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Old wine in new bottles or a promising new approach?

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1. Introduction

Amazon.com lists 50 books with the title "Strategic Management" at the moment.¹ Moreover, nearly all business schools offer courses with the words "strategic" or "strategy" in their course description. In addition, strategic decisions are commonly recognized as very important due to the fact that an appropriate strategy is in general set to be essential for the long term success of a company. For all of those reasons the research on 'organizational strategy' and on 'strategic management' has been a central topic within academic research. In his well-known and popular book 'Strategy Safari'², Henry Mintzberg presents ten strategy formation schools. Thereby the first three schools are prescriptive: design, planning, and positioning. The other schools are descriptive: entrepreneurial, cognitive, learning, power, cultural, environmental, and the configuration school. All of these ten strategy schools are more or less macro-based, meaning they are observing a company's strategy from an outside perspective and recognize strategy as an organizational property. Although some traditional approaches also take internal processes into consideration, the act of 'strategy making', the everyday practices and routines of strategizing that result in a corporate strategy are commonly not observed.

In recent years, strategy research has taken a so called 'practice turn' which is discussed in many top journals at the moment. In contrast to traditional approaches that have dominated the literature on strategy analysis, there have been increasing calls to attend to the different micro-processes and practices of organizational life that in sum generate meaningful outcomes. Conventionally strategy researchers assume that strategy is something organizations have. They have differentiation strategies, diversification strategies and joint-venture strategies; they have strategic planning processes, decision processes and change processes. The 'new' approach recognizes strategy as resulting from individual actions of the organizational members.³ This approach called 'strategy-as-practice'⁴ (s-as-p) tries to contextualize strategy within a theory of practice and to focus attention on routine practices, which have so far been relatively neglected by strategy researchers.⁵ The common ground of practice-based approaches in organization studies is the desire to shed new light on organizational

¹ www.amazon.com.

² Mintzberg/Ahlstrand/Lampel, 1998.

³ Cf. Johnson/Langley/Melin/Whittington, 2007, p 3.

⁴ Within literature, different notations of the term can be found (e.g. strategy-as-practice, Strategy-as-Practice, 'strategy as practice' etc.). Within this thesis I will use the first notation, as this seems to be the most common one.

⁵ Cf. Whittington, 2001.

phenomena by getting closer to the 'real work in organizations'. Their aim is 'bringing work back in'.⁶ In general, strategy-as-practice is seen as "the latest approach in strategic management research, which considers the practices of strategy and strategic works."⁷

Even a quick skim through management journals shows, that the 's-as-p' approach, seems to be 'in fashion' at the moment. But after a second glance the focus on individual actions and processes within an organization does not seem to be such a revolutionary concept as it is entitled in many publications. Most of us would recognize similar approaches, which focus on internal factors and processes that occur within an organization, from their courses at the business schools. Without going into more details at this point, the practice-based approach has many characteristics of a process-based approach (which focuses on internal processes), of the resource-based view (which focuses on internal resources) and of institutional theories (which focus on institutional processes).

Many s-as-p advocates claim that they represent the 'latest' and 'newest' approach within the field of organizational theories and strategy research although some (or even many) characteristics of the 'new' approach can be found in traditional ones. Reflecting scientists commonly speak of 'fashions' to describe management approaches that become very popular in a short period of time. To use the metaphor of 'old wine in new bottles' fashions try to sell content that has been existing for a long time, only this time with another label. In everyday life, such a phenomenon would frequently be entitled as a 'fashion' or as 'hype'. A lot of people are trying to adopt the new fashion in a short time period and say that it is 'new', 'trendy' and 'hip' however on closer inspection we sometimes recognize that those fashions share various characteristics with phenomena that have been popular decades ago and are therefore only labeled with a new name or surrounded by a new package.

As mentioned above, such phenomena are well known also regarding management techniques and organizational research and are commonly entitled as 'management-fashions'. Concepts are popular for a short period of time and are played down afterwards if a newer approach appears. Thus the question occurs whether the practice-based approach is only a fashion which is popular at the moment or if it is really a new and promising approach in organizational studies that can help us to understand organizations in a better way.

⁶ Barley/Kunda, 2001.

⁷ Vuorinen/Kohtamäki, 2008, p 165.

1.1 Research question and objective

Can the practice-based approach in organizational studies be seen as a new and promising concept or is it just a 'management fashion' that was build out of various ideas which already existed in established approaches? Hereby it has to be mentioned that the term 'management fashion' is commonly used for management techniques and in general not for discussing organizational theories. But also scientific research is influenced by certain 'fashion waves' that come and go in the course of time. Ideas which were recognized once as promising and innovative and therefore attracted a lot of attention are played down after some time if weaknesses have been discovered and a new approach appears that promises to overcome those.

At the first view this question seems to consist out of two parts, but when dealing with the corresponding management fashion literature we can see that such an 'old concept with new name' approach is one of the main characteristics of a management fashion. Therefore, it is essential to look whether s-as-p can be regarded as an entirely new strategy approach or not. In addition to that the question of the theoretical foundations of the new concept has to be answered. In general, management fashions are commonly not based on well elaborated theories respectively on extensive scientific research. By combining various characteristics of management fashions, comparable established approaches, theoretical foundations and the concept itself I will try to 'deliver a judgment' of the concept in question.

1.2 Research method

Regarding the research method this thesis focuses primary on the relevant literature in different scientific journals as there are only a few books that are dealing with this topic at the moment⁸. In addition to that I will use bibliographic databases to explore the number of publications that discuss strategy-as-practice since empirical research into 'management fashions' or 'organization concepts' is commonly done by using print media indicators (PMI) to reflect the number of publications on an organization concept.⁹ Of course the evaluation of s-as-p will not only be based on quantitative figures but on a much higher degree by considering qualitative characteristics of fashions in general and of s-as-p in particular.

By focusing mainly on literature, this topic seems quite theoretical at the first view, but I think that it has definitely practical relevance. On the one hand I would like to create awareness about 'hypes' in management studies, on the other hand I want to

⁸ In fact, Vienna University of Economy and Business offers one book regarding that topic.

⁹ Cf. Benders/Nijholt/Heusinkveld, 2007, p 815.

show that not all approaches (whether in organizational theory or in everyday management work) that are entitled with the adjectives 'new' and 'latest' are really as revolutionary as they look at first sight.

1.3 Structure

This thesis consists of two main parts. The first one discusses quantitative and qualitative characteristics of management fashions. Second, the characteristics, origins and comparable concepts of the strategy-as-practice approach are summarized. Hereby I was faced with the following problem: Should I discuss the strategy-as-practice approach in the first step to introduce the concept and base, the part which deals with 'fashions', afterwards or vice versa. I choose the second option due to the fact that in my point of view, it makes more sense if the reader has a basic understanding about different characteristics of fashions. Hopefully this will result in a much more critical consideration regarding the s-as-p approach, if all mentioned characteristics are viewed under the lens of management fashions. Furthermore, some concepts that are good examples for management fashions share some characteristics with the 'new' approach.

Concluding this thesis has the following structure: *Chapter two* discusses relevant terminology regarding the concepts in questions that are consequently essential to understand the concepts in a better way. Based on these definitions, *chapter three* tries to illustrate the most important quantitative and qualitative characteristics of management fashions. In addition to that, *chapter four* deals with comparable organizational concepts. Most of them are frequently mentioned by advocates of the practice based approach as influencing their research in different ways. Furthermore, general points of critics, that are commonly used to differentiate the practice-based-approach from established ones, are examined. Afterwards I will discuss the so called practical-turn in sociology in *chapter five* as s-as-p is recognized as a 'small part' of these new developed social meta-theories. Obviously the theoretical considerations of this chapter form the basement of *chapter six*, where s-as-p is discussed in detail. Finally *chapter seven* tries to combine the several streams within this thesis with the target of answering the research question. For that reason the characteristics of management fashions will be compared with the concept and the underlying assumption of the practice-based approach of strategy.

2. Terminology and definitions

Strategy, routines, practice and fashions are the most important terms regarding this thesis. Unfortunately all of these words have a very broad meaning and can be used therefore to describe various circumstances. Within this chapter I want to find appropriate definitions for those expressions to narrow the terms further down so that they can be used as a basis for further considerations regarding the discussed concepts.

2.1 Strategy

‘Strategy’ and ‘strategic’ are fashionable catchwords used in various kinds of situations. Although an accurate definition of these words is hard to find, they are used commonly by practitioners and business journals for describing something as ‘important’ and ‘long-termed’.¹⁰ Thereby the expression creates different associations in the mind of different people. To find an adequate definition of the term I first want to look at its historical development. The etymologic derivation of the word could be found in military terminology. According to the Oxford English Dictionary strategy in that context is the “art of projecting and directing the larger military movements and operations of a campaign and usually distinguished from tactics, which is the art of handling forces in battle or in the immediate presence of the enemy”. In the course of time, the words ‘strategy’ and ‘strategically’ received a broader meaning and found their way into every day speech of people. Hence a more general definition in ‘The Oxford Dictionary’ defines the word strategy as: “a plan for successful action based on the rationality and interdependence of the moves of the opposing participants” for the “(theoretical) circumstances of competition or conflict, as in the theory of games, decision theory or business administration”.

Consequently also regarding business administration and organizational theory a clear-cut definition of strategy is hard to find. Thereby these differences in the meaning and conceptualization of strategy affect both academics as well as practitioners.¹¹ Havenga/Hobbs (2003) noted in this regard: “Strategy is, for many people, a weighty subject. The subtle meaning seems frightening to some and seems to convey a sense of near mystical and charismatic power to others.”¹²

¹⁰ Cf. Lombriser/Abplanalp, 2005, p 21.

¹¹ Mukherji, 2003, p 1.

¹² Havenga/Hobbs, 2004, p 3.

One early definition was provided by the American business historian, Chandler (1962), who suggested: "Strategy is the determination of the basic long term goals and objectives of an enterprise, and the adaption of course of action and the allocation of resources for carrying out those goals."¹³ Another (broader) definition is given by Pinson (2008) who mentions that strategy can be seen as "...a plan of action designed to achieve a particular goal that has been established."¹⁴ In contrast to this very general definition, Hitt et al. focus on the business context and define strategy as: "...an integrated and co-ordinated set of commitments and actions designed to explicit core competencies and gain a competitive advantage"¹⁵.

A large number of various definitions could be added to these three examples but from my point of view they are good ones to illustrate the broad range of possible definitions and the difficulty to find an appropriate one. For the use of this thesis I will use the 'comprehensive definition' proposed by Lombriser/Abplanalp out of two reasons: On the one hand they mention both formal aspects of strategy and aspects with regard to the content of a formulated strategy, which allows a very detailed explanation of different characteristics. On the other hand they formulate their definition with respect on the case of 'strategic management' and therefore in an appropriate way for the use within this thesis.

formal aspects	aspects regarding content
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategy has an all-embracing character, • is long-term- and future orientated, • based upon highly aggregated information and on • both, intended action but also on flexibility, creativity and entrepreneurial learning and • contains moreover rational, motivational and emotional elements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategy is fundamental success-oriented, • focuses on the one hand on attractive business segments (mainly products and markets) but on the other hand also on internal skills (strategic excellence position, competitive advantages) and • involves targets, measures and resources.

Table 1: Aspects of a comprehensive definition of strategy according to Lombriser/Abplanalp, 2005, p 25.

Moreover, this definition meets the notion of strategy that can be found commonly regarding mainstream research in strategy but also within the 'new' practice approach. Both are interested in the relationship between formal and content aspects of

¹³ Chandler, 1962, p 13.

¹⁴ Pinson, 2008, p 32.

¹⁵ Hitt/Ireland/Hoskisson, 2003, p 9.

strategy. S-as-p scholars for example combine those two sides when they note that 'strategy' is not only an attribute of firms but also an activity undertaken by people.¹⁶ "Strategy is something people do."¹⁷

After finding a suitable definition for the word itself, we have to distinguish between



Figure 1: Types of strategy

various kinds of strategy, depending on their conceptual duties and responsibilities. As illustrated in Figure 1, most papers and books distinguish between 'corporate strategy' and 'business strategy'. Corporate-level strategy in general is concerned with the overall scope of an organization and how value will be added to the different parts (business units) of the organization. This could include issues of geographical coverage or diversity of products and/or services.¹⁸ Foss (1997)

defines this strategy level as "... the pattern of decisions in a company that determines and reveals its objectives, purposes, or goals, produces the principal policies and plans for achieving those goals, and defines the range of business the company is to pursue, the kind of economic and human organization it is or intends to be, and the nature of the economic and noneconomic contribution it intends to make to its shareholders, employees, customers, and communities."¹⁹ Typically corporate strategy reflects the company's mission and vision, that is, saying what the company does, why it exists, and what it is intended to become.²⁰ In addition to that, a business strategy defines how an organization intends to compete within a chosen market segment. Hence the corporate strategy is implemented through several business units with an individual business strategy that allows it to compete successfully in the market place and to contribute to the corporate strategy.²¹

Obviously both levels of strategy are relevant for strategy researchers. On the one hand most of them try to analyze existing corporate strategies and suggest appropriate corporate strategies for a given firm in a given situation. On the other

¹⁶ Cf. Carter/Clegg/Kornberger, 2008, p 86.

¹⁷ Jarzabkowski, 2004, p 529.

¹⁸ Johnson/Scholes/Whittington, 2008.

¹⁹ Cf. Foss, 1997, p 52.

²⁰ Pangarkar/Kirkwood, 2009, p 24.

²¹ Cf. Henry, 2008, p 220.

hand various strategy scholars go beyond the exclusive consideration of corporate strategy as being essential for the organizational outcome. Therefore, also business strategies within the company are taken into considerations by strategy research due to the fact that strategic objectives like 'cost leadership' or 'differentiation' are commonly situated on the business level. Concluding it must be mentioned that when the practice-based approach of strategy proclaims to look "more deeply into the micro-activity inside organizational processes" but also to attend "... more seriously to the macro-context outside process"²² its advocates do not mean the distinction between business- and corporate strategy. Rather both, business and corporate strategies are recognized on a macro level that is influenced by micro activities of individual actors.

2.2 Routines and practice

According to the Chambers 21st Century Dictionary, the noun 'routine' describes

- (1) a regular or unvarying series of actions or way of doing things (daily routines),
- (2) a regular or unvarying procedure or
- (3) a series of movements.

Especially the definition as 'daily routines' emphasizes the obvious connection of the term with organizational theories. This is due to the fact that organizational tasks form a large part of the daily routines of the employees. Consequently, routines are an issue for organizational theories and management studies. Thereby the idea of constructing explanations with the help of internal structure is a basic element of scientific research across a wide range of disciplines. For example, geologists explain phenomena such as earthquakes and volcanoes in terms of internal structures or doctors explain diseases in terms of internal processes within the human body.²³

In classical organizational studies 'routine' refers to a central phenomenon that is directly connected with economies of scale, division of labor and specialization. Routines in the classical meaning of the word are thereby individual actions that are executed frequently and result in savings due to a learning process.²⁴ In recent years, the concept has been discussed in a much broader meaning, by not seeing them as iterated individual actions but moreover as a complex phenomenon²⁵ that is commonly constructed in the mind of people through social interaction. The following

²² Johnson/Langley/Melin/Whittington, 2007, p 36.

²³ Pentland/Feldman, 2005, p 793.

²⁴ Cf. for example time and motion studies by Gilbreth, 1911 and Taylor F. W., 1911.

²⁵ Geiger/Koch, 2008, p 693.

three definitions that can be found in literature illustrate this shift in the meaning of this term²⁶:

- (1) Behavior patterns (recurrent interaction patterns): Currently, most scholars think of organizational routines as repeated behavior patterns for accomplishing tasks
- (2) Rules (standard operating procedures, heuristics, etc.): Organizational routines are seen in this context as rules (standard operating procedures) that are internalized by the members of the organization and consequently result in recurrent interaction patterns.
- (3) Dispositions: Some recent articles argue that organizational routines should be understood as dispositions to engage in previously adopted or acquired behavior, triggered by an appropriate stimulus or context. Rather than patterns of behavior, routines are here seen as 'stored behavioral capacities or capabilities'.

From my point of view, the third definition seems to explain the underlying ideas of the strategy-as-practice approach excellently. When advocates of the approach claim to "bring work back in [in strategy research]"²⁷ by focusing on the behavior of people within the organization due to the fact that "sustainable advantage (...) is lodged in the interactive behaviors of people..."²⁸ similarities with this definition are obvious. Concluding and with respect to further chapters of this thesis, it must be mentioned that routines occupy a critical position in different organization theories. As genetic material, routines are used to explain the inertial quality of organizational structure in evolutionary theories. As memory, routines have become a cornerstone in theories of organizational learning and adaption, as well. Thereby routines occupy the crucial nexus between structure and action and therefore between the organization as an object and the day-to-day activities of organizing.²⁹

Based on the relatively detailed explanation regarding 'routine', I want to discuss the term 'practice' only briefly. One might bring up the question, why much more attention is given on routine than on practice, due to the fact that the title of this thesis is 'strategy-as-practice' and not 'strategy-as-routine'. Without going into further details at this point, it has to be noted that 'practice' can be seen as a collective term for various kinds of routines, and consequently that a sequence of different routines within an organization explicate the work that is done 'in practice'. Chia (2004) illustrates the mutually dependent application of the words when he notes: "The key

²⁶ Becker/Zirpoli, 2008, p 129.

