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Whittington, Richard ; Seidl, David

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# Enlarging the Strategy-as-Practice Research Agenda: Towards Taller and Flatter Ontologies

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## Abstract

Taking perspectives from papers published previously in *Organization Studies*, we argue for progress in strategy-as-practice research through more effective linking of ‘local’ strategizing activity with ‘larger’ social phenomena. We introduce a range of theoretical approaches capable of incorporating larger-scale phenomena and countering what we term ‘micro-isolationism’, the tendency to explain local activities in their own terms. Organizing the theories according to how far they lean towards either tall or flat ontologies, we outline their respective strengths and weaknesses. Against this background, we develop three broad guidelines that can help protect against empirical micro-isolationism and thereby extend the scope of strategy-as-practice research.

## Keywords

macro, methodology, micro, ontology, practice, strategy, strategy-as-practice

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## Introduction

*Organization Studies* has long been a key forum for strategy-as-practice research. And right from the start, a strong theme in this research has been the relationship between ‘local’ strategizing praxis and ‘larger’ phenomena in the world. Thus, in their pioneering *Organization Studies* paper, Knights and Morgan (1991) define strategy’s discursive practices as the product of the post-war

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rise of managerial capitalism as a whole. We take as our focus in this review article exactly this theme: *Organization Studies* papers that address the relationship between strategy practice and larger phenomena. In using Schatzki's (2011) term 'large', we allow both for 'tall' ontologies in which micro-level strategizing praxis depends hierarchically on larger macro structures or systems, and for 'flat' ontologies in which the large is what stretches out sideways in a network of relationships. Our argument is that strategy-as-practice research will progress by doing more to enlarge its scope, either by going taller or by going flatter.

As we shall show, there is already considerable theoretical effort to enlarge the scope of strategy-as-practice research, drawing variously on Foucauldian and critical discourse analysis, structuration theory, Archerian critical realism, narratology and Bourdieusian and Wittgensteinian perspectives. What has proven more difficult for strategy-as-practice researchers is applying these theoretical resources in systematic empirical research (Carter, 2013; Ezzamel & Willmott, 2008; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Fascination with the detailed understanding of local praxis can produce what we term 'micro-isolationism', whereby a local empirical instance is interpreted wholly in terms of what is evidently present, cut off from the larger phenomena that make it possible. Common enough throughout organization studies (Bamberger, 2008; Whittington, 2012), this micro-isolationism treats organizations as the isolated containers of focal phenomena. Beyond some acknowledgement of market interactions perhaps, explanation makes little reference to the larger society. Histories, technology regimes, forms of capitalism, institutions, gender structures or dominant cultures are, at best, bundled away into the hold-all concept of 'context'. As Nicolini (2012) warns, reliance on atheoretical notions of context can be a form of 'lazy' social science.

We take Schatzki's (2011) term 'large' to embrace two distinct ontologies that equally refuse such micro-isolationism. There is of course the flat ontology associated particularly with Latour (2005) and actor-network theory. Flatness here does not imply restriction of scope, but rather a willingness to radiate out horizontally from the single instance in order to trace the network of connections that make it possible. Thus Callon and Law's (1997) archetypal 'Andrew-the-strategist' is only a strategist by virtue of his place in a network of essential elements that includes, in no rank order, his fellow managers, his secretary, his office, his PC and his train to London. On the other hand, we propose the contrasting notion of tall ontology to include those theories that escape micro-isolationism by the vertical route of levels, typically meso and macro. In the tall ontologies of Archer (1995), Foucault (1980) or Giddens (1984), micro-level phenomena are explained primarily by reference to meso-level or macro-level structures or systems. Thus for Knights and Morgan (1991), it is a change in the capitalist system as a whole that produces the everyday strategy discourse of contemporary managers.

We seek to encourage an enlarged agenda for empirical strategy-as-practice research in either direction, tall or flat. In this, we do not wish to devalue one of strategy-as-practice's distinctive strengths so far, the close attention to micro-level strategizing praxis. Strategy-as-practice has its origins precisely in this appreciation of micro-activity (Johnson, Melin & Whittington, 2003), and has persuasively demonstrated the importance of nuances in praxis and practices that had been hitherto poorly understood. However, connecting the micro-level more explicitly to the larger picture can now offer a variety of pay-offs. There is of course the scientific benefit of a more holistic understanding of strategizing praxis, one that recognizes what makes it possible in the first place. There are pedagogical gains too, for linking strategizing praxis to a larger picture offers a more substantial basis for theoretical claims about the relevance boundaries of particular strategy practices. Our teaching will be more effective the better we know what works in which conditions. But a more systematic and rigorous engagement with the wider embeddedness of local praxis can also expose how strategy practices often have unintended and under-appreciated consequences across societies or sectors. Understanding such effects is not only of interest to us as pure researchers, but

also important to those who seek to reform or innovate strategy practices (Whittington et al., 2003). As the larger conditions for the original emergence of a strategy practice shift, so are there opportunities for the introduction of new, and potentially ‘better’, practices.

