Rekindling Strategic Alignment Research: The Lure of a Practice-Based Perspective

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Abstract:

Strategic Alignment (SA) in the information systems (IS) literature is regularly portrayed as the result of a deliberate management process focused on achieving a fit with a particular given strategy. This falls short of acknowledging other social forces that may shape SA and neglects the view that strategy can be emergent. This paper aims to contextualize SA in line with a contemporary perspective in strategy research which draws on practice theory and is widely labelled strategy-as-practice (SAP). We discuss the motives behind this reorientation, outline the SAP perspective, and conclude the paper by establishing opportunities through SAP for the future of the SA research agenda.

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1.0 Introduction:

Strategic alignment (SA), which concerns “the integration of strategies related to business and IS” (Avison et al., 2004; P. 225) is one of the main quests within information system (IS) strategy research and practice (Tanriverdi et al., 2010, Alsurori and Salim, 2011). The notion is widely regarded as desirable and important for IS practitioners and it has persistently featured prominently in studies of critical issues in IS management. Due to its perceived value, documented in the literature through surveys and case studies (Chan et al., 1997, King et al., 2000, Tallon and Kraemer, 2003, Ali and Qing, 2009), it is hardly surprising to see SA at the top of IS practitioners’ management concerns.

In particular, the strategic management field is highly relevant to the IS strategy agenda (Chan et al., 1997, Huang et al., 2014) in the sense that IS strategy literature tends to mirror developments in the strategic management field (Peppard et al., 2014). It is, therefore, not surprising to see this contemporary perspective in strategy research which draws on practice theory and is widely labelled strategy-as-practice (SAP) (Jarzabkowski, 2005, Whittington, 2006) becoming increasingly pertinent to IS strategy research (Henfridsson and Lind, 2013, Whittington, 2014), and more recently to the SA quest, in particular (Hiekkanen et al., 2013, Sarhan and McDonagh, 2014). On this basis, this paper argues for SA to be viewed in the context of contemporary perspectives of SAP, emphasising the necessity and timeliness of such a perspective in the SA quest.

The paper is structured as follows. We will first highlight the necessity for an alternative theoretical perspective for SA research. Following this, we offer an outline of the SAP perspective, followed by an articulation of the multiple ways in which the concept of practice has been examined in SAP. Then, we will develop the case for the relevance of SAP to SA research. This case will investigate how IS strategy has already tried to connect SAP and IS strategy. We draw on these attempts to exemplify elements of SAP that would help to develop the SA agenda as one of the main quests within the IS strategy domain. The paper will draw to a close by shedding light on some highly distinctive elements for the future of SA research under the SAP eye.

2.0 The need for an alternative theoretical lens in SA:

The notion of SA in the extant literature has been predominantly located within the intellectual dimension of IS (Chen et al., 2010). Its central thrust is focused on attaining SA on the premise that a formal business strategy already exists (Henderson and Sifonis, 1988, Lederer and Mendelow, 1989, Reich and Benbasat, 1996). Being highly influenced by the mainstream strategy research that regards strategy as discrete phases of strategy formulation followed by implementation (Kaplan and Jarzabkowski, 2006; P. 4), SA is thus also seen as occurring in discrete phases through which IS strategy conforms to a particular business strategy, finding a fit with it, and assuming an ideal form of SA to be realized afterward (Das et al., 1991, Croteau and Bergeron, 2001, Sabherwal and Chan, 2001, Baker et al., 2011). This dominant perspective in SA is simple but imprecise and could be challenged on the basis that it may be difficult for SA to occur if organizations lack a formal, clear and documented business strategy (Chan and Reich, 2011, Hiekkanen et al., 2013). Considering Mintzberg and Waters’s (1985) discussion on strategy forms, SA is thus unlikely to be realized in the light of the emergent form of strategy.
This classical view adopted by the bulk of SA researchers persists in seeing the attainment of SA as merely deliberate top-down formulation of strategies. In the literature, SA is predominantly envisaged as being the result of good communications between businesses and IS executives (Luftman, 2000, Campbell, 2007, Westerman, 2009), and the development of a shared view among these executives (Preston and Karahanna, 2005, Johnson and Lederer, 2007, Silvius et al., 2009) where IS executives are members of the top management team (Feeny et al., 1992, Preston and Karahanna, 2009). While this stream of research is influential, it fails to address the wider set of social forces which impact on organizations. Furthermore, by assuming SA practitioners are merely senior executives, other practitioners located at different organizational levels who may shape and influence SA are ignored.