²⁷ Barley/Kunda, 2001.

²⁸ Johnson/Langley/Melin/Whittington, 2007, p 8.

²⁹ Cf. Pentland/Rueter, 1994, p 484.

emphasis in these practice, or activity-based approaches are the oftentimes mundane everyday details that lead to strategy formulation – the routines of budgeting, the expenditure meetings, the reports and presentations etc.”³⁰ With regard to the practice-based approach in organizational studies, the distinction between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ should also be mentioned. The definition that can be found in the Oxford English Dictionary seems adequate for that purpose, since the distinction between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ is mentioned explicit: “[practice is] the actual application or use of an idea, belief, or method, as opposed to the theory or principles of it...”. This distinction is reflected by theorists of the discussed approach when they claim that the “... traditional approach of organization science has only been concerned with a formal and rather reductionist analysis of organizations...”³¹ and call for attention “...to the practices by which work is actually done”³². Some authors furthermore distinguish mere human activities (praxis) from routinized patterns of activity (practice). In consequence, the practices that organizational members perform are embedded in praxis.³³

2.3 Fashion

“Modes, vogues, fads, fashions, rages, and crazes frequently revolutionize many aspects of cultural life.”³⁴ Traditionally fashion is primary associated with the field of costume and adornment, but fashion theorists emphasize that fashion operates in many areas of group life like science, Christian names and business management.³⁵ Sproles (1979) definition recognizes fashion as “a way of behaving that is temporarily adopted by a discernible portion of members of a social group because that chosen behavior is perceived to be socially appropriate for the time and situation”.³⁶ This definition seems to be very useful for this paper due to several reasons. On the one hand, it emphasizes the temporally component of the phenomena when he speaks of a ‘temporarily’ behavior that seems to be appropriate for the ‘time and situation’. As I will show later, a fashion is only successful if the optimal moment of its publication is chosen due to the fact that the new concept has to address requirements and desires

³⁰ Chia, 2004, p 1-2.

³¹ Geiger, 2009, p 187.

³² Whittington, 2002, p 119.

³³ Cf. Rasche, 2008, p 272.

³⁴ Abrahamson, 1996, p 254.

³⁵ Cf. Miller/McIntyre/Mantrala, 1993, p 142.

³⁶ Cf. Sproles, 1979, p 5.

of its potential users at this point of time. On the other hand the term 'socially appropriate' points out the view on fashions as social constructed phenomena. Most fashions are therefore primarily based on cognitive constructed assumptions in the minds of people and only secondary on hard and measurable facts. Consequently the actual quality and sensuousness of a certain concept is not called into question by many (potential) users, if major actors within the society advertise the concept to be 'all the rage'.

Apart from many articles that discuss the conventional acceptation of the word, also organizational theorist use the term to describe a certain type of management techniques. In this context it is difficult to find a universal definition of the word. Yet the appellation of the phenomenon differs significantly. Especially in Anglo-American publications the word trend is not common (unlike in the german speaking area). In fact English and American authors often speak of 'fads' (moods, temporary fashion) and of 'fashions' (rather long-termed fashions in contrast to fads). With regard to this it should be mentioned that some authors³⁷ tend not to distinguish between fads and fashion whereas some others mention that they are "totally different"³⁸ phenomena. Generally those authors define 'fads' as a panacea for all circumstances where old ideas are called into question and possible new ideas for solutions of existing problems are of interest. In contrast to that, fashions are recognized as phenomena that have much more impact on the organizations, because the implementation of a fashion requires time, money and effort. Therefore fashions are more long-lasting than fads and in most cases better described and defined approaches. Keeping these differences in mind I will use the term 'fashion' respectively 'management fashion' for further considerations regarding this thesis. From my point of view, all concepts that are discussed below are wide spread management concepts that were discussed extensively in literature. Furthermore, they are also characterized through a long period of existence. For these reasons the term 'fashion' seems to be more appropriate to define those various approaches. Linking this chapter with chapter three I want to mention that according to Zupancic/Belz/Biermann (2004) the term fashion is typically not defined clearly in academic articles which results consequently in a lack of criteria, whether a temporary organizational phenomenon could be classified as fashion or not.³⁹

³⁷ Cf. Cole, 1999 and Abrahamson, 1996.

³⁸ Cf. Dale, 2000, p 137.

³⁹ Zupancic/Belz/Biermann, 2004, p 9.

3. Management fashions

As mentioned above, fashions can also be observed regarding certain management techniques and correspondingly regarding strategic organizational decisions and organizational research. Frequently several components of the managerial work are highlighted as especially essential and gainful (even if these components look very similar at the first view). These 'management fashions' can be observed for example in the popular requirement that companies should focus on specific individual skills to differentiate the company from their competitors (Core Competences). This aim should be accomplished by streamlining the company (Lean Management) where – in simple words – all internal processes should be outsourced to external partners when this process could be bought cheaper or in a better quality from the market (Business Process Outsourcing). Consequently some popular management concepts of the 1990s like Core Competences, Lean Management, but also Total Quality Management (TQM) or Business Process Reengineering (BPR) are recognized as management fashions nowadays. Within this chapter I want to define therefore the term 'management fashions', explain how these fashions are developed and introduced and show what the main characteristics of them are. In the next step I want to illustrate that, like any other 'normal' fashion, these management fashions follow a certain life cycle. Basically this chapter should help us develop a certain awareness regarding different 'fashion characteristics' and supporting us consequently afterwards when we have a detailed look on the 'new' strategy-as-practice approach.

3.1 Definition and characteristics of management fashions

According to Benders/van Veen, Abrahamson (1996, p 257) is the only academic who made a definition of management fashions.⁴⁰ He defines this phenomena namely as: "... a relatively transitory collective belief, disseminated by management fashion setters, that a management technique leads rational management progress" and the fashion-setting process as: "... the process by which management fashion setters continuously redefine both theirs and fashion followers' collective beliefs about which management techniques lead rational management progress."

3.1.1 Management fashion vs. management ideology

The most influential concepts regarding management fashion was proposed by Abrahamson in various articles⁴¹, but it must be mentioned that the idea of seeing

⁴⁰ Cf. Benders/van Veen, 2001, p 35.

⁴¹ Cf. Abrahamson/Fairchild, 1999 and especially Abrahamson, 1996.

different management styles as the result of latent cognitive assumptions in the mind of the managerial staff is much older. Basically all management styles are based on different ways of how people look at the organization as a whole (organizational theories) and on fundamental assumptions that people have about their environment, about human nature and about the possibilities of gaining knowledge. Those assumptions are therefore strongly connected with the philosophical 'theories of cognition' and build the basement of all kinds of social science. So called social paradigms (cf. chapter 4.1) contain a certain ideological character as these underlying basic assumptions are not called into questions by the specific group of proponents. For example the well-known concept of 'scientific management' assumes employees as rational exchangeable parts of the organization that can be treated like other technical spare parts. Consequently, the non-consideration of human requirements and needs seems to be the ideological basement of this specific management approach. As Parush (2008) quotes: "The emerging literature on 'management fashion' and the older school of 'management ideology' share similar subject matters and consequently have much in common."⁴² To differentiate those two concepts we can point out that management ideology emphasizes on themes of authority and domination whereas management fashion highlights several change and dynamism mechanics. Consequently the turn from ideology to fashion can be seen as the shift from a focus on relatively institutionalized and general models that emerged since the end of the nineteenth century to a focus on more specific and short-lived models that waxed and waned since the 1980s.⁴³ For this paper I will use the term 'management fashion' due to the fact that we are talking about short-lived vogues which are often played-down if a newer concept is published. Consequently this short-term orientation of management fashions implicates that they have in fact no possibility to become an ideology at all.

In general, there are several groups of people who are interested in the development and the establishment of new management fashions. On the one hand the inventor of the concept (in most cases consultant companies or 'gurus') who expects high profits resulting of consulting services respectively of selling books or giving lectures. On the other hand also managers on all organizational levels are interested in new managerial concepts (that are identified afterwards as a fashion) due to the fact that they expect increasing profitably with less consumed time or certain 'signaling' effects towards stakeholders from the integration of the particular technique.

⁴² Parush, 2008, p 50.

⁴³ Cf. Parush, 2008, p 63.

3.1.2 The management-fashion-setting process

The management-fashion-setting process is a complex sequence of different action accomplished by individuals, groups or organizations who are trying to maximize their own profit. Kieser's central metaphor to describe this process was the game metaphor.⁴⁴ He conceptualized management fashion as forming an area in which various players bustle about: consultants, academics, managers and editors of management magazines. The main currency in the game is management rhetoric, and the players play mostly cooperative games with the aim of broadening the arena as a whole in order to enhance their overall profits, public image, power, or careers.⁴⁵ Abrahamson (1996) explained correspondently the process of setting a management fashion as occurring within a market, which is occupied by 'management-fashion-setters' on the supply side and 'management-fashion-users' on the demand side. Thereby, besides the interaction between supply and demand, various external factors (sociopsychological, technoeconomic) and norms are essential.⁴⁶

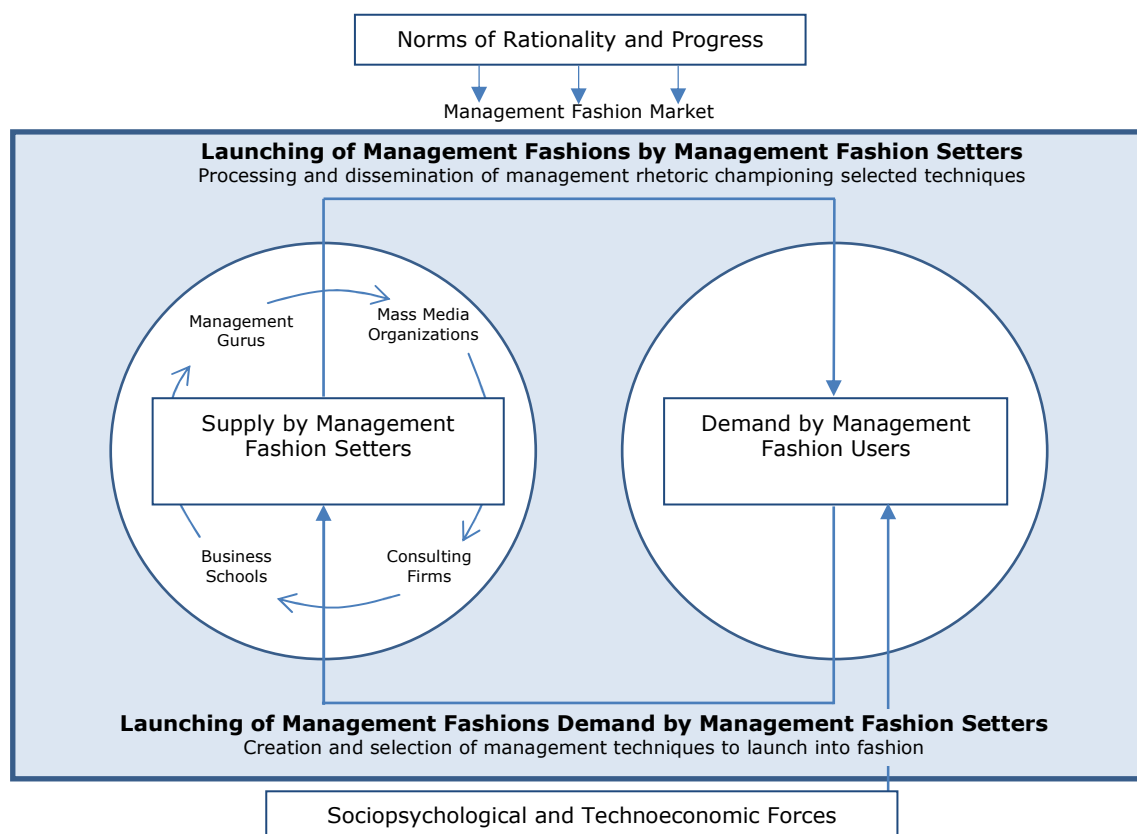


Figure 2: The management-fashion-setting process adapted from Abrahamson (1996)

⁴⁴ Cf. Kieser, 1996.

⁴⁵ Cf. Parush, 2008, p 55.

⁴⁶ Cf. Zupancic/Belz/Biermann, 2004, p 17.

Figures 2 illustrate the process according to Abrahamson. On the supply side there are various players who are interested in introducing a fashion. Commonly a bestselling book (that is marketed by mass media) can be seen as the initial point of the fashion, but some fashions also result from ideas of consultants or from studies that are published by business schools. Nevertheless commonly one point of origin can be identified. Therefore, the arrows in figure 2 are arranged clockwise (and not in both directions). In addition to that it must be mentioned that the process on the fashion supply side has to be viewed as one typical example (starting with a management guru). In fact various combinations and sequences are possible where every involved actor influences the other ones.

External factors that influence the process are on the one hand norms of rationality and progress and on the other hand sociopsychological and technoeconomic forces. According to Meyer and Rowan, organizational stakeholders expect managers to manage their organizations and employees rationally – that is by maximizing the effectiveness and the efficiency of the organization.⁴⁷ By adopting the latest management techniques that often promise quantum leaps in efficiency they can create the impression of acting rationally. Moreover, the general ambition of improving techniques and abilities also influences the management fashion demand. These norms of progress generate expectations of a never-ending improvement process and force managerial staff to act innovative and progressively.

In addition to that, Abrahamson mentions also technoeconomic explanations of fashion demand: Technical and economic changes create incipient preferences among fashion followers for certain types of management techniques that they find useful in narrowing performance gaps opened up by these environmental changes.⁴⁸ Beyond that, the success of management fashion also results of psychological needs of management fashion users. Sapir for example suggested that fashions gratify competing psychological drives for individuality and novelty, on one hand, and conformity and traditionalism, on the other⁴⁹. Applying this explanation to the realm of management fashion suggests that managers demand management fashions to appear individualistic and novel, relative to the mass of managers who are out of fashion but otherwise they maintain some measures of conformity and traditionalism by using techniques used by managers who are in fashion.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Cf. Meyer/Rowan, 1977.

⁴⁸ Cf. Abrahamson, 1996, p 273.

⁴⁹ Cf. Sapir, 1937.

⁵⁰ Cf. Abrahamson, 1996, p 271.

3.1.2.1 *Management-fashion-setters*

Various scholars have claimed that a variety of organizations and individuals populate a management-fashion-setting community: management consultants, business schools, and business-press organizations as well as academic gurus, consultant gurus, and hero managers. Most management fashions are made up by so called management gurus. These management gurus are often viewed as the creators of innovative ideas. Through the publication of best-selling books, articles in leading business journals and talks on the international lecture circuit they have become the outstanding producers of popular strategic ideas.⁵¹ Especially in the 1980s a small number of management commentators attained this 'guru status'. Their books sold in their thousands and even millions and their ideas were merchandised through popular books and articles as well as through mass media and management journals.⁵² Names like Peter Drucker, Tom Peters and Kenneth Blanchard are examples of this 'species' and are still very popular nowadays among managerial staff.⁵³ Some authors even note, that a whole 'guru industry' has grown rapidly in the world's developed economies.⁵⁴ This guru industry is defined for example by Crainer (1998) as "... that hotchpotch of ideas and actors, which produces advice concerning the aims, processes and conduct of management..."⁵⁵

Obviously only a few ideas regarding management techniques become popular and entitle their inventors as 'guru'. Therefore, the use of mass media is essential to make these concepts popular. Although even if the technique is discussed in both, academic and nonacademic publications, does not mean that it is adopted in 'real organizations'. For this reason a concept can only become a practical application and consequently a fashion if it is used by a large number of managers in their everyday work. From my point of view management consultants are therefore the most important players within that game. Although concepts can be developed by individuals or small groups, consultants are necessary to spread the new technique due to the fact that the success of a new concept is highly correlated with the number of companies which adopt the idea. With respect to this, it must be mentioned that the development of new customer segments and new areas of consulting services and therefore the introduction of 'new' concepts (respectively management fashions) build a very

⁵¹ Cf. Clark, 2004, p 108.

⁵² Cf. Huczynski, 1993, p 1-2.

⁵³ Cf. Jackson, 2001, p 1.

⁵⁴ Cf. Collins, 2000, p 26.