The remainder of this paper is structured into four sections. In the next section, we associate the various *Organization Studies* papers we have used to make up the related Perspectives Issue with six distinct theoretical alternatives to micro-isolationism. In the following section, we organize these and other theoretical approaches around an explicit grid reflecting different ontological positions, taller or flatter. This grid is intended to make clearer for researchers their options – and their obligations – with regard to ontological positions. Next we develop three basic guidelines that can help empirical researchers, in strategy-as-practice and elsewhere, to guard against undue micro-isolationism: prime among these is care with the word ‘context’. We close by offering some conclusions regarding future progress in strategy-as-practice research.

## Theoretical Perspectives on Linking Local Strategizing with Larger Social Phenomena

We have chosen papers whose main focus has been the theorization of the relation between local strategizing and larger social phenomena, typically using any empirical materials principally for illustration. In this section, we review these key *Organization Studies* papers, identifying six prominent theoretical perspectives in strategy-as-practice research so far.

The earliest paper in the associated Perspectives Issue of *Organization Studies*, and an important precursor to what became known as strategy-as-practice, takes a Foucauldian perspective. Thus Knights and Morgan (1991: 260) drew on Foucauldian discourse analysis (Foucault, 1980, 1984) to conceptualize strategy as a historically situated, macro-level discourse constituting ‘a field of knowledge and power which defines what the “real problems” are within organizations and what are the parameters of the “real solutions” to them’. Participation in strategy discourse transforms managers’ local practice, even their very identities. This perspective focuses particularly on the power effects of the strategy discourse: ‘On the one hand, [the strategy discourse] is a constraint that “disables” particular actors. On the other hand, it “empowers” other actors’ (Knights & Morgan, 1991, p. 262). Ezzamel and Willmott (2008) develop this Foucauldian approach, locating the internal struggles of an individual organization within broader discursive practices. Their appreciation of the larger-scale is reflected in their call for a

shift in the study of social and organizational objects from a singular emphasis upon investigating elements of the world that ‘management’, ‘organization’ or ‘strategy’ are presumed to comprise to a broader appreciation of the conditions of making such claims and the consequences of taking such claims to be true. (Ezzamel & Willmott, 2008, p. 212)

The potential of this Foucauldian attention to discourse is reflected in a number of other strategy-as-practice papers appearing outside *Organization Studies* (e.g. Allard-Poesi, 2010; Ezzamel & Willmott, 2010; Hardy & Thomas, 2014; McKinlay, Carter, Pezet & Clegg, 2010). Strategy-as-practice scholars (e.g. Laine & Vaara, 2007; Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Vaara 2010; Vaara, Sorsa & Pälli, 2010) have also proposed the related critical discourse analysis approach (Fairclough, 1989, 2003) as a means to study how local strategy discourses, particularly strategy texts, mobilize those that exist at the societal level (see Balogun, Jacobs, Jarzabkowski, Mantere & Vaara, 2014 on the relation between Foucauldian and critical discourse analysis in strategy-as-practice research). Critical discourse analysis captures the micro-macro link as ‘intertextuality’ or ‘interdiscursivity’ (Vaara, 2010, p. 219).

Another perspective that strategy-as-practice scholars have used extensively in *Organization Studies* is Giddensian structuration theory (Giddens, 1984). In the associated Perspectives Issue, Jarzabkowski draws on Giddens (and other theorists) to suggest that the relation between micro-level strategizing activities and the wider society can be captured by focusing on 'management practices-in-use as the primary unit of analysis' (Jarzabkowski, 2004, p. 551). She argues that micro and macro levels are linked through practices: in their micro-level activities strategists make use of general strategizing practices such as particular techniques and tool-usages. In this way the macro-level shapes activities on the micro-level. Yet, as actors deploy practices reflectively, local action is also treated as the source for practice variation on the macro level. In a Giddensian vein too, Whittington (2006) conceptualizes strategizing in terms of three different components: (1) strategy practices (shared routines of behaviour, including traditions, norms and procedures for thinking, acting and using 'things'); (2) strategy praxis (actual activity, what people do 'in practice'); and (3) strategy practitioners (the strategists who carry out and perform the practices). In their concrete strategy praxis (i.e. in local action), strategy practitioners reflectively draw on strategy practices that the organization or society holds in stock. Hence micro praxis links with macro practices. Whittington (2007) takes this argument a step further by introducing the macro concept of 'profession':

