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The Practice Turn In Strategic Alignment Research: Fostering A Strategy-As-Practice Perspective

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The Practice Turn in Strategic Alignment Research: Fostering a Strategy-as-Practice Perspective

(Full paper for IS research method and theory track)

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Abstract:

Strategic Alignment (SA) in the literature has been predominantly envisaged as a result of a formal deliberation process which finds 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 will discuss the motives behind this reorientation, outlining core principles in SAP, and concluding the paper by elaborating the suitability of SAP for the future SA research agenda.

Keywords: Strategic alignment; IS strategy; IS strategizing; IS strategy-as-practice; Strategy-as-practice.

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 has persistently been at the top of list relating to 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.

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This paper argues for SA to be viewed in the context of contemporary perspectives on strategy-as-practice (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 of an alternative theoretical perspective for SA research. Following this, we sketch how the SAP perspective became relevant to the IS strategy agenda, and SA thereafter. An overview of the SAP perspective in relation to strategy and its practitioners will then be presented. Based upon these arguments, we draw on SAP literature to foster the execution of SAP perspective in SA by illustrating SAP's key conceptual constructs to be taken into consideration when conceptualizing and researching SA from SAP perspective. Next, we reflect on the current research practice within SAP field as means to confront the current state of SA research practice. The paper draws to a close in section seven by pointing to key challenges faced when doing research in SAP. This leads us to conclude the paper by consolidating our discussions into a short summary.

2.0 Alternative theoretical lens for 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 premised 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 to which IS strategy conforms to a particular business strategy, finding the 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; Hiekkänen et al., 2013). Considering *Mintzberg and Waters (1985) discussion on strategy forms*, SA is thus unlikely to be realized in the light of the emergent form of strategy.

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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), the development of a shared view among these executives (Johnson and Lederer, 2007; Preston and Karahanna, 2005; 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 presuming 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 broader practice turn in social science research (Arvidsson et al., 2012). The presence of the practice turn in the strategic management domain (Vaara and Whittington, 2012) along with the IS domain (Teubner, 2013) will prove promising in this regard. Since the strategy concept, as reflected in the strategic management discipline, is highly relevant to the IS strategy agenda (Chan and Huff, 1992), it is not surprising that SAP perspective is becoming increasingly pertinent to the IS strategy research agenda (Henfridsson and Lind, 2013), and more recently to the SA quest in particular (Hiekkanen et al., 2013).

3.0 The pertinence of strategy-as-practice (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 of 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, 1996). Galliers, while developing his IS

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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 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 strategists 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.

This may all indicate that SAP is being progressively fostered in the field of IS strategy. Given the affinities of SAP to IS strategy research, it has understandably become evident, through the SAP lens, that IS strategizing does not merely concern the presence of a formal strategy document, but is also what organizations and practitioners learn and know on an on-going basis (DeGeus, 1988; Galliers, 2011; Teubner, 2013)

It could be argued on two levels that the SA supplemented by SAP perspective is necessary and timely. On the one hand, given that SA is among IS practitioners' primary concerns, emphasised earlier, attention must be paid to Galliers et al. (2012) recent call to elicit the detailed practices that constitute day-to-day activities, as related to SA. This means that researchers must immerse themselves into practitioners' activities to understand SA as it is practiced (Buhl et al., 2012). A fundamental premise of studies under the umbrella of the practice concept is that

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researchers have an opportunity to engage in direct dialogue with practitioners, examining issues that are directly relevant to practitioners themselves, and to thus advance our theoretical understanding in a way that has practical relevance (Golsorkhi et al., 2010). This goes some way to justifying interest in SAP as lens.

On the other hand, Hiekkanen et al. (2013) have recently warned that the field of SA could be challenged on the basis that it broadly presupposes a clear and documented strategy with which an IS strategy can subsequently align itself. They call for SA to be regarded within a contemporary view of strategizing. Taking note of the manner in which Hiekkanen et al. (2013) embrace the SAP perspective within the IS literature, it is clear that such a perspective can simultaneously embrace the nature of professional practice (Whittington, 2006) along with the emergent nature of strategy (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985) when dealing with the SA issue.

4.0 Overview of strategy-as-practice research

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 commonsense use of the term *practice*. In the following sub-sections, we outline SAP's own unique definitions of *strategy* and *practitioner* which have contributed to the emergence of this unique perspective within the strategy literature (Bartunek, et.al. 2011).

