

Planting Relational Mode of Thinking in Strategy as Practice: Carry with Context into Field as Social Space

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Abstract

This paper argues that Strategy-as-Practice (SAP) research needs to overcome visible substances such as context and deep into invisible strategic field. The relational mode of thinking in SAP avoids the tendency to reify strategic context as given entities, “constructed as macro or micro factors and shut away into black box, focusing instead on how context are actively enrolled as social force in sustaining strategic struggle”. Specifically, this paper argues for a shift in thinking about field as social space rather than as context, and examines the function of capital and its role in producing identities and finally examines the strategic position and symbolic struggle of strategic actors. The major contribution of what must rightly be called the structuralist revolution consists in having applied to the social world the relational mode of thinking which is that of modern mathematics and physics, and which identifies the real not with substances but with relations [1].

Keywords

Strategy-as-Practice, Bourdieu, Rational Mode of Thinking, Field, Social Space

1. Introduction

Even though strategy-making is an old theme, every manager could not look it down upon in that it could illuminate the direction forward by its guidance. Traditionally, management theory has relied on hard dualisms and static nouns: consider Chandler’s “strategy and structure”, Anthony’s “operational” and “strategic” plans or Andrews’ strategy “formulation” and “implementation”. These dualisms presuppose a detached rhythm that allows for orderly sequences between the analytical formulation of strategy and its smooth implementation in opera-

tions and structures. Nevertheless, with the acceleration of change and the globalization of economic, there is little space to more and more industries for such analysis, detachment and order [2]. This acceleration of change promotes a practice perspective on strategy and organization that is attentive to the hands-on skills of practical activity.

As a new approach, it is only short time for Strategy-as-Practice to come into scholar's horizon that it established the EIASM (European Institute for Advanced Studies in Management) in Brussels in February 2001. From the official website www.strategy-as-practice.org, we have learned: "*Strategy as Practice is a community of scholars interested in the practice of strategy... What we are agreed on is the importance of a focus on the processes and practices constituting the everyday activities of organizational life and relating to strategic outcomes, if we are to move our field forward*". The strategy-as-practice approach has required combining earlier epistemologically and ontologically more reflexive positions into a new orthodoxy. As a matter of fact, the new approach is the only one that is very much couched in European characters [3]-[9], and is clearly to be understood as a systematic critique of orthodox, hegemonic, and mainly North American, or North American-inspired, strategy research [10]-[13]. To do so, we have extended the relational mode of thinking into SAP, which has played an impact role in sociology theory, to examine further the strategic position and symbolic struggle of strategic actors.

This paper seeks to start to open up "black box" in the strategy-making and introduce the relational mode of thinking into SAP studies by attempting to answer the research question: How does a strategy-making form in practice? The paper contributes to the SAP literature by what must rightly be called the structuralist revolution consists in having applied to the social world the relational mode of thinking which is that of modern mathematics and physics, and which identifies the real not with substances but with relations. There is structure for the paper as following: First, it proposed the researched question by drawing into the SAP definition and implication. Second, the strategy factors have been considered from social context. Third, the mechanism of the relational mode of thinking has been deployed and cast light on the relation between SAP and the relational mode of thinking. Finally, the paper presents managerial implications for how to successfully form practice-based strategies.

2. Is Social Context as "Noise" or Factored out in Strategy?

"The simple, wrote Bachelard [14], is never but the simplified." And he demonstrated that science has never progressed except by questioning simple ideas [15]. Objectivist physicalism often goes hand in hand with the positivist proclivity to conceive classifications as mere "operational" partitions, or as the mechanical recording of breaks or "objective" discontinuities (as in statistical distributions for instance). For researchers trained in the positivist tradition, the goal of most exploration and research in SAP is to obtain the "truth" or what "really" happened. Unlike positivist approaches which regard the social context as "noise" and therefore a variable that must be controlled or somehow factored out [16], relational thinking mode focus on the social context and attempt to understand its relation construction and social practice by people.