Strategy is a kind of profession like law, medicine or journalism ... it is an occupational group with a collective identity and a set of connections that goes far beyond particular organizations ... Collectively, the field employs, develops, licenses and spreads particular practices and particular kinds of practitioners, with aggregate effects that can resonate through whole societies. (Whittington, 2007, p. 1580)

As a profession, strategy shapes both the field-level and the local activities and identities of the strategist. Many other papers have elaborated on the micro-macro link in strategy from a structurationist perspective (Whittington, 2010). Two prominent examples are Hendry (2000), who links the structurationist perspective with the discursive lens, and Jarzabkowski (2008), who examines the structuration of strategy processes.

In a recent contribution to *Organization Studies*, Herepath (2014) introduces another perspective, Archer's (1982, 1995) critical realism. Herepath (2014) argues for a clear differentiation between macro-societal structures and micro-level activities as two ontologically distinct entities. She claims that most studies either focus merely on micro-level activities or 'conflate' the two in a way that renders them analytically inseparable and hence obscures 'their interplay, one upon the other, at variance through time' (Herepath, 2014, p. 857). She argues that critical realism both allows the micro and macro levels to be analysed in their own terms and clarifies the specific mechanisms through which the different levels are linked over time. According to this perspective, the interplay between macro societal structures and micro-level activities takes place in a morphogenetic-morphostatic cycle that can be broken into three successive phases: (1) societal structures shape the local situations in which strategists find themselves (structural conditioning); (2) strategists in their structurally conditioned situations use their subjective and reflexive mental powers to choose particular courses of action (socio-cultural interaction); and (3) the strategists' activities in turn reproduce or elaborate societal structures (structural reproduction/elaboration).

The fourth theoretical perspective represented in *Organization Studies* is narratology (Boje, 2001; Gabriel, 2000). Fenton and Langley (2011) argue that the practice of strategy has to do with the production and consumption of strategy narratives. They write:

We see how narrative can be found in the micro-stories told by managers and others as they interact and go about their daily work, in the macro-level institutionalized practices that people draw on for

strategy-making, in the accounts they give of their own and others' work as strategy practitioners, and in the artefacts produced by strategizing activity. (Fenton & Langley, 2011, p. 1172)

They highlight two concepts as particularly suitable for capturing the link between micro and macro levels: the concept of narrative infrastructures (Deuten & Rip, 2000) and that of metaconversations (Robichaud, Giroux & Taylor, 2004). The concept of narrative infrastructure refers to the idea that strategy narratives emerge from a process in which fragments of different micro and macro narratives get layered on top of each other, a process that they describe as 'laminating'. They explain:

For example, people are influenced by available institutionalized macro-level stories about strategy, strategy-making or the orientation of the firm to tell stories about their own activities in ways that reflect or build on expectations created in these macro-stories. When these stories are exchanged with other internal and external stakeholders, they engender mutual commitments to which subsequent storytelling becomes entrained, generating an ongoing thrust and direction that embeds elements from multiple levels. (Fenton & Langley, 2011, pp. 1185–1186)

The concept of metaconversations refers to the process through which actors link different narrative streams into a meta-stream that structures the individual narrative contributions. In this sense, 'metaconversations embed ... different levels of narrative' (Fenton & Langley, 2011, p. 1188). Outside *Organization Studies*, similar conceptualizations of micro-macro links have been advanced with regard to general narrative genres (Barry & Elmes, 1997; Brown & Thompson, 2013) and with regard to the consumption of macro-narratives (de La Ville & Mounoud, 2010).

