STRATEGY-AS-PRACTICE

The social effects of workplace design and their impact on unplanned strategic activity

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1 Background

Strategy-as-Practice (SaP) is a distinctive approach for studying organisation strategy with a focus on micro-level social practices (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). Proposed by Richard Whittington (1996), SaP was developed into a full research agenda by Johnson et al. (2003) in the early 2000s. SaP scholars shifted the focus of strategy research from strategies, something organisations have, on to strategising, something organisations do. This in turn shifted the focus from organisations to strategy makers (Whittington, 1996). Linked to the broader ‘practice turn’ in social sciences (Knorr-Cetina et al., 2001; Whittington, 2011), SaP has its roots in practice theory (Bourdieu, 1990), an approach that before its application to strategy had been used by social scientists in other disciplines to research the practices of scientists (Pickering, 1992), accountants (Hopwood & Miller, 1994) and architects (Schön, 1991).

Before SaP, mainstream strategy research had a focus on the causal effects of deliberately formulated strategic plans on the performance outcomes of organisations (Golsorkhi et al., 2015), and statistical methods of analysis predominated strategy research at this time (Laamanen et al., 2015). The advent of SaP encouraged strategy researchers to shift their focus onto what actually takes place in strategy formulation and onto the strategy makers themselves. The shift in focus was accompanied by a change in the methodologies employed to qualitative approaches that enabled observations of the everyday actions and interactions of strategy practitioners (Whittington, 1996). This approach to strategy research has advanced our theoretical understanding of strategy making in a way that has also produced real insights for strategy practitioners (Golsorkhi et al., 2015).

An accepted definition for what constitutes the strategy of an organisation is the long-term direction realised by an organisation (Johnson et al., 2017). This definition opens the possibility that not all strategy is deliberately planned. It is tempting to think of strategy making as big decisions made by senior executives in boardrooms that intentionally alter the long-term direction of an organisation; indeed, much of the early research in the field of strategy had this focus (Whittington, 1996). However, this view of strategy was challenged in the 1980s (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985) with evidence that not all strategies realised by organisations were deliberately planned. The long-term direction actually realised by an organisation might result from

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planning but could also result from actions that were not part of the formal planning process. This is possible because the decisions and actions that affect the direction of an organisation are not just made in the boardroom but can also be influenced by actions of agents found on the periphery of an organisation (Regnér, 2003).

Not only can strategic agents be found at any level of the organisation structure but, despite their influence on organisation strategy, they are not necessarily acting strategically in a conscious way. Unintentional strategy-making occurs because many decisions and actions are made intuitively in response to everyday problems, and SaP research has also shown that these intuitive decisions can accumulate into patterns that we ultimately recognise as strategic (Chia & Holt, 2006; Garud et al., 2015).

Strategy scholars have labelled the unplanned element of realised strategy as emergent strategy (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). Emergent strategy is evident, at least to some extent, in all organisations. It is very rare that the long-term direction an organisation actually realises in practice is entirely the result of strategic planning. Indeed, the evidence suggests that emergent strategy is more evident when the environment in which the organisation competes becomes more volatile, uncertain and complex (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). The faster the environment changes, the more quickly that strategic plans become out of date, increasing the likelihood that the direction an organisation actually realises in practice has elements that have emerged.

The consequence of this is that we now appreciate far better the breadth of people involved in strategy-making processes, both intentionally and unintentionally, and this understanding has placed an emphasis on the social nature of strategy. Strategy is seen by SaP scholars as a social phenomenon and strategy making as a social accomplishment (Whittington, 1996).

The world of strategy constitutes a genuinely social reality created and recreated in the interaction between various actors inside and outside the organization.

(Golsorkhi et al., 2015, p. 7)

The understanding of strategy-making as a social accomplishment has generated an interest in social interaction as an important unit of analysis for SaP scholars (Jarzabkowski, 2005). Strategy is created through embodied social interaction (Gylfe et al., 2016; Heracleous & Jacobs, 2008; Knight et al., 2018; Paroutis et al., 2015), such that the profiles of interaction (who interacts, how often and for how long) found in organisations matter a great deal in terms of the characteristics of strategy that are realised in practice.

The majority of SaP research to date has focused on the social interactions of deliberately strategic actors, with new insights being produced in the role of strategy meetings (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008) and away days (Gerry Johnson, 2008), the influence of middle managers in strategy making (Rouleau, 2005), the use of strategy tools in facilitating certain types of interaction (Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2014; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2009), the role of strategy professionals in developing strategy (Angwin et al., 2009) and the role of language used in strategic interactions (Fenton & Langley, 2011).

There has been less focus on the role of interaction in emergent strategy, where there have been calls for more SaP research (Vaara & Whittington, 2012), and it is in this regard that applicability to workplace studies is considered particularly relevant.

