

STRATEGY AS PRACTICE IN THE STRUCTURATIONIST PERSPECTIVE: WHAT IT IS AND WHY IT IS? – TOWARD AN ONTOLOGY OF PRACTICE OF STRATEGY IN ORGANIZATIONS¹

Marcio Luiz Marietto²
Ivano Ribeiro³
Fernando Antonio Ribeiro Serra⁴

ABSTRACT: As a developing approach, Strategy as Practice appropriates other theories with converging ontological and epistemological assumptions to build its analytical body. Therefore, in this discipline the designs of Structurationism and the Historical-Cultural Activity Theory generally serve as the analytical basis, even though other theories such as Critical Realism, Sensemaking and Bourdieu's concept of *Habitus* are alternative and/or complementary theories for the basic frameworks. This theoretical study offers a discussion on the appropriation of Structurationism that serves as one of the analytical theoretical structures of Strategy as Practice. The analytical procedure is guided by the central goal of discussing the ontological assumptions of Structurationism that support this perspective under the aegis of Strategy as Practice in the field of Organizational Strategy. For this purpose, the specific objectives are: a) to conduct a theoretical (albeit not exhaustive) review of Strategy as Practice; and b) to conduct a review of Giddens' Theory of Structuration, followed by c) to offer a discussion on the theoretical/analytical specifics that Structurationism shown in studies of Strategy as Practice. The conclusion of the discussion shows adequate ontological agreement with the Structurationist assumptions adopted by the Strategy as Practice discipline, i.e., there is here a parallel intention to reveal an Ontology of Practice of Strategy in Organizations.

Key Words: Strategy as Practice. Structurationism. Strategy

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²Prof. e Pesquisador no Strito Sensu - Mestrado Profissional em Administração. Anhembi-Morumbi. São Paulo. Brasil. E-mail: mlmarietto@uol.com.br

³Doutor Administração pela Universidade Nove de Julho - Uninove. Professor do Centro de Ciências Sociais Aplicadas. Universidade Estadual do Oeste do Paraná (Unioeste). Paraná. Brasil. E-mail: ivano.adm@gmail.com

⁴Doctor in Material Engineer. Professor e Pesquisador no PMDA UNINOVE. São Paulo. Brasil. E-mail: fernando.antonio.ribeiro.serra@gmail.com

ESTRATÉGIA COMO PRÁTICA NA PERSPECTIVA ESTRUTURACIONISTA: O QUE É E POR QUE É? - RUMO A UMA ONTOLOGIA DE PRÁTICA DE ESTRATÉGIA EM ORGANIZAÇÕES

RESUMO: Como uma abordagem de desenvolvimento, a estratégia como prática apropria outras teorias convergindo pressupostos ontológicos e epistemológicos para construir o seu corpo analítico. Portanto, nesta disciplina o estruturacionismo e a Teoria da Atividade Histórico-Cultural geralmente servem como base analítica, embora outras teorias como o Realismo Crítico, o conceito de habitus de Sensemaking e Bourdieu são teorias alternativas e / ou complementares para as estruturas básicas. Este estudo teórico oferece uma discussão sobre a apropriação do estruturacionismo, que é uma das estruturas teóricas de análise da estratégia como prática. O procedimento analítico é guiada pelo objetivo central da discussão dos pressupostos ontológicos do estruturacionismo, que suportam esta perspectiva sob a égide da estratégia como prática no campo da estratégia organizacional. Para isto, os objetivos específicos são: a) realização de uma revisão teórica (embora não exaustiva) de estratégia como prática; e b) revisão da teoria da estruturação de Giddens; seguido de, c) oferecer uma discussão sobre as especificidades teóricas / analíticas que o estruturacionismo apresenta em estudos de estratégia como prática. A conclusão demonstra adequação ontológica dos pressupostos estruturacionistas adotados pela estratégia como prática, ou seja, há aqui uma intenção paralela para revelar uma ontologia da prática da estratégia em organizações.

Palavras-chave: Estratégia como prática. Estruturacionismo. Estratégia.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The purpose of S-as-P is to analyze Strategy, or more specifically Strategic Practice from a sociological perspective, advancing a turn (WHITTINGTON, 2002; JARZABKOWSKI, 2004) on the positivist economic ontological assumption that dominates studies on Strategy without arrogating a dichotomy or break with it. The aim is to simply observe strategic practice as a social phenomenon that is embedded in a social environment like any other (WHITTINGTON, 2007). Marietto *et al.* (2009), based on Whittington (2002) and Jarzabkowski (2004), explain that S-as-P supplies the categories and levels of analysis when it suggests studies on the Practice, Practitioners and Practices of Strategy and the Profession of Strategist (in other words, the work, workers, tools and consultants, professors, researchers and students involved in Strategy) in organizations with a sociological eye. Nevertheless, Strategic Practices are not analyzed only through the theoretical framework of S-as-P. The discipline also involves theories of converging ontologies concerning the daily

practice embedded in the organizational reality under its “umbrella” to capture its context.