The fifth, Bourdieusian perspective is represented in *Organization Studies* by Chia and Holt (2006). Drawing on Bourdieu (1977, 1990, 1998) (and Heidegger, 1962), they argue that 'strategies ... emanate from an internalized modus operandi that reflects our culturally mediated disposition' (Chia & Holt, 2006, p. 637). According to this perspective, embeddedness in a social field shapes the strategist's individual dispositions which, in turn, guide his or her local strategizing activity. Hence, the concept of culturally mediated dispositions (also referred to as 'habitus') links the wider social field with the local strategizing situation. Yet, the authors stress that

Habitus is not about the blind social programming of human behaviour [but] a modus operandi ... inscribed onto material bodies, that enables actors to 'mindlessly' cope with unexpected and changing situations such that the resultant actions appear eminently sensible or reasonable within a specified socio-cultural context. (Chia & Holt, 2006, p. 645)

In a subsequent paper, Chia and MacKay (2007) elaborate on the social ontology underlying their Bourdieusian perspective: what their perspective does

is to 'flatten' [...] macro-micro distinctions [i.e. between the society and the individual] by insisting on the primacy of a dynamic and emerging field of practices as the starting point for social analysis. Now, both micro- and macro-entities are viewed as secondary stabilized instantiations of practice-complexes: individual agency and/or [societal] structure are no longer accorded ontological primacy in this explanatory scheme of things. (Chia & MacKay, 2007, p. 224)

Other strategy-as-practice researchers (Gomez, 2010; Gomez & Bouty, 2011; Splitter & Seidl, 2011) interpret Bourdieu in the classic terms of micro and macro levels, emphasizing structuring aspects of the social field such as shared assumptions about reality (doxa) and valuations (illusio).

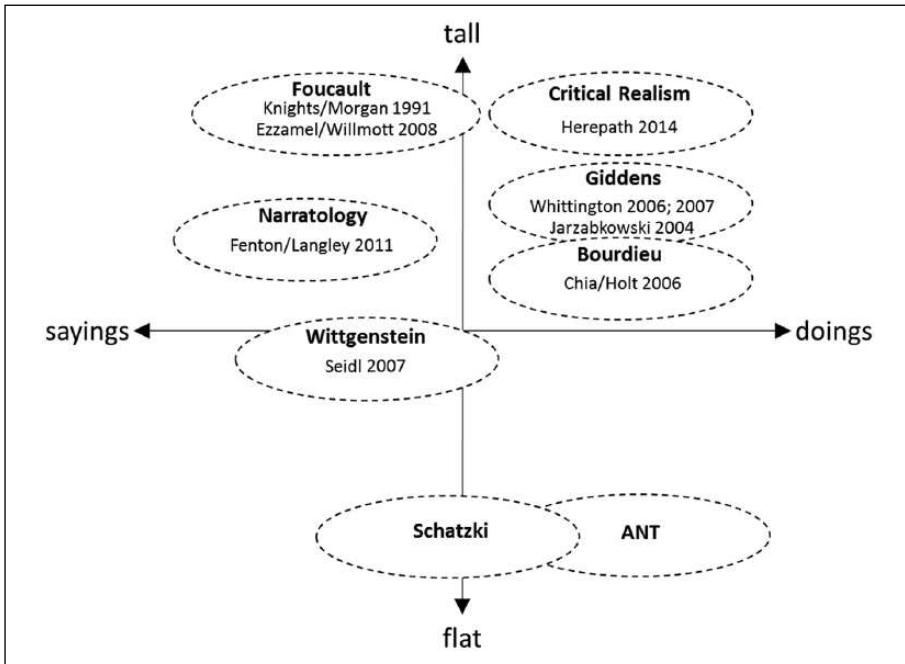
**Table 1.** Overview of Theoretical Perspectives.

Theoretical perspectives	Papers included in the Perspectives Issue	Other central papers	Concepts linking the local with larger social phenomena
Foucault	Ezzamel & Willmott (2008); Knights & Morgan (1991)	Allard-Poesi (2010); McKinlay et al. (2010); Ezzamel & Willmott (2010)	Local enactment of the macro-level discourse
Giddens	Jarzabkowski (2004); Whittington (2006, 2007)	Hendry (2000); Whittington (2010)	Practices-in-use; practice-praxis relation; profession-praxis relation
Archer	Herepath (2014)	—	Morphogenetic-morphostatic cycle
Narratology	Fenton & Langley (2011)	Brown & Thompson (2013); de la Ville & Mounoud (2010)	Narrative infrastructure; metaconversation; local consumption of macro-narratives
Bourdieu	Chia & Holt (2006)	Chia & MacKay (2007); Gomez (2010); Gomez & Bouty (2011); Splitter & Seidl (2011)	Culturally mediated dispositions; habitus
Wittgenstein	Seidl (2007)	Mantere (2010, 2013)	Structural coupling; family resemblance between language games

