It’s strategy. But is it practice? Desperately seeking social practice in strategy-as-practice research

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Abstract
Over the past years, strategy-as-practice research has become a cornerstone for better understanding how strategy emerges from the sayings and doings of individuals in organizations. While tremendous progress has been made, we believe that the process that has led us to where we are today has left a crucial debate for understanding strategy as a “practice” behind. Inspired by other recent challenges to the field, we address a central question that has concerned the strategy-as-practice community from its early beginnings, but for which an adequate answer has yet to be provided: What is practice? We answer this question by suggesting that strategy-as-practice scholars place a knowledgeability principle at the core of their conceptualization of practice. We believe that taking the notion of practice more seriously in our research in this way will help not only reinvigorate, but also revitalize our field by deepening our understanding of the relationship between practice research and strategic organization.

Keywords
activity, knowledgeability, managerial work, practical knowledge, practice theorizing, social practice, strategy-as-practice

Introduction
In a recent thoughtful and provocative essay titled “It’s practice. But is it strategy?” Jarzabkowski et al. (2021) discuss how mainstream practice and process approaches to strategy research have adopted consequentiality as the defining feature of the actions or activities in organizations that are considered to be “strategic.” Because of this, strategy-as-practice (SAP) research has tended to define what is strategic either in terms of its relation to performance or in terms of what strategy practitioners themselves regard as consequential for “doing” strategy. This has led to an overwhelming focus of SAP research on topics that are traditionally associated with strategy processes, such as strategic planning or strategic change. According to these authors, this way of defining strategy has blinded SAP scholars to the full myriad of activities that might be consequential to strategy in ways that are less visible or immediately obvious, and by so doing, has resulted in SAP research failing to fulfill the radical agenda it had initially envisioned. We totally agree with all of

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these points. As a remedy, Jarzabkowski et al. (2021) propose to “reinvigorate” the SAP agenda by suggesting that researchers should themselves be able to determine what patterns of action are consequential (and thus strategic) within the context in which they occur, regardless of whether these patterns are associated with known strategy processes or articulated as such by informants. However, while we think that these authors’ proposal is both timely and relevant, we also believe that if our aim is to truly “revolutionize strategy research” (p. 3), SAP research needs to take one additional step.

In the opening paragraphs of their essay, Paula Jarzabkowski (as first author) relates the story of how a certain senior scholar who—upon hearing about her ethnographic work on the trading practices of reinsurance underwriters—commented that what she had been observing was practice, not strategy. The comment prompted her to reflect on what it was about the people she was studying or the nature of their practices that made it such that this scholar would define their activities as “practice, but not strategy” (Jarzabkowski et al., 2021: 2). Reading this reminded us that in our own work, we too have had to deal with the second part of this comment (e.g. “But it is not strategy”), and this for the better part of our careers. We thus empathize with Paula’s experience. At the same time, we were also disturbed by the suggestion—implied in her commentator’s evocative statement—that there was unanimity about what practice is and is not in SAP research. Moreover, I (the first author) have more often had the reverse impression: that in the last 20 years or so, SAP research has largely been about “strategy, but not practice.”

In this So!apbox essay, we propose to reopen a crucial debate within the SAP community about “what practice is.” Our view is that not only is it necessary to reinvigorate the field by offering SAP scholars a methodological solution for determining what practices are strategic when collecting and analyzing data, but that it is also necessary to revitalize it at a theoretical level by reopening the debate about how strategy researchers conceptualize the notion of practice in their work. In our view, accelerating the transition toward what Jarzabkowski et al. (2022) refer to as the “Propagating Phase” of SAP research requires taking the notion of social practice (much) more seriously than it has been to date. While we recognize that SAP research has put forth innovative and fruitful knowledge on strategizing, as the field becomes more consolidated and institutionalized, it is important to balance breadth with depth, by seeking to produce deeper and more robust knowledge of what goes on when organizational actors strategize. Being more grounded in the radical agenda of social practice theory will benefit the field by providing stronger conceptual resources to reaffirm its uniqueness and achieve its promises of radically transforming strategy research. Rather than viewing practice as simply the outcome of purposeful human activity, social practice theories—articulated around a knowledgeability principle—invite researchers to see strategizing as a practice phenomenon in and of itself, or to view it as a social accomplishment, and to go behind problematic dualisms (e.g. discourse–materiality, action–structure, process–practice). Reopening the debate on “what practice is” might in turn help SAP scholars find theoretical ways of facilitating connections between research communities both within and outside the field and provide solutions to the long-standing problem of establishing a relationship between micro- and macro-strategizing (Seidl and Whittington, 2014).

