Time to make space for practice-based research in project portfolio management

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Abstract

Practice-based research is extending understanding in the disciplines of strategy and project management, in part as a result of strong advocacy of research from 'strategy-as-practice' and 'projects-as-practice' perspectives. Such perspectives provide holistic contextual information and reveal the evolutionary and responsive nature of project and strategy processes. As environments shift and become more complex, dynamic capabilities are required for projects to flourish. Normative project management approaches are being challenged and practice-based project portfolio management (PPM) research is emerging. Increasingly, PPM defines the space between strategy and project management, with a key project focus on temporality. There is a need for further development and encouragement of practice-based approaches in PPM research that are alert to the becoming of projects as spatial manifestations that unfold in (different conceptions of) time. We identify three themes in project and portfolio management research that employ practice-based and strategically anchored perspectives. We illustrate the trajectory of early work on strategy and the front end of projects through to the development and application of increasingly sophisticated theoretical perspectives in project portfolio management (PPM) research. The dynamic capabilities perspective is shown to provide a strong theoretical foundation for investigating PPM and its role in implementing and informing strategy through projects. Theoretically grounded and practice-based research represents the interplay between structure and practice, with these reciprocally and recursively shaping each other over time. Building on these examples we call for practice-based research in PPM, and we suggest a convergence of strategy-as-practice perspectives and practice-based PPM research.

Keywords: Practice-based research; Strategy-as-practice; Front end of projects; Project portfolio management; Dynamic capability; Emergent strategy.

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1.0 Introduction

Traditionally framed by mechanistic and rationally linear assumptions, project management (PM) research is evolving to embrace contextual practice-based perspectives. The main benefit of practice-based research is its focus on the actuality of project management practice and thus its ability to close the gap between ideational prescription and practical heuristics. Taking a practice perspective attends to what is actually done, not what, according to some prescriptive calculus, should be done. In the past, project management has been more normative than empirical, espousing forms of rationality grounded in engineering rationality rather than social reality. Normative theory produces models for practice; practice approaches uncover theories in action. The practice perspective aims to rectify normativity. Focusing on actual practice and theories in use helps us to understand how project and portfolio management work in practice. While practice-based research has gained some momentum in the project management context, PPM research is only beginning to adopt this new direction. We highlight some practice-based findings in PPM research and argue that there is a need for PPM research to move more definitively into the 'practice-based' studies space.

Increasingly, organizational strategy is delivered through projects. Recognition of the strategic importance of project activity has shaped consideration of strategy as a core theme within PM research. PPM research, in its focus on strategic oversight and holistic management of project portfolios, is even more focused on strategy as practice. Interest in research on strategy and project portfolio management extends beyond the PM community, with findings regularly published in top management journals (Kwak & Anbari, 2009). Strategically anchored PM and PPM research is emerging that adopts strategic theories and frameworks (Killen, Jugdev, Drouin, & Petit, 2012). Practice-based research is extending our

understanding in the disciplines of strategy and project management by drawing on 'strategy-as-practice' (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Johnson, Langley, Melin, & Whittington, 2007; Regnér, 2008) and 'projects-as-practice' (Blomquist, Hällgren, Nilsson, & Söderholm, 2010; Lalonde, Bourgault, & Findeli, 2010, 2012) perspectives in research.

In this article we focus on PPM and the front end of projects as it is in these moments that organizational strategy becomes translated into projects and programs. PPM capabilities are framed by strategic priorities and evolve over the life of many projects as new strategic challenges have to be met. Timely responses to environmental dynamism are executed and real-time decisions have to be made to try and manage project practicalities while acknowledging strategic imperatives. Using practice-based studies to examine what is accomplished and how it is done at this stage of the project lifecycle will advance understanding of how 'strategizing' is done in a project environment, contributing to the strategy-as-practice movement. We therefore identify a convergence of strategy and PPM perspectives that is at the forefront of practice-based PPM research.

This paper is structured as follows: We first explore the role of practice-based methods in PM and PPM research as well as the parallel moves to enhance strategy research by employing practice-based perspectives. Three streams of practice-based research on strategy and projects are then explored, illustrating advances in the scope and the theoretical underpinning of PM and PPM research, focusing on the relationship between strategy and the front end of projects.