Enactment of SAP is situated within other nested and overlapping social systems. Interaction with strategy may enact and reproduce other social structures, such as those that reflect the system of authority in an organization or a normative professional culture, in addition to a SAP. Our model focuses specifically on SAP as being particularly relevant to strategy implementation in organizations. As Giddens [17] notes, "in any structural analysis, one must foreground some structures and background others". Bearing in mind Giddens's notion of structures as "traces in the mind", we reminds ourselves that structures are emergent and enacted in recurrent social practices.

Giddens's structuration theory in strategy field can be extended into Bourdieu's field theory. Field theory integrates an explicit consideration of strategy into, in an attempt to explain how strategy implementation is implicated in the production and reproduction of social structures. In SAP field, we conceptualize strategy as both the product of human action and structuring human action through its implementation in organizations. How a strategy is designed and appropriated in a given field is influenced by structural properties that, in turn, are re-affirmed or transformed through actor's strategy implementation.

3. The Relational Mode of Thinking

The relationship between the individual and society, or structures and agencies, is expressed in an analogy:

compare social activity to an individual sense of play—people are free to act but they can only do so within the constraints of the game that they are playing. Bourdieu discusses on the one hand, the unity and regularity of systems and their practical coherence, and on the other, their “fuzziness” and irregularities which are both being equally necessary and inscribed into the logic of practice [18]. In their framework for field analysis, Bourdieu and Wacquant [19] suggest analysing the position of the field vis-à-vis the field of power.

As Strategy-as-Practice, we need to explore how the social relation of strategists in the field is constructed in and through misrecognition, or in spite of misrecognition; how top managers and low-level actors agree, by a sort of tacit transaction tacitly guided by the concern to minimize costs and risks, to agree on a minimal definition of the situation of game play.

Bourdieu tries to convey that the social space and individuals that occupy it are as a result of historical struggles, and individuals produce the social space they live in and are produced by it. Therefore they both incorporate and objectify social structures that they inhabit [20]. The game or social activity allows for improvisation and manipulation of rules, and coming to terms with the game is called the logic of practice. This is not just coming to terms with the rules, nor is it a wholly unconscious experience, nor is it purely as a result of rational calculation. It is that people develop strategies of behaviour but these are shaped by their objective situation (*ibid.*). The feel for the social game becomes an instinctive part of the make-up of individuals via the habitus that becomes a way of behaving based on a sense of what might be achieved (*ibid.*), so people have internalized the objective chances they face [21].

On the one hand, the objective structures that the sociologist constructs, in the objectivist moment, by setting aside the subjective representations of the agents, form the basis for these representations and constitute the structural constraints that bear upon interactions; but, on the other hand, these representations must also be taken into consideration particularly if one wants to account for the daily struggles, individual and collective, which purport to transform or to preserve these structures. This means that the two moments, the objectivist and the subjectivist, stand in a dialectical relationship [22] and that, for instance, even if the subjectivist moment seems very close, when taken separately, to interactionist or ethnomethodological analyses, it still differs radically from them: points of view are grasped as such and related to the positions they occupy in the structure of agents under consideration.

How can we concretely grasp these objective relations which are irreducible to the interactions by which they manifest themselves? These objective relations are the relations between positions occupied within the distributions of the resources which are or may become active, effective, like aces in a game of cards in the competition for the appropriation of scarce goods of which this social universe is the site. According to my empirical investigations, these fundamental powers are economic capital (in its different forms), cultural capital, social capital, and symbolic capital, which is the form that the various species of capital assume when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate [23]. Thus agents are distributed in the overall social space, in the first dimension, according to the overall volume of capital they possess and, in the second dimension. According to the structure of their capital, that is, the relative weight of the different species of capital, economic and cultural in the total volume of their assets.

Field is a differentiated and structured space of objective relations between positions held by agents or institutions. Every field is relatively autonomous. It is built, structured and organized through time. It is ruled by its own stakes and specific interests [18]. If photographed at a given moment, the field is a field of forces, a field of struggles, even those presented as disinterested, like science [24], arts [25] [26] or sports [27]. The field structure reveals “the state of the forces between agents or institutions engaged in struggle” to dominate the field [19]. Specifically, this paper argues for a shift in thinking about field as social space rather than as context, and examines the function of capital and its role in producing identities and finally examines the position and habitus of strategic actors.