Our essay is structured as follows. We begin by tracing the trajectory followed by the “What is practice?” question in historical debates within the SAP community, and use this as a basis for arguing that to date, most SAP research is based on a view of practice as managerial work. To get beyond this, we propose that SAP scholars view strategy as a form of practical knowing. We conclude by discussing how taking the notion of practice more seriously in SAP research offers a more encompassing comprehension of how strategic organizing is locally and socially accomplished.
Back to the practice debate in strategy

The so-called “practice turn” in strategy research has gained considerably in popularity over the last two decades. To understand how the SAP community of scholars has carved out a place for itself in strategic management and organization studies, it is useful to go back in history and recall the thinking that had prompted the establishment of this community in the first place. In the early 2000s, when Gerry Johnson, Richard Whittington, and Leif Melin—whom many would consider were at the center of the emerging SAP movement at the time—were organizing the first SAP-related events, the debates underway centered mostly around the challenge of rethinking the role of strategists and managers in strategy research. To help situate and define the field’s identity around this core challenge, diverse options were proposed which gave rise to lively discussions. For example, there was talk of whether the best positioning should be in terms of micro-processes of strategizing (2001 EIASM workshop in Brussels), activities (Johnson et al., 2003), or strategy work (Whittington, 2003). At the time, when presenting our papers in these forums, discussions tended to be theoretically oriented around authors’ underlying conceptual theorization of human action.

Very quickly, this nascent community of scholars adopted the label “strategy as practice” to define itself. This was a practical choice made for the purpose of providing a compelling identity to an emerging stream of research and situating it within a well-established field. This choice made sense: the notion of practice being polysemic—an “umbrella” notion (Floyd et al., 2011) that carries multiple meanings—made it potentially interesting and appealing to a wide diversity of researchers. To maintain and sustain such interpretive flexibility however, leading SAP scholars could only provide a loose rationale for defining strategy as the outcome of human practices, which they did by proposing that strategy was something “that organizational members did” rather than something that organizations “had” (Jarzabkowski, 2004; Whittington, 2004). This broad definition consecrated SAP’s commitment to theoretical and methodological pluralism by leaving open the meanings behind what exactly was meant by strategy conceptualized as a social practice. This was necessary to ensure SAP’s distinctiveness from—but also inclusion in—the broader field of strategy.

Next came a need to disseminate this emerging and growing knowledge project and set its boundaries. In their editorial for the second SAP Special Issue, published in Human Relations, Jarzabkowski et al. (2007)—drawing on Whittington’s (2003) initial proposal—formalized the SAP “Praxis, Practices and Practitioners” framework. According to this framework, strategizing happens at the nexus of these three elements. The framework was helpful for setting a research agenda for the SAP community and for sustaining its identity over time, as evidenced by it being one of the most highly cited papers in the field (1812 citations in Google scholar, 22 June 2022). Moreover, the framework provided a means to parse the growing body of SAP research into these pre-defined categories, and by so doing, trace a portrait of the field by delineating the progress made in advancing SAP’s research agenda in each of them (Vaara and Whittington, 2012).

However, these developments—and the introduction of the SAP framework in particular—inadvertently closed the debate around the question of “what is practice?” that had galvanized the SAP community in the first place. Discussions at international meetings and conferences turned almost entirely toward issues related to publication. This of course was highly attractive for junior scholars and PhD students—among them the second author of this essay—who believed that their work might fit within this growing and dynamic community, helping it effectively grow even more. As the community grew, new concerns about the focus of SAP research were raised. Among these were renewed concerns around what it was exactly that SAP scholars were studying.
Indeed, as SAP scholars were more interested in “strategizing” rather than “strategy,” this led them to partly shift their attention away from typical or traditional strategy-related activities, such as strategic planning or strategic change, into domains and subjects that were not traditionally seen as being related to strategy or even as being “strategic” per say (e.g. middle managers, meetings, emotions, discourse). To avoid dilution, SAP leaders started insisting that the organizational and everyday practices featured in SAP research be strongly and explicitly associated either to strategic outcomes or to strategic processes (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015). This in turn invited a flurry of renewed critiques and debates around the question of “What is strategy?” The event reported by Paula Jarzabkowski in the opening of her article (with Kavas and Krull, cited above) was typical of these debates and conversations during the progressive institutionalization of SAP research (or the “Blossoming Phase” as per Jarzabkowski et al., 2022).