2.0 What is practice?

Practice – what people do when working, whether engaged in professional or any other form of practice – mediates individual agency and social institutions.[1] Practice is something that organization members do; an activity that relies on institutionalized methods, data and devices. What individuals are able to do is made possible in and through the materials, methods and devices used. Orlikowski (2015) suggests seeing practice through three lenses: as a phenomena – the notion that what is most important in organization research is understanding what happens 'in practice' as opposed to what is derived or expected from 'theory'; as a perspective – a distinct way of looking at the world, and as a philosophy – seeing what we take for granted as social reality as something that depends on our habitual ways of seeing.

Studying practice as a phenomenon means understanding the messy, everyday realities of deadlines, late night sessions, frustrating project meetings and so on, realities that are fostered by general project complexities. Time and space, in the sense of who happens to be present at what meetings where, is a crucial element in the 'garbage can' that is this phenomenon (Cohen, March and Olsen 1972). It is not just a matter of participation and adjacencies, however. How we understand a phenomenon depends on the lens or perspective that we adopt. A practice perspective shifts attention to the mundane, the routine everyday experiential world. The role of material things – devices, tools and techniques – is particularly important. Practice constructs that which is the object of analysis through everyday doings, means of accounting, normalizing, and representing phenomena as objects of strategy.

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[1] Practice theories first emerged in sociology with scholars such as (Bourdieu, 2002; de Certeau, 1984; Foucault, 1979; Garfinkel, 1967; Giddens, 1984; S. Turner, 1994). A philosopher, Schatzki (2001, p. 2) has defined practices as 'embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understandings' (see also Schatzki, 2002). Contributions that draw on these foundations include Gherardi (2013), Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) and Nicolini (2102).

The specifics of emergent and contingent aspects of everyday activity, its embodiment, embraining and organizing, as well as its material mediation and embeddedness are important. A practice philosophy, as Tsoukas (1998, p. 792) notes, is one in which 'the models through which we view the world are not mere mirrors upon which the world is passively reflected but, in an important sense, our models also help constitute the world we experience'. Practice is productive of that to which analysts then attend. These practices constitute a reality. Behind the idea of a practice philosophy is the idea that "social science is performative. It produces realities" (Law & Urry, 2004, p. 395). The combination of social practices and material devices, referred to as socio-materiality, makes up the practices that involve particular subjects, skills, situations, devices, interactions, texts and so on.

3.0 Practice-based research in projects and strategy

Practice is never a-contextual or de-institutional: it is not an immaculate conception. In a field crowded with rational and prescriptive studies on project management, there is now a growing body of practice-based literature. Practice-based studies provide benefits in increasingly complex, dynamic and interconnected PM and PPM environments; such studies allow exploration from a broad and holistic perspective emphasizing the strategic and front-end aspects and the importance of context, learning and change.

Early practice-oriented studies include Clegg's (1975) ethnomethodologically influenced discourse-based research of project managers at work, albeit contributed within organization theory, and Morris and Hough's (1987) study of the 'reality' of projects through multiple perspectives. Increasingly, research uses a practice-based lens to explore the wider context of project management practice, including aspects such as strategy, finance and politics in addition to the traditional topics generally identified with 'project management'. More recently, the Rethinking Project Management Network (Cicmil, Williams, Thomas, &

Hodgson, 2006) urged project management researchers to study the actuality of projects, prompting a surge in publications about the importance of practice based research in project management (Blomquist et al., 2010; Lalonde & Bourgault, 2013; Lalonde et al., 2010, 2012; Sauer & Reich, 2009).

Practice-based studies have also gained traction in the strategic management community. The 'strategy-as-practice' movement promotes the value of research grounded in the everyday practices used within organizations (Cook & Brown, 1999; Jarzabkowski & Wilson, 2006; Johnson et al., 2007; Whittington, 2003). Strategy research often neglects questions about 'how' strategy is implemented, instead focusing on the 'what and why' of strategic formulation (Carter, Clegg, Kornberger, & Schweitzer, 2011). The community of 'strategy-as-practice' researchers is broadly defined as "a network concerned with everyday processes, practices and activities involved in strategy" (Carter et al., 2011, p. 27). By studying activities distributed throughout (a project) organization, the study of 'strategy-as-practice' provides understanding of how strategies are implemented rather than conceiving of strategy as a grand narrative, coined by elites and then smoothly unfolded and implemented (Jarzabkowski, 2003; Johnson et al., 2007).