In what Bourdieu describes as the dominant circular path—a causal loop of generation and reproduction—actors internalize the structure of the field as “habitus”. Habitus in turn generates practice and practices serve to reproduce the structure of the field. Habitus—as a product of history—is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and affected by them in ways that either reinforce or modify its structures.

It is important to note here that, though durable, these are not eternal [28]. Practices are generated by dynamically combining past experience, present situation and implicit anticipation of the future consequences of these very actions. Also, there is the question of how power relations exist and are maintained alongside habitus.

Domination is maintained in society by means other than direct repression. Society, as stated, is made up of

different fields, for example, fields of education, politics, economics and so on. Within each field, people compete for “capital”. This could, for example, be cultural or monetary capital—any capital that is at stake within that particular field. Different forms of capital can be converted to other forms. Once the credentials of this capital become generally acknowledged and legitimized, then power relations no longer exist between individuals but become “objective mechanisms and social institutions that reproduce relations of domination without the need of direct intervention by the dominant group in society” [20]. The term symbolic violence is coined—acknowledgement and legitimization of the form of capital at stake in a particular field resulting in reproduced relations of domination. It is gentle and invisible’ violence and internalized relations of power [19], being a legitimate call for deference to authority.

In terms of conducting critical research, the concept of habitus, arising out of, shaped by and reflecting the fields in which it operates, allows Bourdieu to “forsake the false problems of personal spontaneity and social constraint, freedom and necessity, choice and obligation” [19] and side-steps the micro-macro debate that “forces a polarized, dualistic social ontology” (ibid.: 168). Participants in a field are qualified as agents, because they are “neither a subject confronting the world as an object in a relation of pure knowledge”, nor completely shaped by a “milieu” exerting a form of mechanical causality” [29]. Familiar expressions such as “What you have thought is determined by your rank” are parts of our everyday paradox that perpetuates the external stand-by between position and decision making. The prevalence of this expression requires a re-programming of researchers working with strategy to no longer think of position as simply site but rather as something people do with position power.

Indeed, from the theory frame of the Bourdieunian: $\text{Field} + (\text{Habits} \times \text{Capital}) = \text{Practice}$, we could realize that it is the theory base of the relational mode of thinking, what’s more, the relational mode of thinking is of strong relevance to the SAP, which is focused on micro activity of practice.

3.1. Hierarchy of the Different Species of Capital Varies across the Various Fields

Organizations constitute fields, which are included in larger fields such as industries, competitive markets, economy and society [30]. As such, organizations are at the same time agents involved in its competitive environment taken as field, and a field whereas individuals taken as agents evolve. As agent included in its competitive field, any organization possesses capital, varying in amount and form. “Just as the relative value of cards changes with each game, the hierarchy of the different species of capital [economical, social, cultural, symbolic] varies across the various fields.” [19].

At this point of the discussion, we can compare social space to a geographic space within which regions are divided up. But this space is constructed in such a way that the closer the agents, groups or institutions which are situated within this space, the more common properties they have; and the more distant, the fewer. Spatial distances—on paper—coincide with social distances. Such is not the case in real space. It is true that one can observe almost everywhere a tendency toward spatial segregation, people who are close together in social space tending to find themselves, by choice or by necessity, close to one another in geographic space; nevertheless. People who are very distant from each other in social space can encounter one another and interact, if only briefly and intermittently in physical space. Interactions, which bring immediate gratification to those with empiricist dispositions—they can be observed, recorded, filmed, in sum. They are tangible, one can “reach out and touch them”—mask the structures that are realized in them. This is one of those cases where the visible, that which is immediately given, hides the invisible which determines it. One thus forgets that the truth of any interaction is never entirely to be found within the interaction as it avails itself for observation. One example will suffice to bring out the difference between structure and interaction and, at the same time, between the structuralist vision I defend as a necessary (but not sufficient) moment of research and the so-called interactionist vision in all its forms (and especially ethnomethodology). I have in mind what I call strategies of condescension, those strategies by which agents who occupy a higher position in one of the hierarchies of objective space symbolically deny the social distance between themselves and others, a distance which does not thereby cease to exist, thus reaping the profits of the recognition granted to a purely symbolic denegation of distance (“she is unaffected,” “he is not highbrow” or “stand-offish,” etc.) which implies a recognition of distances. (The expressions I just quoted always have an implicit rider: “she is unaffected, for a duchess,” “He is not so highbrow, for a university professor,” and so on.) In short, one can use objective distances in such a way as to cumulate the advantages of propinquity and the advantages of distance, that is, distance and the recognition of distance warranted