Contextualizing adequately, the rise and expansion of Strategy as Practice stems from a repressed demand for the need to observe studies in Strategy “from another perspective”. There is a perceived decline of the contribution of old concepts and tools of analysis (DOZ; PRAHALAD, 1991) that do not account in detail for the reality of social procedures and results of actors who are involved in the daily strategies that are operationalized in organizations. The old concepts “merely scratch” the surface of the reality that is socially constructed by Strategy’s Practice in organizations over time, this accounts for the advent of a social eye of strategy (MARIETTO *et al.*, 2009; WHITTINGTON, 1996; 2007).

At this point, an attempt can be made to explain some assumptions of S-as-P which, as is the case with any developing discipline, has been misunderstood and met with a certain amount of skepticism. Like the Strategy in Economic Vision, an explanatory and positivist objective endorsement is sought in Economic Theories. Thus, S-as-P proposes to adopt theories with a sociological and intersubjective imprint to analyze its phenomena or objects of study. In another way, theories such as the RBV (PENROSE, 1959; BARNEY, 1991), the Evolutionary Theory (NELSON; WINTER, 1982) and the Co-Evolutionary Theory (LEWIN; LONG; CARROLL, 1999), the Transaction Cost Theory (COASE, 1937; WILLIAMSON, 1985), the Theory of Agency (ROSS, 1973), among other theories of the Organizational, Institutional and Industrial Economy and other fields of economics, have lent their theories and assumptions to the positivist studies of Strategy in the Economic Perspective (in general, statistics leaning on the relationships of cause and effect on organizational performance and its results). However, S-as-P resorts to theories such as Giddens’ (1979; 1984) Theory of Structurationism, the Historical-Cultural Activity Theory (ENGESTRÖM, 1987; 1993 & 2002), the Activity Theory (JARZABKOWSKI, 2005) and the Theory of Practice and Bourdieu’s (1990) concept of *habitus*, among others, as theoretical assumptions to support the qualitative analyses of an intersubjective nature for the social constituents of Strategy in the field of Organizational Studies.

It is known (and no one contests it) that other authors of sociology, such as Granovetter (1985), Scott (1987, 1992, 1995) and Whitley (1991) had already approached Strategy in organizations with a sociological eye. However, these studies

were in the field of sociology or related fields. It was S-as-P, initially approached by Whittington (1996) that introduced studies of a sociological nature into the field of Organizational Strategy Studies. In other words, S-as-P seeks to institutionalize the sociological within the field of Strategy Studies, seeking to offer a new point of view for the analysis of strategy from the field and from the assumptions of Organizational Strategy linked to assumptions of sociology in parallel with the Economic Perspective of Strategy rather than from sociological assumptions that occasionally included the Strategy of Organizations or related organizational fields in their studies (e.g. The definition of Organizational Fields by DiMaggio and Powell, 1991, p. 64-65).

In S-as-P, in the Field of Organizational Strategy, the Strategy phenomenon/object, principally Strategic Practice, is central, as in the economic perspective it is central to the organization's performance and results. It is not parallel or casual as it was in previous sociological studies that eventually barred or included Strategy in organizations. In general, the central phenomenon/object of studies on sociology was different or ended up becoming involved or colliding with the Strategy of Organizations. When it comes to the social eye of strategy, it is understood that organizations do not always seek only economic goals. On many occasions, even in order to resolve an economic problem, organizations have to deal with social matters, which includes taking into account the social environment in which the organizations are embedded (WHITTINGTON, 1996).

Oftentimes, attempting to frame economic assumptions as process, content or result (for further details concerning these assumptions see Bulgacov *et al.* 2007) can result in ontological incoherence and distort concepts that S-as-P does not seek to approach since it proposes a sociological analysis appealing to a structure of shared meaning under an ontology of potentials (GIDDENS, 1984). This is done in an attempt to capture the strategic practice in power at the moment of its occurrences. Thus, economic assumptions of a "given" reality do not fit this dynamic perspective because there is a need to look at the moment and its temporal aspect rather than conduct an analysis of something that is positively recognized as a process, content or result.

