

**Rethinking the boundaries of strategising-as-practice:  
phenomena, epiphany, epiphenomena**

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**Track: Strategy-as-practice**

**Abstract**

In this paper, we present an argument for rethinking the current conceptualisation of strategizing as practice (SAP), choosing to view SAP instead through a phenomenological lens. Our intention in undertaking this particular juxtaposition is to advance the current research agenda beyond the realm of social practice theories. When considering strategizing, a phenomenological lens suggests that in pre-reflective self-consciousness, the experiences of practitioners are given as subjective lived-through experiences. Thus, by problematizing the dominant assumptions in the existing strategizing research agenda through the proposed meta-theoretical position, we de-objectify strategizing, and offer an alternative dimension to studying lived-experience.

The central contribution offered in the paper is therefore the reconceptualisation of strategic practice as phenomena and emergent ephiphenomena. As the reflective accounts of pre-reflective experience, we propose to access such phenomena and ephiphenomena through the lived-through epiphanic episodes of strategy practitioners.

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In this bewildering world, the search for predictive theories to guide strategy has been no more successful than the search for such theories in other areas of human existence. Pattern do emerge from the past, and their study permits educated guesses about the range of potential outcomes. But the future is not an object of knowledge; no increase in processing power will make the owl of history a daytime bird. Similar causes do not always produce effects, and causes interact in ways unforeseeable even by the historically sophisticated.

Knox (1994:645)

## Introduction

Theorising within the strategic management field has been prolific over the past few decades with Allison (1971), Chaffee (1985), Ansoff (1987), Nonaka (1988) and Mintzberg et. al, (1998) and other researchers portraying different representations of strategy formation. In a response to the growing attention to strategy formation, Mintzberg et. al. (2009:396) acknowledge the need to get

“beyond the narrowness of each strategy school [the ten schools of strategy]: we need to know how this beast called strategy formation, which combines all of these schools and more, really lives its life”.

One seminal work in this area is by Sloan (2005) concluding that the schools are complementary rather than competing and sees strategy as “synthesis”. Her findings demonstrate that none of the schools alone could explain strategy formation. Rather it is the schools’ collective influence that accounted for how strategies formed.

Nonetheless, a new wave of researchers under the umbrella of strategy as practice take strategic management beyond economics to the realms of social sciences drawing on theoretical and philosophical perspectives such as Abbott, Bourdieu, de Certeau, Foucault, Giddens, Latour, Habermas, Wittgenstein, Heidegger and others. The focus of strategy as practice research is on activities and practices in and around strategic management (Golsorkhi et. al. 2010; Jarzabkowski et. al. 2007; Balogun et. al. 2003; Whittington et. al. 2008). The key insight of these studies has been linked to the work of strategy - “strategizing” - looking at the effect of organisational practices on process and outcome of strategy (Vaara and Whittington, 2012).

Strategy as practice has links with other areas of strategic management such as strategy process research stream (Sminia, 2009: 97) focussing on how practices enable actors’ actions and processes. The practice tradition has been argued to build upon and complement a process lens (Whittington, 2007). Feldman and Orlikowski (2011:1241) suggest that “central to a practice lens is the notion that social life is an ongoing production and thus emerges through people’s recurrent actions”. In this context, actions imply activity and process; therefore, strategizing implies process. Marabelli and Newell (2014:479) argue that the epistemology of possession complements an epistemology of practice, whereby “knowledge (possessed) and knowing (practice) are recursively and mutually constituted”.

However, despite the achievements of both strategy process research and strategy as practice

research in strategic management, the field has further potential for more research into practitioners' experiences and more specifically practitioners' lived experiences. This resonates with the recent call for studies, in strategy as practice, into "the lived experience of practitioners" (Ericson, Melin and Popp, 2015: 517). The purpose of this paper is to depict the potential contributions to the field using a phenomenological lens.

The article is structured as follow. First, the research problem is clearly outlined. Then, the underlying philosophical and methodological underpinnings will be portrayed to demonstrate the potential contribution of the proposed phenomenological lens to strategy-as-practice research. Finally, the paper delves into depicting the potential reconceptualization of strategizing as practice. We next turn to outline the nature of this context for the study of strategizing as practice.

## **The research problem**

To date, practice-based approaches have focused on uncovering the activity inside the process within episodes or sequence of episodes of strategy formation (Johnson et al. 2003). The different practices and processes characterise strategizing in organisations (Vaara and Whittington, 2012). As such, strategizing refers to the actual 'doing' in the activity of strategy formation.