by its symbolic denegation.

So the search for invariant forms of perception or of construction of social reality masks different things: firstly, that this construction is not carried out in a social vacuum but subjected to structural constraints; secondly, that structuring structures, cognitive structures, are themselves socially structured because they have a social genesis; thirdly, that the construction of social reality is not only an individual enterprise but may also become a collective enterprise. But the so-called microsociological vision leaves out a good number of other things: as often happens when you look too closely, you cannot see the wood from the tree; and above all, failing to construct the space of positions leaves you no chance of seeing the point from which you see what you see.

Thus the representations of agents vary with their position (and with the interest associated with it) and with their habitus, as a system of schemes of perception and appreciation of practices, cognitive and evaluative structures which are acquired through the lasting experience of a social position. Habitus is both a system of schemes of production of practices and a system of perception and appreciation of practices. And, in both of these dimensions, its operation expresses the social position in which it was elaborated. Consequently, habitus produces practices and representations which are available for classification, which are objectively differentiated; however, they are immediately perceived as such only by those agents who possess the code, the classificatory schemes necessary to understand their social meaning. Habitus thus implies a “sense of one’s place” but also a “sense of the place of others.”

What are the social conditions of possibility of such a judgment? First, it presupposes that taste (or habitus) as a system of schemes of classification, is objectively referred, via the social conditionings that produced it, to a social condition: agents classify themselves, expose themselves to classification, by choosing, in conformity with their taste, different attributes (clothes, types of food, drinks, sports, friends) that go well together and that go well with them or, more exactly, suit their position. To be more precise, they choose, in the space of available goods and services, goods that occupy a position in this space homologous to the position they themselves occupy in social space. This makes for the fact that nothing classifies somebody more than the way he or she classifies. Secondly, a classificatory judgment such as “that’s petty bourgeois” presupposes that, as socialized agents, we are capable of perceiving the relation between practices or representations and positions in social space (as when we guess a person’s social position from her accent). Thus, through habitus, we have a world of common sense, a world that seems self-evident.

3.2. Capital Impacts Agents’ Position in the Field and Their Strategic Orientation towards Strategic Game

Capital is a core notion to understand practice because it impacts the agents’ position in the field, their relative force, and their strategic orientation towards the game. Although capital struggles might appear as vain for actors external to the field, they are crucial for its members. Through competitive relations, agents try to increase their amount of capital. They also try to increase the value of the forms of capital they possess. As a consequence, the conquest of capital or the valuation of existing capital is always underlying in agents’ practice, even if this remains at an unconscious level.

Symbolic struggles over the perception of strategy may take two different forms. On the objective side, one may act by actions of representation, individual or collective, meant to display and to throw into relief certain realities: I am thinking for instance of demonstrations whose goal is to exhibit a group, its size, its strength, its cohesiveness, to make it exist visibly; and, on the individual level, of all the strategies of presentation of self, so well analyzed by Goffman [31] [32], that are designed to manipulate one’s self-image and especially—something that Goffman overlooked—the image of one’s position in social space.