⁵⁵ Cf. Crainer, 1998.

important mechanism of creating new demand for management consulting companies. Thereby the ability of the experts (the consultants) to highlight the plausibility of the developed concept and to establish the assumption that for the implementation their help is needed is essential for the success of the consulting company.⁵⁶ A good marketing concept, which involves the elaboration of rhetoric that reveals organizational performance gaps and champions management techniques capable of narrowing these gaps, is absolutely necessary to fulfill this purpose.⁵⁷

To support the efforts of the consulting companies they can trust on the support of university professors which adapt new concepts relatively early. This adoption is favorable out of two reasons (from the point of the fashion creator). On the one hand they give their idea a sort of scientific legitimacy even if they do not do independent research regarding that topic.⁵⁸ On the other hand they spread the ideas under their students who are subsequently likely to implement them afterwards in companies they are working in.⁵⁹

3.1.2.2 Management-fashion-users

Fashions are a paradox phenomenon: they reduce insecurity, provide orientation and assure legitimation through the imitation of well-known examples so that the 'dedicated follower of fashion' is not alone.⁶⁰ A management technique is successful if it fulfills the requirements of managers regarding security and control on the one hand and the requirement regarding acceptance and identity on the other hand.⁶¹

All managers' are confronted with a world of risk and environmental uncertainty and management fashions help them to appear innovative by using state of the art management techniques which are considered to be a rational way of managing organizations and employees at that point of time. As mentioned above, managers that do not appear to use such techniques, disappoint stakeholders' expectations that the organization is run rationally. Consequently stakeholders will tend to withdraw their support from the organization, thereby increasing the likelihood that this

⁵⁶ Cf. Ernst/Kieser, 2002, p 67.

⁵⁷ Cf. Abrahamson, 1996, p 278.

⁵⁸ Cf. Kieser, 1996, p 28.

⁵⁹ Cf. Abrahamson, 1996, p 279.

⁶⁰ Cf. Faust, 2002, p 45.

⁶¹ Cf. Fink/Knoblach, 2008, p 462.

organization and its managers will fail (and therefore creating a self-fulfilling prophecy).⁶²

Furthermore, management fashions suggest a need of external help, i.e. consultancy companies. This is due to the fact that the described new techniques tend to be very vague in their formulation which leads to discussions among the consumers of these texts and the desire to get more and detailed information about the concept. As discussions will not lead to a satisfied explanation of the concept it is subsequently necessary to seek the advice of experts – which are of course the creators of the texts and therefore commonly consulting companies.⁶³ In addition to that, managers are vulnerable to those fashions because fashionable concepts reduce risk and responsibilities by building up the illusion of control. If a manager fails although he has adopted the new concept in an appropriate way, he can always claim that the failure is the fault of the concept. On the contrary, if the manager has omitted to adopt the new concept he would be accused that particularly his resistance against the new and innovative management technique had been the key factor of failure.⁶⁴ Moreover, these fashions could be used as motivating factors within the company because their implementation creates an illusion of future orientation or openness to change and creativity. Last, if the implementation of the fashion is marketed cleverly within the organization, it can even provide arguments for the need of reorganizations and make them appear reasonable and successful afterwards.

The larger the number of companies which have implemented the discussed fashion successfully, the higher is the acceptance of the technique within the industry. Therefore, consultant companies try to publish reports about achievements that resulted from the implementation of a new concept. As a consequence companies which do not have implemented the questionable concept are more likely to adopt the concept as they are not willing to lose cooperative advantage. The downside of this mechanic is that the larger the number of managers and organizations is that follow the fashion, the lesser is the possibility to demonstrate the attendance of innovation for the particular manager. Therefore, fashions are no long-lasting phenomena and consequently result in rejection of the technique by the consumers who are looking for something new and different.⁶⁵

⁶² Cf. Abrahamson, 1996, p 261-262.

⁶³ Cf. Ernst/Kieser, 2002, p 66-67.

⁶⁴ Cf. Abrahamson, 1996, p 270-274.

⁶⁵ Cf. Faust, 2002, p 45.

3.1.3 Characteristics of management fashions

A fashion is limited in duration and get substituted due to social processes by newer - and then recognized as state of the art - temporary concepts⁶⁶. Like the concept of management ideology, the concept of management fashion can be used in a negative/critical sense or in a neutral one. Where only few students of management fashion maintained a completely neutral conception of fashion most authors use the term management fashion in a negative way. Commonly fashions are seen as a fickle, often irrational, potentially even destructive phenomenon. The question whether all fashions have a negative impact on companies which implement them will be discussed later. First of all I want to explain key characteristics of management fashions which can be found in literature that can help us afterwards when we take a detailed look on strategy-as-practice in that context. Alfred Kieser proposed a model of fashions where several key metaphors guided his analysis, including management fashions as a religion and management gurus as their priests, who seduce anxious managers with promises of salvation and threaten them with apocalypse if they do not apply the latest panacea.⁶⁷ According to Kieser, the more of the following rhetoric elements a management book features, the more is the likelihood of the book becoming a bestseller:⁶⁸

- (1) A key factor is being highlighted, for example corporate culture, quality management and lean production or core competences. According to the authors this factor has not been considered in managerial decision yet which means that its discovery can be seen as a revolutionary and radical break with traditional management principles. The main problem thereby is the generalization regarding these key success factors. For example one of the main components of 'lean production', the just-in-time inventory management, tells factories in countries like America or Australia that they should slash their raw materials inventories and rely on frequent small consignments by their suppliers. However, these suppliers may be 500 miles away and the trucking companies may be unionized which leads consequently to high dependences, cost blow-outs and production losses.⁶⁹
- (2) The application of the new approach is set to be inevitable because the old techniques are set to fail due to environmental changes and new threats (e.g. the threat of bankruptcy in case of non-adoption).

⁶⁶ Fink/Knoblach, 2008, p 461.

⁶⁷ Cf. Parush, 2008, p 55.

⁶⁸ Kieser, 1996.

⁶⁹ Cf. Donaldson/Hilmer, 1998, p 16.

- (3) The new principles are connected with important values of the reader, for example besides efficiency with employee satisfaction, cooperative advantages of the local economy or creativity and capacity for innovation within the company. Therefore, and with respect to the explanations in chapter 4.1, the authors base their techniques on social paradigms, which seem to be appropriate at that point of time.
- (4) The author shows examples of – local – areas of excellence where the concept was introduced successfully. Furthermore, the rhetorical technique of personalization is essential for giving the idea a face and to underline that appropriate leadership is the most important thing regarding the implementation. In addition to that management fashion setters try to stress the concept's universal applicability.
- (5) No manager is blamed for not discovering and not applying the new principles on his own. In fact everything has changed according to the fashion setters – environment and appropriate solutions – and if these changes are not considered appropriately (of course with help of the new concept) the company would get very soon in serious troubles.
- (6) Potential bestsellers are moreover characterized by a mix of simplicity and ambiguity. Interpretative viability, e.g. leaving a certain room for interpretation, is therefore essential to provide space for discussions and the offer of consultancy services. Moreover, the presentation of the concept as an easily understandable commodity with a catchy title would attract additional users. Thereby the attention which a new management technique receives by potential consumers is highly depending on the rhetorical quality of the text and of course on the timing of the publication. As Crainer (1998) quotes "... management's gurus are as much a part of the entertainment business as they are part of industry..."⁷⁰
- (7) Commonly the author points out that the implementation of the concept can cause big problems and the possibility of a failure implementation is enormous but consequently he underlines thereby the challenging character of the implementation process to appeal the competitive streak of the managers. Furthermore, he promises preferably substantial performance enhancement if the challenge is met and the concept is implemented successfully.
- (8) Sometimes the author mentions empirical studies which 'prove' the usefulness of the concept without discussing detailed research methods. Especially if a well-known university is involved, the reader would take the findings for granted without asking for detailed information. Donaldson/Hilmer (1998) mention in this regard that the main problem with those fads is „... their lack of any solid

⁷⁰ Crainer, 1998 quoted from Collins, 2000, p 26.

intellectual foundation. Implicit in each fad is a cause-and-effect statement that is rarely made explicit and never properly supported.”⁷¹

- (9) The potential bestseller has to be easily readable, meaning that the sentences have to be kept short and no academic expressions or foreign words should be used. Commonly interviews with top managers are contained in these bestselling books to underline the author’s connection to the economy.
- (10) The most important factor is of course, as mentioned before, an appropriate timing. The concept has to have the finger on the pulse of the time and consider the actual requirements of the market.

3.2 Models of management fashion

Literature about management fashion distinguishes between various models that try to explain the emergence of management fashions. On the one hand process models try to define and to analyze the actors and processes that are involved in the process of fashion development. On the other hand life cycle models illustrate the dissemination among managerial staff in the form of a bell-shaped curve.⁷²

3.2.1 Process models

The process model that has been discussed most intensively in the correspondent literature is the model of Abrahamson⁷³. Based on his theory, the management fashion setting process is defined as the process by which management-knowledge entrepreneurs continuously redefine both their and fashion followers’ collective beliefs about which management techniques are at the forefront of rational management progress.⁷⁴



Figure 3: Fourfold management fashion process model according to Abrahamson, 1996, p 264-270.

In the *first stage* (creation) “management fashion setters produce the collective beliefs that certain management techniques are both innovations and improvements relative to the state of the art.”⁷⁵ Thereby new concepts are developed and discussed by

⁷¹ Donaldson/Hilmer, 1998, p 17.

⁷² Cf. Fink/Knoblach, 2008, p 18.

⁷³ Abrahamson, 1996 refers on his part to the more general fashion setting process of Hirsch, 1972.

⁷⁴ Cf. Abrahamson/Fairchild, 1999.

⁷⁵ Abrahamson, 1996, p 265.

scientists, consultants and other promoters. If these discussions are favorable for the new technique, other players of the fashion-setting-process jump on the bandwagon, which results consequently in a more and more self-enhancing process. The more promoters support the fashion, the more the new ideas are distributed among the market actors and the more difficult it becomes for potential fashion setters to ignore the new development.⁷⁶ In the *second stage* (selection) fashion setters select certain management techniques according to the demand for new types of management fashions. After selecting a management technique, it gets processed in the *third stage* (*processing*). Thereby processing involves the elaboration of a rhetoric that can convince fashion followers that a management technique is both: rational and at the forefront of management progress.⁷⁷ In addition to that, the name of the new approach is essential for their success. It must have a positive cognition, highlight the possibility of dramatic changes in profit and suggest feasibility.⁷⁸ The *fourth stage* of the fashion-setting-process (dissemination) tries to disseminate the new concepts. Fashion setters use the power of mass media to distribute their concepts. Indeed, mass-media publications reach broad public and therefore, have the potential to draw widespread attention to particular management techniques.⁷⁹

3.2.2 Life cycle models

In contrast to process models, life cycle models of management fashions do not try to explain the process of origin of these concepts but rather the chronological development of the fashion based on its diffusion rate.⁸⁰ In most cases the diffusion rate is thereby determined through qualitative empirical research methods as explained in section 3.4. There are several life cycle models that can be found in the management fashion literature⁸¹ which look relatively similar. They consist of four stages (with a different terminology) where “a relatively long period of dormancy, after a management technique has been invented, reinvented, or rediscovered, is followed by a short-lived, bell-shaped, symmetric popularity curve”⁸².

⁷⁶ Cf. Fink/Knoblach, 2008, p 463.

⁷⁷ Cf. Abrahamson, 1996, p 266-268 and Staehle, 1999, p 143.

⁷⁸ Kieser, 1996, p 27.

⁷⁹ Cf. Abrahamson, 1996, p 269.

⁸⁰ Cf. Fink/Knoblach, 2008, p 463.

⁸¹ For example Abrahamson/Fairchild, 1999; Gill/Whittle, 1992 and Fink/Knoblach, 2008.

⁸² Abrahamson/Fairchild, 1999, p 711.

For this paper I will use the fourfold process (thematisation, expansion, dominance, and dethematisation) proposed by Fink⁸³:

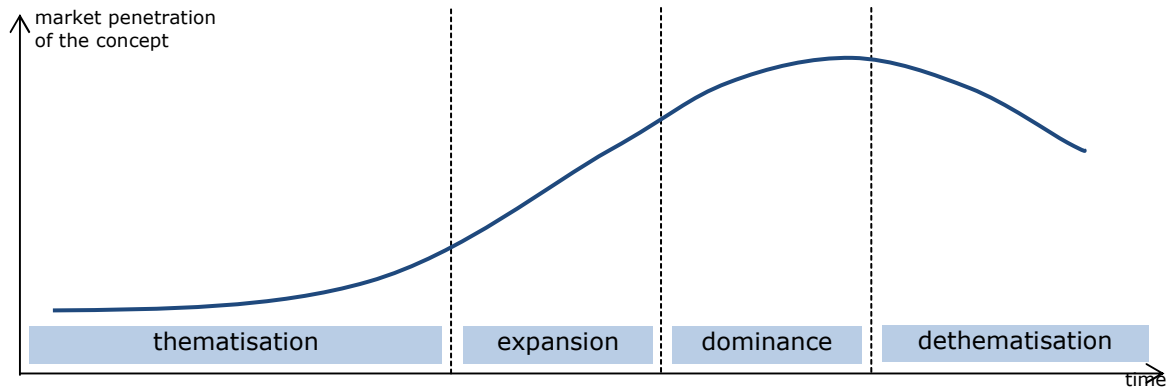


Figure 4: The life cycle of management concepts adopted from Fink, 2003.

As mentioned above, the market penetration of the concepts is measured frequently by analyzing their media attention and comparing these 'waves' afterwards with other observed fashions. Although an exclusive consideration of media attention (without attention on other characteristics) seems to be problematic, this approach obviously makes sense. Following the definition of fashions as transitory collective beliefs, media discourse influences the production of collective beliefs causally.⁸⁴

In the *thematisation phase*, initial discourse paves the way for a new concept, and the first coalitions of authors, consultants and other promoters are formed. In this stage the rate of adoption of the concept is still relatively low and is characterized by moderate growth rates. Simultaneously the number of articles referring to a management concept rises, resulting of growing popularity for the concept.

Secondly in the *expansion phase*, the propagated ideas and principles encounter wider acceptance. More and more companies go on to implement the concept, while at the same time it is being taken up by a growing promoter community and spread into the market with increasing vehemence. This stage represents a pattern in which the number of articles referring to a management concept rises while the proportion of the articles that refer to the concept in their titles declines. Consequently, its rate of adoption increases strongly.

Afterwards the concept meets with the highest degree of acceptance in the *dominance phase*, during which its ideas and the methods of the concept become a generally accepted norm. Again, this phase is characterized by moderate growth. However, this time, growth is based on a relatively high rate of adoption. Finally, in the

⁸³ Fink, 2003. Fink/Knoblach, 2007 and Fink/Knoblach, 2007, p 54-55.

⁸⁴ Cf. David/Strang, 2006, p 217.

dethematisation phase, there is a change in the mode of thinking. More and more consultants disengage from the old coalitions and distance themselves from the previous ideas and join up to form new promoter communities in order to launch the next fashion.⁸⁵

There are several factors which lead to the downswing of a management fashion. First of all, some fashions simply become old and battered. Once they are seen as old fashioned, they lose their value as a symbol of innovation. Everyone is using the technique everyone talks about and everyone knows how to handle the technique (which is of course disadvantageous for consultants).⁸⁶ The ideas, that are now no longer considered to be new and innovative, are worn out and have revealed weaknesses. Ultimately they lose ground to new concepts. Of course it must be mentioned, that if a concept is 'out of fashion' once, it does not mean that it is lost forever.⁸⁷ Retrospectively it can be observed frequently, that as fashions in common sense (e.g. clothes) management fashions tend to return after a longer period of time. As Peter Drucker quotes: „In the ten years between 1910 and 1920 [...] every single one of the great themes of management is struck [...] And almost everything that we have done since then, in theory as well as in practice is only a variation and extension of the themes first heard during that decade“⁸⁸.

Based on the considerations regarding the life cycle, Fink and Knoblach distinguish between fashions with respect on the stability of their guiding principles. As the proposed principles are often ambivalent and vague, they are subjected to be interpreted by their users. Namely the authors mention the following types of fashions⁸⁹:

- (a) stable fashions where their original principles are strengthened in the course of time as intended by their inventors,
- (b) volatile fashions where their original principles pass through various turns, inflections and changes in the course of time, whereas these changes are not intended by the inventors at the beginning, and
- (c) emergent fashions where the principles are not defined ex ante by individual players, but rather been developed through a self-organized process.

⁸⁵ Cf. Fink, 2003, p 54-55 and Rüling, 2005, p 189-190.

⁸⁶ Cf. Kieser, 1996, p 33.

⁸⁷ Cf. Fink, 2003, p 55.

⁸⁸ Drucker, 1977, p 19.

⁸⁹ Cf. Fink/Knoblach, 2008, p 469.