The last perspective taken up in *Organization Studies* by strategy-as-practice scholarship is based on Wittgenstein's (1951) language game concept. Here Seidl (2007) argues for a conceptualization of the field of strategy as a network or ecology of different language games regulating the proper use of strategy language. With the concept of ecology he emphasizes that the different language games are 'both autonomous and highly interdependent at the same time' (Seidl, 2007, p. 209). That is, each move in a language game is only defined in its meaning by the particular language game in which it takes place, yet every language game is structurally coupled to a multitude of other language games. Hence, the link between the local and the wider social aspects is encapsulated in the concept of structural coupling between different language games. The Wittgensteinian perspective on strategizing has been further extended by Mantere (2010, 2013), who – putting less emphasis on the boundaries between different language games – elaborates on Wittgenstein's concept of 'family resemblances' between language games as an alternative way of conceptualizing the link between the local and wider social field. He writes: 'The language games where they are used are connected with each other into a "complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail"' (Wittgenstein 1951: §66)' (Mantere, 2013, p. 1414).

The six perspectives presented above provide a rich pool of theoretical resources for analysing the interplay between the local and larger social phenomena (see Table 1). Each of them describes particular mechanisms through which the two aspects are brought together. Thus the first perspective (Foucauldian and critical discourse analysis) speaks of the *local enactment of the macro-level*





**Figure 1.** Spectrum of Theoretical Resources as Represented in Key Papers.

*discourse* and *inter-discursivity*; the second perspective (Giddens) suggests the concepts of *practices-in-use*, *practice-praxis relation* and *profession-praxis relation*; the third perspective (Archerian critical realism) elaborates on the concept of the *morphogenetic-morphostatic cycle*; the fourth perspective (narratology) presents the concepts of *narrative infrastructure*, *metaconversation* and *local consumption of macro-narratives*; the fifth perspective (Bourdieu) speaks of *habitus* and *culturally mediated disposition*; and, finally, the last perspective (Wittgenstein) proposes the concept of *structural coupling* and *family resemblance between language games*. However, while offering a multitude of conceptual resources, these perspectives do represent very different positions regarding the relation between local strategizing activity and larger social phenomena. As we shall explore in the next section, for some the relationship is between different levels (taller ontologies); for others the relationship is more a meshing of local praxis into a network of other local praxes (flatter ontologies). These ontologies offer very different opportunities and challenges to strategy-as-practice research.

### Tall and Flat Social Ontologies

As described above, strategy-as-practice scholars publishing in *Organization Studies* and elsewhere have already made available a wide range of theoretical resources for dealing with the problem of micro-isolationism. Here we organize these theories on a grid reflecting the extent to which they lean towards either tall or flat ontologies. All these theories insist on the embeddedness of particular episodes in larger social phenomena, but they differ in whether they see these phenomena as bearing down from above or connecting from beside. In comparing them this way, we make explicit the ontological choices available to researchers and, crucially, explore advantages and

disadvantages for empirical research of different ontological positions. We can also identify some relatively under-explored spaces and propose some promising additional resources that have not been covered so far.

Figure 1 organizes the various theoretical resources along two continuous axes. The vertical axis locates them according to their broad ontological positions, taller or flatter, particularly as interpreted by the key papers of this issue of Perspectives. As indicated by the dotted ellipses, the boundaries of these locations are permeable: for example, Bourdieu is capable of taller interpretation (Mutch, 2003); over time, Foucault's writings tended towards a flatter ontology (Reckwitz, 2002). In other words, the vertical axis conveys central tendencies, rather than definitive ontological locations. The horizontal axis, by contrast, organizes these resources according to their main empirical focus. It too is a continuum, differentiating by the extent to which theoretical perspectives stress 'doings' or 'sayings', to borrow Schatzki's (2002) terms. A practice is typically some combination of these: saying is a kind of doing. The ellipses stretch sideways, therefore. Nevertheless, some theories focus empirical attention more on the discursive aspects of practice (talk and text, for instance), while others highlight broader kinds of doings (deciding or politicking), in which of course saying will usually play an essential role. As for the vertical axis, the theoretical locations on the horizontal axis reflect relative weights.