Shifting the debate away from SAP’s theoretical positioning around the notion of practice to focus more on the nature of strategy was helpful (and probably necessary) to maintain the cohesion of the community while ensuring the diversity of SAP research (Kohtamäki et al., 2022). It also helped increase the perspective’s legitimacy within the broader fields of strategic management and organization studies (Burgelman et al., 2018). Nevertheless, over the years, various attempts were made to reopen this debate, mainly from scholars who did not self-identify as belonging to the SAP community. For example, commenting on the SAP perspective, Chia and MacKay (2007: 219) argued that there was “a basic lack of clarity about what practice really is” in these conversations and invited the SAP community to further differentiate itself from mainstream strategy research by adopting a “post-processual” view of strategy. In 2008, following the publication of the SAP framework, Clegg et al. (2008) urged SAP scholars to be more reflexive and critical about how they were defining practice. In their response to this critique, Jarzabkowski and Whittington (2008) affirmed that the community wished to be inclusive and that, consequently, it was inappropriate to privilege any specific view or definition of practice. On their part, Corradi et al. (2010) argued that by promoting a heterogeneous view of practice around the “doing of strategy,” the SAP community was, in essence, conceptualizing practice as little more than a kind of empirical object, forfeiting in so doing some of its more radical potentialities. Some years later, Rouleau (2013) wondered whether SAP research had reached a crossroads by asking whether the SAP community should, going forward, adopt a stronger practice approach, notably by revitalizing its commitment to socio-logological theories of practice.

Despite these challenges and reflections, the SAP research community has remained at square one when it comes to debating—and agreeing on—what practice is. As the field enters its “Propagating Phase” (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022), we add our voice to recent reviews (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022; Kohtamäki et al., 2022) and discussions (Jarzabkowski et al., 2021; MacKay et al., 2021) about how to further advance SAP research by arguing that now is a good time to reopen this debate, notably as a means of finding new ground for revitalizing the field and, by so doing, enrich its further development and propagation in the years to come.

Not social practice, but managerial activity

As mentioned above, in the midst of the SAP community’s growth spurt, Clegg et al. (2008: 87) entered the conversation, qualifying the relationship that the SAP perspective had drawn between practice and strategy as “ambiguous.” On the one hand, SAP scholars claimed to have embraced the practice turn in strategic management by defining strategy as a social practice. On the other, this notion of social practice almost always appeared to take the form of an outcome resulting from the doing, by organizational members, of certain detailed activities labeled as “strategic.” Thus, while the notion of social practice opened an array of theoretical possibilities for better
understanding the sociological nature of strategy, in our collective work, this notion appears to have been reduced to a single meaning, namely, that associated with the “doing strategy” metaphor.

The “doing strategy” metaphor has certainly been beneficial for ensuring the “blossoming” of SAP research (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022) over the years. It has allowed SAP researchers to position their work as “an alternative to mainstream strategy research” (Golsorkhi, 2015 [2010]: 1). One basis for differentiation was to make deliberate efforts at being inclusive of—and paying attention to—organizational members other than senior executives, such as middle managers, consultants, and so on (Rouleau et al., 2015) involved in the doing of strategy. The “doing strategy” metaphor has also helped scholars recognize the complex, fragmented and messy character of what managers/strategists do. Within this root metaphor, the novelty of SAP research rests above all on its constructionist paradigmatic positioning. A majority of SAP studies assume that reality is socially constructed and subject to as many interpretations as there are multiple truths, depending on the context and methods by which they are discovered. This positioning has given SAP researchers the opportunity to reconsider the agency–structure debate by addressing the issue of how agency is enacted in organizations by means of the day-to-day activities, routines, conversations, events, texts, and so on produced by organizational actors, notably by examining how these are contextually embedded in strategic goals and outcomes.