Previous research on strategizing emerged from the work of Mintzberg (1973) on managerial activity - practice as managerial action. Researchers developed an understanding of the micro activities of managers in the actual doing of strategizing. Most of the research focuses on top level and lower level management involvement in the process of strategizing (Balogun and Johnson, 2005; Paroutis and Pettigrew, 2007; Nordqvist and Melin, 2008; Angwin et. al., 2009; Whittington et. al., 2011). For instance, Whittington et. al, (2007) conclude that studying managerial activity has benefits for practitioners in understanding their strategizing practices and might help in enhancing their skills. Other studies have focused on the view of practices as a set of tools, norms and procedures (Hodgkinson et al., 2006; Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008; Palli et al., 2009; Kaplan, 2011; Jarzabkowski et al.; 2013). These studies have led to a growing attention to the strategy tools and their role in facilitating strategic practitioners work in strategizing (Kaplan 2011; Jarzabkowski, et. al, 2012). Most of the research in this area focuses on the role tools play in strategic planning episodes; ignoring other activities that strategists might be involved in and might contribute to the strategy formation.

Another strand of research focuses on practice as a social and tacit knowledge used by practitioners in strategizing (Clarke et. al., 2011; Mantere, 2008; Rouleau, 2005; Samra-Fredricks, 2003) drawing on social practice theories. This view is based on the assumption that practice "is related to knowledge frame that actors need to draw on to accomplish strategizing" (Rouleau, 2013:551). In this perspective, contextual characteristics play an important role in understanding strategy formation as opposed to just focusing on the role of practitioners in strategizing. For instance, Balogun and Johnson (2005) using reflective diaries, consider managers informal interactions as a way of understanding strategic change. This helped in understanding how their sense-making contributed to the strategic change. On the other hand, Stensaker and Falkenberg (2007) looked at how the individual interpretations of employees and middle managers affected strategic change. The growing influence of strategic sense-making and framing support the shifts in attention to text and talk. Fewer studies have observed the discursive aspects of strategy (Balogun et. al, 2011; Barry and

Elmes, 1997; Cornelissen et. al., 2011; Ezzamel and Willmott, 2008; Fenton and Langley, 2011; Heracleous and Jacobs, 2011; Knight and Morgan, 1991; Mantere and Vaara, 2008; Samra-Fredricks, 2005; Whittle et. al, 2013) to provide an understanding of the linguistic aspects of discursive episodes of strategizing. Samra-Fredricks (2003:142) has focused on the “lived experience” of managers and examined the rhetorical skills used in the moment. Nevertheless attention in these studies to date has “mostly been on the language of strategy and its communication per se” (Balogun, et. al., 2014:176).

As such, existing studies of strategizing are primarily qualitative with a focus on using ethnographic observations and interviews of organisational members. Many of these studies focus primarily on the reflective experiences of practitioners. In other words, they focus on what practitioners think about or make sense of strategy formation or strategizing. It appears that practitioners *pre-reflective* experience of strategizing is a relatively unexplored subject. There are different dimensions to an experience: a *lived-in* experience, a *lived-out* experience and a *lived-through* experience. Research into lived-in experiences of practitioners focuses on interpretations, perceptions and sense-making of strategy formation/strategizing, while process research focuses on the interpretation of the lived-out experiences of strategy formation overtime (strategy as a thing in itself). Both dimensions dominate strategic management research. An experiential study of strategizing involves an understanding of the implicit pre-reflective self-awareness since it could be argued that experiences have subjective feel to them (Nagel, 1974:436; Searle, 1992). All experiences are given as experiences we are living through; we over look them; we do not attend to them. Zahavi (2014) argues that “unless a mental process is pre-reflective, there will be nothing it is like to undergo the process, and it therefore cannot be a phenomenally conscious process”. In phenomenology, intentional experience is lived-through (*erlebt*), but does not appear in an objective manner (Husserl, 1984:399). Moreover, a phenomenological lens offers opportunity to know more on the meaning of strategizing from the lived-through experiences of practitioners.

By examining lived-through experiences of practitioners, using a phenomenological lens, we can better understand the attributed meaning of strategizing. With this understanding, researchers can expand their research into understanding emergent strategies in different setting adopting a phenomenological lens. Practitioners can forge a new and improved understanding of certain dimensions of strategizing as practice to become more effective at what they do.