4.1 From strategy to strategizing

Strategy-making is increasingly viewed as strategizing, which is defined as “*a dynamic process that is socially accomplished by multiple actors*”, rather than “*discrete phases of strategy formulation followed by implementation*” (Kaplan and Jarzabkowski, 2006; P.4). It is an umbrella that comprises a number of activities that lead to the creation of organizational strategies (Vaara and Whittington, 2012). These activities consist in actions, interactions and negotiations among multiple actors, and the situated practices they draw upon in accomplishing such activities (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009). In this sense, strategy is something people do, and something

socially accomplished (Whittington et al., 2006; Kaplan and Jarzabkowski, 2006) rather than something organizations have. Organizations may have a differentiated strategy, but this strategy involves people doing things differently in such a way that is difficult to imitate (Johnson et al., 2007).

4.2 From the upper echelon to a plurality of actors

SAP sheds light on the plurality of actors involved in strategizing activity (Johnson et al., 2007). Thus, it defines practitioners' identities widely to include individual practitioners, aggregate groups of practitioners, those internal to organizations from multiple levels and those external to organization hierarchy (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009). In this spacious view of practitioners, 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).

The plurality of actors is taken seriously in SAP empirical research, implying a fundamental shift in couple of aspects. First, SAP offers deeper insights into strategic *sense-making* and *sense-giving* that have traditionally been restricted to how top management make sense of change and how they diffuse their thoughts to others regarding strategic change (Vaara and Whittington, 2012).

In his ethnographic single case study, Rouleau (2005) got closer to middle managers to identify praxis which constituted the process of strategic sense-making and sense-giving. He drew on middle managers' routine and conversation in episodes such as meetings, events and discourses to show how middle managers work as *interpreters* for the company's new strategic change and as *sellers* of this change at micro-level in customer and shareholder interactions. SAP informed the study by bringing to light the micro-activities that constitute strategic sense-making and sense-giving, and discovering the role played by middle managers in this sense.

Second, SAP recognizes strategizing as no longer solely shaped within formal organizational structure; instead, it involves players from outside the organization. In this sense, SAP has extended its direction to include those who have no allocated hierarchy role within an organization and may influence the work of strategizing.

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Nordqvist (2011) elaborated how a strategic consultant played the role of “mediator” to create a balance between family and non-family involvement in strategy development. Such a study informed by SAP revealed consultant praxis in strategic planning practice including: evaluating strategic ideas and ensuring a family’s interests were incorporated into strategy development.

Somewhat similarly, Nordqvist and Melin (2008) demonstrated, in the family business context, how a strategic consultant can be an effective planning practitioner, make a difference where he/she is involved, and go beyond board members’ expectations. They revealed that in addition to being an analytical planner and strategic thinker, a strategic consultant must be *social craftsperson*, *artful interpreter* and *known stranger*.

5.0 Approaching SAP: Practice, Practitioners and Praxis worldviews

In the discussion above, the focus has been on the need for an alternative lens in the SA literature, emphasizing the pertinence of the SAP perspective to our field’s agenda, and outlining SAP’s own unique views of strategizing and its practitioners. In the interest of moving toward fostering the execution of a SAP perspective in the SA literature, this section is intended to better equip SA scholars with SAP’s key conceptual constructs and frameworks to preface the subsequent discussion on SAP key principles to be taken into consideration when grounding SA in the SAP perspective.

The SAP approach fundamentally consists of three main pillars: encompassing **Practice**, that is “the routines, norms and procedures of implementing strategy, in which multiple practitioners engage to strategize”; **Praxis**, “broadly known as the stream of activities - routine and the non-routine, formal and informal - in which strategy is accomplished”, and **Practitioners**, referring to “the plurality of actors involved in strategizing activity” (Whittington, 2006; Johnson et al., 2007; Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009). At the nexuses of these pillars, strategizing occurs (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007, Golsorkhi et al., 2010) and the micro level of strategizing can be revealed by shedding the light on *who*, *how*, *where* and *when* of strategic actions (Paroutis et al., 2013).

