shift that dissolves the distinctions between practice and process levels of analysis and introduces a fundamental compatibility that allows for a more comprehensive exchange of questions, concepts and methodologies. The 'decision-making process', for example, need no longer be treated as a pre-existing thing into which SAP insights can be slotted. Rather, such organizational processes should be approached as fluid, indistinct collections of actors, activities and practices which need intimate and open-ended exploration. Burgelman et al. (2018) conclude that strong process ontology provides the basis for a reconciliation of the two traditions in the form of 'strategy as process and practice' (SAPP).

This strong process ontology opens up questions surrounding the objectifying of strategy processes—in other words, the crystallization of fluid activities into concrete entities fit for measurement, communication and accountability. The managerial trick of appearing to stabilize such phenomena as a strategic decision process, a planning system or a transformation programme as distinct and

consistent 'things' becomes itself the focus of practice-oriented investigation. The sceptical ethnography familiar to SAP scholars can be applied to the very demarcation of the processes that have traditionally preoccupied process research. Decision processes, planning processes and change processes should all be treated as continuously and precariously defined in action, their boundaries in need of relentless assertion and reassertion. Most fundamental of all, of course, is how managers achieve the definition of 'strategy' itself: how does what may be merely an emergent pattern of activities become transformed into an object of deliberate design, presented to stakeholders as some finished thing (Mirabeau & Maguire, 2014)? If the articulation of formal strategies can move financial markets (Whittington et al., 2016), then the practices of pattern-finding and sensegiving by which they are stabilized as coherent objects need further investigation (Rouleau, 2005).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: MOVING THE FIELD FORWARD

Over the past two decades, SAP research has become an important stream within the strategy discipline, challenging more mainstream approaches and enriching its theoretical and methodological resources. In the period 1980–2000, 96.6% of the *Strategic Management Journal's* empirical articles were quantitative, with the rest organizational level case studies (Phelan et al., 2002). Now it is possible to find video methods recommended in its pages (Gylfe et al., 2016), discussions of PowerPoint presentations (Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015) and even diagrams of Steve Jobs in action on the Apple stage (Wenzel & Koch, 2018).

The burgeoning of SAP research has, however, led to a need to take stock of the various research streams and their inter-relationships. Thus, based on a systematic analysis of the field, we have identified five SAP clusters—praxis, sensemaking, discourse, sociomateriality and institutional—and an adjacent cluster of strategy process research that is extensively referenced in the SAP literature. We have elaborated on the distinctive characteristics of these clusters and shown how they have each advanced understanding in their respective areas. The result has been a powerful pluralism of perspectives, each of which is pushing research forwards by engaging deeply with specific theoretical and methodological traditions. Specialization in depth has helped counter critiques calling for greater theoretical engagement in addition to the rich empirical analysis that characterized early SAP research (Carter et al., 2008).

However, we also see potential in harnessing this diversity in order to develop new agendas and greater richness in SAP research. Thus, we have particularly pointed to

the research opportunities that lie in connecting streams. Reflecting debates and tensions in the literature, we have especially called for research at the following intersections: (i) micro and macro; (ii) sociomaterial and discourse; (iii) critical and mainstream; and (iv) practice and process perspectives. In each case, we have drawn from the repertoire of crossing strategies developed by Schultz and Hatch (1996) to develop particular strategies—sequential, interplay or bridging—by which to connect research clusters. Our proposals are not exhaustive and we encourage SAP researchers to look for further opportunities to apply these kinds of crossing strategies to connect other, relatively detached clusters of research. Our review indicates that such crossing strategies can generate research opportunities and questions that are not only important and interesting in themselves, but which can help the SAP field move forward in a way that leverages the strengths of diversity while respecting some fundamental differences. While each research stream has agendas of its own to pursue, there is power too in strategies of connection. This approach can also contribute to the coherence of the strategy field as a whole, for example by bringing together process and practice research in the SAPP formulation proposed by Burgelman et al. (2018).