In light of these observations, there is a necessary and urgent need and opportunity for the SA literature to embrace the practice turn in the strategic management domain (Vaara and Whittington, 2012) that has become widely labelled as strategy-as-practice (SAP) (Jarzabkowski, 2005, Whittington, 2006). We believe that the SAP lens would have much to offer researchers in SA. Indeed, the presence of the SAP lens in the IS strategy domain (Teubner, 2013) impels us to extend its promising agenda to one of the key constructs in IS strategy – that is SA. We shall now turn to introducing the SAP perspective. We will first discuss its unique view of strategy. Subsequently, we will discuss the multiple faces of practices with SAP and offer a few empirical illustrations. We believe SAP, with its five faces on examining practices, will help us to rekindle the research agenda for SA.

3.0 An outline of the SAP perspective:
A comprehensive review of various traditions that have led to the emergence of SAP is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is important to note that this perspective, in drawing on practice theory (Jarzabkowski, 2005, Whittington, 2006), has reimaged the concept of strategy in a way that is consistent with the adoption and application of practice theory (Sarhan and McDonagh, 2014). To begin with, strategy – as a phenomenon – is a social practice (Hendry, 2000, Jarzabkowski et al., 2007, Whittington, 2007) that involves an organized bodily doings and sayings (Schatzki, 2005, Whittington, 2007, Rasche and Chia, 2009). Under this practice eye, SAP would advance three interpretations in regard to its view of strategy.

Strategy is an institutionalized practice within the society (Whittington, 2007) whereby its meaning is derived from the social context it evolves in and whatever practitioners make of it (Hendry, 2000). Just as with any social practice, it extends beyond the organization (Hendry and Seidl, 2003), is connected and embedded in a particular society (Whittington, 2007) and is spread out across multiple levels from individual levels to the institutional level (Golsorkhi et al., 2010).

Once strategy is conceptualized as a social practice, the doing of it has to, for the sake of consistency, be similarly re-conceptualized. The doing of strategy that comprises actions, interactions and negotiations of multiple actors (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009) is increasingly being referred to as strategizing (Whittington, 1996a, Whittington, 2002, Kaplan and Jarzabkowski, 2006, Jarzabkowski et al., 2007), and suggests that at least three interrelated interpretations of strategizing to be offered.
First, the use of the verb form would entitle the movement towards humanizing the field of strategy (Jarzabkowski, 2005, Paroutis et al., 2013) and bringing human actors into the center of its research focus (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009). Thus, SAP sees strategizing as something people do and which is socially accomplished (Whittington et al., 2006, Kaplan and Jarzabkowski, 2006) rather than something that is a property of organizations or something which the organization may achieve (Johnson et al., 2007). Second, as it stands in practice theory, these strategizing activities are situated in the field of social practice (Jarzabkowski, 2005, Johnson et al., 2007), implying that society, not only an organization, suffuses practitioners and their strategizing activities (Jarzabkowski, 2005, Whittington, 2007). Finally, SAP regards strategizing as far more than top-down formulation. Indeed, there are many influencers on strategy and facilitators for its implementation who may be located at different organizational levels and have no formal strategic role (Rouleau, 2005, Hoon, 2007). SAP recognizes their roles and goes further by including external actors such as consultants (Nordqvist, 2011) and non-executive directors (Nordqvist and Melin, 2008) in addition to internal practitioners (Regnér, 2008). As such, this broader scope in the analysis indicates that strategy in SAP concerns all levels in the organization (Johnson et al., 2007, Rouleau, 2013).

What has become apparent from the above explanations is that strategy is defined, in SAP, by its concerns rather than its products in terms of economic value for organizations (Hendry, 2000). Thus, SAP sees strategy as a situated and socially accomplished set of activities (Jarzabkowski, 2005) concerned with strategizing, and how this strategizing is influenced by and influences their organizational and institutional context (Johnson et al., 2007). In more explicit terms, SAP concerns the minutiae of strategy (Whittington, 2007); who does it, what they do, how they do it, what they use and what implication this has for shaping strategy (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009; P. 69). It aims to uncover practitioners’ detailed activities of which strategy is constituted (Hendry and Seidl, 2003, Whittington, 2003), signalling to the centrality of human actors in SAP from its definition right up to its empirical focus (Johnson et al., 2007).