## Philosophical underpinnings

“Strategy without design is a willingness to think about what is unthought and unsaid whilst freeing us from both the obstinacy of the commonplace and the iridescent glare of the new. It requires us to face things as things, without recording or representing or analysing these things, so that we meet the world as something other than a vast collection of resources and that we understand ourselves as something other than an isolated rational, separated collector of these resources”

Chia and Holt (2009:212)

The core of the research is the description of the *things in their appearing*. This approach does not seek to test scientific theories or to evaluate the efficacy of strategizing. Instead, it encourages people to open up to their experiences as they emerge in the course of their daily

life, without being coerced by personal interpretations.

When we see things and approach things, we deal with them as they are, not with our mental intermediaries. A 'thing' in the Oxford dictionary has different meanings ranging from an act, an event and so on to, not specified by name. This idea of a thing that has no name resonates with the purpose of this research as looking at the originary meaning of the phenomena of strategizing. Kant (1929 [1781]) thesis argues that the *things-in-themselves* - the Noumenal world - are unaccessible and unknowable through perception, we can only know them through *things-for-us*. As such, reality is the creation of the human mind. The human world is accessed pre-reflectively and reality is how *things present themselves* as they are (similar views to Husserl, Heidegger, van Manen and others). Accordingly, the human world is never a world in itself; it is an experienced world. Thus, reality is made up of different assumptions that individuals produce and reproduce as they go about their everyday lives. These assumptions are part of the social environment of different individuals. Each individual lives-through experiences and unless asked, they might never reflect on the different experiences. Recollecting the lived-through experiences could shape the meaning of a phenomenon. In this position, strategizing as a lived-through phenomenon could be shaped by the experiences of multiple actors in the university. Thus truth is situated and experiential based on people's lived world and everyone's lived world. In this context, We are less interested in how the individuals mobilise their knowledge or identifying their theories-in-use but more on providing an account of their lived-through experiences in order to reflect on their experiential accounts. Therefore, our assumptions align with the 'interpretivist paradigm' guiding the research design of this study (Burrell and Morgan 1979; Blaikie 2000; Cunliffe 2011). As per described by Morgan and Smircich (1980), the epistemological stance of this research is to depict the phenomenological insight of the lived experiences and more specifically the lived-through experiences to understand the meaning of strategizing.

Moran and Mooney (2002:1) argue that phenomenology is, "the descriptive study of whatever appears to consciousness, precisely in the manner in which it so appears". Therefore, phenomenology looks at the phenomenon with a fresh eye uncontaminated with a priori scientific impositions. The aim is to depict a true picture of the phenomenon as it is experienced (Moran, 2000). As such, the word phenomenon comes from the Greek word *phaenesthai*, which means "to flare up, to show itself, to appear" (Mouskatas, 1994). A phenomenological study following Husserl's descriptive (transcendental) phenomenology transcend the essence of the meaning of a phenomenon by acknowledging that intentionality is the starting key concept of understanding an experiential practice (Mouskatas, 1994). Intentionality refers to "the internal experience of being conscious of something" (ibid:28). "Intentionality is the principle that every mental act is related to some object" (Dowling, 2005; Moran and Mooney, 2002), and implies that all perceptions have meaning (Owen, 1994). Van Manen (1990:182) argues that all thinking is always thinking about something. Therefore, the aim of phenomenology is the study of how *things* manifest themselves and how things are experienced by individuals to clearly reflect on their lived meaning.

Merleau-Ponty in his eminent writing "Primacy of perception", identified four existentials considered to be important elements of lifeworld; *lived space* (spatiality), *lived body* (corporality), *lived time* (temporality), and *lived human relation* (relationality or communality). Van Manen (2014) argues that the existentials could help in understanding the meaning of a phenomenon. He argues that they belong to everyone's lifeworld – "they are universal themes of life" (ibid:302) and that we all experience our world and reality through these existentials.