3.3 Examples of fashions

In the past two or three decades, an inflation of new - or renewed, as some would have it — models of management approaches have swept managerial circles around the globe. Lean Management, the learning organization, TQM, business process reengineering and other models have been frequently taken up and applied by large managerial staff, only to be abandoned or played down shortly afterward.⁹⁰ Thereby those concepts tend to be represented by their advocates as promising and innovative. At the same time, they are often criticized for not being promising or innovative at all.⁹¹ Due to these reasons, I want to discuss some of the mentioned concepts briefly. My primary focus is hereby not on explaining the models in detail. Rather I want to highlight some specific characteristics of the concepts regarding typical evidences of management fashions. Furthermore, some of these well-known management approaches also share basic assumptions with the 'new' strategy-as-practice approach.

3.3.1 Business Process Reengineering

Business Process Reengineering has been a very popular management concept in the 1990s and is still a frequently mentioned approach nowadays. The concept was introduced by Hammer and Champy in 1993 who defined their approach as "... the fundamental rethinking and radical redesign of business processes to achieve dramatic improvements in critical contemporary measures of performance, such as cost, quality, service, and speed."⁹² In general, the whole concept is based on four basic assumptions:

- (1) BPR focuses on the decisive business processes
- (2) Business processes have to be tied on customer requirements
- (3) The company has to concentrate on its core competences
- (4) Information technology has to be used intensively to support the processes.

Especially since business processes are highlighted within the concept of BPR, similarities with s-as-p are obvious, although s-as-p focuses of course primary on more 'intangible' strategy making activities. In contrast BPR analyzes more 'real existing' inner-organizational structures and workflows (processes). BPR postulates thereby a certain domination of operational dynamics over organizational structure,⁹³

⁹⁰ Cf. Parush, 2008.

⁹¹ Cf. Benders/van Veen, 2001, p 33.

⁹² Hammer/Champy, 1993.

⁹³ Staehle, 1999, p 672.

which results in some interesting statements where some authors mention that the process orientated organization (as a result of BPR) is just a younger model of divisionalized organizational structures.⁹⁴

Although such general declarations are of course simplified, they are good indicators for identifying management fashions as the 'old wine in new bottles' character of management fashions is criticized frequently. Moreover, the initial mentioned definition of BPR seems to be a further evidence for management fashion due to the fact that Hammer and Champy use superlatives when they speak of 'fundamental rethinking' and 'dramatic improvements'. In addition to that, the very broad and vague basic assumptions of the concept in question are typical for a management fashion. Another comparable evidence for seeing BPR as a fashion is mentioned by Davenport/Stoddard (1994) when they quote that "business process reengineering has been touted as the magical elixir that will empower managers to free themselves from existing constraints, to 'think out of the box' and to achieve significant benefits."⁹⁵ Comparable with other popular management concepts BPR originated in university research, followed by excellent marketing of a consulting company and a bestselling book, that promises quantum leaps in management, ending even in a short period when the concept was seen as an economic panacea. Unfortunately, like any other management fashion, the concept does not even come close to meet those high expectations.⁹⁶ Even Michael Hammer and James Champy admit that 70 to 80 percent of such reengineering projects fail.⁹⁷ The absence of substance and foundations of the concept was criticized frequently which resulted in the phenomenon that one of the most important management concepts of the 1990s is nowadays recognized widely as a fashion.

3.3.2 Total Quality Management

The origins of Total Quality Management⁹⁸ can be found in Japan, although many of the original ideas came from Americans who helped to rebuild Japanese industry after World War II. In general, TQM emphasizes continuous and ongoing activities on all organizational levels with the focus of identifying weaknesses, controlling processes and organizing organizational routines. Those gradual, unending improvement

⁹⁴ Kasper/Heimerl/Mühlbacher, 2002, p 77.

⁹⁵ Davenport/Stoddard, 1994, p 121.

⁹⁶ Cf. Fink/Knoblach, 2009, p 7-8.

⁹⁷ Cf. Straub/Forchhammer, 1995.

⁹⁸ Cf. Besterfield et al., 2003.

activities which involve every person in the organization should thereby support the establishment of quality as the overall organizational objective.⁹⁹ For this reason, TQM is set to be an approach that tries to combine duties and responsibilities of the management, inner organizational processes, employee requirements as well as expectations of customers.¹⁰⁰ Different quality norms and corresponding certifications¹⁰¹ have been subsequently developed to support companies in the introduction of total quality management systems. Of course the mentioned certification of a company is very cost intensive. On the one hand, the certification is realized by external companies, on the other hand in most cases the support of a consulting company is needed to adjust the organizational processes according to the requirements of those norms.

Many companies benefit, if TQM and the corresponding certifications are recognized as a key success factor for companies. This institutionalization of general assumptions regarding the benefits of TQM approach is the first indicator that we can observe regarding management fashion. As mentioned above, consulting companies are often inventors of new fashions due to the fact that they try to enlarge their field of business and consequently attract potential customers. If such companies manage to establish a collective belief within an industry that one concept is absolutely necessary for long term success, their future profits will be secured. Therefore, all consultants jumped on the bandwagon of TQM consulting when TQM was a booming management fashion in the 1990s, although the technical foundations of the practice were missing in most cases.¹⁰² In addition to this considerations, we only have to read through the TQM explanation proposed by Hummel/Malorny to identify the very vague and broach character of the concept: „TQM is based on the participation of all members of an organization, the quality is in the center of attention, and thus aims to satisfy customers' long-term business success and to benefits to the members of the organization and to society in general. “¹⁰³ Obviously, no manager would negate, that ‘business success’ and ‘benefits to the members of the organization and to society in general’ are desirable organizational targets. Therefore, TQM is addressing basic intrinsic needs of potential followers like individual (professional) success on the one hand but also of making a contribution to the wealth of the society on the other hand.

⁹⁹ Cf. Näslund, 2008, p 272.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Rothlauf, 2004, p 38-39.

¹⁰¹ For example ISO 9000 and the EFQM model of business excellence.

¹⁰² David/Strang, 2006, p 215.

¹⁰³ Hummel/Malorny, 2002, p 5, english translation by author.

Out of these reasons, and of course due to the fact that such concepts are in general not suitable for every kind of organization, the success of TQM was declining after a certain period of time. For example, Byrne proclaimed 1997 in a 'business week'¹⁰⁴ article that "TQM is as dead as a pet rock". Comparable Haehling and Huesmann (2004) note that "...TQM is the latest management tool to go out of fashion; it is the most recent business panacea to show scant curative effect; it is the newest managerial emperor to lose its clothes."¹⁰⁵ Apart from that, also empirical studies demonstrate that the life cycle of TQM can be compared with a product life cycle and consequently with the management fashion life cycle that was introduced above. According to this research, TQM seems to be situated in the dethematisation phase of this fashion life cycle even long before 2002.¹⁰⁶

3.3.3 The learning organization

The increasing importance of information technology and the corresponding social development towards a 'knowledge based society' influences naturally the field of organizational studies and management techniques. For example Gerhard (1997) quotes that the increased importance of knowledge-based intangibles: "... depends more on managing the company's intellectual resources than on directing the physical actions of its people or the deployment of its tangible assets."¹⁰⁷ Consequently, these 'learning based' management approaches highlight the importance of knowledge building and learning processes within the company.

Argyris and Schön were among the first scholars to discuss learning processes within organizations.¹⁰⁸ According to them, an organization has learned if a change in their collective shared behavioral norms or respectively in the accepted schemes of interpretation among their members took place. Thereby organizational learning is recognized as the "...process within the organization by which knowledge about action-outcome relationships and the effect of the environment on these relationships is developed"¹⁰⁹. To describe such collective schemes of behavior Argyris and Schön introduced the term 'theories-in-use', meaning everyday theories on which humans base their decisions. In general, those 'theories-in-use' are unconscious and

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Byrne, 1997.

¹⁰⁵ Evans, 1995, p 5.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Haehling/Huesmann, 2004, p 253.

¹⁰⁷ Gerhard, 1997, p 195.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Argyris/Schön, 1978.

¹⁰⁹ Ducan/Weiss, 1979, p 84.

inaccessible for the public. In contrast to that, they speak of 'empoused theories' for official norms of behavior that were arranged between two parties or prescribed by higher authorities (e.g. the government). If the expectations and the outcome that results from a decision or an action differs (mismatch), individuals can try to correct the variance by adjusting their 'theory-in-use' (single-loop) or by revisiting their 'theory-in-use' (double-loop) when the variance occurs frequently. Existing 'theories-in-use' that are competing are furthermore tested by individuals and the more appropriate one gets integrated in the collective behavior.¹¹⁰ Advocates of learning based organizational theories are thereby interested in micro-activities and routines within the company. In general, they differentiate for that reason between 'lower-level' and 'higher-level' learning. Dodgson (1993) for example defines lower-level learning as "...those activities which add to the knowledge base or firm-specific competences or routines of the firm without altering the nature of their activities"¹¹¹. By contrast, higher-level learning refers mainly to the development of new routines, which can be seen as a discontinuous process, shifting from the state of rules to state of new rules.¹¹² Once again similarities between an established approach and s-as-p are obvious. Especially the concept of organizational learning seems to be very interesting regarding this thesis and will be discussed therefore in detail afterwards when we try to evaluate the 'new' approach.

From a management fashion point of view, it must be mentioned that the concept of organizational learning cannot be seen as a management fashion. On the one hand the concept is well elaborated and theoretically founded; on the other hand the concept itself was never applied by a large number of managers in the real business world. 20 years and a bestselling book were needed to make organizational learning popular. In fact the term of the 'learning organization' joined the business lexicon not before Peter Senge's book 'The Fifth Discipline'¹¹³ was first published in 1990. Apart from the catchy title, the following quotes illustrate the fashion characteristics of the concept excellently as they are so broad, vague, generalizing and moreover exaggerating promises that try to attract requirements and wishes of managerial staff. For example on page three he defines the learning organization as an "...organization where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective

¹¹⁰ Cf. Staehle, 1999, p 916-917.

¹¹¹ Dodgson, 1993, p 383.

¹¹² Cf. Saka-Helmhout, 2010, p 42.

¹¹³ Senge, 1990.

aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together." Based on that he mentions on page five "fundamentally [factors that] will distinguish learning organizations from traditional [ones]". Furthermore, he points out on page 14 that "a few brave organizational pioneers [that] are pointing the way...", and mentions "immense payoffs" on page 12 but also the "challenging character" of the implementation on the same page. Of course he also warns on page 17 that the organization as a whole "cannot recognize impending threats, understand the implications of those threats, or come up with alternatives" without applying his new concept. I could resume with many similar examples but if we compare these few sentences with the characteristics of management fashions mentioned above, we will recognize extensive similarities. Kerka et al. (2007) mention the same problem when they quote: "...comparable with lean management and business process re-engineering the concept ties in (supported by a catchy language) with the needs and problems of managers, often supported by long-winded success stories and Anglo-American bestseller-rhetoric."¹¹⁴

3.4 The up and down of organizational fashions

Every management fashion highlights singular facets of managerial work at the expense of another part which results in a pendulous up and downs of various fads. This frequent change from fashion to fashion respectively from one concept to another concept is thereby characterized by rather revolutionary than evolutionary processes. New management techniques are rarely based on traditional approaches that are advanced incrementally. In fact new management fashions try to break with 'old' and 'established' concepts by trying to substitute and displace them.¹¹⁵ In section 3.2.2 a life cycle model of management fashions was already explained in detail. Based on these theoretical considerations, the bell-shaped life cycle of different management techniques can also be demonstrated by qualitative empirical research. Qualitative empirical research into 'management fashions' or 'organization concepts' is thereby commonly dominated by the use of PMI. Such research builds on the premise that the number of publications on an organization concept in the course of time reflects the managerial interest in this concept.¹¹⁶ In general, those studies are based on qualitative techniques and consequently on multiple secondary information sources. This includes management and academic journals (e.g. articles in the ProQuest ABI/Inform article database as well as discourse volumes measured similarly as in the

¹¹⁴ Kerka/Kriegesmann/Schwering/Striewe, 2007, p 329, translated by the author.

¹¹⁵ Cf. Fink/Knoblach, 2007, p 93.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Benders/Nijholt/Heusinkveld, 2007, p 815.

previous chapter) or sales registers (ranking of bestselling books of the largest US online bookseller Amazon.com).¹¹⁷ Figure 5 for example illustrates the result of an empirical analysis¹¹⁸ that was conducted by Kerka/Kriegesmann/Schwering/Striewe, 2007. The life cycles of these three very popular management techniques follows (in

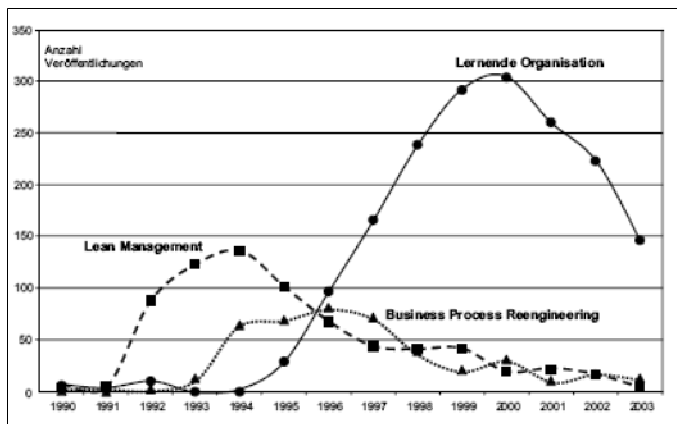


Figure 5: The up and down of management fashions

different intensity) the theoretical proposed model of management fashions. After a concept is introduced and marketed appropriately, various consultants and business school professors adopt the approach. Consequently the number of publications which discuss the concept increases exponentially.

After a certain period of time

fashion users and academics recognize that the new technique is not as innovative and novel as it looked at the first glance. Therefore, most fashion followers abandon the approach. Subsequently the decrease in attention results in fewer and fewer scientific publications that discuss the concept (in its original form).

Concluding it must be mentioned that the exclusive use of qualitative empirical techniques regarding scientific management fashion research is sometimes criticized. Although they are a good starting point that can give indications whether a concept is popular at a certain point of time, the number of publications enables no distinct answer to the question: "... how much and how organizations used the concept studied."¹¹⁹ Furthermore, various qualitative characteristics are crucial whether a concept can be judged as fashion or not, especially if the concept is discussed a priori (and therefore before the whole fashion life cycle is finished). For these reasons I will combine the mentioned quantitative techniques as well as the discussed qualitative characteristics in section 7 to evaluate the strategy research approach in question.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Klinecicz, 2006, p 88-89.

¹¹⁸ Their research is based on figures taken from Alfred Kieser's research and extended by the concept of the 'learning organization'. The quantity of publications represents the number of entries in the WISO 2 database.

¹¹⁹ Benders/Nijholt/Heusinkveld, 2007, p 827.

4. Foundations and similar concepts

Although proponents of the practice based approach title their concept as a 'new field'¹²⁰ in strategy research, they do not forget to consider the contributions of traditional concepts regarding academic strategy analysis. Most frequently contributions of the "Resource-Based View" (cf. Johnson et. al., 2003; Chia/MacKay, 2007), "Institutionalist Theories" (cf. Johnson et. al., 2007; Jarzabkowski, 2004 and Jarzabkowski/Whittington, 2008), process-approaches (cf. Carter et. al, 2008; Whittington, 2002 and Geiger, 2009), as well as the "Carnegie tradition of sensemaking and routines", the "Actor-network theory " and "Situated learning" theories (cf. Johnson et. al., 2007) are quoted. Generally speaking advocates of s-as-p criticize these concepts for seeing strategy as something that organizations have and therefore for focusing too much (or exclusively) on the 'macro context' of strategy without considering 'micro activities' within organizations. Even if these 'micro activities' are highlighted by strategy researchers (as in the process-approaches) they are used (according to practice-based theories) commonly for explaining the performance of the organizational unit as a whole whereas the practiced-based approach claims to point out the performance of the 'artful individuals'¹²¹.

Within this section I would like to discuss concepts, that look similar to the practice-approach of strategy on the first view, namely the process approaches, the resource-based view and the institutional theories as they are widespread within academic research and consequently well-known by business students. Moreover, I will give a short overview about the other more 'micro-activity' based approaches mentioned above and on evolutionary concepts of strategy research as they highlight the importance of processes and routines within organizations. From my point of view a good understanding of those basic foundations of s-as-p is absolutely necessary for evaluating afterwards, whether the so titled 'new approach' can really be seen as 'new' or rather just as an evolution respectively as a combination of those 'old' and established approaches.

4.1 A Framework of social science

Burrell and Morgan (1979) developed a framework which tries to categorize social theories in terms of four broad paradigms, based on different sets of meta-theoretical assumptions with regard to the nature of social science and the nature of society. The "*Functionalist Paradigm*" tries to better understand individual behavior within a social

¹²⁰ Hurtado, 2008, p 130.