Taller ontologies tend to situate instances of local praxis in some kind of vertical hierarchy, where higher levels shape, enable or constrain what occurs on the ground, lower down. As indicated in the introduction, this kind of ontological position is associated with a vocabulary of 'structures' and 'systems', especially as joined with terms such as 'macro', 'societal' or 'levels'. Thus Herepath's (2014) realist account takes a tall approach that prioritizes doing. For her, societal structures shape the local conditions in which strategists do their strategy work: in her example, the cultural and political structures of Wales constitute macro extra-organizational forces that bear down on the micro intra-organizational strategizing of the Welsh National Health Service. In a similar way, Jarzabkowski (2004) and Whittington (2006, 2007) use Giddensian structuration theory to describe how larger social systems (for example, the strategy profession) furnish the practices that enable the doing of local strategizing. Elsewhere, this Giddensian approach has informed the new institutional work perspective, in which vertical levels persist, but strategy as a set of overarching practices is also produced by the reflexive agency of strategy workers, whether managers, consultants or business school academics (Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013; Suddaby, Seidl & Lê, 2013; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). On the saying side of Figure 1, discursive approaches take a range of ontologies (see Balogun et al., 2014). Here Foucault is associated with a tall ontology, as exemplified by Knights and Morgan's (1991) account of how strategy, as a dominant discourse of twentieth-century managerial capitalism, exercises various 'power effects' on managers and employees in contemporary society. Fenton and Langley (2011) likewise adopt a tall position on saying, when they describe how strategy narratives emerge from the laminating of macro narrative layers on top of micro layers.

Local praxis remains important in these taller ontologies: the micro is the site of structural reproduction, resistance and occasional innovation. Fundamentally, however, macro structures or systems condition what is possible: cultures, economies, technological regimes or dominant discourses form the envelope of what people can do. There are methodological advantages to these tall ontologies. One merit is analytical efficiency: identify the key mechanisms connecting macro to micro, and a good deal of what happens is explained. With a clear macro-theory (about the role of technology, of gender or of capitalism), one knows where to look for power and causality. Another advantage is how a hierarchical perspective grants the local a greater significance, as representative of something bigger than the immediate praxis at hand. To the extent that it reflects the macro, the micro is never trivial: it is too widely reproduced to be dismissed. Tall ontologies

thereby open up the possibility of larger critique, as what is discovered in one case of the micro is likely to apply to other sites with similar structural conditions. In a tall ontology, local dysfunction is rarely unique and remedies may have wider purchase. Taller ontologies also suggest the potential for systematic comparison of varying structural conditions: natural questions are how strategy praxis, practitioners or practices may be different in the contrasting institutional structures of China and the West, in the presence or absence of new technologies or with greater or lesser degrees of gender diversity. But the danger in tall ontologies is a macro determinism that renders the micro superfluous. The default reading of hierarchy is macro-reproduction through micro-routine. Without due attention to micro interpretation, innovation and resistance, the macro can be attributed qualities of spatial generality, temporal stability and internal consistency that are too overpowering.

Flatter ontologies tend to situate instances of local praxis not in a vertical hierarchy but in a web of interconnections. The characteristic vocabulary is one of 'networks', 'constellations', 'ecologies' and 'relations'. The flattening instinct extends to actors, with equal status given to humans and non-humans, including technologies. Although also acknowledging field-level phenomena, Chia and Holt (2006) appeal to a flatter ontology when they describe strategic agency as involving the relationality of places and pasts, rather than some sharp distinction between the pre-formed individual and detached environment. Seidl's (2007) Wittgensteinian approach turns towards saying in particular, describing strategy as involving an ecology of coupled language games. However, it is quite striking that the domain of flatter ontologies in Figure 1 is more sparsely populated than that of taller ontologies. This gap can be filled by other theoretical resources beyond those featured so far by strategy-as-practice scholars in *Organization Studies*.