Thus, the application of a phenomenological lens seeks to draw out the meaning of practical involvements in the world. It is an attempt to return to “the things themselves” (Husserl, 1984 [1911]), and further, to let these things speak for themselves (Heidegger, 1962). The phenomenological reduction of returning to the things themselves is

“The task of describing in textual language just what ones sees, not only in terms of the external object but also the internal act of consciousness, the experience as such, the rhythm and relationship between phenomenon and self”

(Moustakas, 1994:90)

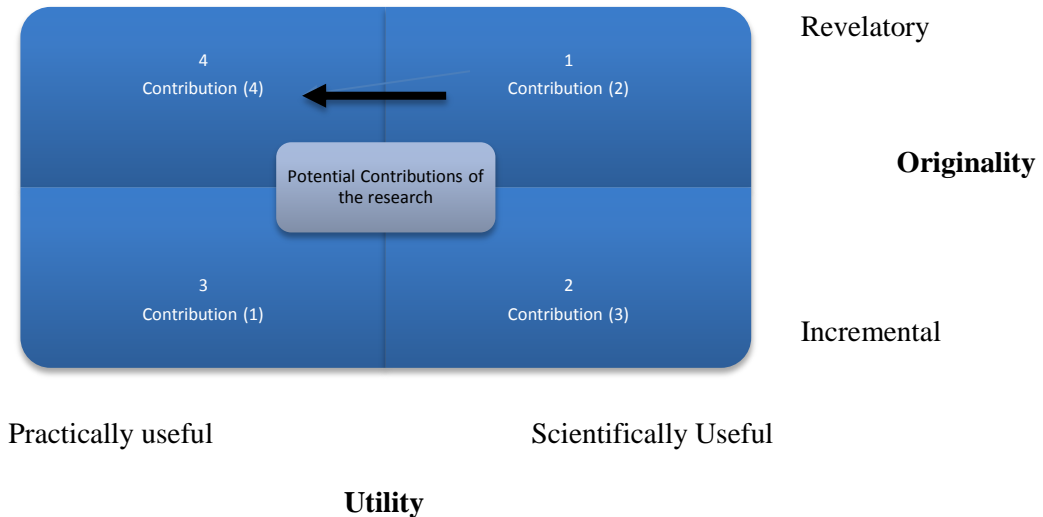
The study is guided by context-sensitive form of phenomenology called “phenomenology of practice” pioneered by Van Manen (2007) which stems its roots in the work of Frederikn Buytendijk, Martin Langeveld and Johan Hendrik van den Berg.

The lived-through experience has always gone as we are always in the now. We can recover and reflect on its meaning using recollection – pre-reflectively. Seeing what gives itself according to Van Manen (2014) involves reflecting on pre-reflective life, on lived or primal experiences. It is the study of phenomenological meaning - meaning as we live it – the pre-reflective meaning. In this context, phenomenology of practice is a reflective study of pre-reflective experience that aims at untangling the lived meaning of the practice of strategizing. The proposed methodology is suitable in the context of this research as it provides a better understanding of the practices of practitioners and enhances their understanding of the practices of their peer-practitioners.

## **Theoretical and conceptual underpinnings**

Despite the growing attention to strategizing in strategy-as-practice, the understanding of the meaning of strategizing by organisational actors is fairly limited. We aim to extend the approach by employing a phenomenological lens to construct a possible interpretation of the nature of strategizing. With the shifting attention to strategy as Discourse, the strategy-as-practice literature and strategic management seems to ignore the pre-reflective accounts of practitioners and their influence on shaping an understanding of strategizing. Most of the research on strategy discourse focused attention on strategy as a body of knowledge (historically constituted), strategy as organizational narrative, and strategy as rhetoric in conversation (Vaara, 2010:33).

# RETHINKING THE BOUNDARIES OF STRATEGIZING AS PRACTICE: PHENOMENA, EPIPHANY, EPIPHENOMENA



*Figure 1 Potential Research Contributions (adapted from: Corley and Gioia, 2011)*

Strategizing as lived-through experiences is multifaceted, dynamic and complex. The notion of dynamic entails that strategizing is temporal and situated in a specific moment or event. Based on the view that strategizing is at the centre of strategy formation (Vaara and Whittington, 2012) constituting of actions, practices and processes; Tsoukas (2015:71) argues that there are different types of actions based on the intent of actors. The actors internalised practices act as a precursor for their non-deliberate coping actions. This is considered as practical coping as opposed to deliberate coping where actors respond to practical concerns. In the latter mode, actors pay explicit attention to what they do retrospectively - “thematic awareness” (Ibid: 71). In this view, strategizing is discerned from the actual doing of actors. The major weakness of the research stream, focusing on patterns of actions from what actors say or the visible doings, constitutes a fallacy. Researchers pay attention to the observed doing ignoring the culturally and historically shaped tendencies and dispositions acquired through social practices (Chia and Mackay, 2007: 226).