¹²¹ Johnson/Langley/Melin/Whittington, 2007, p 35-36.

system by analyzing social processes on causal correlations and to put these correlations as universal paradigms. It assumes rational human action and claims to understand organizational behavior by testing hypothesis. The '*Interpretive Paradigm*' on the other hand beliefs that social reality is not given by "hard facts" but that social reality is designed by the members of the society and can be interpreted in different ways. Furthermore, theorists of the '*Radical Humanist Paradigm*' are mainly concerned with releasing social constraints that limit human potential and criticize current social structures which are separating people from their 'true selves'. The fourth paradigm is the '*Radical Structuralist Paradigm*' which propagandize the need of a social change within the society by understanding, explaining and criticizing the (according to this paradigm) objective given social structures within a social system. Therefore, this has been the fundamental paradigm of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Lenin.¹²²

A majority of organizational theories¹²³ that are discussed in business schools (i.e. Max Weber's analysis of bureaucracy, scientific management and Taylorism, the Human Relations-Approach, behavioral sciences or contingency, consistency, institutional economics and evolutionary approaches) can be categorized within these four paradigms. Paradigms become ideology if they are not reflected by their users. This means that for example a manager who bases his own management style on the '*Radical Humanist Paradigm*' always primary focuses on the requirements of his staff and not on the targets of the whole company (no matter if this managerial approach is optimal for reaching the different requirements of all stakeholders or not). This non consideration of basic assumptions that are underlying individual behavior is obviously comparable with the mechanics of management fashion. A management concept is taken up and applied by managerial staff mainly because it is 'in fashion' respectively because these techniques are "generally believed to be the most rational and effective solutions to organizational problems."¹²⁴ Unfortunately if the 'new' and the 'old' concept are based on the same organizational paradigms, they are commonly not able to go beyond fundamental constraints of the paradigm even if the new 'concept' postulates to overcome the weaknesses of the old one. Thereby the ideological element is not always instantly recognizable for what it is, as it is commonly not observable.¹²⁵ For that reason those paradigms or ideologies have to be kept in mind when we are talking about management fashions, since management fashions are also

¹²² Cf. Burrell/Morgan, 1979.

¹²³ An overview could be found in Kieser/Ebers, 2006.

¹²⁴ Parush, 2008, p 53.

¹²⁵ Cf. Anthony, 2005, p 23.

based on fundamental cognitive assumptions in the mind of their 'creators' and respectively have some characteristics of management ideologies.

4.2 Resource-based view of strategy

The resource-based view (RBV) is particularly significant when we are talking about historical foundations of the practice-based approach of strategy due to the fact that s-as-p is concerned with organizational practices and activities that could presumably constitute bases of competitive advantage. These competitive advantages are also central to some of the basic concerns of a RBV.¹²⁶ The RBV (which is situated in the functionalistic paradigm in the Burrell/Morgan scheme) and the corresponding dynamic capability theory have developed increasing presence in strategy research over the last 20 years.¹²⁷ In general parlance strategy research based on a RBV recognizes competitive advantage from the perspective of a firm's superior resources, competences and capabilities which lead to sustainable competitive advantage. Thereby the RBV is based on fundamental assumptions and neo-classical microeconomics that focus on how markets determine the quantity, quality and price of goods and services. Some typical fundamental assumptions of the RBV - like the economic actors (organizations or people within them) as bounded rational utility maximizers, incomplete and/or unequal information and variable competitiveness within markets - are inherent in practice-based approach of strategy.¹²⁸ Applied on strategic decision making (illustrated in figure six), RBV claims the following: resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable allow the firm to do a better job in elaborating strategic actions.¹²⁹



Figure 6: The core concepts of the resource-based view of strategy making

Of course strategic resources result not only from factor market imperfection but also from unique historical circumstances (e.g., a valuable physical location) and from the accumulation of specialized capabilities.¹³⁰ Especially the expression of 'specialized capabilities' links the RBV with the discussed concept of strategy-as-practice due to

¹²⁶ Cf. Johnson/Melin/Whittington, 2003, p 6.

¹²⁷ Cf. Freiling, 2001, p 5.

¹²⁸ Barney, 1991.

¹²⁹ Cf. Ketchen/Hult/Slater, 2007, p 962.

¹³⁰ Cf. Oliver, 1997, p 699.

the fact that those internal resources result frequently from efficient and effective internal processes and routines or existing organizational knowledge. Obviously this approach highlights the importance of the individual organizational members ('humans') regarding the competitive advantage of organizations.

To clarify this, I would like to use sports analogy (as the world cup 2010 has ended just a few months ago). Even if the coach has studied the environment (e.g. the weather forecast) and the opponent extensively and formulates an appropriate strategy for a given situation (the next game) a soccer team will only be successful if the players (the organizational members) are able to implement the strategy within the game. They are obliged to have the required skills (individual knowledge) to execute the various processes (e.g. shots, passes and flanks) better than the opponent.

The non-consideration of micro capabilities was criticized frequently regarding the traditional RBV. For that reason some newer approaches¹³¹ have been developed afterwards. For example the so called 'knowledge-based view of the firm'¹³² is situated against the background of a more and more knowledge-based society and the information era. Researchers claim therefore that "a firm's ability to manage its knowledge-based resource capabilities has become increasingly important as a result of performance threats triggered by technology change and intense competition"¹³³. In addition to that the 'dynamic capabilities perspective' (another adaption of the RBV) is also recognizing individual knowledge as a vital resource within the organization. By definition, dynamic capabilities¹³⁴ involve adaption and change, because they build, integrate, or reconfigure other resources and capabilities. In this context capabilities are seen as the "...ability of an organization to perform a coordinated set of tasks, utilizing organizational resources, for the purpose of achieving a particular end result"¹³⁵. Thereby the evolutionary mechanics of organizational capabilities are in the spotlight. Capabilities were a subject to change in the course of time, mainly due to environmental effects but also due to internal modifications (e.g. fluctuation of staff). Furthermore, some capabilities are more or less important at different points of time, depending on the various market requirements. Those never-ending organizational changes results in continuing processes of learning and adopting within an

¹³¹ A good overview can be found in Rugman/Verbeke, 2002.

¹³² Cf. Grant, 1996. and Spender, 1994.)

¹³³ Carrillo/Gaimon, 2004, p 1504.

¹³⁴ Cf. Teece/Pisano/Shuen, 1997.

¹³⁵ Helfat/Peteraf, 2003, p 998.

organization. For Jarzabkowski (2005) those learning processes that a firm carries out are a distinctive contribution from a practice perspective, since it acknowledges more dynamic forms of theorizing.¹³⁶ To distinguish between the two approaches (dynamic capabilities vs. practices based approach) and to legitimize the existence of strategy-as-practice, researchers criticize the macro view of the Resource-based approach. Johnson et. al. mention that "the value of a resource depends not on its existence but on its utilization"¹³⁷, meaning that in the end the individual actions are responsible for the organizational strategy. Consequently, one perspective is primarily concerned with the social practice of strategy and day-to-day strategizing activities (micro), while the other focuses in the end on aggregated organizational-level routines and capabilities (macro).¹³⁸ In this context some authors add, that the explicit references of practice-based theorists on the various resource-based views lead to an 'intellectual straitjacket' of s-as-p due to the fact that the connection with industrial economics influences their application obviously, while it is unclear what those references have to offer for strategy-as-practice.¹³⁹

4.3 Process-based approaches

The link of strategy-as-practice to established process-based approaches of strategy making is quite obvious. It is also intended by s-as-p researchers when they "...propose an activity-based view of strategy that focuses on the detailed processes and practices which constitute the day-to-day activities of organizational life and which relate to strategic outcomes."¹⁴⁰ Regarding the Burrell/Morgan framework, process-based approaches are situated in the 'interpretive paradigm' due to the fact that they try to observe 'on-going processes' to better understand individual behavior. Of course, a focus on internal processes is not new at all within academic strategy research. On the one hand, also the RBV (especially the 'dynamic capability theory') refers whether implicit or explicit on inner-organizational processes. On the other hand various process approaches are discussed frequently within literature.¹⁴¹ The origin of the strategy process research can be found within the classical '*rational process model*', that is basically characterized through two successive stages, namely the 'strategy formulation stage' and the 'strategy implementation state'. Thereby an

¹³⁶ Cf. Jarzabkowski, 2005, p 6.

¹³⁷ Johnson/Melin/Whittington, 2003, p 7.

¹³⁸ Regnér, 2008, p 569.

¹³⁹ Cf. Carter/Clegg/Kornberger, 2008, p 87.

¹⁴⁰ Johnson/Melin/Whittington, 2003, p 3.

¹⁴¹ Cf. Hofmann/Stölzle, 2007, p 9.

appropriate strategy is defined by the top-management, based on information about the environment and on complex decision techniques. Furthermore, the strategy is implemented afterwards by the lower management. Unfortunately, strategic decisions in reality are not made as a whole *ex ante*, but rather through small steps that are influenced by various organizational actions. This '*incremental process model*' is therefore characterized by evolutionary and dynamic processes, meaning that strategy formulation and implementation cannot be considered separately. In contrast to the rational model, organizational processes and the involved individuals are of huge interest for strategy researches which creates a connection to the practice-based approach. The traditional process model is titled as the '*interpretative approach*' and recognizes strategies as "... the product of individual, or collective, sense-making about the organization and the environment in which it operates." Similar to other interpretative theories in social science, reality is not given as an objective constant but rather as created in the minds of the involved individuals. Therefore, social reality is always constructed through various actions that create norms and relevance.¹⁴² As individuals are limited in their ability of processing and absorbing information, they have to orientate their decisions and action on previous experiences and therefore create behavioral routines. Especially these behavioral routines are essential for the discussed practice-based approach of strategy making due to the fact that organizational strategy is seen as the result of various individual actions. Figure seven illustrates the process-based view and helps to identify similarities and differences with regard to the resource-based view.

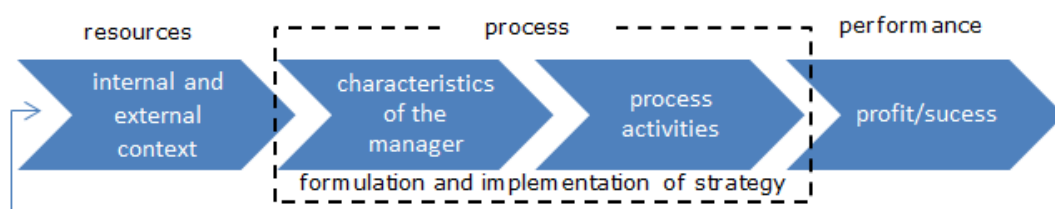


Figure 7: The core concepts of the process-based view of strategy making adapted and modified from Hofmann/Stölzle, 2007, p 15.

Internal and external resources are seen in both approaches as the main source of organizational performance. The difference between the two approaches can be found in how these resources are used to reach organizational targets. Resource-based views claim that the accurate decision about the resources is the key success factor for achieving competitive advantage e.g. to use the appropriate resources at the right time to maximize the customer value. In contrast, for process approaches the micro level of strategizing is much more important. Certainly the context factors influence

¹⁴² Cf. Scherer, 2006, p 36.

the strategy process but how the strategy is formulated and implemented is also depending on factors such as characteristics of the decision maker ('the manager').

Apart from the three basic process models mentioned above, various approaches have been developed by adopting and improving established ones. In the corresponding process-based literature, Hutzschenreuter and Kleindienst (2006) mention that the field is characterized by an ever-increasing plurality of concepts and frameworks. Some of these are prescriptive, whereas others are descriptive. Some are anchored at the individual level, some at the group level, and some at the organizational level. With keeping these various levels of research in mind, some redundancies with the practice based approach are inevitable. Therefore, Whittington (1996) states that "... the practice based approach draws on many insights of the process school, but returns to the managerial level, concerned with how strategist 'strategize'."¹⁴³ Also Johnson et al. (2003) claim that "... the process literature is still insufficiently sensitive to the micro"¹⁴⁴, meaning that although process research tells us about the overall processes of organizational decision-making and organizational change, it has been less interested in the practical activity and tools necessary to make these processes happen. From my point of view, this point of critic is similar to the one that was already mentioned regarding the RBV: Although established approaches claim to consider micro-activities within their research, they are interested primarily on the macro-level outcomes of the various processes.

4.4 Institutional theory

From an institutional perspective, firms operate within a social framework of norms, values, and taken-for-granted assumptions about appropriate respectively acceptable economic behavior. Economic choices are thereby constrained not only by the technological, informational, and income limits that neo-classical models emphasize but by socially constructed limits that are distinctly human in origin, like norms, habits, and customs.¹⁴⁵ The 'neo-institutional theory' is the dominant form of institutional theory today. Neo-institutionalism, in contrast to traditional institutionalism, considers also the importance of informal institutions. Thereby the concept of the institution is not clearly defined. Generally, an institution is understood as a set of rules that provides behavioral guidelines. Sociologically inspired scholars therefore also recognize cognitive rules of the human mind as institutions.

¹⁴³ Whittington, 1996, p 732.

¹⁴⁴ Johnson/Melin/Whittington, 2003, p 12.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Oliver, 1997, p 699.

Consequently neo-institutional theorists do not see organizations as monolithic 'black boxes' like conventional functionalist approaches but as systems consisting of individuals that have different targets, interests, needs and requirements.¹⁴⁶

Neo-institutional theories are of interest regarding this thesis due to several reasons. Firstly, practice is situated within institutionalized social structures that persist across time and space. Secondly, institutional social structures are part of daily practices and routines that constitute individual action. Thirdly, structures persist through the tacit knowledge and practical consciousness of actors who choose familiar patterns because it provides them with "ontological security"¹⁴⁷. Furthermore management-fashions are practices and routines that become institutionalized during different periods of social evolution, due to the fact that they are macro-based-concepts that found their way into micro-actions within various organizations. Regarding to this, DiMaggio and Powell (1991) admit that "most intuitionists prefer to focus on the structural environments, macro to micro-level effects, and the analytic autonomy of macro structures."¹⁴⁸ As mentioned above, the concepts of institution and institutionalization have been discussed among various approaches of organizational studies. Therefore, I want to concentrate on aspects of institutional theories that are strongly related to the s-as-p approach. Firstly, I want to show four commonly used models that try to explain various effects within society which result in institutionalization¹⁴⁹:

- (1) Institutionalization as a process of instilling value: Institutionalization is seen here as a process that is being subject to conscious design and intervention. Thereby organizational structures are view as adaptive vehicles shaped in reaction to the characteristics and commitments of participants as well as influenced and constrained by the external environment. As Selznick (1957) quotes: "Institutions, whether conceived as groups or practices, may be partly engineered, but they also have a 'natural' dimension. They are products of interaction and adaption; they become the receptacles of group idealism; they are less readily expendable"¹⁵⁰.
- (2) Institutionalization as a process of creating reality: Generally speaking, this model is based on the philosophical approach of 'constructivism' meaning that social reality is constructed in the mind of humans through social interaction. In an organizational context, individuals orientate their action on historical experiences

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Ebers/Gotsch, 2006, p 247-256.

¹⁴⁷ Jarzabkowski, 2004, p 531-532.

¹⁴⁸ DiMaggio/Powel, 1991.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Scott R. W., 1987; Scott/Foo, 1999 and Ebers/Gotsch, 2006.

¹⁵⁰ Selznick, 1957, p 21-22.

(e.g. routines) that become institutionalized over a period of time and therefore not called into question by the majority of organizational members. Thereby these routines are often underlying assumptions, and consequently strongly connected with organizational culture. If we look into different organizations we can observe different ways how people are dressed, how they talk, how they deal with customers and how they look on the organization as a whole. These fundamental behavioral processes are often institutionalized routines that were taken for granted over a (long) period of time. Therefore, an organization that engages in a new activity for the first time, needs to establish internal and external norms, new roles for organizational members, standard operating procedures and new patterns for interacting. The fact that these activities are not yet taken for granted creates a liability of newness.¹⁵¹

- (3) Institutional systems as a class of elements: In this version of institutional theory the emphasis is on existing shared norms, values and rules (e.g. laws). Thereby the attention is shifted from such environmental elements as the market, the location of resources and customers, and the number and power of competitors, in order to call attention to the role of other actors like the state and professional association that influences the development of the organization.
- (4) Institutions as distinct social spheres: This model of institutional theory focuses attention on the existence of a set of differentiated and specialized cognitive and normative systems – institutional logics – that arise and tend to persist, in varying form and content in all societies (e.g. religion, work, family and politics). These logics and behaviors constitute repertoires that are available to individuals and organizations and that help them to achieve their own targets.