The importance of practice and context are repeatedly highlighted in PPM research. Practice-based studies are not framed by rationalist assumptions and mechanistic explanations about what is expected but instead explore the reality of projects and reveal what actually happens. For example, practice-based studies reveal deviations from expected PPM processes where unauthorised projects consume valuable resources to the detriment of authorised project success (Blichfeldt & Eskerod, 2008), and where decisions are not made following rational assumptions but instead are strongly influenced by context in a process of learning and negotiation (Christiansen & Varnes, 2008). Contextual factors are found to influence PPM decision making in multiple practice-based studies (for example Biedenbach & Müller, 2012;

Blomquist & Muller, 2006; Loch, 2000; Olsson, 2008; Unger, Gemünden, & Aubry, 2012) while the influence of power is shown to be especially strong in other in-depth studies (Clegg & Kreiner, 2013; Kester, Griffin, Hultink, & Lauche, 2011).

Practice-based perspectives are therefore especially valuable for PPM studies, owing to the influence of power relations and negotiation processes on project's temporal unfolding, as well as the evolving nature of both organizations' environments and the processes used for portfolio-level management as time elapses. Martinsuo (2013) draws attention to the limitations of viewing portfolio management as a rational decision process, suggesting that further PPM studies explore context and practice aspects of PPM. These 'strategy-as-practice' methods and approaches are well suited to furthering the practice-based study of PPM.

Viewing projects as strategic elements provides us with a powerful platform to address the shortcomings of traditional research on strategy and projects. In the remainder of this paper, we introduce three themes that have emerged in the project and portfolio management literature and show how they build upon the strategy-as-practice perspective and are evolving to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Our first theme deals with research at the front end of projects and shows how that work has influenced a stream of literature on the project portfolio level. Next, we outline research that explores the relationship between strategy and projects, in particular the growing interest in emergent strategies and the role of PPM. Finally, we delve more deeply into the ways that dynamic capability theory and practice-based research complement each other to advance our understanding of PM practice and strategy. Through these three themes we develop our argument for practice-based perspectives in the study of PPM, and we point to the convergence of strategy-as-practice perspectives and practice-based PPM research.

4.0 Strategy and projects: in the front end and through project portfolio management

Project management research has evolved across three decades and has been extended to include strategic as well as operational perspectives. Attention to the front end of projects brings a strategic focus to bear by exploring the processes that stretch from conception to selection and financial commitment, in terms of what is now often referred to as PPM. Williams and Samset (2010, p. 39) identify essential portfolio-level decision-making tasks at the front end of projects, such as identifying the most appropriate concept; aligning the project concept with corporate strategy and goals; making judgements about the future; estimating issues that relate to calculating costs and benefits as well as designing governance in a turbulent environment.

PPM's prevalence in the wider PM research community aligns with the increasing attention to strategy. The quantity of literature on PPM and its strong strategic emphasis is well documented (Filippov, Mooi, & van der Weg, 2010; Kester et al., 2011; Killen et al., 2012; Kwak & Anbari, 2009). Governance from a PPM perspective is also receiving increased attention from a range of authors (Blomquist & Muller, 2006; Jonas, 2010; Klakegg, Williams, & Magnussen, 2009; Thiry & Deguire, 2007), with Urhahn and Spieth (2013) proposing that thinking in terms of 'portfolio management governance' offers the affordance of devices enabling an extension of PPM into further areas of enquiry.

In summary, studies of projects and strategy have evolved with a strong emphasis on the front end of projects and the role of PPM as a way of managing the interface between strategy and projects. The front end of projects is a particularly fruitful area for strategy research because it links overall organizational strategy with particular projects and thus encompasses specific strategizing practices enacted in project organizations within their strategic frame. We extend the discussion of the relationship between strategy, practice and PPM in the next section and

document the strong and growing interest in two-way relationships between strategy and projects.