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The task now implies the need for a framework that is capable of drawing out key perspectives that SAP focuses on. In this endeavour, Whittington contributed decisively to how SAP can be studied (Whittington, 2002; Whittington, 2006; Whittington, 2007; Vaara and Whittington, 2012). His framework suggests that there are a set of practitioners who perform specific activities (praxis) at a specific place and time. As they strategize, practitioners may draw upon an established set of strategies (practices) that are available within the wider institutional context in which their organization is embedded. Alternatively, they may draw upon their specific routines and formulae of strategizing that have been laid down by their organizations. What is crucial to Whittington's framework is that it acknowledges the interdependence between praxis and practice, and how practitioners are seen as the critical connection between these two concepts. For instance, practitioners may participate in the work of strategizing by relying on the shared practices that are often implemented in episodes such as board meetings, workshops or away days. However, those practitioners may adopt the existing practice by performing their praxis differently. In this sense, the extra-organizational practitioners may accept this as a new practice. In addition, practitioners may bring new practices that are currently outside the accepted practice of their particular organization and regard this as a legitimate way of strategizing (Whittington, 2006).

Beyond the three core concepts, some additional insights are worth noting from a SAP perspective. Jarzabkowski et al. (2007) propose a conceptual framework that appears logical which implies the impossibility of studying one concept without drawing on others. Their central argument is that strategizing occurs at the nexus between practitioners, praxis and practice. From the perspective of Jarzabkowski et al. (2007) drawing on the three concepts is inescapable in any SAP research question. However, empirical examinations may place more emphasis on any two of the concepts, tentatively overriding the third concept.

The key message from these frameworks, particularly Whittington's framework, for SA scholars is the fact that micro and macro levels are correlated and researchers need to be aware of these relations. What Whittington (2007) has usefully termed as *social embeddedness* of strategy making, has become the chief characteristic of the SAP perspective (Tsoukas, 2010). In terms of social embeddedness, the researcher is

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expected to attune to a wider set of connections that go beyond organizational context towards recognizing the larger sectoral and societal practices in which organizations are embedded (Whittington, 2006). This idea of embeddedness is instructive as it raises the importance of recognizing the significant outcomes that come from small instances of praxis which may lead to legitimize new practice or, conversely, delegitimize particular practice (Vaara and Whittington, 2012).

A second consideration for SA scholars arising from the above frameworks is the notion of *situatedness*. This is where SAP has been further distinctive from the mainstream strategy research that is characterized as individualism (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Vaara and Whittington, 2012). The notion centers on the idea that all activities are situated; they shape and are shaped by the situation within which they occur (Johnson et al., 2007; Suddaby et al., 2013). This implies that practitioners' strategizing activities derive their meaning from the interplay with the micro context, "*Individual level*"; meso context, "*Organizational level*"; and macro context, "*Institutional level*" (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009).

This notion is clearly evidenced in empirical SAP research, whereby practitioners' praxis is unveiled through the situated practice in which they are enacted. While that stream of research focuses on practitioners' praxis thoroughly, it will become very clear that praxis were identified by drawing on certain practices, signalling to the impossibility of examining praxis in isolation from the practice in which they are located.

For instance, Hoon (2007) drew upon committee meeting practices to reveal how middle managers acted as strategists. From his close observation of 64 scheduled committee meetings at a public university, Hoon (2007) identified three praxis that middle managers put into effect in informal conversations with senior managers in order to sound out their interests, and orientate formal discussion toward this.

Another illustration comes from Hendry et al. (2010). They examined individuals' praxis in two of the strategizing practices identified by Jarzabkowski (2008), namely *procedural strategizing* and *interactive strategizing*. They revealed, after drawing on six cases from different sectors, that where the board does not express concern over

the current strategy, procedural strategizing practice is preferred. In this sense, board members' key praxis includes review, approval, monitoring and signing off of strategic plans and budgets that have been prepared by management. Contrary to this, it was expressed by board members that interactive strategizing practice was an ideal practice to deal with complexities inherent in changing strategic direction. Boards preferred interactive strategizing to build shared meanings with management around strategy in face-to-face, formal and informal social interactions.

6.0 Researching SAP: current research practice

This section aims to draw SA researchers' attention to current practice in researching SAP, which can be different from the dominant research practice in SA quest as it relates to the IS field (Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991; Chen and Hirschheim, 2004; Williams et al., 2009). The examination in this section is based on our analysis of 28 empirical papers in the SAP literature, ranging from 2002 to 2013. Our intention is to show that the application of SAP in SA research would require the practice of SA research to shift accordingly. In this shift, we argue that the essence of SAP research can be adequately captured and that SA research can readily embrace a SAP orientation in future programmes of inquiry.