2 Applicability to workplace studies

Bringing together the disciplines of Strategy-as-Practice and workplace design offers opportunities for both communities and the potential to produce real insights for practitioners. To

workplace researchers, SaP offers the opportunity to explore the strategic consequences of decisions made about office design. This potentially broadens the audience for the research beyond facilities managers and architects to include senior corporate executives and other strategy practitioners. To SaP researchers, workplace studies offer the potential to develop a new understanding of the effects of space and spatial configurations on strategy. There have been repeated calls in recent years to do this, and there have been some outstanding but isolated responses to these calls. However, this research is still in its infancy, and this is perhaps best illustrated by the absence of a chapter on space in any of the leading strategy textbooks used in business schools today.

The logic for working together can be described as follows. The spatial configurations that result from the design of the workplace have an impact on the patterns of social interaction that occur in organisations. Patterns of social interaction that occur in organisations have an impact on the strategies that are realised by organisations in the long run because it matters in strategic decision-making, who interacts with whom. At the intersection of these two disciplines lies a mutual interest in the antecedents of social interaction in the workplace.

Evidence that the spatial configuration of the workplace has an impact on patterns of social interaction comes primarily from research in architecture and workplace design.

The modern office is a network of places for interaction, where people are linked by physical infrastructures. These places for interaction construct the frame in which the social infrastructure of work unfolds.

(Blakstad, 2015, p. 59)

Research on workplace design has shown that the profiles of social interaction are influenced by the spatial configuration of the offices in which the interactions take place. Spatial configuration is defined as the position of every space in relation to all other spaces into an overall system of some kind (Hillier, 1996; Hillier & Hanson, 1984). Research has shown that offices can be configured spatially in very different ways that can be objectively measured and compared using quantitative methods (Bafna, 2003). These methods generate objective measures of a workplace's spatial configuration such as integration and segregation. Workplaces might be well integrated, where all spaces are well connected to each other, as might be the case in open-plan offices. Whereas, segregated workplaces occur where spaces are not well connected, as might be the case in offices with cellular offices. These measures of integration have been shown to have an impact on social interaction. More integrated offices tend to have more unplanned interaction and more interaction across teams (Penn et al., 1999; Sailer et al., 2012).

The profile of interaction that results depends on a number of other factors. For example, the location of people in the office is important because proximity encourages interaction (Allen & Henn, 2006). If employees are located close to their colleagues, as defined by the organisation structure, interaction within teams is encouraged and interaction across teams tends to be discouraged, leading to organisational silos (Sailer & Thomas, 2019).

However, movement within the workplace can be encouraged by attractors, defined as facilities such as kitchens that are known to amplify the naturally integrated character of space by attracting further movement. Attractors might include watercoolers, photocopiers, meeting rooms, breakout spaces or coffee machines (Sailer, 2007). The combination of proximity and movement creates 'functional zones' of social interaction within the workplace (Kabo et al., 2015).

Sailer and Thomas (2020) use quantitative methods for understanding space to investigate the relationship between the spatial configuration of the workplace and the stated objectives

of the organisation. Wineman et al. (2014) explore the interconnectedness of spatial layout and social structure in organisations and its impact on innovation. The complex relationship between an organisation's spatial layout and its social structure is further developed into a measure that can be used to objectively assess the degree to which spatial and social structures correspond (Sailer & Thomas, 2019). The authors demonstrate how socio-spatial correspondence (or non-correspondence) can have a dramatic impact on the interaction profiles that result in the organisation, concluding that spatial layout cannot be considered in isolation from social structures.

It can be seen that the spatial configurations that result from workplace design have an impact on the patterns of social interaction that occur in organisations. However, it is rare for this research to make the next step in the logic just described to make a connection between the patterns of social interaction that occur in the organisation to the strategies that are realised by those organisations. This evidence comes primarily from SaP research that consistently demonstrates the importance of space and spatial configurations in the workplace through qualitative accounts that describe how social interaction in the workplace, both planned and unplanned, have an impact on strategic outcomes.

Jarzabkowski et al. (2015) show how three types of strategic work achieved within a re-insurance broker are socially accomplished within three distinct types of space. The spaces are shown to both enable and constrain the social activities performed within them, with consequences for the strategic work done. Bouty and Gomez (2016) demonstrate how the 'spatial entanglements' of the workplace in three haute cuisine restaurants has an influence on social interactions that result in the creativity evident in those organisations. The authors "specifically show that each thread of creativity is related to specific spaces" (Bouty & Gomez, 2016, p. 237). It is partly as a result of the configuration of these spaces that the 'working on ideas' becomes socially embedded into the organisation.

This work builds on the findings of research that shows the importance of unplanned interactions to creativity and innovation. Interacting with people you did not know you needed to interact with has the potential to generate new and innovative ideas (Burt, 2004; see also Chapter 14 on radical innovation theory), and interactions that span organisations can generate real novelty (Garud et al., 2015).