5.0. Deliberate and emergent strategy through project portfolio management

While strategy is traditionally portrayed as a top-down process in which high-level strategies, encapsulated in grand narratives, are worked up by top management and cascade down through the levels of the organization (Archibald, 2003; Kerzner, 2000; J. R. Turner & Keegan, 1999), practice-based studies increasingly highlight the bottom-up processes that influence strategic directions, often within a PPM capability, stressing the 'translations' that occur to strategies in practice. These studies explore relationships between multiple levels of analysis, moving beyond the approaches used in the bulk of PM and PPM research, where organizational phenomena have traditionally been investigated through a single level of analysis (e.g. individual, project, project portfolio, organization). While the single-level analysis is appropriate for many inquiries, such an approach is not able to capture the multidimensionality of project organizations (Tracey, Phillips, & Jarvis, 2011). In order to recognize the full complexity of project work, it is necessary to develop a contextual and holistic picture of organization (as verb) and organizations (as nouns) through the consideration of multilevel perspectives and the relationships between the levels. For example, PPM is constituted as a higher-level function than PM, albeit one that is interdependent with it (Brady & Davies, 2004; Keegan & Turner, 2002; Larson, 2004). The interdependence is often viewed as an influence on lower level practices by the higher level practices in an organization; however, practice-based studies also reveal reciprocal influences between levels as well as creative and innovative ways of inscribing action in their interstices.

In the past decade, interest in the role and mechanisms for emerging strategy has formed an influential theme for PM and PPM research. Empirical research by Poskela, Dietrich, Berg, Artto and Lehtonen (2005) revealed PPM processes as central to the integration of strategic-level and operative-level activities in the front-end phase of innovation (Poskela et al., 2005). They found that a participative strategy formulation process, including bottom-up as well as top-down strategy processes, improved the integration of strategic and operative management. These integrative mechanisms can slip out of sight in a focus on either one or the other level.

More recently, Kopmann, Kock, Killen and Gemünden (2014) explored the nexus between deliberate and emergent strategy. The empirical study considers both top-down and bottom-up strategizing activities and addresses the role of project portfolio management in the formulation and implementation of strategy. The findings showed deliberate and emergent strategies complementing each other with each contributing to project portfolio success; however, deliberate strategies became less effective in dynamic environments while emergent strategies remained effective and thus were especially important in times of turbulence. Practice-based study of emergent strategy in a telecommunications firm demonstrated how projects initiated to solve local problems and operational issues nonetheless influenced strategic directions (Mirabeau & Maguire, 2014). Such practice-based approaches have the capability to reveal what actually happens rather than being limited by the desiderata of strategy to attending only to a superficial understanding based on strategy prescriptions rather than the reality of strategy's practice (Johnson et al., 2007).

6.0 Dynamic capability and strategy-as-practice

Dynamic capabilities are a special type of strategic capability enabling an organisation to respond to changes in the environment (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Teece, Pisano, & Shuen,

1997). A dynamic capability is one that allows organization's to integrate, build, and reconfigure those competences they can call on in order to address rapidly changing environments, priorities and problems. In dynamic environments, organisational agility is important as objectives may change even while action is in process to achieve them. Recent research identifies a range of strategies employed in practice to enable PM and PPM to respond to changes in the environment. Among these strategies, 'dynamic capabilities' enable an organisation to "purposely create, extend, and modify its resource base" (Helfat et al., 2007, p. 4), and thus enable agility, adaptation and change.

The 'strategy-as-practice' research approaches have been shown to have particular strengths for exploring dynamic capabilities as part of strategy research (Regnér, 2008). We argue for further extension of the emerging strategically focused, practice-based perspectives in PM and PPM research to incorporate the underlying assumptions of the strategy-as-practice movement, Especially relevant for PPM is the evolving capability to respond to environmental changes strategically and frequently. Projects are extremely dynamic because of their unfoldingness across time and space populated by many diverse stakeholders; often project strategy is not incorporated within a single organization. Project research could draw upon a dynamic capabilities perspective and employ it in a 'strategy-as-practice' approach.