S-as-P specifically for the analysis of Strategic Practice (WHITTINGTON, 2007) resorts to the ontological assumptions of the Structurationist Theory, where the central dimension of Structurationism is "Practice", i.e., social practice ordered over

time-space (GIDDENS, 1984, p. 4). His main argument involves understanding the activity of people (social actors) as the central objective of social analysis. Thus, when developing the concepts of agency, structure and Structuration, Giddens urges intrinsic importance on the investigation of practice. The conception of human agency also comes into play when Giddens (1984, p. 8) claims that the activities that people practice matter, and therefore the practices need to be studied because they make a difference to the results, in the same way that his notion of social structure enables both the constraint and the capacity of these activities. This is because in order to capture activities, it is necessary to attempt institutional embeddedness.

To connecting to the assumptions of S-as-P in general, rather than specifically, this means analyzing how and why the Praxes and Practices of Practitioners and Professionals who take part in the routine of Strategy in organizations influence the organizational structure through their day-to-day actions and, recursively, how this structure, almost simultaneously, constrains and also enables these practices in the sense of a contextual and temporal adaptation to the environment, unveiling the permanence and survival of the organization through the deployment and implementation of strategy.

Therefore, this essay proposes a discussion on the “Ontological Assumptions” of the conceptual and analytical convergence of Giddens’ (1984) Structurationism and Strategy as Practice. There is also a parallel goal of beginning a discussion of the ontology of practice, founded on the concept of Ontology raised by Grix (2002), who refers to Ontology as:

[...] are claims and assumptions that are made about the nature of social reality, claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with each other. In short, ontological assumptions are concerned with what we believe constitutes social reality (BLAIKIE, 2000, p. 8). [...] what is the nature of the social and political reality to be investigated? (GRIX, 2002, p. 177).

Finally, the paper will include a review of the literature of Strategy as Practice and Structurationism, which is by no means exhaustive, followed by a discussion that seeks to locate the specifics whereby Strategy as Practice resorts to the ontological fundamentals of Structurationism. The work comes to a close with its conclusions and recommendations for future studies.

CONCLUSION

Viewing S-as-P through the Structurationist perspective, as shown briefly in this article, one can see that practice (strategic action) is directed at the social actor (the strategist as a social category) – not an individual – who provides a series of progressive and regular practical action in the continuity of the working day (power of human agency), embedded in an institutional system of people (intersubjectivity), surrounded by rules and resources (provided by the social structure – organization and eventually the external environment). Together, they also execute these practices (shared meanings), reproducing them over time through continuous interaction. Thus, the notion of duality of structure is demonstrated recursively in the mutual dependence (between agency and structure) in the production and reproduction structural properties by the practical actions of social actors almost simultaneously. This leads to the dynamic durability of organizational practices (COHEN, 1988; GIDDENS, 1984; ROSSONI; MACHADO-DA-SILVA, 2008; ROSSONI; MARIETTO; SILVA, 2011; WHITTINGTON, 2007).

Within the Structurationist perspective, S-as-P opens up a wide range of analytical possibilities such as questions about resources and rules, discourse, symbolism, rituals, power, intentionality, practical and discursive consciousness and legitimation. However, it should be emphasized again that these cannot be achieved in a positive processual economic vision of contents or results in Strategy. It should be made clear that in the Structurationist approach of S-as-P there is also a displacement of the analysis level. In other words, a multi-level analysis may permeate between the micro, meso and macro levels of an organization because the recursiveness in the duality of structure passes through these levels almost simultaneously.

Whittington (2010) shows that the Structuration Theory helps one to understand the improvised and emerging nature of the phenomena due to the fact that structural principles are neither set nor objective. However, it is in practice that they are shown, and the structure of the phenomena is emerging in the embedded action in a time-space context subject to the subjective interpretation of the actors much more than a determinist and objective pre-conception of reality. Finally, a conclusion can be reached that it is the ontological feature of the “Ontology of

Potentials”, of the Symbolic Interactionism and Intersubjectivity in the analysis of “Practice” that appears to attract the Structuration Theory to Organizational Studies; more specifically, the analytical assumptions of the “Strategic Practice” of managers in organizations that instigate studies of S-as-P. As shown above, this ontological investigation of Strategic Practice in its potential, i.e., at the moment in time-space when it occurs via the Structuration Theory that corroborates the power of human agency in the duality of the organizational social structure appears to provide a very robust analytical and conceptual basis for the assumptions chosen for S-as-P. This leads to the questions posed in this work concerning what S-as-P is in the Structurationist perspective and why it is embedded adequately in its analytical assumptions.

A recommendation for future studies is to delve deeper, either theoretically or empirically, into proposals for methods of analysis and research of the phenomena involved in the intersubjectivity and constitutive ontological potentials of organizational practices, since these still appear to be in need of refined techniques for their analysis and understanding to support the ontological assumptions recommended here more securely.

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