We therefore add to Figure 1 two further theoretical perspectives that take a flat approach to larger phenomena: actor-network theory (ANT) and Schatzki's (2002) interpretation of practice theory. Actor-network theory conceives of the larger social world as made up of spatiotemporally extended networks of associations between a variety of actors, human and non-human (Latour, 2005). Hence, the characteristic research move is to trace connections from one empirical site of activity to another. Rather than talk of capitalism as some mysterious, abstract structure, go to the Wall Street trading rooms that are its heart, and follow their various connections wherever they lead (Latour, 2005, p. 179). Here the researcher will find not only traders but non-human actors such as Bloomberg screens, phones and fibreoptic cables. This striking appreciation of non-human actors can lead ANT to focus more on 'doing' than 'saying'. Schatzki (2002), however, is explicitly even-handed in his approach: for him, practices are spatially-temporally dispersed sets of doings and sayings, organized by common understandings, teleologies and rules. Schatzki (2002) also moves from networks to describe the larger social world in terms of spatiotemporally extended 'constellations' of bundled practices and material arrangements. Noticeable here is Schatzki's emphasis on practice relationships: the activities of individual people are not 'only contingently related to one another' but are also linked to each other by being 'essentially members of organized sets of activity [i.e. practices]' (Schatzki, 2011, p. 8). For the researcher this means tracing relations between different practice-arrangement bundles rather than different activities per se. For example, in the coal industry (Schatzki, 2011, pp. 9–10), the task is to study how bundles of mining practices (such as drilling, blasting, debris removal) relate to bundles of management and accounting practices (such as budgeting, calculating, planning) which in turn relate to other bundles of regulatory practices and energy consumption practices, all associated with their specific material arrangements. Both ANT and Schatzki's practice theory have already found their way into strategy-as-practice research (see Denis, Langley & Rouleau, 2007 and Jørgensen & Messner, 2010, respectively), though there is more work to be done to realize their full potential for capturing the larger social embeddedness of activities.

The relative neglect of flatter ontologies in strategy-as-practice so far is surprising. After all, such flattening dissolves the macro in a way that can be seen as particularly natural to strategy-as-practice research. From a flat perspective, the macro is not a different kind of stuff to micro; fundamentally it is a set of interactions too. Thus capitalism as a macro-structure is made up of multiple sites of strategic decision-making, each a kind of local interaction in itself. For strategy-as-practice researchers, talk of a disembodied capitalist macro-structure denies their special skill at getting inside the praxis of capitalist decision-making. In this sense, the advantage of a flat approach lies in its encouragement to trace the specific connections between sites (capitalist boardrooms, etc.). Following connections exposes the interactions inside so-called macro structures, with no 'jumps' (Latour, 2005) from macro to micro, or the reverse.

According to a flatter ontology, therefore, the natural strategy-as-practice reflex should be to follow capitalism's investors, analysts, managers, consultants and business school teachers, in order to see what they do, together. Researchers thereby avoid parking macro features in an unexamined and taken-for-granted 'context' and are prompted to commit fully to inductive and ethnographic types of methodology. At the same time, unlike some ethnographic approaches, tracing the network of connections recognizes that the apparently local is typically highly extensive spatially and temporally. There is no ethnographic parochialism: strategy connects to the worlds of technology, knowledge production and economic and social change more widely. Moreover, by contrast with taller theories, flatness makes no a priori assumptions regarding general sources and directions of causality, but instead invites open-minded investigation into why things are happening specifically in the here and now. There is a sort of direct accountability implied too: managers, as informants, cannot so easily pass responsibilities on with abstract nouns such as 'globalization' or 'competition', but can be asked exactly how their interactions connect to these phenomena (Marston, Jones & Woodward, 2005). There are costs to this flat approach, however: relative to the powerful mechanisms of the macro-micro hierarchy, flatness imposes the complexity of contingency. Networks of affordances differ in each case; every link is a candidate for following through. With no a priori theory of what causes what, the research demands are high and the prospects of generality are low. Methodologically, extensive networks may finally require researchers to be quite ruthless in truncating inquiry, relying on another kind of hierarchy: Latour (2005) ends up prioritizing what, in any particular case, constitutes the densest set of connections.

## **Guidelines for Progress in Strategy-as-Practice Research**

Thus strategy-as-practice research has plenty of resources to assist in going beyond the local. It is not for want of theoretical vision that strategy-as-practice researchers struggle to enlarge the scope of empirical research. The problem is the practical difficulty of doing so. Here we shall pull together the threads of our argument so far to suggest three linked guidelines that can help avoid empirical micro-isolationism.

The first guideline is to be wary of 'parking' concepts such as contexts, frames or environments (Latour, 2005). These concepts park where they set outside of analysis the larger stuff that may, in fact, be important to the particular interactions in hand. When 'context' is invoked, there is often no theory of how the contextual makes things possible and no detail about what it contains. Context appears contentless, theoretically and empirically. The merit of the tall and flat ontologies outlined in this article is that they look inside context and ask what it does. Tall ontologies offer theories of how structures and systems shape what is going on. Flat ontologies oblige us to trace the connections that permit what is going on. Both ontologies prompt the researcher to probe the content of context, either for causality or for affordances. Granted, intense focus on the local may sometimes be all that is practical, if the novelty or complexity of the episode requires extensive elucidation.