As I will show later, we will observe many characteristics of these four models when we take a detailed look on strategy and practice. Moreover, Feldman (2000) illustrates the strong connection between the two concepts unintended when she speaks about routines and institutionalization: "Routines are performed by people who think and feel and care. Their reactions are situated in institutional, organizational and personal contexts" and that emphasizing "...organizational routines is important for understanding the role of routines in institutions and the creation or recreation of structure." Furthermore, also proponents of the practice-based approach of strategy mention the contribution of (neo-) institutional theories and the significant part that the 'socially constructed world' plays in their considerations although they criticize that

¹⁵¹ Cf. Stinchcombe, 1965.

there is "... little empirical work that engages with truly micro level."¹⁵² Hereby a similar (e.g. the RBV and the PBV) criticism is mentioned by s-as-p advocates a third time: "... a great deal of institutional research has so far stayed at a level of aggregation in which the details of activity are hidden..." although they admit that "institutional theorists of various kinds are already beginning to theorize and research this connection of the micro and the macro."¹⁵³

4.5 Other comparable approaches

In recent years, strategy research has gone away from the view on routines as individual, repeated rule. Rather, the concept of 'routines' becomes a key issue within various theoretical streams in organizational studies helping them to increase the economical appreciation of inner-organizational issues.

As mentioned above, routines form a central concept in population ecology and evolutionary approaches to determine the behavior of organizations.¹⁵⁴ For example Marx (2004) notes: "evolutionary theory has come to be a useful theory to explain strategy processes and has been applied implicitly or explicitly by several researchers".¹⁵⁵ Evolutionary approaches in organization research are commonly based on the famous 'synthetic theory of evolution' proposed by Charles Darwin (first edition in 1859). Generally speaking, evolutionary approaches try to explain the rise and fall of organizations with basic biological mechanisms. The evolutionary processes are thereby taken as universal applicable, meaning that they can be used for explaining general cosmic phenomena but also for analyzing human interaction, societies, religion and of course organizational development. Several streams within the evolutionary approach use the natural mechanisms of variation, selection and reproduction in different ways to explain social phenomena. Hereby the 'population ecology' approach seems to be the most popular and furthermore the best elaborated one.¹⁵⁶ Population ecology¹⁵⁷ considers mainly changes of elements that belong to the core of an organization (e.g. changes in the management or changes of the strategic direction of an organization). Population ecologists assume that changes in these core element result intermediately in a decreased 'chance of survival' of the organization.

¹⁵² Johnson/Melin/Whittington, 2003, p 8.

¹⁵³ Johnson/Langley/Melin/Whittington, 2007, p 44-45.

¹⁵⁴ Cf. Geiger/Koch, 2008, p 694.

¹⁵⁵ Cf. Marx, 2004, p 31.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. Kieser/Woywode, 2006, p 311.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Hannan/Freeman, 1977.

Moreover, the change in an organizational core element can only have positive impacts on the survival chances of the organization if a long period of time is considered, for example when the organizational change is related to a changing environment.¹⁵⁸ With regard to practice-based approaches, organizational changes increase the likelihood of failure due to the disruption of established routines, core and peripheral features.¹⁵⁹

In addition to that, Becker (2005) also establishes a relationship to s-as-p when he mentions that "the concept of an 'organizational routine' is central to the evolutionary theory of the firm."¹⁶⁰ Other more specific theoretical resources for strategy-as-practice that are mentioned in standard literature¹⁶¹ are theories of 'Sensemaking and routines', 'Actor-network' theories and 'organizational learning' concepts. Theories of organizational learning claim that learning is done by people, not as individuals but as 'people-in-the-world' and therefore learning is about becoming members of 'communities of practice', for whom legitimacy may be at least as important as cognition. In reality, individuals are confronted nearly every moment of their life with various problems and possible solutions which results subconsciously in a continuous process whether a certain action is appropriate and acceptable in a specific situation or not. Connections between learning based approaches and the strategy approach in question are quite obvious. For example Elsbach et. al (2005) note that "...research on organizational learning and memory has focused on how knowledge becomes stored in institutional norms, rules, and routines."¹⁶² Quite similar, Actor-network theories¹⁶³ attempt to explain organizations with focus on how relations between objects, people, and concepts are formed, rather than why they are formed. Human and nonhuman actors are viewed as equal actors in networks which want to achieve a common purpose. The consideration of nonhuman actors, which are part of a functional chain, is thereby an essential point of the approach. Scientific research regarding actor-network theories are commonly characterized by very detailed processes of describing and recording various social interactions (similar with s-as-p). Finally, 'the Carnegie tradition of sensemaking and organizational routines', that is frequently associated with the work of March and Simon (1958) and Cyert and March (1963), is considered

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Beck, 2009, p 714.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. Lewin/Weigelt/Emery, 2004, p 137.

¹⁶⁰ Becker, 2005, p 249.

¹⁶¹ Johnson/Langley/Melin/Whittington, 2007, p 39-47.

¹⁶² Elsbach/Barr/Hargadon, 2005, p 430.

¹⁶³ Cf. Callon, 1986. and Latour, 1987.

to involve two important streams of work with relevance to s-as-p. One is concerned with organizational sensemaking; the other discusses the importance of routines within the organization.¹⁶⁴

The concept of sensemaking tries to explain how individuals frame experienced situations as meaningful. Regarding organizational theory sense-making is recognized as a unifying principle that underpins the way in which organizational members encounter organizational structures and proceed to act on the way in which they interpret them.¹⁶⁵ Figure 7 tries to classify the various discussed approaches:

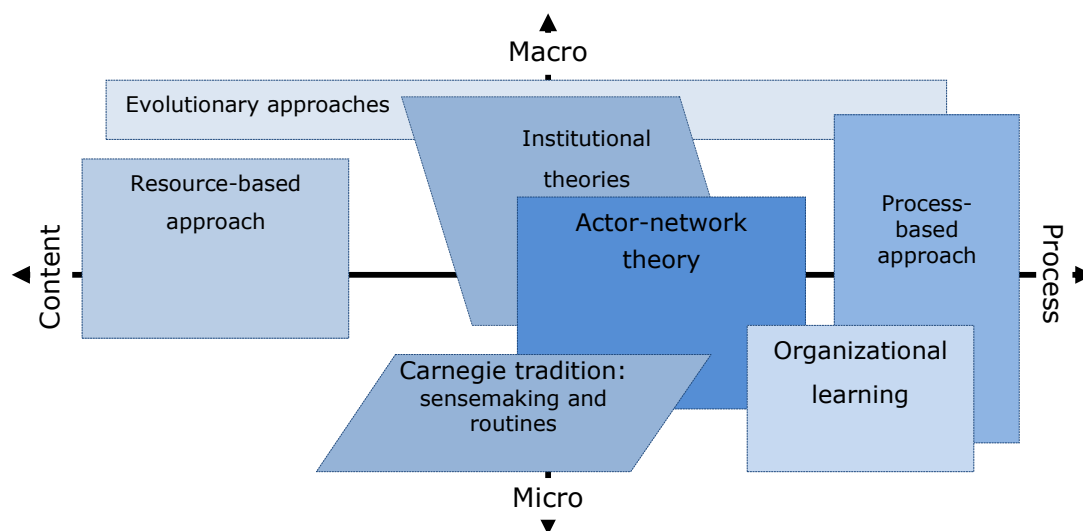


Figure 8: Seven theoretical resources for strategy as practice adapted and modified from Johnson/Langley/Melin/Whittington, 2007, p 37.

Approaches with a focus on Micro-activities try to understand behavior within organizations by looking at individual actions by their members. In contrast Macro-approaches look at the organization at a whole. The process vs. content axis tries to evaluate, whether a concepts highlights processes of change and adaption or more stable and long lasting phenomena.

¹⁶⁴ Johnson/Langley/Melin/Whittington, 2007, p 40-41.

¹⁶⁵ Cf. Weick, 1997.

5. The practice turn in social science

As mentioned, a practice turn seems to take place currently in social sciences, recognizing knowledge as embodied and local. Practice theorists conceive of practices as embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding.¹⁶⁶ This reinforcement of individual actions can also be observed regarding strategy research and results from a central dissatisfaction with prescriptive models and frameworks of traditional models.¹⁶⁷ Within this section I'd like to discuss the reinstatement of micro-activities in the context of the 'practice turn'¹⁶⁸ or 'linguistic turn'¹⁶⁹ in social (and organizational) science. For that purpose I will basically explain the philosophical foundations (mainly social constructive theories) in a first step, discuss neo-structuralist and neo-interpretative theories that recognize the importance of practices and routines in a second step and finish with practice based social theories that are building the theoretical foundations of strategy-as-practice. Figure nine tries to illustrate a genealogy of the practice turn in social science.

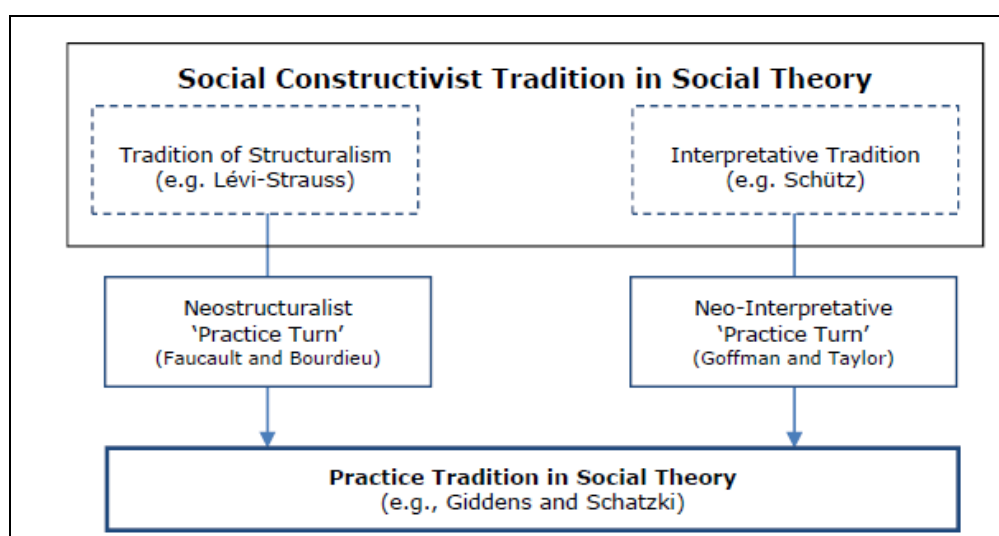


Figure 9: A Genealogy of the Practice Tradition in Social Theory, adapted from Rasche/Chia, 2009, p 716.

As illustrated, social constructive theories are based on traditional structuralism on the one hand and on traditional interpretative approaches on the other hand. Generally speaking, both approaches have been criticized for being either focused exclusively on objective structures that create reality or for localizing the process of 'meaning

¹⁶⁶ Schatzki/Knorr-Cetina/von Savigny, 2003.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. Jarzabkowski/Balogu/Seidl, 2007, p 6.

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Schatzki/Knorr-Cetina/Savigny, 2001; Geiger, 2009 and Simpson, 2009.

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Alvesson/Kärreman, 2000 and Neumann, 2002.

creation' only in the subjective individual. Neo-structuralist and neo-interpretative approaches claimed in their 'practice turn' to overcome these points of critics by trying to include some aspects of the 'contrary' concept in their considerations. Based on that, practice based traditions in social theory combine structuralism and interpretative characteristics of social constructivist approaches.

5.1 Social constructivist theories

Traditional organizational theories are commonly based on models that postulate the existence of an 'objective social reality' to which individuals have access. An objective reality enables scientists to describe the social reality and cause-effect relationships by using quantitative variables and research methods. The underlying paradigm of these approaches is thereby the 'functionalistic paradigm' due to the fact that those scholars tend to look at organizations from an outside and objective perspective. In contrast to that, constructivist approaches are situated in the interpretative sector of the Burrell/Morgan framework as they consider organizations and their environment as the result of a mental construction in the minds of interacting human individuals.¹⁷⁰ The functionalist paradigm consequently underlies the s-as-p approach due to the fact that from a practical point of view, organizations present themselves as a 'field' of historically emerged, socially constructed and interconnected practices.¹⁷¹ Although a large variety of constructivist theories have been developed, basically two viewpoints of constructivist theories exist. The individual constructivist view recognizes social reality as a product of individual actions and sees social norms and conventions as constraining the acts of individuals and thus helping reduce insecurity and create social order and meaning.¹⁷²

In contrast to that, social constructivism identifies the process of creating 'reality' not in the individual consciousness, but rather in socially organized collectives. Knowledge is considered in terms of its social involvement and consequently to be situated not in the minds of individuals but in interaction processes between the members of social communities. The basic assumption is that social facts are in general not given, but made.¹⁷³ The collective constructed processes make the world meaningful for their members and enable actors to act accordingly. This picture of reality as a socially constructed phenomenon was initially proposed by Peter L. Berger und Thomas

¹⁷⁰ Cf. Staehle, 1999, p 67.

¹⁷¹ Cf. Gheradi, 2006.

¹⁷² Cf. Rasche/Chia, 2009, p 715.

¹⁷³ Cf. Vogel, 2005, p 88.

Luckmann¹⁷⁴. Their book 'The Social Construction of Reality' was published in 1969 in the United States and is commonly recognized as a 'key work' of social constructivist theories. Rasche/Chia (2009) distinguishes in line with Schatzki (2005) between two approaches within social constructivism: structuralism and the interpretative tradition.

5.1.1 Tradition of structuralism

Structuralism is a scientific paradigm that had its peak of popularity in the 60s and 70s of the 20th century. The main idea of structuralism is to discover the unconsciously universal human principles of thinking.¹⁷⁵ The most popular and influential advocate of structuralism is perhaps the French ethnologist and linguist Claude Lévi-Strauss¹⁷⁶ who studied the cultural aspects of Indians living in the Amazonia-region in Brazil. According to his ideas, human intellect is situated in individual actors, but human nature is a collective phenomenon that is shared by mankind. The rules and processes of the human minds thereby are prescribed by nature and individuals have no access to these rules. Therefore, all social or cultural rules and norms are seen as subconsciously collective behavioral patterns of mankind, similar to a cultural grammar that creates meaning for the individuals.¹⁷⁷ In general, human capabilities and logical capacities of individuals are recognized as being the same in every society. The difference between various cultures is set in the social structures which provide a particular direction of behavior and shape form and character of knowledge.¹⁷⁸ In simple words, social practices and routines and their reproduction are detached from the subject and are exclusively a result of objective structures. Consequently, structuralism in its traditional form favors a clear separation of the 'objective' structures and knowledge codes that underlie action from the action itself. Historically speaking, Pierre Bourdieu and the 'late' Michael Foucault criticized structuralism for that 'objective' view and thus paved the way for a neo-structuralism practice theory.¹⁷⁹

5.1.2 Interpretative tradition

Interpretative theorists understand social interaction as an interpretative process. The main idea behind this paradigm is the interpretation of accomplished and expected

¹⁷⁴ Berger/Luckmann, 1969.

¹⁷⁵ For an introduction to structuralism cf. Fietz, 1998 and Frank, 1984.

¹⁷⁶ Born 1908 in Brussels and died 2009 in Paris. For a biography see for example De Ruijter, 1991.

¹⁷⁷ Cf. Fietz, 1998, p 111.

¹⁷⁸ Cf. Solo, 1975, p 614 and Reckwitz, 2003, p 288.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. Rasche/Chia, 2009, p 717.

actions of other social-group members by the individual. The interpreting actor deals in this way with various situations that influence his environment. In contrast to the 'objective' structuralism proposed by Claude Lévi-Strauss's this social phenomenology is much more subjective due to the fact that meaning is created by reasonable interpretation of interactive behavior.¹⁸⁰ Social reality is therefore constructed through terms that are used by ordinary individuals to describe their world and to create sensuousness. One basic assumption regarding this approach is the conception that social reality is always pre-interpreted by actors that are part of this reality.¹⁸¹ On the first look the interpretative paradigm seems to be contrary to the objective structuralism due to its very subjective perspective. But both approaches have one important thing in common: The positioning of culture and social phenomena in the mind of people, and therefore the intention to focus reality as being constructed through mental processes.¹⁸²

5.2 The practice-turn of social constructivism

Based on traditional approaches, the practice-turn in social science highlights social practices and routines (e.g. how to act in a certain situation) and postulate that reality is constructed through these behavioral guidelines. Consequently, neo-structuralist approaches recognize those guidelines as influenced by social disposals, whereas neo-interpretative positions point out individual behavior that tries to act like the society expect them to do.

5.2.1 Neo-structuralist 'practice-turn'

As mentioned above, traditional structuralism assumes that social practices are detached from the subject, which was criticized for example in the late work of Michael Foucault and by Pierre Bourdieu. According to Rasche/Chia (2009) they "...transformed structuralism from a *mentalist* preoccupation, with its focus on the 'objective' knowledge codes underlying human action, to an analysis of the materiality of social practices."¹⁸³

According to the philosopher and historian Michel Foucault (1972), particular practices reflect and sustain the implicit norms of a society for what is seen as 'right behavior', 'true', 'beautiful' or 'just'. All these societal norms and values are enacted, reflected,

¹⁸⁰ Cf. Giddens, 1994.