Difficulties may arise, however, when an attempt is made to distinguish between strategic activities that are related to strategizing and other types of social activities. The SAP literature addresses this issue by emphasising a focus on activities that draw on strategic practices (strategic planning, annual review) and strategic episodes, such as strategy meetings and strategy workshops (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007, Lavarda et al., 2010). While this would narrow the analytical focus to practitioners’ strategic activities, SAP does not overlook informal interactions that have been empirically found to influence strategizing, as captured in the studies of Hoon (2007) and Nordqvist and Melin (2010) within the SAP field.

4.0 A primer of studying practices in SAP:

SAP is envisaged as a perspective within the field of strategic management (Rouleau, 2013). Central to this perspective is the examination of organizational and institutional practices that shape and are shaped by practitioners’ strategizing activities (Johnson et al., 2007, Suddaby et al., 2013). As such, it can be argued that SAP pays attention to what practitioners do in relation to strategy, but within their organizational and wider institutional context. It therefore spans levels by investigating what goes on inside organizations and also the wider social context that
influences practitioners’ strategizing activities within organizations (Johnson et al, 2007).

Notwithstanding, given the nature of practice theory literature, which involves various theoretical means of theorizing practices (Rouse, 2001, Schatzki, 2001b, Reckwitz, 2002, Nicolini, 2013), it is not surprising to see different concepts of practices used in the SAP field (Jarzabkowski, 2005, Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009). Without recognition of any one dominant view on practices in the field (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009, Rouleau, 2013), we aimed to embrace the plurality of four faces of practice as identified and envisaged in SAP, which are articulated below.

**Institutional practices** refer to the accepted way of strategizing (Vaara and Whittington, 2012) that include traditions, norms, and procedures of how to strategize (Whittington, 2006, Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009, Paroutis et al., 2013). They are shared between practitioners and routinized over time (Vaara and Whittington, 2012) and serve as the infrastructure through which strategizing activities are constructed (Jarzabkowski and Balogun, 2009). They are the range of practices, such as strategic planning practice and annual review that provide symbolic resources for practitioners to engage with (Johnson et al., 2007), facilitate strategy-related interaction (Jarzabkowski, 2005), and enable communication and collaboration between practitioners with different interests (Jarzabkowski and Balogun, 2009).

For instance, SAP research places the practice of strategic planning at the center of its empirical focus, offering insight into the effect of such practice on enabling practitioners to strategize in their particular organizations. For example, Nordqvist and Melin (2010) highlighted how strategic planning acted as a mechanism for coordination and control in three family business firms, showing, for instance, that the variety of interests of multiple influencers in the family business context (owner, family member and board member) can be aligned formally through strategic planning practice, leading family business firms to organize their strategic works in line with professional firms. Somewhat similarly, Jarzabkowski and Balogun (2009) showed, at a single European multinational firm, how strategic planning practice acts as a mediator between actors with different interests from diverse units across Europe; revealing the manner through which their interests have been shaped. Such studies informed by SAP have regarded strategic planning practice as a mediator for interaction between practitioners, revealing what practitioners do and how they strategize, both through their social interactions and within the specific practice they engage in.

**Organizational practices** refer to organization specific localized settings - norms and operating procedures embedded in routines, which guide and shape strategizing activities in a particular organization (Whittington, 2006, Johnson et al., 2007). SAP brings these organizational practices under close scrutiny, revealing the micro activities that underpin practices at the organizational level and how these local practices shape strategizing (Whittington, 2006, Rouleau, 2013). In a single public UK university, Jarzabkowski and Wilson (2002) showed how the top management team (TMT) reinforce their own strategic thinking through the interplay of organizational context and localized practices.
On the one hand, the TMT draws upon their position, knowledge of the external environment and experiences to legitimately establish organizational norms that define strategic goals and locate strategic actions in terms of excellence in performance in areas such as research ranking, income-generation and teaching (Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2002). Such norms are formally exercised within centralized committees in terms of formal operating procedures for resource allocation, strategic decision-making and financial planning. For instance, in bringing departments’ performances in line with TMT defined goals, resource allocation decisions are legitimized to the extent to which each department complies with the core strategic area, thereby encouraging departments to compete towards the university’s goals because their resources are negotiated on this basis. On the other hand, these centralized committees are underpinned through localized routines of interaction. For instance, overlapping committee memberships for TMT members and informal interactions between them both serve towards establishing shared team knowledge and decisions within each committee that are in line with overall university strategic goals. Eventually, these formal committees and localized routines of interaction act as a framework within which TMT thinking can advance.