Central to SAP research is the notion of how strategy is practiced in the daily activities of practitioners. Conducting such research requires a "go out and look" approach with a heavy reliance on what practitioners actually do and say (Johnson et al., 2007; Rasche and Chia, 2009). As a consequence, qualitative approaches to inquiry dominate extant SAP studies as evidenced in table 1 below.

	Qualitative	Quantitative
Percentage	97 %	3 %
Number of studies	27	1

Table 1 shows qualitative vs quantitative in the SAP field

What is clear from these studies is that relying on qualitative data is typical when taking a SAP perspective. The main driver behind the dominance of qualitative data is the nature of the phenomena that human interactions involve; demanding an approach that gets closer to practitioners to understand what they do, how they do it and the

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way these actions lead to strategic outcomes (Johnson et al., 2007; Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009; Splitter and Seidl, 2011). It is noteworthy that only one study, conducted by Hodgkinson et al. (2006), adopted a quantitative approach. However, it is interesting to note that, while this study focused on one strategic episode “workshop”, it aimed to present managerial experience in this event rather than unveiling what they do. The main aim served by this large-scale UK survey was to mainly determine how often strategy workshops occur in participants’ organisations.

When examining the research methodologies in SAP, it is interesting to note that the closeness to strategic practitioners through in-depth ethnographic methodology is strongly emphasized in the SAP literature (Chia and MacKay, 2007; Rasche and Chia, 2009). Vehement advocates for such a methodology argue the notion that SAP consists in an everyday activity that requires the researcher to conduct participant observations to trace actions through to strategic outcomes (Rasche and Chia, 2009). Arguably, the richness of the data which needs to be collected from practitioners and their practices within their organizational context led researchers to endorse such a direction. However, our own examination of the SAP field revealed a methodology that proved to capture micro-activities within SAP. This methodology, case study, has become common in the SAP field as illustrated in Table (2) below.

	Case study	Ethnography
Percentage	75 %	25 %
Number of studies	21	7

Table 2 compares the prevalence of case study vs. ethnography in the SAP field

There is no doubt that SAP researchers tend to conduct in-depth investigation into their focus area, capturing the daily activities of strategy practitioners, their talk and acts, and the tools they have created or employed (Johnson et al., 2010). Nonetheless, that does not actually mean that ethnography is the only means by which to pursue such research. While there are calls within the SAP literature to consider action research to increase relevance (Johnson et al., 2010), to conduct further ethnographic research to enhance our experience on how strategy is accomplished in practice (Rasche and Chia, 2009); empirical work in the SAP domain indicates that a case study approach is more than fit for purpose as it allows SAP scholars to satisfactorily explore all SAP’s key constructs.

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Given that case study is being increasingly used to explore the work of strategizing, this approach is served by its ability to allow researchers to work on a wide set of data from multiple sources. As illustrated in Rouleau (2005), Hoon (2007), Kaplan and Jarzabkowski (2006), Lavarda et al. (2010) and Cuganesana et al. (2012), most SAP case researchers draw on interviews, observation (participant and non-participant) and extensive documentation analysis, increasing the variety of evidence to support their inquiries. In this sense, case study research provides a rich and holistic understanding of SAP though it may lack some of the more fine-grained perspectives that one might naturally associate with the ethnographic method.

7.0 Distinctive challenges in conducting practice-oriented inquiry

Following our earlier treatment of the concept of practice as embodied in the SAP literature, we are deeply conscious that the conduct of practice-oriented inquiry raises a number of highly distinctive research challenges. Irrespective of whether a researcher opts for a case study approach (Johnson et al, 2007), an ethnographic approach (Rasche and Chia, 2009), or a collaborative research approach (Eikeland, 2012; McDonagh, 2014), it remains that the study of practice is highly distinctive in a number of particular ways. That distinctiveness is reflected in its multi-level nature and the associated implications for the design and execution of programmes of research in which a SAP lens is embedded (Huff et al., 2010).