Nevertheless, problematizing the SAP perspective around the “doing strategy” metaphor was not exactly revolutionary within management and organization studies. As many already know, the root of this metaphor is not original to SAP research, but rather stems from managerial work studies (Whittington, 2007). For decades, management and organization scholars have been researching “What do managers do?” The second half of the 20th century produced an impressive body of empirical research on the muddled nature of managerial activities (e.g. Carlson, 1951; Hales, 1986; Hannaway, 1989; Kotter, 1982; Mintzberg, 1973, 2009; Tengblad, 2012; Wilkinson et al., 2017). Similarly to managerial work studies, the work of strategists in SAP research remains generally viewed as the outcome of a set of purposeful efforts and intentional actions aimed at some recognized end.

Consequently, at the end of the day, by adopting the “doing strategy” metaphor, SAP scholars have chosen—most likely unintentionally—to set their agenda around a “commensensical” definition of practice (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015). While being useful for setting a broad and inclusive agenda, it has nevertheless limited, in our view, the robustness of the SAP perspective in three ways: First, within this perspective, practice is largely associated with concrete empirical activities accomplished in relation with the doing of strategy. By aggregating observable activities into sets of practices, SAP research has carried out over the years an underlying vision of practice that is anchored in an “objectivist problematic of knowledge” (Cunliffe, 2015). Second, in many of these studies, individuals or collectives tend to be the main unit of analysis. Indeed, SAP scholars have tended to study purposeful strategy work where strategic outcomes remain clearly anchored in informants’ contextual understandings of strategy. Third, related debates around the disconnect between micro- and macro-strategizing are still ongoing within SAP research (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022; MacKay et al., 2021), suggesting that SAP’s focus and attention to activity at the local level has come at the expense of connecting such activities to broader practices at higher levels of analysis (Kohtamäki et al., 2022; Seidl and Whittington, 2014). For these reasons, we believe that most SAP studies have tended to endorse a “weak” practice perspective on strategy, on account of not engaging more deeply—or at least deeply enough—with the fundamentally theoretical question of what practice is.

Examples coming from the main special issues of SAP research will help clarify our point (Balogun et al., 2014; Burgelman et al., 2018; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). Paroutis and Pettigrew (2007), in a study published in an SAP special issue in Human Relations, identified seven practices
(executing, reflecting, initiating, coordinating, collaborating, supporting, shaping context) and their related activities, that characterized the behavior of strategy teams in a multi-business firm. For example, developing new strategic ideas and starting new strategic projects were activities composing the practice of “initiating.” In this study, practice is essentially defined in terms of the observable activities that are empirically related to more or less formal strategy work. Likewise, in the 2014 SAP special issue published in Journal of Management Studies, Kwon et al. (2014) reveal five discursive strategies (equalizing, re/defining, simplifying, legitimating, and reconciling) that teams used to develop shared views of strategy in board meetings. In this article, proposing and constructing scenarios are the activities that allowed managers to “define” an issue as strategic in board meetings. By substituting the term “practices” with “strategies,” these authors assume that managerial teamwork is an outcome of intentional and purposeful discursive activities, without questioning how or why these strategies have the effects that they do. And finally, in the 2018 SAP special issue published in Strategic Management Journal, Wenzel and Koch (2018) identify four discursive and bodily practices (referencing, relating, demarcating, mystifying) of keynote speakers at industry events that the authors’ claim contribute to constructing different conceptions of an organization’s strategy. For instance, to demark a new product from existing ones (demarcating practice), the speaker is shown to foreground its familiar aspects by initially maintaining a relaxed body and hand position, but then to highlight its novel aspects by raising and pushing his hands forward. Even though these authors show how the multimodality of micro-strategizing shapes the strategy, they nevertheless reproduce a misleading conception of the micro-macro links by overlooking the socio-cultural predispositions in which these discursive and bodily activities happen (MacKay et al., 2021).