While studying this type of practice remains marginal in SAP research (Rouleau, 2013), it has some appeal in terms of the practice perspective as it involves the micro perspective of how strategy is shaped at the nexus of organizational context and localized routines and practices. Indeed, studies of this kind would aid understanding in the field of SAP relating to the interpretative nature of strategic actions under different contextual configurations (Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2002).

Practitioners’ strategizing activities take place in Episodes (Whittington, 2006, Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009). These episodes are seen in SAP as practices that shape and organize practitioners’ strategizing activities (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009, Vaara and Whittington, 2012), and as being responsible for provoking changes or reinforcing stability in an organization’s strategy (Jarzabkowski, 2005). Such episodes which include meetings, workshops and away days have been subject to a detailed analysis in SAP literature, revealing the micro of how strategizing is shaped by the practices within a particular episode (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009).

Drawing on Hendry and Seidl’s (2003) strategic episodes framework, Jarzabkowski and Seidl (2008) examined the role of meetings in stabilizing existing strategic orientation or proposing change in strategic orientations (destabilizing). Observing 51 formal strategic meetings, they identified practices that exemplified each concept (initiation, conduct and termination), revealing how specific meeting practices contributed to either stabilizing or destabilizing strategic orientation. For instance, practices such as restricted free discussion and administrative discussion, as forms of meeting conduct, were used to enable firms to stabilize their existing strategy. In contrast, practices such as the formation of working groups and free discussion were found to contribute to destabilizing strategic initiatives.

Similarly, Whittington et al. (2006) examined strategy workshops, project management and symbolic artefacts. They highlighted the importance of strategists’ practical skills and creativity in these episodes, alongside traditional analytical skills: for instance, the success of the workshop in one of the cases in the study relied not only on the chief executive’s analytical skills, but on her skills in controlling detailed
activities, such as seating and time-tabling, which ultimately led to the smooth running of the workshop. As such, these studies informed by SAP shed light on specific occurrences during these episodes which have passed unnoticed in traditional strategy research (Whittington, 2002, Duffy and O'Rourke, 2014).

**Strategic tools** can be understood as frameworks, techniques, approaches and methodology which are used by managers to support strategy making decisions (Clark, 1997). Arguably, SAP researchers regard them as a practice and do not evaluate tools per se nor which tools are being used. Rather, SAP pays close attention to how these tools are being used in practice (Gunn and Williams, 2007), how practitioners engage with them (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2008) and how these tools mediate interactions between practitioners during strategizing activities (Kaplan and Jarzabkowski, 2006). For instance, Hodgkinson et al. (2006) showed how strategic analytical tools applied in workshops were used to guide the discussion rather than being employed for their original analytical purposes. Hill and Westbrook (1997) revealed how SWOT analysis outcomes in most of their 20 cases were not used as an input into strategy decision, and were used only as a method to initiate strategy discussion.

Kaplan and Jarzabkowski (2006) have taken an ethnographical approach to examining how practitioners search for rationality and objectivity through the use of two tools: one of them internally developed. They highlighted that, while managers introduced tools to search for rationality and objectivity in their strategy, tools turned out to be the subject of managers’ disputes over the legitimacy of the tools themselves, i.e. where tools’ outcomes conflict with their personal interests or where tools do not cover dimensions in which they are deemed critical. While in many cases tools did not provide the objective answers they were looking for, tools have placed many concepts and tough questions on the table, leading to a great deal of discussion around strategy. Such studies informed by SAP shed light on how tools are engaged with by different practitioners as means of stimulating discussion and aligning practitioners’ perspectives within organizations. Indeed, SAP has unveiled the social role of tools rather than the analytical ones, revealing that strategy tools are actively and differently used during strategizing through imposing, fostering and constraining practitioners’ strategizing activities within organizations (Moisander and Stenfors, 2009).