Furthermore, our analysis helps to recognize what is missing or ‘invisible’ in SAP research. In addition to the elaboration of existing clusters, there are adjacent areas of research that could be more present in our analysis. Two such are the microfoundations (Eisenhardt, Furr, & Bingham, 2010; Felin & Foss, 2005) (Barney & Felin, 2013; Felin & Foss, 2005) and behavioural strategy (Gavetti, 2012; Reitzig & Sorenson, 2013) traditions of research. They are missing in our map not because of irrelevance, but because so much SAP research simply omits them in their citation practices. (Gavetti, Levinthal, & Ocasio, 2007; Powell, Lovallo, & Fox, 2011) This neglect of microfoundations and behavioural strategy research is surprising given their micro-level orientations, something that was originally shared by many prominent SAP scholars (e.g. Johnson et al., 2003). Moreover, these streams have also emerged as alternatives to mainstream strategy research and are similarly aimed at placing the characteristics or cognition of ‘strategists’ at the centre of analysis. There is a common critical spirit cutting across these areas, reflected in a willingness to reveal problems, challenges, biases, deficiencies and limitations in the more rationalistic views of strategic decision-making. Thus, we believe there is a great deal of untapped potential in establishing linkages and developing joint research interests across these areas.

Such connections should not be aimed for at any cost, as there are some profound differences between these research areas as well. Reasons for the lack of collabo-

ration between SAP and microfoundations/behavioural strategy scholars can be found in their distinctive onto-epistemological, theoretical and methodological approaches (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). For instance, SAP research has characteristically tried to avoid reductionism and aimed at analysing strategic activity in its social, cultural, institutional and historical contexts. Microfoundations and behavioural strategy have instead focused on the individual level and been reluctant to bring sociological elements into their more cognitive and behavioural research agenda (Felin et al., 2015). The differences are pronounced also on the methodological front, where qualitative methods have often characterized SAP research, while microfoundations and behavioural strategy have relied more on quantitative or laboratory methods (Reyppens & Levine, 2018). Nevertheless, there are research opportunities from more cross-fertilization between these approaches. One obvious avenue for SAP researchers is to extend current work on sensemaking by incorporating more explicitly cognitive and behavioural biases. Fundamentally, we believe that the differences between SAP research and microfoundations/behavioural strategy should be amenable to similar crossing strategies (Schultz & Hatch, 1996) to those we have identified between the various SAP and process clusters of research. Sequential, interplay and bridging strategies should have parts to play in connecting microfoundations and behavioural research with SAP research in the future. These strategies allow researchers both to transfer insights and to respect differences.


This review has highlighted the disconnects between different streams in SAP and developed a research agenda based on crossing between streams. However, we do not wish to derogate the many research opportunities that lie within the individual streams themselves. Continued specialization is one means by which SAP research can deepen its insights, drawing as it does so on advances in related areas—be those sensemaking research, discourse analysis, sociomateriality or institutional theory. At the same time, these specialized streams hold out the possibility of reciprocally enriching these related areas. The challenges of accessing the often secretive phenomena of strategy may lead to methodological advances that are relevant more widely (Gylfe et al., 2016; Jarzabkowski et al., 2015a). The peculiarities of top management strategizing may offer theoretical insights into other elitist spheres. For example, developing the strategic sensemaking perspective within SAP, for example, should be valuable for sensemaking scholars more generally.

The point we want to close on, however, is that if SAP researchers fail to connect across streams, they will not only miss the opportunities of harnessing diversity but risk leaving the field fragmented and dissipating one of

its key strengths: a broadly shared interest in discovering new aspects of strategy practices that make a difference in strategy work. We also believe that making connections between different perspectives will generate theoretical and empirical insights that can take SAP research far beyond its first quarter century since Whittington (1996), at the same time as continuing to enrich the strategy discipline as a whole with innovative methods and theories from outside the mainstream. The next decades offer exciting prospects for SAP research.

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