In sum, despite their positioning within SAP research, these studies rely on an atheoretical conceptualization of practice that is closer to managerial work than it is to social practice. This, of course, is consistent with the research agenda set over the years by SAP’s leading scholars. Whittington (2003), for example, proposed that SAP research focus on deepening our understanding of “Where and how is the work of strategizing and organizing actually done; who does this strategizing and organizing work; what are the skills required for this work and how are they acquired?” (p. 119). In an essay targeting the concurrent “practice-based view of strategy” proposed by Bromiley and Rau (2014), Jarzabkowski et al. (2016) reaffirmed that the distinctiveness of SAP rests in the following research questions: “what” (practices are used?); “who” (is engaged in the practices?); and “how” (the practices are carried out?). In their recent review of the two decades of SAP research, Jarzabkowski et al. (2022) affirm that the field has, since the middle of the last decade, entered in a “Harvesting Phase” (2015–2016 to 2021–2021) in which they claim that the SAP agenda has been confirmed—its objects of study, namely, “the focus on people doing strategy work, their practices and the flow of strategy-making,” now largely taken for granted (p. 12). While such an approach has proven to be fruitful thus far, what opportunities for deepening our engagement with a social practice approach—and by association our understanding of strategizing itself—do we leave behind?

In our view, there is more to a social practice, whether it be managerial or strategic, than the flow of activities that managers and other actors deploy in various contexts of organizing and strategizing. Loosely associating the notion of practice to a myriad of observable activities—whether these be discursive, material, emotional, bodily, and so on—omits to answer a question that is fundamental to understanding strategy conceptualized as a social practice: “Why do strategists do what they do?” We contend that a perspective on practice that is truly social must encompass both the situated and collective “knowledge” that organizational actors have acquired over time and their contingent use of this knowledge within the inhabited social and organizational structures in which they are embedded.
Consequentiality, yes! But why not knowledgeability too?

In their paper, Jarzabkowski et al. (2021) invite us to rethink the logic of consequentiality upon which SAP scholarship is based in order to allow researchers to take a more active role in defining which organizational practices are strategic or not. Echoing this invitation, we wish to encourage SAP scholars to take a further step by embracing a knowledgeability principle when identifying and analyzing practices deemed “strategic.” Doing so requires that scholars take a more active role in defining practice according to a social practice view in their research (see Table 1). To explain how practices are socially accomplished, it is necessary to turn our attention to the practical knowledge involved in what people are doing. Relying solely on the “doing strategy” metaphor is thus not enough for adequately researching practice. As doing and knowing cannot be separated in action (Gherardi, 2006), we contend that taking into account the knowledgeability of a practice can help revitalize and deepen SAP research and open avenues for making stronger theoretical contributions to our understanding of strategy work.

While the principle of consequentiality refers to the effects of actors’ practices upon the patterns of action that scholars assert are strategic, the principle of knowledgeability refers to a concern for the underlying forms of practical knowledge that are necessary for actors to—more or less competently—do what they are doing. In the former view, the notion of practice is defined mainly in relation to its causal effects on a given, external object (e.g. strategy). Consequentiality, viewed either as performance, process or as a reinvigorated practice, thus infers an objectivist

| Table 1. Views on practice in strategy research. |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| **Social practice view (revitalized)** | **Practice view (reinvigorated)** |
| **Jarzabkowski et al. (2021)** |
| What is “knowledgeable” | Identifying underlying forms of practical knowledge behind formal and mundane everyday doings that practitioners or researchers assert as being strategic (or managerial) | What is “consequential” | Identifying indirect and consequential effects of actors’ practices upon patterns of action that scholars may assert are strategic, articulated strategic performance goals or strategy processes |
| What is practice | Practice is the result of shared tacit knowledge that presupposes its performance. Being constitutive of, and constituted by “what actors do,” practice is embedded in networks of relationships | What is studied | Those mundane everyday practices uncovered by deep immersion that are, often, identified by scholars’ hunches about what is important, strategic, or consequential in situ |
| How practices are socially accomplished | Actors embedded in an ongoing collective undertaking deploying their practical knowledge of how organizational, social and cultural rules and norms constrain and/or enable their actions | Who is studied | A wide range of actors including those who are not explicitly identified as having strategic roles or responsibilities within organizations |
| Role of the researchers in defining what is practice | Active selection by the researcher of a theory of social practice | Role of the researchers in deciding what is strategic | Active selection by the researcher of what is strategic |