Social practice theories tend to emphasise “the tacit and informal dimensions of practices and praxis” (de la Ville and Mounoud, 2015: 249) while strategy as practice researchers tend to focus attention on the deliberate actions and favouring explicit practices. In addition, researchers focus on the actual experiences of actors (practitioners) and what they consider to be strategizing. Looking at strategizing from a social practice perspective (figure 2) has provided insight into strategizing as a concept. Ongoing definitional uncertainties have led some scholars to argue that the conception of practice typically employed by strategy-as-practice scholars is underdeveloped, contradictory and confusing (Carter et al., 2008:89; Carter et al., 2010:579). Furthermore, the variety of the meaning of practice, illustrated in the list below, calls for refocussing attention around the structure and meaning of strategizing. This contribution has a practical and incremental importance (figure 1) as it seeks at advancing an understanding of the essence of strategizing.



# RETHINKING THE BOUNDARIES OF STRATEGIZING AS PRACTICE: PHENOMENA, EPIPHANY, EPIPHENOMENA

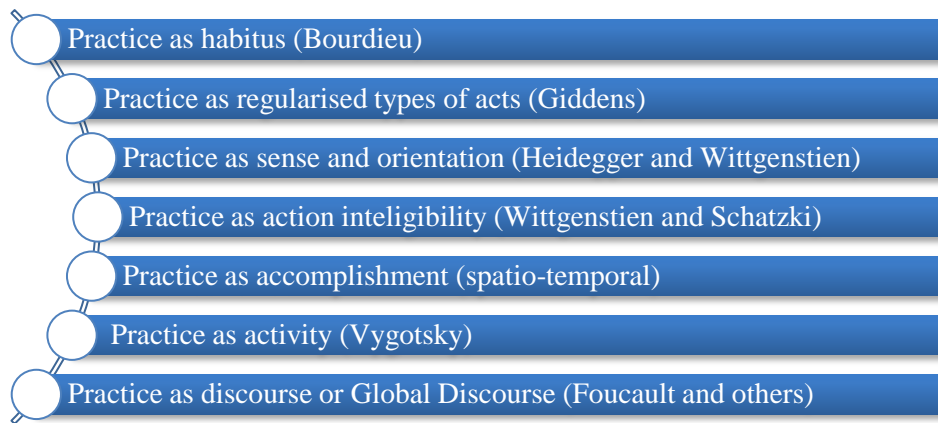


Figure 2 Philosophical assumptions of practice from the current literature

Going beyond strategy-as-practice and strategy process assumptions and induced perceptions, this paper aims at a scientifically useful and revelatory contribution (Figure1) through seeking a situated truth by going back to ‘the things themselves’ and being sensitive to ‘being’ and ‘intentionality’ (Heideggerian principles). In this view, being-in-the world entails that the context where strategizing take place - as practice or a pattern of actions or talk or lived experience - should be understood relative to lived time, lived space, lived body and lived human relation (Merleau-Ponty existentials). Understanding the nature and structure of the meaning of strategizing from a phenomenological lens would help practitioners to become more tactful and thoughtful in their profession and discipline. The new dimension of knowledge is not to replace or substitute the current knowledge of strategizing. It is about adding a new form of knowledge that is currently understated in the profession and discipline.

As well as identifying gaps in the existing literature, a further attempt is made to make contributions to knowledge through problematization (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011). The aim of problematization in this context is to

“come up with novel research questions through a *dialectical interrogation* of one’s own position, other stances, and the domain of the literature targeted for assumption challenging”

(Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011:252)

Problematization is approached here by challenging the dominant assumption that strategy takes place in specific practices and consisting of rituals of strategic planning, meetings, presentation, discussions and so on. Strategizing, we propose is not simply an objective act of doing and talk in organizational rituals, but rather is rendered into an epiphenomenon that emerges from the lived-through experiences of practitioners independently of the underlying phenomenon (Figure 4). Epiphenomena is

“phenomenon that can be described independently of the underlying phenomena that bring it about”