The strength of a strategy-as-practice research approach has been illustrated in PM and PPM studies. For example, the dynamic capabilities perspective was employed in a practice-based study that proposed a dual model of strategic change in project management (Biesenthal, 2013). The model accounted for the ways in which different change practices were prominent at different organisational levels (i.e. strategic level, operative level). In the study, dynamic capabilities were found to vary depending on the work to be done at a particular level and were seen to possess two complementary components, an ostensive and performative component. The ostensive aspect refers to the abstract and ideal pattern of routine practices

that primarily change in a formal, 'top-down', structured way, while the performative aspect refers to context-specific practices taken up by specific people at specific times and places to manage change in an informal, 'bottom-up', less structured fashion (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). Put simply, the dual model is applicable more widely and recognizes that all dynamic capabilities have both ostensive and performative aspects; together they help organizations renew their resources (Biesenthal, 2013).

Several researchers have employed strategy-as-practice research perspectives for PPM research since it was first identified as a potential dynamic capability due to its strong strategic orientation and its role in reconfiguring the resource-base in response to environmental change (Killen, Hunt, & Kleinschmidt, 2007). A range of studies of PPM, competitive advantage and environmental change have drawn on dynamic capability strategy frameworks, such as Teece, Pisano and Shuen's (1997) "processes, positions and paths" framework (Gardiner, 2014; Killen & Hunt, 2010; Petit, 2012), with research methods for such studies increasingly taking a practice-based approach (Killen et al., 2012).

These example illustrate how research themes on capability evolution, flexibility, strategic change and the ability to adapt to dynamic environments through new ways of working and allocating resources are increasingly important for PM and PPM research. Employing a strategy-as-practice research approach offers a fertile basis for examining and explaining the dynamic process through which strategy is enacted and adjusted.

7.0 Conclusion

Following the underlying notion of a practice-based philosophies, PPM and PM should be conceived as a social science that is fundamentally performative; including this perspective on change helps us to conceptualise a richer picture of project reality (Law & Urry, 2004). Employing a strategy-as-practice perspective for research on strategy and PM advances the

research agenda of practice-based studies in PM as well as underlining their relevance. We identified three strategy-related themes in PM research and illustrated how a strategy-as-practice perspective enables rich and detailed exploration to generate in-depth understanding with the ultimate aim of improving project practice.

The three themes anchor project and portfolio research within a broad strategy framework. For instance, focus on the front end of projects has led to increased scrutiny of the strategic positioning of projects, incorporating both top-down and bottom-up mechanisms. A focus on emergence demonstrates that strategic positioning can be subject to constant re-specification and refocusing, especially in turbulent environments. Ostensive and performative aspects of dynamic capabilities provide a strong theoretical foundation for practice-based research on PM and strategy. Combining the strategy-as-practice and the dynamic capability perspectives, as we illustrated, advances the discipline through the convergence between the two perspectives. The two perspectives are complementary and provide a theoretical and methodological lens that represents the interplay between structure and practice, reciprocally and recursively shaping each other through deliberate and emergent mechanisms.

As a space for strategizing PPM may appear to be, from a prescriptive perspective, somewhat disorganized; however, from a practice perspective this apparent disorganization is simply the temporal processes of adjustment as dynamic capabilities pan out across project spaces. That these are processes are not necessarily captured in advance in a strategic plan that then unfolds seamlessly is less a sign of disorganization and more emblematic of the highly contingent and frequently contested spaces of project accomplishment.

We have highlighted parallel moves toward practice-based research emanating from the strategy research community as well as the project and portfolio management research community. The 'strategy-as-practice' movement's push to bring strategy research to explore

the actuality of implementing strategy and reveal emergent strategies brings strategy researchers to project and portfolio management domains, while PM and PPM researchers are adopting strategic perspectives in practice-based research approaches in investigations of project and portfolio management as strategic assets with influence on competitive advantage. We are observing a convergence of strategy-as-practice perspectives and practice-based PM and PPM research that stands to enhance researchers' ability to explore the space between strategy and projects. We propose that this is particularly relevant for the advance of PPM research; as the bridge between strategy and projects, PPM research may be best served by adopting a 'strategy-as-practice' perspective.

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