In summary, practices have been central to SAP examination and an essential element of its research agenda. For SAP, the concept of practice opens broad opportunities for the research agenda that include the examination of institutional practices, organizational practices, strategic episodes and tools mobilization in practices. Of note is the fact that these agenda are not merely focused on practices per se. Indeed, it unveils how these practices shape and are shaped by practitioners strategizing activities. Further, these agenda are seen as being of primary importance in unveiling the meaning of practitioners’ activities while they strategize.

### 5.0 The pertinence of SAP to the SA agenda:

There are a number of grounds for considering the SAP perspective in the SA agenda. It is therefore important to highlight efforts made in the IS strategy literature “in general” since the present paper draws on these efforts in its attempt to position IS
strategy in the context of contemporary perspectives on SAP, and to argue that SA, as one of the main quests in the IS strategy literature, should be viewed in line with this contemporary perspective, also.

First, the shift of perspective from strategy towards strategizing in Galliers (2007, 2011) indicates the manner in which he drew on the SAP approach, for which the term “strategizing” was coined (Whittington, 1996a). Galliers, while developing his IS strategizing framework, noted that the dominant understanding in the extant IS strategy literature merely regarded the development of IS strategy as the product of a deliberate process to determine future actions in the form of formal decision making (Chen et al., 2010, Henfridsson and Lind, 2013). While Galliers does not reject this notion, he emphasizes that IS strategizing also involves human interaction, informal information collection and learning from the community of practice, in addition to deliberations concerning formal decision-making processes. Indeed, Galliers’s turn towards practice being informed by SAP was applauded in the IS strategy literature, and calls for further development of this perspective have since been made (Teubner, 2013, Teubner and Pellengahr, 2013).

Second, SAP is being increasingly recognized as a lens in the IS strategy field. Editors Galliers et al. (2012) in “Journal of Strategic Information Systems (JSIS)” called for IS strategy research to be supplemented by SAP literature, marking the opportunity for IS strategy scholars to study their agenda through a different lens. The JSIS’s special issue on “Information Systems Strategy-as-practice: Micro Strategy and Strategizing for IS” has already seen its first outcomes appended with an SAP lens as illustrated in Leonard and Higson (2013) and Henfridsson and Lind (2013), who both drew on Jarzabkowski’s (2005) activity theory framework from the SAP literature. Somewhat similarly, Huang et al. (2014), through an SAP lens, explored how a Chinese firm explores opportunities in the market, revealing the interrelationships amongst practitioners that shape and refine the role of IT-enabled practices in identifying and exploiting new market opportunities.

Finally, we also cannot ignore the recent commentary paper produced by Whittington (2014), who has contributed decisively to the SAP literature. Indeed, he applauded the initiative of bringing together IS strategy and SAP research, highlighting a natural synergy between both research agendas. In his paper, Whittington (2014) sheds light on the most promising ideas available to IS strategy researchers through the 3Ps (practice, praxis and practitioners). Indeed, these three points may all indicate that SAP is being progressively fostered in the field of IS strategy, signalling to the affinities of SAP to the IS strategy research agenda.

We shall now propose some avenues for SA researchers towards building on the SAP perspective developed within the IS strategy domain. We aim to establish new directions for SA research that may prove attractive to SA scholars. Our approach for the next section will be mostly illustrative. By and large, we shall explain some specific elements in SA, emphasise their limitations, and delineate the wider opportunities for, and value of, rekindling SA research from a SAP perspective.

6.0 Embracing a SAP perspective with SA research
Based on a high-level critique of the SA literature, we identified four areas in which SA scholars could readily embrace a SAP perspective.
To start with, attaining SA is clearly engraved as a norm of institutional and organizational practice in the extant literature. Indeed, studies have shown that SA is unanimously regarded as desirable by IS practitioners, regardless of organizational size, industry or location (Cumps et al., 2006, Caffrey and McDonagh, 2008). Another way of formulating this is that SA, similarly to the SAP view on strategy, is a social practice that extends beyond organizations and, as a consequence, is embedded in the particular social context in which it evolves. Such a conceptualization would have immediate implications for SA. It entails the need to firstly humanize the field of SA by seeing SA as the doing of practitioners as opposed to the dominant view that sees SA as an organizational achievement (Luftman, 2000, Reich and Benbasat, 2000, Cumps et al., 2006, Preston and Karahanna, 2009). From this point of view, we are robustly answering Galliers et al.’s (2012) recent call to elicit the detailed practices that constitute day-to-day activities, as related to SA. In this sense, researchers must immerse themselves in practitioners’ activities and ask how SA is practised (Buhl et al., 2012) and not ask how firms can be aligned (Avison et al., 2004, Cumps et al., 2006). Of course, this requires a shift from firms’ performance level toward individuals’ performance levels, and hence, as academics, we can aid the practice world of practitioners by bringing a higher degree of reflexivity regarding what they are doing at that level and the effects of these activities (Johnson et al., 2003).