On the subjective side, one may act by trying to transform categories of perception and appreciation of strategy, the cognitive and evaluative structures through which it is constructed. The categories of perception, the schemata of classification, that is, essentially, the words, the names which construct strategy as much as they express it, are the stake par excellence of political struggle, which is a struggle to impose the legitimate principle of vision and division, *i.e.*, a struggle over the legitimate exercise of what Bourdieu called the “theory effect.” [23] [33], Strategy are the instruments and stakes of innumerable tactics and that agents are endlessly occupied in the negotiation of their own identity. They may, for example, “manipulate strategic ritual,” just as we, for similar reasons, manipulate the outside consultants as “founding support” of particular change solution. Like-

wise, on the level of the daily implementation, struggle that strategic agents wage in an isolated and dispersed state, we have insults, gossip, rumours, slander, innuendos, and so. On the collective and more properly political level [34], we have all the strategies that aim at imposing a new construction of social reality by jettisoning the old political vocabulary, or at preserving the orthodox vision by keeping those words (which are often euphemisms, as in the expression “common folks” that Bourdieu just evoked) designed to describe the social world. The most typical of these strategies of construction are those which aim at retrospectively reconstructing a past fitted to the needs of the present—as when General Flemming, disembarking in 1917, exclaimed: “La Fayette, here we are!”—or at constructing the future, by a creative prediction designed to limit the ever-open sense of the present.

3.3. The Situation of Agents in a Strategic Field Depends on the Capital They Possess

No doubt agents do have an active apprehension of every strategy. No doubt they do construct their vision of strategy. But this construction is carried out under structural constraints. According to the fields, some forms of capital are more valuable than others. They also change in time. The situation of agents in strategic field depends on the capital they possess. The more relevant capital they possess, the more powerful they are, the more possibilities of actions they get.

One may even explain in sociological terms what appears to be a universal property of strategic transformation, namely the fact that the familiar strategy tends to be “taken for granted,” perceived as natural. If the strategy tends to be perceived as evident and to be grasped. To use Husserl’s [35] expression, in a doxic modality, this is because the dispositions of agents, their habitus. That is, the mental structures through which they apprehend the strategy, are essentially the product of the internalization of the structures of that strategy. As perceptive dispositions tend to be adjusted to position, agents, even the most disadvantaged ones, tend to perceive strategy as natural and to accept it.

Then there is a need to map out the objective structure of the relation between positions occupied by agents or institutions and finally to analyse the habitus of agents—those systems of dispositions they have acquired by internalizing a determinate type of social and economic condition, and which find a definite trajectory within the field under consideration.

Capital varies in forms and in importance for each field. The position of industry affects the initiatives of individual firms inside the industry. Inside the field of an industry, the capital volume and structure of firms as agents are different. Symbolic capital corresponds to the credit and prestige to master inclusion outside organization; social capital includes the involvement in social networks; political capital is constituted by the support from governmental environment.

The structure and the distribution of corporate capital among competing firms determine their power over the field in general and more specifically over their competitors. The more capital a firm possesses, the more success factor it gets and the larger possibilities it can develop [30]. Indeed it is the amount of capital and the relative weight of the various forms of capital hold by agents that is determinant.

This corporate capital can take various forms [30], for instance: financial capital, corresponding to the control of direct and indirect financial resources; technological capital, with the mastering of specific techniques, research and development capabilities; commercial capital, with the control of sales network and an advantage in commercial negotiation; information capital, with a privileged access to information upon the market; symbolic capital, such as brand image or customer loyalty.

3.4. Agents Apply to the Objective Structures of Strategy as Structures of Perception and Appreciation

The position of agents in the field, *i.e.* the volume and structure of capital they possess, constrain and condition practice but do not determine it. Social space presents itself in the form of agents endowed with different properties that are systematically linked among themselves. Agents may have different personal perspectives on practice: even with similar positions and trajectories in the field, two agents won’t necessarily do the same thing. In other words, through the distribution of properties, the social world presents itself, objectively, as a symbolic system which is organized according to the logic of difference, of differential distance. Social space tends to function as a symbolic space, a space of lifestyles and status groups characterized by different lifestyles.

Owing to the fact that symbolic capital is nothing other than economic or cultural capital when it is known and recognized, when it is known through the categories of perception that it imposes, symbolic relations of

power tend to reproduce and to reinforce the power relations that constitute the structure of social space [15]. These symbolic struggles, both the individual struggles of strategic position and the collective, organized struggles of strategic transformation, have a specific logic which endows them with a real autonomy from the structures in which they are rooted. More concretely, legitimation of strategy is not, as some believe, the product of a deliberate and purposive action of propaganda or symbolic imposition; it results, rather, from the fact that agents apply to the objective structures of strategy as structures of perception and appreciation which are issued out of these very structures and which tend to picture strategic vision as evident.