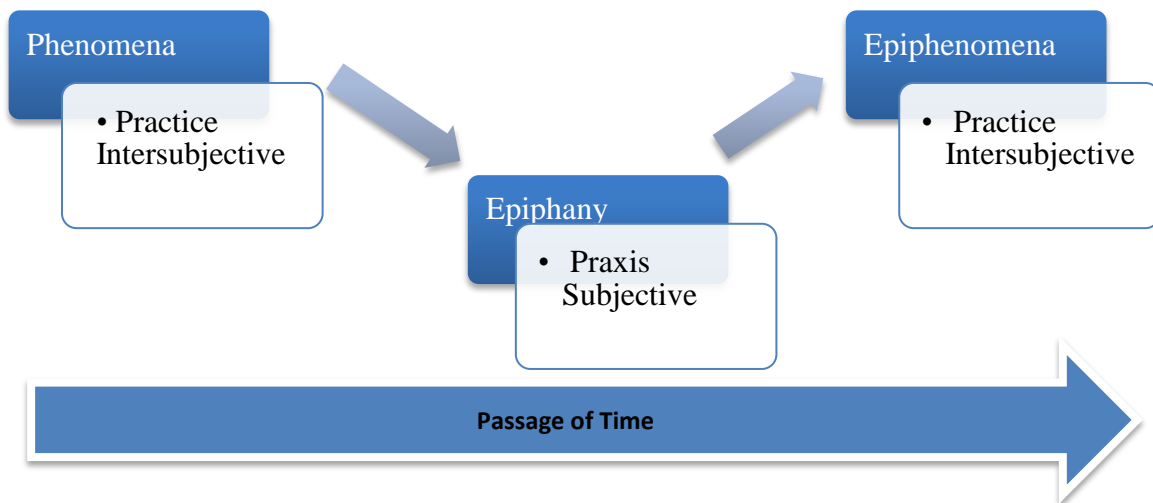
(Abbott, 2006:15).

Strategizing as epiphenomena is parallel and linked temporarily to strategy formation. In this view, for instance, a single act of doing is not practice; it is the passage of time that converts the actions to practice (Ericson, 2014). It can be argued that any attention to strategizing also demands an attention to time (temporality), in addition to dimensions of socio-materiality,

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spatiality, corporality and communality. Time has been unaddressed in strategy-as-practice (Ericson, Melin and Popp, 2015: 516).

Following a “path-(up) setting” mode (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013:148) spanning across other areas of social sciences and humanities, we aim at advancing an approach grounded by van Manen (2007) phenomenology of practice, to challenge the assumptions that strategizing consists of actions, practices and processes, and strategy discourses in a specific episode or sequence of episodes. I aim to collect experiential descriptions in the form of stories and



*Figure 3 The Nature of Change/transformation into Practice*

anecdotes of the experiences of academics through conversations about different moments of strategizing – returning to the earliest, the most recent and the memorable recalled moment to develop a “frame-bending” (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013:148) reconstruction of strategizing from the *epiphanies* of practitioners – strategizing as epiphenomena (figure 4). The term epiphany is derived from the Greek word *epiphainesthai* which means to “appear” or “to come into view” (Arnold, 2002) and it is used to refer to moments of sudden and significant insight (Paris, 1997). The term is used in a variety of academic disciplines including social theory (Denzin, 1989) and narrative psychology (Schultz, 2001). McDonald (2008:90) argues that

“epiphanies are momentary experiences of transcendence that are enduring and distinct from other types of developmental change and transformation”.

In this context, epiphanies are sudden and significant insights and/or change in perspective that transform individual’s concept of practice through the creation of new meaning in the individual’s experience of strategizing. The epiphenomenon is shaped by the sudden and significant insights of what practitioners do when they engage with practices (Praxis).

## Conclusion

In this paper we are challenging the dominant assumptions in strategy as practice research that of primacy is given to observed doing, perceptions and talk. Strategy as practice research

to date added strong contributions to the understanding of the *actual doings* of practitioners in strategising. While there is extensive literature focusing on borrowing from a range of social practice theories to shed a light on the theoretical perspective of strategizing, our understanding of the lived-through meaning of strategizing is limited.

We have challenged this dominant approach by arguing that as lifeworld is understood as what individuals experience pre-reflectively without resorting to interpretation; it cannot be understood from a detached and objective representational perspective to strategizing.

By viewing the world from a phenomenological lens and moving beyond a practice ontology, the central contribution offered in the paper is therefore the reconceptualisation of strategic practice as phenomena and emergent ephiphenomena. As the reflective accounts of pre-reflective experience, we propose to access such phenomena and ephiphenomena through the lived-through epiphanic episodes of strategy practitioners.

From this tentative beginning, we suggest that a phenomenological lens might offer a valuable counter-balance to the limitations of social practice theories that dominate the strategy as practice literature, opening a rich vista of research opportunities in strategic management discipline.

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