The **first** challenge to emerge relates to the framing of research questions that embody a practice orientation. Here, the researcher needs to be aware that there is a large body of literature in the field of management and organisation studies that offers a rich set of theoretical perspectives on practice (Felin and Foss, 2005; Orlikowski, 2010; Whittington, 2010; Gomez, 2010; Nicolini, 2009 & 2013). There is an equally vibrant range of conceptual frameworks used to guide practice-oriented inquiry (Hendry and Seidl, 2003; Jarzabkowski, 2005; Whittington, 2006). While the SAP literature clearly mobilises such frameworks, it is important to note that that literature is drawing from the richer store in the wider field of management and organisation studies. Essentially, for researchers, the concept of practice should not be treated casually and for whatever reason it should not be interpreted simply to refer to what

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people do. As noted in the aforementioned critique, practice is a rich multi-level construct where the concept of levels has been well articulated in extant literature.

The **second** challenge relates to the use of a practice lens when seeking to review extant literature in support of a practice-oriented study (Holohan and McDonagh, 2014, 2014a; Hughes and McDonagh, 2014; Sarhan and McDonagh, 2014). While it is common to use a practice lens as an integral part of a research design in support of a practice-oriented study, there is little evidence to suggest that researchers use the same clinical approach when reviewing extant literature. For example, any researcher intent on studying SA from a SAP perspective will do well to execute a comprehensive review of extant literature with the aid of a conceptual framework that explicates the multiple dimensions of SAP. While extant studies within the SA domain may not actually have embraced a SAP orientation, that does not imply that a SAP perspective is absent from the literature. Most likely, it is evident but in a highly fragmented and disjointed manner (Holohan and McDonagh, 2014, 2014a, 2014b; Hughes and McDonagh, 2014, 2014a).

The **third** challenge relates to making explicit and adequately specifying the concept of levels as reflected in the theory of practice being used in any given study. If for example, one is settling on micro, meso, and macro levels (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009) then the researcher must be explicit about these levels and define precisely their boundaries (Johnson et al, 2007). In addition, the researcher must pay explicit attention to both inter-level and intra-level considerations (Huff et al., 2010). In the event that a particular study is designed to embrace retrospective and real-time dimensions, then the evolution of practice both within and across multiple levels must be attended to over an extended period of time (Johnson et al., 2010). For now, it is sufficient to say that the concept of levels is critical to understanding practice and as a result it must be specified and delineated in an appropriate manner.

The **fourth** challenge relates to the design and execution of a data collection strategy that attends to the multi-level and dynamic nature of practice as it evolves over time. Having clarified the levels included in a study, the test here is to adequately specify the streams of evidence to be collected at each level (Johnson et al, 2007). This includes primary and secondary evidence within each level along with streams of data

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that could be used as a basis for subsequently establishing inter-level dynamics. In the event that a study is seeking to capture retrospective and real-time data, it is essential that any longitudinal data collection strategy adequately classifies and captures all key data elements at each level; bearing in mind the interrelationship between those levels. Weaknesses in multi-level data collection strategies are often the direct consequences of inappropriate attention to the specification of levels and related concepts during research design (Aguinis and Vandenberg, 2014).

The **fifth** challenge relates to the design and execution of a data analysis strategy that captures the multi-level and dynamic nature of practice as it evolves over time. Having established and executed a robust data collection strategy, it is essential that a researcher focuses his or her analytical skills on the streams of evidence as they relate initially to individual levels and subsequently to inter-level dynamics. How a researcher can attribute changes at a micro level to related changes at a macro level warrants a clear chain of evidence that is supported by data collected (Huff et al., 2010). A simple assertion is not acceptable in the absence of tangible proof that establishes clear linkages across levels. A frequent dilemma for researchers here is to lose sight of the need for rigorous analysis at all levels while simultaneously tracing the inter-level dynamics of change as they relate to the evolving nature of practice.

The **sixth** challenge relates to the potential development of any conceptual framework that seeks to offer a multi-level practice-oriented explanation of how organisational and IS strategies are aligned through the enactment of routines on a daily basis. Having faithfully attended to the concept of levels during both data collection and data analysis, researchers need to ensure that key findings and any related theoretical frameworks are advanced with a multi-level dimension. For example, the study of how executive management engage in the practice of SA would seem somewhat deficient to say the least if any emerging framework failed to attend to the macro context in which strategies are framed and subsequently executed. Seeking to explain the practice of SA in a public sector context would rightfully address the institutional context in which change is advanced if one is to adequately understand practice at an organisational level. So, carrying the multi-level dimension beyond data collection and analysis is essential. It must also be reflected in key findings and any related conceptual frameworks.