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onto-epistemological view of practice by focusing on the effects of a set of observable activities (Corradi et al., 2010). Knowledgeability, on the contrary, infers that practice is the result of shared tacit, practical, and/or non-propositional knowledge that presupposes its performance. Being constitutive of, and constituted by “what actors do,” practice from this perspective is viewed as an ongoing social accomplishment. Researchers adopting a principle of knowledgeability are less interested in the carriers of practice (e.g. different types of activities) or its outcomes (strategy) than in the ongoing practical and reflexive reasonings that underpin the mundane and everyday actions of strategists and other organizational actors. The scope of the “doing” metaphor must therefore be enlarged and connected with a “knowledgeable doing” metaphor (Gherardi, 2022: 24). As per Gherardi (2022), such a metaphor is more useful for developing stronger empirical and theoretical contributions in domain-specific practice research such as SAP.

Taking social practice more seriously in SAP research requires that we look behind the “doing” or recurrent pattern of activities—whether these be strategic in a traditional sense or merely managerial or organizational—in order to better understand “Why people do what they do.” This means shifting from practices as activities or as empirical observable things to practices viewed as ways and/or “sites of knowing” (Nicolini, 2011). According to Nicolini (2011: 602), “practice is where knowledgeability manifests itself and agency becomes possible.” Practice has to do with the multiple and distributed ways that the practical knowledge of actors is instantiated in their everyday sayings and doings.

As a consequence of our previous point, taking social practice seriously invites researchers to decenter their focus on strategists (or managers) and what they do as their unit of analysis, and focus instead on the practices themselves. According to Gherardi (2006: 38), a practice cannot be viewed as simply the outcome of “a conscious activity involving meaningful acts.” Practices are embedded in, and constituted by, larger networks of relationships in which multiple practices are embedded in one another. Moreover, the practical knowledge deployed by actors when carrying out their practices must be viewed as collective. This means that a practice is accomplished through actors’ practical knowledge of how surrounding systems of rules and norms constrain and/or enable the actions they choose to perform. The situatedness of these practices is embedded not only in organizational rules and norms, but also in social and cultural ones, such as gender, class, ethnicity, and so forth. Furthermore, rather than being fully shared between actors, practical knowledge and understanding is dependent on each actor’s individual experience of these systems of rules and norms and, consequently, is necessarily incomplete and differentiated. This does not mean that collective action is impossible, but rather that the outcomes of the social activities that constitute practices, such as strategic planning or strategic change, are unpredictable. It is the situatedness of local practices that constitutes an accomplished instance of strategizing or organizing.

Finally, adopting a social practice perspective requires a willingness on the part of scholars to immerse (or re-immers) themselves with a “general theory of practice” (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015: 188). In contrast with a view of practice as managerial activity, a social practice theory provides a comprehensive definition of practice that is integrated within a larger conceptual system. Social practice theories thus provide a set of conceptual resources that are useful for envisioning and capturing with greater precision the practical knowledge that actors need to carry out their day-to-day activities. There are several social practice theories, each of which provides a specific way of defining what a practice is. All include a variant of the principle of knowledgeability, such as, for example, the notion of shared practical understanding (Schatzki, 2001), habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), or practical consciousness (Giddens, 1984), to name a few. Closer to organization studies, Weick (2017) would call this “mindfulness” while Le Baron et al. (2016) propose the notion of “mutual intelligibility” and Sandberg et al. (2017) suggest the idea of paying attention to actors’ “skillful” performance. All of these conceptualizations, one way or another, invite us to see
strategy (as well as any other type of managerial and organizational work) as an ongoing social accomplishment informed by actors’ practical knowledge within the specific context in which it is embedded. As they are integrated within a larger system of thoughts, social theories of practice provide us with a better and stronger lens through which to view the invisible that is behind or intertwined with the visible.