Pinch also shows how the spatial configuration of the workplace can impact creativity. However, Pinch highlights the complex nature of creativity and its relationship with space by suggesting the creative act is related neither to one place nor to one person, but to the complex and often unplanned social interaction made possible by configurations of space in a spatial system of some sort. The configuration of space in ways that make unplanned interaction possible means that "new sorts of social actions arise" (Pinch, 2016, p. 153).

Bucher and Langley (2016) use the methods of routine dynamics (described in Section 3) to show how spaces with different characteristics, that the authors name 'reflective and experimental', create the conditions for social interaction that enables strategic change. The configuration and interplay between these spaces encourages social interaction that spans groups that facilitates change. By contrast, Siebert et al. (2017) show that spatial configurations that restrict interaction to pre-determined groups can have the effect of resisting strategic change.

In summary, SaP research has demonstrated the impact of social interaction on strategy. Indeed, the evidence is that in times of great uncertainty it is every day, unintentionally strategic, social interaction that has the greatest impact on the strategies that are ultimately realised by organisations. As workplace research has demonstrated how the spatial design of the workplace influences social interaction, it follows that as corporate environments become ever more uncertain, workplace design should become more central to an organisation's strategic

thinking. As a result, the methods of SaP theory have the potential to place corporate real estate management (CREM), facilities management (FM) and workplace design on the desks of organisational leaders.

3 Methodology/research approach

Despite the clear contributions of research in both workplace design and SaP, there remain gaps in the predominant methodologies of both disciplines that constrain further progress in developing a better understanding of the influence of workplace design on strategy. This section describes methodological contributions and gaps in both disciplines in order to understand how the influence of workplace design on strategy might be better understood.

Strategy-as-Practice primarily uses qualitative methods (Laamanen et al., 2015) to identify and study strategic work. A particular challenge to the SaP community has been how to identify strategic work that is not deliberately strategic in nature that leads to the emergence of long-term directions realised by the organisation. Three methods have been utilised and developed by the SaP research community that enhance the ability of researchers to identify and examine both deliberate and emergent strategic work.

The first employs ethnographic methodologies that involve the immersion of the researcher into the everyday environment 'lived' by strategists over a sustained period of time (Rasche & Chia, 2009). SaP researchers have focused on the micro-foundations of strategy and the everyday, seemingly mundane, work of strategy makers by using ethnographic methods. This has made it possible to incorporate analysis of the embodied character of strategy practices (Heraclous & Jacobs, 2008; Paroutis et al., 2015).

The second method employs the study of routines, and this has enhanced our ability to identify patterns of action and interaction that contribute to an organisation's strategy. Routines are defined as "repetitive, recognizable patterns of interdependent actions carried out by multiple actors" (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). These routines might be "effortful" (Pentland & Rueter, 1994) but can equally be emergent in nature (Feldman, 2000). Studying organisational routines has helped SaP scholars identify actions and interactions that consciously and unconsciously contribute to the long-term direction realised by the organisation.

The third method employs critical discourse analysis. This stream of research identifies strategy work through the analysis of narratives and other discourse forms in organisations (Vaara, 2015). It has been suggested that this methodological approach is considered particularly useful in identifying the fleeting moments of strategy making that contribute to emergent strategy (Cooren et al., 2015).

Each of these methodologies has enhanced the ability of the SaP researcher to identify both deliberate and emergent strategy in practice which in the context of this chapter provides the opportunity for the researcher to observe and analyse both the nature of social interaction and the physical environment in which these strategic practices take place.

These methodologies potentially fill gaps in the methods typically used by workplace researchers in understanding the impact of workplace design on strategy. However, the benefits do not flow in just one direction, because the qualitative methods that predominate in SaP research (Laamanen et al., 2015) tend to be context specific, which leads to an analysis of space and spatial configuration that has remained largely descriptive. This makes objective comparisons of space across businesses more difficult.

In addition, the focus on the micro activities of strategy makers makes it more difficult to recognise macro trends or patterns that potentially emerge, which makes it harder to draw broader, more generalisable conclusions (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). These critiques mean that

SaP would benefit from an accepted method for analysing spatial systems in more systematic and repeatable ways. Qualitative methods potentially overcome the problems of comparison and generalisability, and for these reasons there have been calls to include more quantitative analysis in SaP research (Laamanen et al., 2015). Workplace researchers have developed quantitative methods to analyse space and spatial systems, most notably in the methods developed within the Space Syntax community.