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The **seventh** challenge relates to rightfully clarifying weaknesses in the execution of multi-level studies of practice and how such weaknesses can be remedied over time. For researchers who are intent on honing their skills with multi-level research, learning by doing is a cornerstone to success. Invariably, the first research designs will not be the best and may often carry significant weaknesses. A mature researcher rarely bemoans such weaknesses. Rather, the researcher focuses on a clinical assessment of the effectiveness of his or her research strategy relative to the research questions being addressed. Such an assessment clarifies key weaknesses and focuses on effective remedial strategies which can be taken on board in any future programme of research. Knowing weaknesses and knowing potential remedial strategies is a sign of maturity and strength on the part of a researcher. From our experience, it seems that young researchers need strong support in the design and execution of research strategies targeted at uncovering the multi-level nature of practice as it relates to the alignment of organisational and IS strategies in public service organisations.

The **final** challenge relates to the development of a holistic approach to inquiry that simultaneously attends to the multi-level nature of practice as embodied in a research question, the review of supporting literature, the research design, the data collection and analysis strategies, and any emerging theory that seeks to explicitly address the research question posed. Such a holistic approach must be deliberately crafted. It does not emerge naturally. There is strong evidence within both the IS strategy and SA literature that researchers fail to address the institutional context in which strategies are framed and advanced. Such a deficit is equally missing from critiques of extant literature though Holohan and McDonagh (2014, 2014a, 2014b) and Hughes and McDonagh (2014) are seeking to redress this imbalance.

By way of summing up, we strongly encourage researchers who are intent on studying practice to carefully consider multi-level issues as part of their research design. Furthermore, we encourage researchers to carry the issue of levels through every aspect of their research programmes from the framing of questions through to the framing of key findings and their implications for theory and practice. The multi-level nature of practice research is not to be confused with the adoption of case based inquiry, ethnographic inquiry, or collaborative inquiry. All of the latter can more than

adequately embrace and attend to the multi-level nature of practice and its evolution through time.

8.0 Conclusion

The necessity and timeliness of taking a SAP perspective with regards to the SA quest does not diminish the contributions made by SA in the IS strategy field. Rather, it builds on extant research by placing a particular emphasis on strategizing, attending to the wider set of social forces that go beyond immediate organizational context, and recognizing the plurality of practitioners who may shape and influence the practice of SA over time.

In our discussion above, we have established the relevance of SAP to the SA agenda. There are at least two good reasons for considering SAP in the quest for SA. First, Galliers's strategizing framework is highly consistent with the wider practice turn in the social science literature and the parallel appearance of SAP in the mainstream strategic management literature. His turn towards practice has been taken forward by a new stream of IS strategy research that is supplemented by the SAP perspective. Second, we commend this turn in IS strategy research and call for it to be extended to the SA quest as an approach to overcome key limitations evidenced in the extant SA literature.

Our investigation has moved to outline SAP's own unique definitions of strategy and practitioner that have contributed to the emergence of this unique perspective within the strategy literature. We supplemented this particular section with extant research to demonstrate how a SAP perspective has contributed to a very distinctive stream of literature within the strategy domain.

Embracing a SAP perspective within the SA literature may raise questions concerning how best to execute SAP studies in practice and what are the key challenges that need to be addressed. We attended to this by putting forward SAP's key constructs "*Practice, praxis and practitioners*" that are regarded as the building blocks between whose nexuses strategizing occurs. We focused on these three pillars to portray the field's key conceptual elements and articulate available frameworks that are capable

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of drawing out the three constructs that SAP focuses on. In addition, we attempted to manifest SAP's research practice as a means to confront the current state of SA research practice. In the final section, we aimed to draw attention to challenges that need to be addressed when exploiting SAP perspective to inquiry into SA research. Specifically, researchers need to take note of the multi-level nature of Micro-Meso-Macro, being explicit about these levels, defining precisely their boundaries, and rightfully clarifying data collection and analysis strategies that attend to the multi-level and dynamic nature of practice.

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