A view of practice as a social accomplishment raises the challenge of how to observe and reconstruct practical knowledge—how to lift the veil on what Turner (1994) has called the “opacity of practice.” It is, of course, impossible to arrive at a perfect and complete understanding of the practical knowledge that underlies the everyday doings of organizational actors, whether formal or mundane. Nevertheless, practical knowing emerges from interactions between actors that over time become inscribed into the larger systems of norms and rules in which they are acting. Consequently, to gain access to the traces of this practical knowledge, researchers need to immerse themselves in the context of actors’ doings in order to “see” what might appear at first glance to be “unseeable” (Gherardi, 2019).

Over the three phases of development of SAP research proposed by Jarzabkowski et al. (2022), a handful of studies have already set a path for showing how social practice might be taken more seriously within SAP. For example, during the “Germination Phase” (2001–2007/2008), and drawing on a Giddensian perspective, Rouleau (2005) examined a set of routines and conversations during an episode of strategic change to show how middle managers used their practical knowledge of the symbolic and cultural systems in which they, their product, and their clients were embedded to make and sell the meaning of the proposed change. During the “Blossoming Phase” (2008–2015/2016), Balogun et al. (2015) investigated the strategic work of tour guides in museums. Drawing on the Goffmanian notion of moral order, they demonstrated how tour guides deployed “interactional competence” for bringing strategy into being when recreating a normal course of action during museum visits. Such competence consisted of making skillful use of physical, spatial, and material resources during visits. And finally, during the “Harvesting Phase” (2016–2020/2021), Jarzabkowski and Bednarek (2018) adopted a relational perspective to study competitive dynamics in the reinsurance market. To do so, they considered “the knowledgeable practices of actors who have a practical understanding (Schatzki, 2002) of ‘how to go on’ (Giddens, 1984: xxii) in their industry” (Jarzabkowski and Bednarek, 2018: 799). They use the notion of “relational presence” to define the ability of reinsurers to use their common knowledge of competitors and the industry when dealing with clients. It is worth noting that we now see, in SAP’s “Harvesting Phase,” an increasing number of studies adopting a social practice perspective in strategy to clarify how they conceptualize practice in their research (e.g. Cabantous et al., 2018; MacKay et al., 2021; Whittle et al., 2021). This, in our view, augurs well for the future “propagation” of SAP research.

Reinvigorating the field, but not without revitalizing it as well

After more than two decades of development and growth, the SAP perspective is now well established. Until now, the cohesion of the SAP community has been achieved by adopting a view of practice that sets aside—or at least leaves undefined—a clear theoretical positioning and definition of what practice is. This ambiguity has allowed the community to grow at a rapid pace.

In this essay, we suggest that taking social practice more seriously, by adopting a “knowledgeable doing” metaphor and anchoring such doing in a general theory of social practice to clarify what we mean exactly by practice when conducting SAP research, offers a more encompassing understanding of how strategic organizing is accomplished, both locally and socially. In our view, so doing invites more insightful contributions to our understanding of strategy and strategizing in
organizations and beyond. General theories of practice provide a variety of theoretical resources based on diverse ontologies for more accurately addressing three limitations to existing SAP research that we previously identified: limitations associated with defining practice as an aggregation of observable activities, with viewing individuals and collectives as the sole building blocks of strategy-making, and with the ongoing disconnect between micro- and macro-strategizing. General theories of social practice are anchored in broader systems of thought and carry with them theoretical resources that enable researchers to explore the practical knowledgeability that underpin the activities carried out by strategists, displace their unit of analysis from the minds and doings of individuals to collective practice, and to reach beyond common dualisms (action–structure, discourse–materiality, process–practice, mind–body, etc.).

Raising this debate now is, moreover, timely as the field of SAP research is still at a “critical juncture” (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022: 18), where options for its further development still remain open. We strongly believe that grounding our research in a social practice view enhances our distinctiveness as a field by bringing back in the radical theoretical project of SAP research. As there are multiple social theories of practice, placing knowledgeability at the core of our conceptualization of practice will help reinforce the inclusive and pluralist character of SAP research that is dear to the field’s leaders and members. We also contend that our agenda somewhat constitutes another “crossing strategy” (Kohtamäki et al., 2022: 210) that wields potential to facilitate connections in currently disjointed internal streams of research (discourse–materiality, process–practice, mainstream–critical, etc.). It also provides a broader understanding of practice that is not domain-specific that should facilitate alliances with other types of practice research, thus enabling its further propagation within management and organization studies.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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