Given that SA has remained among top IS practitioners’ primary issues of concern for more than 25 years (Dickson et al., 1984, Branchau and Wetherbe, 1987, Watson et al., 1997, Luftman and McLean, 2004, Luftman et al., 2006, Luftman et al., 2009, Luftman and Ben-Zvi, 2011), we, as researchers, should ask why our long-standing research program fails to produce knowledge that touches the lived experience of practitioners. It is against this backdrop that we attribute this frustration in SA to the program of research in the field that reduces SA to quantifiable measurements (Hiekkanen et al., 2013) and knowledge generated though large-scale cross sectorial studies (Aversano et al., 2012), and which denies the increasingly concerns that IT become locally embedded into organizational practices (Arvidsson et al., 2014).

Such a program of research became remote from the lived world of how SA is actually practised by its practitioners. For this critic, the alternative theoretical lens offered by SAP would be persuasive. SAP with its intimate attention to contextual configuration and how this impacts on practitioners’ works, SA can aid the practitioner’s world by regarding SA as a context dependent phenomenon, thereby getting closer to practitioners’ reality of doing SA. As it stands in SAP, strategy is connected and embedded in a particular society (Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006) and better investigated at the local contextual level (Whittington, 1996b); the current state of SA research practice needs to be confronted (Sarhan and McDonagh, 2014) as it falls short in addressing practitioners’ long-standing concerns regarding SA.

Within the SA literature, there has been a steady growth in the number of approaches (Sabherwal and Chan, 2001), frameworks (Baker and Jones, 2008, Baker et al., 2009, Baker et al., 2011, Alsdudiri et al., 2013) and models (Henderson and Venkatraman, 1999, Luftman, 2000, Avison et al., 2004, Ali and Qing, 2009) as practices available to the pursuit of SA. However, this pluralism of perspectives does not always contribute to the strength of the field. Indeed, Hiekkanen et al. (2013) emphasized that such a proliferation proved to be of little value to practitioners as they promote complexity on practitioners in terms of knowing which model to apply, when and
how. This view is consistent with Ciborra’s (1997) earlier argument that the application of this stream of research is unfeasible, since it is not derived from the rich experience of seasoned practitioners.

The SAP lens is well-positioned to address such a matter in the field of SA and opens up a new opportunity for future inquiry. SAP has already developed a stream of research agendas that focus on how tools are used in practice, and SA would find in the SAP perspective useful ways to either accept or reject the applicability of these tools and frameworks in practice. Indeed, the point made by Jarzabkowski and Wilson (2006) in the SAP literature is worth noting in this respect. They call for recognition of practitioners’ liability to adopt strategy theory as part of their daily strategizing activities without the necessity of making reference to the theory from which they originated. This is, therefore, why Jarzabkowski and Wilson (2006) argued for a practice view to capture the actual utilization of strategy theory in practice to inform our understanding prior to claiming the irrelevance of these theories to practice. On such bases, SA researchers, under the umbrella of SAP, should ask how their tools and techniques are mobilized in practice by engaging in direct dialogue with practitioners towards advancing our understanding of the practicality of our tools in practice.

The SA field is making inroads in promoting organizational activities that aim to foster SA. In this sense, the SA literature compiled themes such as: the impact of IS executives’ position within an organizational structure on the development of SA (Preston and Karahanna, 2009); IS executives direct reporting relationship with the top management team and how this fosters SA (Baker et al., 2011); the role of the informal structure in driving SA (Chan, 2002); IS executives’ involvement in strategy development as SA enablers (Luftman et al., 1999), and the impact of developing partnerships with business executives to sustain SA (Khandelwal, 2001, Kearns and Sabherwal, 2007). With appreciation of this stream of research, the SAP perspective offers a clear opportunity to develop the field in terms of examining episodes in which actors engage in to align. Such research, informed by SAP, would reveal an empirical stream of research that zooms in on SA episodes to uncover how SA is shaped within particular episodes. As such, we advance our understanding of how practitioners interact in relation to SA and how their SA activities are shaped and organized within these episodes.

