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Paula Jarzabkowski: Strategy as Practice: An Activity-Based Approach

2005, London: Sage, 216 pages

DOI: 10.1177/0170840606066422

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Jarzabkowski's book is a welcome contribution and introduction to the emerging strategy-as-practice research community (see www.strategy-as-practice.org). The research agenda builds on the tradition of strategy process research (e.g. Mintzberg 1990) and draws inspiration from the practice turn in social theory (e.g. Bourdieu 1977; Ortner 1984) to examine strategic practices in use. Intraorganizational dynamics as well as the activities of top managers are focalized in an effort to understand how strategies are constructed and change. The main contribution of the book is the conceptual development of an activity-based framework to analyze the dynamics of strategy. A comparative case analysis of three university contexts is drawn on to provide empirical illustrations that demonstrate the utility of the framework.

The beginning of the book provides a brief introduction to strategy-as-practice research as well as its theoretical bases. The core of the book draws

on the university cases to develop a grounded conceptual approach to strategy. The concluding sections review the main points of the book and make overtures about future research directions. The book is organized didactically with several illustrations, and textual reiterations of the main points. This combined with the empirical examples of the main concepts makes for a reasonably good text for doctoral students interested in entering into the strategy-as-practice research community. At the same time, this structure enables key points to be absorbed more quickly and efficiently by more advanced scholars who desire an introduction to this emerging area.

While the framework Jarzabkowski develops is a major step forward for this research area, there are a variety of conceptual issues that require further refinement while also presenting opportunities for an expanded research agenda. Strategy is defined as a pattern in a stream of goal-directed activity over time. This gives the notion of strategy a kind of durability, while also focusing attention on the time inflected mechanisms by which strategies emerge, change and are reproduced. However, it is unclear how the concept of strategy used in the book relates to more conventional notions of strategy as a long-range action plan to achieve organizational goals. For instance, in the context of the universities analyzed, meta-goals of teaching competence, research excellence and the generation of commercial revenue are discussed as kinds of strategies without attention to the action plans by which top managers aim to achieve those goals.

In addition, the notion of activity is defined very broadly as just about everything that managers and other organizational actors do, making it difficult to assess which activities are related to strategy. This open-endedness is not necessarily a serious problem, but requires the researcher to justify why some activities were focalized and others were bracketed. In this book, Jarzabkowski attends to top managers and relies on interviews, observation and other documents over a seven-year period to track shifts in strategy process. While the empirical examples are usefully illustrative, a top-tier journal article would require much more documentation regarding research method and analytical strategy.

In contradistinction to the buzzing confusion of organizational activities, the notion of practice focuses attention on the institutionalized methods that managers rely on to shape strategic activity. Two general kinds of practices — procedural and interactive — are identified as key elements that top managers rely on to shape strategy. The use of these practices is referred to as strategizing. Procedural strategizing is the use of formal administrative practices such as plans, budgets and other monitoring devices to shape strategy by structuring routines about how resource allocation and other key organizational decisions are made. Interactive strategizing is the use of face-to-face communications to shape strategy by creating master frames that delimit appropriate behavior. While I found this distinction quite useful, the more general use of the term ‘practice’ creates some ambiguity. For instance, it is unclear how the aforementioned kinds of practices relate to the notion of strategy ‘as a practice’ which is invoked at the beginning and end of the book. Nonetheless, researchers in the strategy-as-practice research community

should take note of Jarzabkowski's efforts to distinguish the notion of practice from the everyday activities of managers and resist efforts to expand the concept beyond its social theoretic utility.

Jarzabkowski further develops the distinction between procedural and interactive strategizing by emphasizing how managers use these practices in an effort to respectively attain structural and interpretive legitimacy. That is, if a strategy becomes successfully embedded in administrative procedures that are widely accepted by organizational members, then it will have structural legitimacy in the sense that it becomes reinforced by organizational routines, hierarchies and roles. Alternatively, the use of interactive strategizing can lead to interpretive legitimacy of a practice if top managers are able to successfully construct a widely shared frame that enables organizational members to understand and accept a particular strategy as appropriate.

These concepts are then used to construct a practice strategizing matrix by assessing a strategy according to the extent to which it has structural and interpretive legitimacy. A strategy that has low structural and interpretive legitimacy is in a state of pre-active strategizing where a strategy may be nascent, undeveloped, or marginalized. If a strategy has high structural legitimacy but low interpretive legitimacy, procedural strategizing is the dominant practice-in-use. Interactive strategizing is more pervasive under conditions where a strategy has low structural legitimacy and high interpretive legitimacy. Finally, a strategy with high structural and interpretive legitimacy will rely on integrative strategizing — the use of both forms of strategizing as complementary practices. Acknowledging the flaws of theoretical matrices, the empirical illustrations used in the book enhances understanding of how strategies may shift from quadrant to quadrant over time. This may occur as a result of managerial initiative or in spite of it. In addition, Jarzabkowski nicely highlights some of the problematic aspects of strategizing practices. For example, a strategy that becomes embedded in administrative procedures may become perverse or misaligned with the goals of the organization.

While less developed than other sections of the book, Jarzabkowski provocatively discusses the use of multiple strategies and their relation to one another. Since strategy research tends to focus on dominant firm strategies, the notion of multiple conflicting strategies opens up new research vistas into the study of organizational power and conflict in strategy research. For instance, efforts of university administrators to increase commercial income has created conflict with more research focused faculty that find an income generating focus as antithetical to scholarly activity. This kind of focus not only highlights the need to understand strategy as distributed and heterogeneous as noted by Jarzabkowski, but to also attend to the broader institutional context within which strategy and strategizing occur. For instance, organizational goals and strategies related to teaching, research and commercial income generation may be understood as embedded in broader logics that play out across an organizational field (e.g. Scott 2001; Thornton 2004).

Attention to institutional forces and processes is currently a blind spot in the strategy-as-practice community (Whittington 2005). While a focus on practices-in-use is important, a more comprehensive perspective on practice should also

aim to shed light on the origins of practices as well as their dynamics inside and across organizations. For example, the commercialization of intellectual property has been a key area of development for many universities over the past two decades. Efforts to legitimize these activities have not only occurred via established interpretive and procedural strategizing methods, but have enabled the creation of new kinds of practices related to technology transfer offices and how faculty are assessed and rewarded. The shape these practices take is not only influenced by localized organizational politics, but also by interorganizational linkages and broader discourse. In Jarzabkowski's book, such broader influences are only noted in passing when it is emphasized that strategy is a societally situated phenomenon (p.21). This does not lessen the contribution of the book, but highlights an important opportunity for expanding the scope of strategy-as-practice research. To wit, it would be useful to stimulate dialogue between the strategy-as-practice community and researchers in sympathetic areas such as the new institutionalism in organizational analysis and cognate research streams that are engaged in practice research from a more structuralist standpoint (e.g. Lounsbury and Ventresca 2003).

Overall, I found this book insightful and intriguing. As an interested outsider, I appreciated the aim of the activity-based framework and its key concepts. While I believe that many scholars will similarly recognize the significance of the theoretical apparatus developed, the real value of the book lies in the fact that it raises more questions than it answers. This is especially helpful in emerging areas of research, and in this case, Jarzabkowski has astutely signaled an agenda for future scholarship that will no doubt fuel the continued growth of this subfield.

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