4. Identify the Real Not with Substances but with Relations beyond Visible Substances: Deep into Invisible Field Space and Grasp Relational Mode of Thinking in SAP

As Latour [36] puts it: “the macro-structure of society is made of the same stuff as the micro-structure”. This emphasis on “relational materiality” [37] reflects an unwillingness to accept a priori the pre-existence of social structures and differences as somehow inherently given in the order of things. The major contribution of what must rightly be called the structuralist revolution consists in having applied to the social world the relational mode of thinking which is that of modern mathematics and physics, and which identifies the real not with substances but with relations [1].

This relational mode of thinking is at the point of departure of the construction presented in Bourdieu’s book named *Distinction*. It is a fair bet, however, that the space, that is, the system of relations will go unnoticed by the reader. This is due, first, to the fact that the substantialist mode of thinking is easier to adopt and flows more “naturally.” Secondly, this is because, as often happens, the means one has to use to construct social space and to exhibit its structure risk concealing the results they enable one to reach. The groups that must be constructed in order to objectify the positions they occupy hide those positions.

The “social reality” which Durkheim spoke of is an ensemble of invisible relations, those very relations which constitute a space of positions external to each other and defined by their proximity to, neighborhood with, or distance from each other, and also by their relative position, above or below or yet in between, in the middle. Sociology, in its objectivist moment, is a social topology, an analysis *situs* as they called this new branch of mathematics in Leibniz’s time, an analysis of relative positions and of the objective relations between these positions [15].

This relational mode of thinking avoids the tendency to reify strategic context as given entities, “constructed as macro or micro factors and shut away into black box, focusing instead on how context are actively enrolled as social force in sustaining strategic struggle”. The aim of this paper is to open up these black boxes, these simplifications that we take for granted, and expose the way that strategic struggle occur and social position are produced and reproduced in strategic field.

5. Conclusions

While strategy can be seen to have been constructed with particular capital and inscribed with strategists’ vision and illusion about the world, it is only when this strategy is implemented in recurrent social practices that it can be said to structure actors’ action. That is, it is only when repeatedly drawn on implementation that strategy content becomes constituted by actors as particular operations and institutions that shape their action. The relationship is recursive, in that, through routine practices associated with strategy implementation, actors shape strategy whether deliberately, inadvertently, or by improvisation in response to unexpected events.

From Bourdieunian perspective, SAP research includes focusing on capital and interaction in organizational field, analysing specific position on which individuals experience capital transformation, and recognizing the symbolic uses of strategy while transcending the actors’ purely subjective participation. We have argued in this paper that the emphasis SAP places on detailed, local and contextualized empirical analysis which needs to introduce relational thinking mode. As Walsham [38] notes, challenging the rigid separation of human and non-human seems valuable—particularly where the boundaries between macro-level and micro-level force are continually negotiated and struggled, such as in strategy forming and implementation. This paper relates an attempt to construct a strategy field. The strategy field approach allows us to understand how various actors went about struggling an organizational position in terms of particular strategy stake, and perhaps why the strategy was not implemented, but remained merely an assembly of quarrelling human actors and a stack of strategy on papers or

documents.

To conclude, we have argued that SAP research needs a field analysis if it is to avoid an unreflective accommodation with how strategy is implicated in organizations and society. To achieve this, such research needs to complement its empirical richness with a reflective approach that reveals how the status quo has come to be and who benefits from existing arrangements of strategy and organization. Further, the interpretation needs to be connected to broader considerations of capital power and invisible control.

In doing so, we have attempted to avoid privileging dominant—such as context—perspectives on strategy that would simply reinforce the received view of such phenomena. Our reflective approach was informed by ideas drawn from the social theories of Bourdieu. This field theorization enabled us to connect the empirically-based interpretive research with the broader social space conditions of possibility within which strategy forming and implementation.

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