¹⁸¹ Cf. von Felden, 2003, p 125-126.

¹⁸² Cf. Reckwitz, 2003, p 288.

¹⁸³ Rasche/Chia, 2009, p 717.

sustained and reproduced in a society's particular practices.¹⁸⁴ Thereby, Foucault points out, that these cultural practices are highly resistant to change. In fact, there are no obvious knock-down arguments against a given phenomenon in a socially constructed system what consequently implicate that such systems remain essential conservative. Change takes place, if at all, only incrementally.¹⁸⁵

In addition to Foucault's considerations, one of the best-known concepts of 'practice' was proposed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) in his book 'the logic of practice'.¹⁸⁶ The various concepts that were proposed by Bourdieu cannot be recognized in isolation. They are highly interdependent and can be considered to be part of a Meta-Theory rather than a theory. His Meta-Theory is intended to guide research and to elicit research questions, and thus it is not considered as a theory to be validated, as Bourdieu himself has used the concepts to both theorize and conduct empirical research regarding a variety of social phenomena.¹⁸⁷

Generally speaking, Bourdieu's approach¹⁸⁸ is that skillful social actors facilitate practices. Whether we are considering a café waiter, a school teacher, a politician, a nurse, or an accountant, a high degree of practical accomplishment is involved in the ways that social actors understand and respond to the range of possible behaviors that their situations may involve, knowing how to perform in a particular position. Such practical accomplishment involves an ongoing mastery of a position and the situation in which it is located.¹⁸⁹ In particular, Bourdieu wanted to frame a theory of practice sensitive to the ambiguities, equivocations, and indeterminacy of life as it is actually lived, thereby permitting the investigator to move, as he claimed, from the "mechanics of the model to the dialectic of strategies"¹⁹⁰. His work has been primarily influential in sociology, but due to the 'meta' character of the theory the concept also found its way into linguistic and educational concepts.¹⁹¹ From a sociological perspective, Bourdieu attempts to transcend the duality of objectivism (structuralism) and subjectivism (phenomenology, interpretivism). In order to go beyond this duality,

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Foucault, 1972 and Geiger/Koch, 2008, p 190.

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Nealon, 2008, p 40.

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Bourdieu, 1990.

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Hurtado, 2008, p 130.

¹⁸⁸ Bourdieu, 1982; Bourdieu, 1977 and Bourdieu, 1990.

¹⁸⁹ Cf. Baxter/Chua, 2008, p 212-230.

¹⁹⁰ Cf. Spiegel, 2005, p 179.

¹⁹¹ Cf. Haida, 2003, p 54.

Bourdieu introduces three key concepts as the foundation of this theory of practices: '(social) practice', 'habitus', and 'fields'.¹⁹²

'Habitus' is defined by Bourdieu as the "durably inculcated system of structured, structuring disposition"¹⁹³ The concept of Habitus points out, that every social actor is predetermined and this predetermination influences consequently current and future actions of the individual. But not the social actor per se is determined by the society but rather his 'habitus'¹⁹⁴. Therefore, the construct of 'habitus' implicates, that human action is commonly based by a practical sense and not by practical considerations. According to Krais/Gebauer (2002) the theory of habitus includes a fundamental change of paradigm in social science as it postulates a renunciation from the traditional view of social interaction as a result of intended behavior respectively of various social norms and rules that are followed.¹⁹⁵ The concept is based on the experience that the social environment (milieu), to which a human individual is born in and where it grows up, consequently determines different norm and habits of this individual. Therefore, 'habitus' is correlated with a certain style of live and a product of an internalization of environmental practices. However 'habitus' is also influencing the behavior of other individuals and accordingly generating social practices, meaning that social structures not only structures practices, but rather that those practices are also 'structuring the structure'.¹⁹⁶ In simple words: The habitus is not only a result of a certain lifestyle, it also produces this lifestyle.¹⁹⁷

The second concept that is introduced by Bourdieu is the (social) 'field'. Benson (1999) quotes: „Bourdieu sees society as differentiated into a number of semi-autonomous fields. [...] governed by their own 'rules of the game' and offering their own particular economy of exchange and reward..."¹⁹⁸ Within a field, players engage in 'social practices' that Bourdieu also calls 'strategies' or 'coping strategies'. For a given group of players (in the same class or position) within a field, these practices or strategies are generated by the class' habitus.¹⁹⁹ Social fields are characterized by various dominating and dominated groups, specific game rules, interactions, games and

¹⁹² Cf. Hurtado, 2008, p 159.

¹⁹³ Cf. Bourdieu, 1990, p 52.

¹⁹⁴ Cf. Schwingel, 1995, p 55.

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Krais/Gebauer, 2002 .

¹⁹⁶ Cf. Tosana, 2008, p 7.

¹⁹⁷ Cf. Bourdieu, 1982, p 280.

¹⁹⁸ Benson, 1999, p 464.

¹⁹⁹ Cf. Hurtado, 2008, p 132.

gambles and a 'illusion' that makes the game members belief in the seriousness and meaningfulness of the game.²⁰⁰ In addition to that, Bourdieu assumes that different players within a field have different access to a portfolio of 'capital'. Regarding this capital he distinguishes between economic (in terms of economic resources), cultural (e.g. knowledge and skills that are strongly influenced by education) and social capital (e.g. the social network that a player has access to).²⁰¹

5.2.2 Neo-interpretative 'practice turn'

From a genealogical perspective, a different stream of practice theory emerged out of Erving Goffman's and Charles Taylor's critique of the subject-centered mode of explanation favored by interpretative theories.

Erving Goffman's research focused on the framing processes of social interaction (Frame Analysis, 1974) and on the 'dramaturgical execution' of various individual actions (The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, 1959). According to Goffman, individuals always try to transmit a certain picture of themselves by social interactions due to the fact that they are aware of being observed by other individuals. Following these basic considerations, Goffman concludes that in fact all humans are behaving like actors on a stage. Humans try to present themselves in their own favor and are playing for that reason a certain part in the play called 'life'. Hereby Goffman is interested in the relationship between self-actualization on the one hand and the execution of social role specification on the other hand. According to his theory, the individual actor is strategically and economically rational, meaning that they always evaluate the best ways to meet the expectations of their audience. Furthermore, they use this positive impression in the social-group members mind to build a favorable self-perception.²⁰² In addition to that, he mentions 'frames' are associations that come up when a certain term is mentioned.²⁰³ According to Goffman, frames are categories that help the actor to create meaning which are already existent in the culture and in the mind of the individual human being. Culture is considered as reservoir of different schemes or frames which provides meaning for the individual.²⁰⁴ Consequently the subject is not the ultimate locus of meaning production anymore,

²⁰⁰ Cf. Rademacher, 2002, p 133.

²⁰¹ Cf. Hurtado, 2010, p 57.

²⁰² Cf. Goffman, 1975.

²⁰³ Cf. Helmig, 2008, p 111.

²⁰⁴ Cf. Donati, 2001.

but understood as a participant of social practices who draws on certain shared cognitive presuppositions (e.g. 'frames') to understand the world.²⁰⁵

Similarly to these consideration of individual social practices as meaning-creating processes, Charles Taylor quotes: "The meanings and norms implicit in these practices are not just in the minds of the actors but are out there in the practices themselves, practices which cannot be conceived as a set of individual actions, but which are essentially modes of social relation, of mutual action."²⁰⁶ Comparable with Goffman's considerations he localizes common meanings not simply in the heads of actors. According to his theory the meaning of a social practice outruns on the one hand each individuals mind resulting from that individual participation in practical processes. However on the other hand this meaning results from the way in which society considers that things ought to be done. A practice therefore contains more than what individuals themselves put into it.²⁰⁷

5.3 The practice tradition in social theory

Practice theories in social science try to combine the two philosophical streams of structuralism and individualism. According to these approaches social reality is constructed the minds of the individuals and through social interaction between those



Figure 10: Key terms of practice theory.

individuals. In addition to that social structures influence individual behavior and actions. Those social actions are recognized as routinized practices that are performed by the individuals within a certain social group (e.g. within an organization). Of course the focus on individual action has a long tradition in various disciplines. Reckwitz (2002) highlights the philosophical background of practice theory by referring to Ludwig Wittgenstein's late works and Martin

Heidegger's early philosophy and claims that "...in fact, we find everything that is original in practice theory in the works of these authors."²⁰⁸ Nevertheless, practice theories in social science are widespread and

²⁰⁵ Cf. Rasche/Chia, 2009, p 719.

²⁰⁶ Taylor C. , 1971, p 36.

²⁰⁷ Taylor/Tully/Weinstock, 1994, p 107.

²⁰⁸ Cf. Reckwitz, 2002, p 250.

applied within various disciplines like organizational theories and strategy research. For that reason I want to discuss certain social-theoretical key terms that are conceptualized by practice theory and combine them with the approaches of Theodore Schatzki and Anthony Giddens that are frequently mentioned in literature. As illustrated in Figure 10, those seven key terms are: Actor/Individual, Body, Mind, Things, Knowledge, Discourse/Language and Structure/Process. Furthermore, some characteristics of s-as-p will also be mentioned to connect those key concepts with the approach in question.

5.3.1 The individual/agent

The individual actor/agent is the central concept of practice based theories due to the fact that it is the individual that performs different practices. Therefore, practice theories are commonly based on a 'methodological individualism' because they try to explain and describe social processes (macro-level) through individual behavior of participating individuals (micro-level).²⁰⁹ Actors are important because their practical skills enable them to free their activity from mindless reproduction of initial conditions.²¹⁰ For example Schatzki respectively Giddens highlight the importance of the individual when they define practices as "... organized human activities"²¹¹ or as "... skillful procedures, methods or techniques appropriately performed by social agents"²¹². Of course this focus on individual action can be observed in various traditional concepts. In fact every social theory discusses the importance of individual actors in creating reality. Practice based theorists therefore mainly combine ideas from social constructivism theories such as structuralism and interpretivism. On the one hand practice theories recognize the importance of individual behavior regarding the creation of a social reality. Social practices are carried out by individuals in their everyday actions. Although the individual is in the focus of attention in these theories, actors are not recognized as totally free in their decisions. Comparable with the ideas of institutionalization, individual actions are constrained by institutionalized guidelines (e.g. values, rules and norms). In fact these borders structure the context within the practices are taking place. In addition to that, social practices reproduce structures

²⁰⁹ Cf. Elster, 1989, p 13.

²¹⁰ Cf. Giddens, 1984 and Giddens, 1991.

²¹¹ Schatzki, 2005, p 471.

²¹² Cf. Giddens, 1984, p 20-22.

due to the fact that underlying assumptions and constraints are passed from one individual to another by social interaction.²¹³

5.3.2 Structure/process

For practice theory, the routinization of actions creates social structures. Social practices are recognized as routines: routines of moving the body, of understanding and wanting, of using things, interconnected in a practice. A social structure is therefore not only created in the minds of the individual (like in structuralism) but rather in behavioral patterns.²¹⁴ For practice theorists it is the internalized practices or schemata of action (or what Bourdieu calls habitus) that are the real 'authors' of everyday coping action (e.g. the reproduction of norms and values within a society).²¹⁵ The theory of structuration, proposed by Anthony Giddens (1984), tries to combine objective positions (structuralism, functionalism) where the object (e.g. the society, the organization) dominates the subject (e.g. the human individual, the social actor) with subjectivism. The central concept of duality between object and subject is explained by Giddens when he claims: „The essential recursiveness of social life, as constituted in social practices: structure is both medium and outcome of social practices. Structure enters simultaneously into the constitution of the agent and social practices, and 'exists' in the generating moments of this constitution“²¹⁶ This quote summarizes the new ideas behind Giddens concept quite suitable:

- (1) The social actor produces and reproduces external conditions (structure) through their behavior and
- (2) Structures are both, the medium and the result of social actions.

Consequently, structures and actions do not compete within the theory of structuration. Rather they are initial conditions for each other.²¹⁷ As mentioned above structures are reproduced through social practices that are carried out by individual actors. Summarizing, the various structure (e.g. cognitive structures and structures of domination) that theorist claim to constrain social life are not external given but instead constituted by the web of practice-arrangement bundles.²¹⁸

²¹³ Cf. Golsorkhi, 2004.

²¹⁴ Cf. Reckwitz, 2002, p 255.

²¹⁵ Chia/MacKay, 2007, p 225.

²¹⁶ Giddens, 1979, p 5.

²¹⁷ Cf. Walgenbach, 2006, p 405-406.

²¹⁸ Cf. Schatzki, 2005, p 479.

5.3.3 Discourse / language:

The practice turn has to be considered together with the so called 'linguistic turn' in social science. The term 'linguistic turn' refers on a shift in social paradigms in the 20th century towards a greater emphasis of the importance of verbal interaction and the phenomenon of language in general. Similarly also practice scholars stress the importance of face-to-face communication and point to the duality of interpretation processes, because rules and decisions can also be modified while being interpreted.²¹⁹ Despite diverse backgrounds, linguistic scholars express a shared message: They suggest that the proper understanding of societies, social institutions, identities, and even cultures may be viewed as discursively constructed ensembles of texts.²²⁰ The 'linguistic turn' has become more important in recent years, especially regarding organizational theory due to the fact that language, verbal interaction and written documents are used to explain organizational behavior and differences between companies. The research interest of linguistic approaches is threefold. Firstly, the language itself is observed: different ways of saying something and the complex relationship between 'saying' and 'understanding' are of interest. Secondly, language is considered as a result of conversation by people in various contexts. Thereby "...the interest is not to produce philosophical investigations of the nature of language but to study social practices – language use – in social contexts". Thirdly, linguistic theories are used for explaining and understanding the process of academic work regarding the elaboration of research papers in a better way. ²²¹

5.3.4 Knowledge

Practice theorists propose, that learning and innovation is the result of organizational practices and consequently that a community of practice is the source of learning and innovation processes in organizations.²²² Knowledge is thereby not something that people possess in their heads, but rather something that people do together.²²³ New knowledge about specific situations arises from the social activities of dialog and interaction often by using 'trial and error' schemes. With regard to this, it must be mentioned that the influence of the external environment is frequently neglected in the first step. New practices result from the participating in the social process of

²¹⁹ Cf. Huebner/Varey/Wood, 2008, p 207.

²²⁰ Cf. Alvesson/Kärreman, 2000, p 137.

²²¹ Cf. Alvesson/Kärreman, 2000.

²²² Cf. Geiger, 2009, p 187.

²²³ Cf. Gergen, 1985, p 270.

problem solving within the social community.²²⁴ The term routine is also connected with the process of knowledge creation. Practices also include a routinized understanding of the world, based on shared knowledge. When social actors process a practice, they use collective knowledge.²²⁵ Gherardi (2001) for example mentions therefore, that practice connects “knowing with doing”²²⁶.

5.3.5 Body

For practice theorists, a practice (whether they are mental or physical) is always performed by a (human) body. The body learns to deal with different situations and to carry out actions in an appropriate way. These internalized processes are frequently called routines and consist on the one hand of course of bodily activities but on the other hand also of mental and emotional actions.²²⁷ Although a connection between mental actions and the human body are not obvious at the first glance, practice theorists argue that the activity of ‘thinking’ is also performed by a body, even if the activity cannot be observed. The focus on bodily activities supports them to overcome the dualistic separation of the individual and the social, meaning that in traditional theories reality is created whether by individuals or by social structures. Their aim is to combine the two dualistic opposites by recognizing the embodied social actor as the vehicle of practice.²²⁸

5.3.6 Mind

In addition to the considerations regarding the bodily performance, practices can also be understood as mental activities that are carried out by a human body and support the (bodily) individual in understanding the world and reduce insecurity. Humans always interpret external circumstances in various ways and their behavior is shaped through objective given or inherent targets and constitutions. Therefore, cognitive processes have always to be kept in mind when we are talking about practices and routines.

5.3.7 Things

Real physical objects are frequently not considered in organizational theories. They are recognized as factors that support individual actions but do not influence them. In

²²⁴ Cf. Jarzabkowski, 2004, p 236.

²²⁵ Cf. Rasche/Chia, 2009, p 723.

²²⁶ Gherardi, 2001, p 136.

²²⁷ Cf. Reckwitz, 2003, p 251.