Space Syntax is a social theory of space developed at University College London in the late 1970s and now used as a method for quantifying the characteristics of spatial systems in universities and architectural practices around the world. Importantly, Space Syntax is a socio-spatial theory, making it compatible with the understanding of strategy as a social accomplishment proposed by SaP scholars. Space syntax is a theoretical model of human space that describes how space is structured, how it works, how it is understood and how it is a part of the thing we call society. The method of Space Syntax establishes a mathematical relationship between every space with every other space in a spatial system and uses graph theory to characterise the spatial system with measures such as the degree of integration or segregation, as described earlier.

In summary, an understanding of the influence that workplace design has on the strategies realised by organisations might be realised through the integration of the theories and methods used by Strategy-as-Practice scholars into workplace studies. This is a prize worth working for, as it would place workplace design and management firmly on boardroom agendas.

4 Limitations

One of the fundamental limitations of SaP research is the problem of identifying strategic activity in real time. As strategy is defined as patterns of action realised by an organisation in the long term, it is only with hindsight that specific agential activity (see also Chapter 10 on principal-agent theory) or specific social interactions can be recognised as being strategic in nature. As Tsoukas (2015) highlights, just because a board of directors attend long strategy workshops is no guarantee that their decisions will translate into realised patterns of action for the organisation in the long run. Equally, unintentionally strategic actors can have an impact on realised long-term patterns of action through their responses to everyday problems (Chia & Holt, 2006; Chia & MacKay, 2007; Tsoukas, 2015). This means that the attribution of the word ‘strategic’ to any decision or social interaction can only be retrospective.

The problem of retrospective attribution is a significant one for the SaP community that has the explicit aim of understanding how practitioners ‘do strategy’ in their everyday actions and interactions (Whittington, 1996). The implication of this limitation is that social interaction profiles of potentially strategic actors can be studied in real time, but researchers will understand whether the interactions studied were actually strategic only retrospectively. This problem is not restricted to strategy research but is recognised as the “constant and unfinished task for social theory” (Lynch, 2001, p. 146).

The sort of cross-disciplinary approach proposed in this chapter will not solve this problem. However, it does have the potential to lead to fresh new perspectives that move us closer to understanding the everyday nature of unplanned strategic activity. For example, SaP research has shown us that organisations with different profiles of social interaction have distinct strategic characteristics. Investigating a relationship between the workplace and the profiles of interaction found might mean that the spatial configuration of the workplace is a real-time proxy for the complex web of interactions that ultimately influence the long-term strategy of the organisation.

5 Theory relevance to practice

From the outset, one of the key objectives of the SaP research agenda was to produce insights strategy practitioners could benefit from (Whittington, 1996). SaP is considered an alternative to mainstream strategy research (Golsorkhi et al., 2015) precisely because it has an emphasis on the everyday practices of strategy makers. As has already been described, this has resulted in research of considerable practical relevance on the role in strategy making of middle managers, the use of strategy tools, the role of meetings, the role of strategy professionals and strategy consultants and the role played by language in the strategy making process.

This chapter has argued for an addition to this list of research insights with practical relevance to include the role of space in strategy making, particularly with regard to emergent strategy. It has been argued that SaP is particularly well placed to rise to this challenge because its methods are well suited and sensitive to emergent strategy as a phenomenon (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). However, this chapter has also argued that SaP needs the support of the workplace studies community of researchers for their abilities to understand and analyse the effects of space and spatial configuration.

The practical relevance of such a research agenda could be significant as it could produce insights into how decisions on workplace design might impact the long-term direction realised by the organisation. This is something that managers already understand intuitively because it is understood that the layout of offices affects who interacts with whom, and how often, and that this affects outcomes that are fundamentally strategic in nature. For example, it is common practice for high-tech companies to build vast open-plan offices that claim to be ‘cathedrals to innovation’ (Waber et al., 2014). The architects of these are explicit that the impact of the office layout on social interaction is making the difference.

Gehry said of the offices he designed for Facebook: “He (Zuckerberg) did not want it overly designed. It also had to be flexible to respond to the ever-changing nature of his business – one that facilitated collaboration and one that did not impose itself on their open and transparent culture” (Frearson, 2015). Similarly, Norman Foster said of the design for the Apple Inc. HQ in Cupertino, California: “This open plan layout used in much of the building – with most employees situated around [a] large table instead of separated into individual offices – is intended to promote collaboration” (Moore, 2018).

Of course, the impact of these large open-plan workplaces is disputed. Sailer and Thomas (2020) have argued that there is a paradox of perception and reality with regard to open-plan offices. Contrary to the claims of some of the world’s leading architects and the CEO’s they work for, those that actually work in those offices appear to actively dislike working in them.

Research to date is far from clear-cut, with one-third of studies on organisations moving to open-plan offices reporting positive results, one-third a decrease in levels of communication and the other third inconclusive (Sailer & Penn, 2009).

These results suggest that new theoretical underpinnings are required to the relationship between the workplace and organisation strategy, and that these would be of great practical relevance.

6 Further reading

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