**7.0 The conduct of SAP based inquiry:**

Given the affinities of SAP to the IS strategy agenda and its value for SA research, we are conscious that the conduct of SAP-oriented inquiry raises a number of highly distinctive research challenges as noted below.

Initially, and perhaps most importantly, the notion of practice steers away from the misleading idea of merely studying people’s activities in more detail (Nicolini, 2013). Therefore, researchers for whatever reason should not interpret the notion of practice as simply being what people do. Indeed, the concomitant interest in what people actually do, adheres to the common sense use of the practice term that goes beyond individual activities solely, to reading human activity as both shaping and being shaped by the wider social context in which these activities are embedded (Rouse, 2007, Whittington, 2011, Suddaby et al., 2013).
This matter demands that SA researchers be aware of the rich set of theoretical perspectives on practice available in organizational studies (Felin and Foss, 2005, Orlikowski, 2010, Gomez, 2010, Nicolini, 2009, Nicolini, 2013) that guide and organize typical research under the practice eye. But this is not about as far as they can go. Indeed, there is an equally wide range of conceptual frameworks used to particularly guide SAP-oriented inquiry (Hendry and Seidl, 2003, Jarzabkowski, 2005, Whittington, 2006) in a manner that is consistent with the manifestations of practice theory.

Since we have envisioned SA as a social practice, similar to the SAP view on strategy that extends beyond organizations and derives its meaning from the particular social context to which it belongs, one would expect that the new conceptualization, informed by practice theory, would influence how investigators should see social and organizational phenomena through the practice eye (Schatzki, 2005). This suggests that practice is an ontological choice (Nicolini, 2013), which in turn implies the belief that organizational phenomena occur within, and are aspects or components of, the field of practice (Schatzki, 2001a; P. 11). As such, this entails commitments to the fact that the field of practice is the chief of the organizational phenomena under investigation (Schatzki, 2001a), that human actions are understood as enabled by organizational and wider social practices (Golsorkhi et al., 2010, Vaara and Whittington, 2012), and that eventually the conduct of the research design would typically play a supporting role for such premises (Schatzki, 2001a, Nicolini, 2013).

Once the common sense use of the practice term is settled, SA researchers will be required to adequately strengthen the relationship between Micro empirical evidence and Macro social context under which activities are constructed (Rouleau, 2013). This relates to the design and execution of a data collection method that attends to the multi-level nature of practice-oriented studies under which researchers are expected to specify the streams of evidence - primary and secondary - to be collected at each level (Johnson et al., 2007, Sarhan and McDonagh, 2014). As a consequence, SA researchers need to ensure that key findings and any related theoretical frameworks are advanced with multi-level dimensions. Of course, any explanations relating to how SA is practised have to faithfully show the Macro context under which SA is framed and subsequently executed.

8.0 Conclusion:
We have argued in this paper that SAP has a great deal to offer in SA research. We have shown specific reasons for advocating SAP application into SA at this point in time. On the one hand, this is highly consistent with both the strong emphasis on SAP in the mainstream strategic management literature, and its parallel appearance more recently in the IS strategy and SA literature sets thereafter. On the other hand, the apparent limitations in the study of SA, as evidenced in its academic literature, would invite us to reimagine the manner in which SA is treated.

We have outlined the SAP perspective and undertaken its examination for the notion of practice in particular with the purpose of showing the field’s wide and valuable research agenda. We then turned to indicating the pertinence of SAP to the IS strategy agenda. We then extended this application of SAP in the IS strategy literature by stressing the aspects of struggle identified in the SA set. Consequently, we have shown new avenues for research and examinations of SA supplemented with SAP,
particularly in terms of episodic practices under which SA is shaped, and tools mobilization in practices, and have given further attention to contextual configurations under which SA is practised. We have drawn the paper to a close by highlighting elements for the new SA infrastructure. These elements would invites us, as SA researchers, to challenge our research program right up from our ontological choices down to data collection and research execution. Researchers in the SA field may do so by drawing upon theoretical perspectives on practice available in organizational studies to design and execute empirical examinations that capture practice and SAP manifestations.
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