But that is contextual bracketing by necessity. Elsewhere, invocation of context is not a let-out clause, something whose vague acknowledgement defers further research. Where possible, context should invite systematic investigation and analysis, whether flatter or wider.

The second guideline follows from this: researchers should be reflexive about their choices between taller or flatter ontologies. The choice can be seen as involving fundamentally incompatible philosophical positions: certainly for Latour (2005), adoption of a flat ontology renders all talk of macro levels inadmissible. But the grounds for choice may be pragmatic as well. We have already suggested that both kinds of ontology have their own particular advantages. Tall ontologies can facilitate comparison and generalization; flat ontologies lend themselves to open-minded inquiry where existing theory offers few clues; both offer their own forms of critique, whether in the exposure of system-wide or structural dysfunctions or the substitution of specific interactions for protective clouds of abstract nouns. Ontological choice relates to what we seek to do.

The third guideline is to follow through on ontological choices. Researchers have a range of ontological positions to take, along a continuum of taller or flatter ontologies. But either for reasons of philosophical consistency or for sheer research practicality, they should stick to the logic of their ultimate choice: they are unlikely to satisfy both. If the choice is for taller ontologies, then researchers should take advantage of the potential for structured comparison at the level their ontological positions indicate. A very tall theory about how the nature of capitalism shapes practice should motivate the researcher to compare instances in which the relevant form of capitalism is present or absent, perhaps by analysing practices in different capitalist societies or different historical moments of capitalist development. A less tall theory of technology, on the other hand, could be satisfied by more modest comparison of technological presence or absence within the same society or industry. A flat ontology, of course, would be both more inductive and more suspicious of abstract concepts such as capitalism or industry. Flatter ontological positions would encourage the researcher to trace how one site of interaction connects to others, without presuppositions and insisting on the specific. The essential task is to go beyond the particular episode. From a flat perspective, stopping at the 'micro' is as unsatisfactory as arm-waving about the 'macro'. Either way, no more micro-isolationism.

## Conclusion

One of the key contributions of strategy-as-practice research has been its re-valuation of the role of local praxis and practices in strategizing. What the papers featured in this Perspectives Issue of *Organization Studies* have begun to do as well is connect local strategizing with larger phenomena. The promise now of both taller and flatter ontologies is to enlarge still further the significance of strategy-as-practice research.

Flatter ontologies extend the scope of strategy-as-practice research by bringing in a range of sites, both local and distant, and a variety of actors, both human and non-human. Strategy-as-practice research becomes thereby more than an isolated splinter of organization theory, but linked to the sociologies of technology, knowledge, economic institutions and social change at least. The links are two-way: just as strategy praxis relies on other practices and affordances, so does it contribute to these other domains of human activity. There is a research agenda on how the demands of strategy practice may, to some degree or other, actually change the technologies, knowledge and economic and social institutions with which they connect. Strategies make globalization, as well as the other way round (Marston et al., 2005). These larger linkages are important to taller ontologies as well. As tall ontologies link micro strains to larger systemic or structural pressures, so do they motivate social critique. Thus strategy practice can be seen as transforming prevailing managerial identities or notions of public service in unexpected and potentially

damaging ways (Knights & Morgan, 1991; Oakes, Townley & Cooper, 1998). At the same time, just as such tall ontologies define the larger conditions for particular kinds of strategy practice, so can they identify moments of likely failure and change. To the extent that strategy-as-practice research tracks the dynamics of larger economic and social structures, it can be alert to moments and places where existing strategy practices are being superseded and new ones being introduced. With a tall ontology, strategy-as-practice researchers can expose the likely sites and shapes of practice innovation. For example, new technologies and changing societal cultures may currently be promoting the spread of more ‘democratic’ forms of strategy praxis (Stieger, Matzler, Chatterjee & Ladstaetter-Fussenegger, 2012).

Adopting a larger scope offers therefore exciting prospects for future progress in strategy-as-practice research. The *Organization Studies* and other papers that we have reviewed in this article provide ample theoretical resources for such continued progress. We hope the three guidelines offered here will also help in furthering empirical research: (1) beware parking larger phenomena in unexamined ‘contexts’; (2) actively choose between taller and flatter ontological positions; and (3) follow through on this choice, linking hierarchically or tracing horizontally as relentlessly as the adopted ontology demands.

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