²²⁸ Cf. Simpson, 2009, p 1332.

contrast to that, practice theories highlight the important of these physical 'things'. For example Schatzki 2005 titles them as 'material arrangements' and quotes: "Whenever someone acts and therewith carries on a practice, she does so in a setting that is composed of material entities."²²⁹ Similar with the points mentioned regarding the bodily character of actions and practice, practice theorists frequently criticize the dematerialization of the social that can be found in various established theories of social and culture respectably the exclusive consideration of physical artifacts in functionalistic approaches like classical structuralism. Therefore, it can be said that in traditional concepts, things appear either as technical resources that support the individual or as the only component that determines human behavior. The practice theory seeks a third way. Specific artifacts like computer, aircrafts and clothes are understood partly as an element of social practices.²³⁰ Whereas those scholars have partial empirical insights into how objects enable strategy practices by acting as symbolic artifacts, strategy-as-practice research also claims to study how objects limit the performance of practice. For instance, examining how the use of PowerPoint presentations Flip Charts or Balanced-Score Cards influences the discussion about strategic issues can be interesting.²³¹

5.4 Applications in management

As mentioned above, practice based theories can be seen as meta-theories which are applied in different fields of social research.²³² Thereby it is interesting to notice, that the need for a practice turn in their specific field is justified commonly by the same arguments that are mentioned regarding strategy research. For example, theorists who discuss *marketing-as-practice* claim that "academic marketing research has focused disproportionately on studying how organizations should conduct marketing but has largely neglected studies of how marketing is conducted."²³³ Similarly, *accounting-as-practice* researchers criticize that "...accounting practices have pervasive and enabling characteristics which create particular 'financial' forms of visibility for abstract social and organizational phenomena that would otherwise never be 'seen'".²³⁴ Additionally to those two approaches, the *knowledge-as-practice* approach discusses how knowledge is being developed in practice. Thereby the

²²⁹ Schatzki, 2005, p 472.

²³⁰ Cf. Reckwitz, 2003.

²³¹ Cf. Rasche/Chia, 2009, p 422.

²³² Cf. Whittington, 2002, p 120.

²³³ Hackely/Skálén/Stenfors, 2009, p 131.

²³⁴ Potter, 2005, p 265.

researchers shift the focus away from positioning ideas inside scientists' minds to cultural science practices and the interaction processes between scientists. They suggest that people who are working together can be examined as epistemic cultures whose collective knowledge exists as practice.²³⁵

Comparable *learning-as-practice* theorists propose to look at "organizational knowledge and learning processes through the prism of practice — the way in which work gets done and [...] knowledge is created."²³⁶ Similar other researchers quote that their approach "...highlights the essential role of human action in knowing how to get things done in complex organizational work."²³⁷ In addition to that, *technology-as-practice* claims to develop "...a practice lens to examine how people, as they interact with a technology in their ongoing practices, enact structures which shape their emergent and situated use of that technology"²³⁸ and *innovation-as-practice* deals with the practices of product innovation.²³⁹

However practice theories are mainly used to describe organizational strategy and the strategy development processes that will be discussed in the next chapter.

²³⁵ Cf. Knorr-Cetina, 1999.

²³⁶ Cf. Brown/Duguid, 2001, p 125.

²³⁷ Orlikowski, 2002, p 249.

²³⁸ Orlikowski, 2000, p 404.

²³⁹ Cf. Dougherty, 1992.

6. Strategy-as-practice

In February 2001, a group of about 50 researchers convened at the European Institute for Advanced Studies in Management in Brussels, attending a workshop organized by Gerry Johnson, Leif Melin and Richard Whittington, to discuss development in strategy's micro-processes. Although some basic ideas of this strategy-as-practice titles approach are much older and Richard Whittington has identified an "emerging approach to strategy [...] that is concerned with managerial activity [and] how managers 'do strategy'..."²⁴⁰ in 1996, this conference is commonly seen as the initial point of a more practice-based approach to strategy making.²⁴¹ Numerous articles in top-tier journals, several special issues²⁴², handbooks and textbooks and the establishment of a 'strategy-as-practice community' later, the strategy-as-practice approach is among the most popular concepts in organizational theory nowadays. Consequently, this chapter will discuss the s-as-p approach in detail by examining various key terms and relationships between them, definitions, points of critics and distinctions from other traditional strategy research agendas.

6.1 The concept in general

The strategy-as-practice community explains their research interest as follows: "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. We see the linkage through to strategic outcomes as an important component of our research as we ultimately need to be able to link the outcomes of (multiple) strategizing activities, events and behaviors' within the firm to more macro organizational, institutional and, possibly, even broader social contexts and outcomes."²⁴³ This quote summarizes the concept of s-as-p in a good way. Advocates of the emerging approach claim to combine inner-organizational processes of organizational strategy making and macro consequences of those micro activities. Their main research interest is "... where and how is the work of strategizing and organizing actually done; who does this strategizing and organizing work, what are the skills required for this work and how are they acquired?"²⁴⁴ Most of the

²⁴⁰ Cf. Whittington, 1996, p 731-732.

²⁴¹ Cf. Carter/Clegg/Kornberger, 2008, p 83.

²⁴² Journal of Management Studies (JMS), Special Issue (2003, Vol. 4, No. 1) regarding an 'Activity-Based View' and Human Relations (HR), Special Issue (2007) regarding "Strategy as Practice".

²⁴³ Strategy-as-practice community: <http://www.s-as-p.org>, from 27th.08.2010.

²⁴⁴ Whittington, 2002, p 218.

research in s-as-p is done by qualitative interviews with strategists, by attending strategy meetings or workshops and through observing how different strategy tools (e.g. the Balanced-Score-Card or Portfolio Analysis) are used by practitioners. To begin with, it must be mentioned that strategy-as-practice is very much couched in European characters and must therefore be understood as a systematic critique of orthodox, hegemonic, and mainly North American or North American-inspired strategy research.²⁴⁵

6.2 Key terms and definitions

General speaking the s-as-p approach emphasizes detailed processes and practices which constitute the day-to-day activities of strategizing and their impact to strategic outcomes. The focus therefore is on micro-activities that, while often invisible to traditional strategy research, nevertheless, can have significant consequences for organizations and those who work in them.²⁴⁶ To give a basic understanding of the concept in question, I will anticipate the detailed explanations that follow and try to summarize the approach in one sentence. S-as-p tries to explain and research organizational strategy by focusing on micro-activities that are carried out by individual actors (practitioners) in various situations (episodes of praxis) by applying routinized forms of behavior (practices) that are situated in the macro-level (and therefore supra individual) of the organization. To make that definition more clear, I want to discuss the different terms that were used in this 'one-sentence-explanation' subsequently.

6.2.1 Strategy and strategizing

S-as-p scholars conceptualize strategy as "... a situated, socially accomplished activity, while strategizing comprises those actions, interactions and negotiations of multiple actors and the situated practices that they draw upon in accomplishing that activity"²⁴⁷. As mentioned, s-as-p sets as antagonist to traditional concepts of strategy research that recognizes strategy as something like an organizational property. Consequently, they highlight the "... need to study strategy as an activity, something that people do in the social practices they perform."²⁴⁸ Thus the activity of 'strategizing' is performed by individual actors who draw their decisions upon – in a structuralist sense – the set of established practices available from their social context

²⁴⁵ Cf. Carter/Clegg/Kornberger, 2008, p 83.

²⁴⁶ Cf. Johnson/Langley/Melin/Whittington, 2007, p 7.

²⁴⁷ Jarzabkowski/Spée, 2009, p 70.

²⁴⁸ Rasche, 2008, p 273.

(the macro-level).²⁴⁹ Therefore, the relationship between the macro and the micro-level of the strategy process is in the center of interest. Strategy is conceptualized as a combination of 'animation' (action) and 'orientation' (direction) meaning that individual action is influenced by a direction that can be found in supra individual structures. Consequently strategizing is the iterative execution and reproduction of social practices. In addition to that, those social practices are permanently evaluated by the individual actors and only applied again in an ensuing decision situation if their result is recognized as positive.²⁵⁰ Apart from the inner organizational factors, the s-as-p approach recognizes external influences that affect organizational strategy and social practices. Examples for such supra-organizational variables which legitimate strategizing practices are for example governmental restrictions, the industry, social culture, management gurus respectively fashions and business schools.²⁵¹

6.2.2 Routines

Organizational routines are the most important concept regarding the strategy-as-practice approach. Thereby, the relationship between routine and practice is commonly not discussed in literature. Moreover, the two terms are used quite confusingly. Jarzabkowski and Whittington (2008) quote for example that: "Practices involve the various routines, discourses, concepts and technologies through which this strategy labour is made possible"²⁵² whereas Jarzabkowski (2004) points out the "...routinized nature of practice."²⁵³ The first quote assumes that routines are a part (among others) of organizational practices while the second quote postulates that all practices are routinized actions. Due to the fact that the lack of a clear definition will be discussed afterwards, I want to discuss the relationship between the two terms in this section, showing that social practice can be understood as a much more comprehensive concept of traditional routines. To begin with, it must be mentioned that modern approaches of routines and accordingly of practice use a broader conceptualization of the term 'routine' than traditional ones. To understand the concept of routines and practice it is therefore necessary to examine the shift in meaning of the term.

²⁴⁹ Cf. Whittington, 2002.

²⁵⁰ Cf. McKiernan/Carter, 2004, p 4.

²⁵¹ Towards a practical model of strategy-as-practice

²⁵² Cf. Jarzabkowski/Whittington, 2008, p 111.

²⁵³ Cf. Jarzabkowski, 2004, p 531.

In general, routines have no positive cognition in the minds of humans. As Feldman and Pentland (2003) quote: "Because of their nature as fixed structures, the story goes, routines also result in inertia, inflexibility, and mindlessness"²⁵⁴. But organizational research considers routines in a much broader (and much more positive) way in recent studies. Organizational routines are seen no longer as a monotone and iterative fulfillment of rules. In contrast, routines are taken as complex, social, and historical grown behaviors, which can be applied to different sociological phenomena. For business theory and especially to understand organizations in a better way, this paradigm shift, which is labeled often as the 'practice turn', provides a lot of interesting explanations. As illustrated in Figure 11, routines have gone through a shift of meaning in recent years, towards a conceptualization of routines as social practices.²⁵⁵



Figure 11: Shift in meaning of the term routine

In their classical definition routines are predetermined automatic responses to expected problems ('stimuli'). The classical definition enables researchers to focus on conditions that cause a certain behavior and predict the behavioral consequences of the stimulus. The point that is criticized frequently regarding the classical stimulus-response model is the consideration of the human actor as passive and predetermined, due to the fact that their behavior is seen only as a result of situational conditions that are controlled by the consequences of the executed actions.²⁵⁶ Based on the mentioned points of critics, organizational theory has gone away from recognizing humans as mindless and predetermined actors. Rather they focus on a 'tacit knowing' of how things are done and highlight the extraordinary abilities of humans that carry out those routines. A further development of the routine concept is the consideration of those as collective abilities that involve multiple actors. The involvement of multiple actors includes consequently the possibility to distribute routines across space, or across the organization. Even though those different actors are not physically required to be located at the same place, they are linked by their interaction. In addition to that, the knowledge that is held by the involved actors when they execute the routine must be considered. Due to the fact that organizational

²⁵⁴ Cf. Feldman/Pentland, 2003.

²⁵⁵ Cf. Geiger/Koch, 2008.

²⁵⁶ Cf. von Rosenstiel, 2003, p 62.

knowledge cannot be considered anymore as the sum of individual knowledge it gets difficult, if not impossible, to get an overview of the 'whole' organizational knowledge if routines are seen as collective abilities. Therefore, theories of knowledge and learning frequently discuss organizational knowledge that lies beyond the individual mind. Moreover, the multiple actors that are involved in those routines can form various communities. On the one hand, there are hierarchical communities like a functional organization that is characterized by hierarchical levels, shared norms and rules and specialization. On the other hand, there are epistemic communities and communities of practice, which are defined by the production of new knowledge or by a common interest in a given practice.²⁵⁷

The fourth definition of routines, that underlies practice-based approaches in strategy, is the consideration of routines as a 'social practice'. Organizational routines are thereby no longer understood as individual dispositions that were previously adopted or acquired and that are triggered by an appropriate stimulus or context. Rather than patterns of behavior, routines are 'stored behavioral capacities or capabilities' based on collective knowledge and memory. When individuals carry out routines, an interaction of organizational structures and individual habits occur that lead to sequential behavior.²⁵⁸ As mentioned regarding general theories of practice, routines embody the duality of structure and agency. Due to the theory of duality, routines consist of two interrelated aspects, the 'ostensive' and the 'performative' as Feldman/Pentland (2003) entitles them. Ostensive aspects represent abstract and generalized ideals of a routine and collective ideas of individuals who are involved in the execution of those routines respectively some kind of an idealized nature of the routine that is stored in the collective memory of the specific social group. Performative aspects on the other hand relate to the specific exercised routines. Deviations from the ideal behavior of individuals will lead either to a change in the ostensive aspects of routines or sanctions to maintain the expected idealized type of appearance.²⁵⁹ Of course, practice theories try to overcome the duality of structure and agency and consequently also the ostensive and performative character of routines. Therefore, they introduce three key terms of strategy-as-practice, namely practice, practitioners and practices that combine micro and macro-level aspects of organizational routines. Summarizing it can be said, that social practices contain

²⁵⁷ Becker, 2004, p 646-647.

²⁵⁸ Becker/Zirpoli, 2008, p 130.

²⁵⁹ Cf. Feldman/Pentland, 2003.

various organizational routines in the s-as-p concept, but the meaning of the word routine is much broader than in the traditional sense.

6.2.3 The three p's of strategy-as-practice

Whittington (2006) argues that a practice perspective on strategy should incorporate consideration of how strategy 'practitioners' (most often senior managers, board members and consultants) draw on more or less institutionalized strategic 'practices' (routines, tools or discourses at organizational and supra-organizational levels) in idiosyncratic and creative ways in their strategy 'praxis' (specific activities such as meetings, retreats, conversations, talk, interaction, behaviors).²⁶⁰

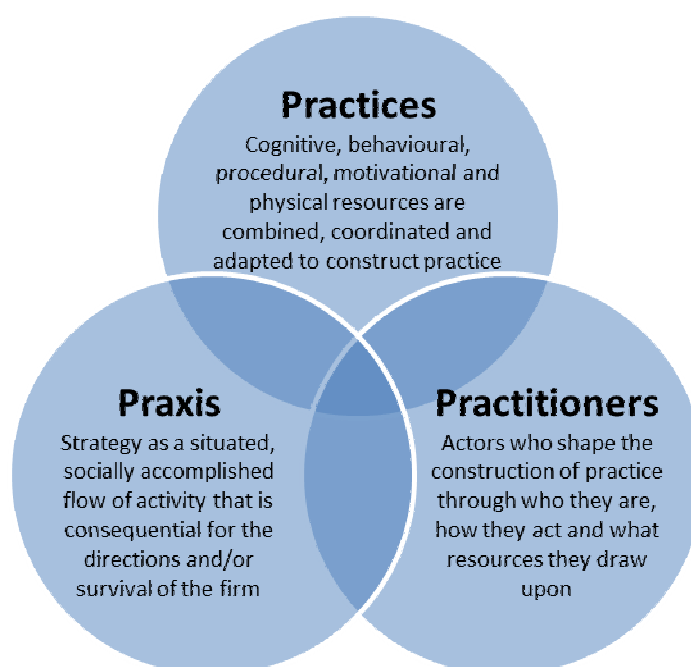


Figure 12: A conceptual framework for analyzing strategy as practice adopted from Jarzabkowski/Balogun/Seidl, 2003, p 8.

As mentioned several times, strategizing happens in the nexus between practices, praxis and practitioners and can be therefore seen as result from the interaction of these three concepts. In addition to those three factors Whittington (2008) mentions a fourth theme that is connected with strategizing in one of his recent papers: 'the profession' of strategy as an institution within organizational science.²⁶¹

6.2.3.1 Praxis

Regarding the s-as-p approach, praxis "...comprises the interconnection between the actions of different, dispersed individuals and groups and those socially, politically,

²⁶⁰ Cf. Whittington, 2006 cited from Fenton/Langley, 2008.

²⁶¹ Cf. Whittington, 2007, p 1578.

and economically embedded institutions with which individuals act and to which they contribute.”²⁶² Organizational praxis thereby always consists of formal and informal activities. Formal activities are for example the attendance at a strategy workshop, the use of a balanced-score-card or the presentation of a power-point slide. For s-as-p researchers, informal activities like talks at the coffee machine or individual behavior in a decision situation are even more important for their research activities due to the fact that their focus is by definition on the ‘real work’ of strategizing. Jarzabkowski and Whittington (2008) highlight the nature of praxis when they quote: „Praxis refers to the work that comprises strategy: the flow of activities such as meeting, talking, calculating, form filling, and presenting in which strategy is constituted.”²⁶³ Referring to Bourdieu’s meta-theory of practice, praxis can be seen as the ‘field’ in which practitioners act by using various available practices. Praxis is always a specific situation in the process of strategizing where people make decisions, accomplish tasks and interact with other individuals. Besides the association with everyday actions, that happens within ‘strategizing’, s-as-p also recognizes the importance of the relationship between those activities and the context (social, institutional or organizational) in which the activity occurs.²⁶⁴ Such context factors are for example various organizational or governmental rules and guidelines that influence the way in which a strategic direction of the company is elaborated, which person takes part in the strategy formulation process and which technical and financial resources are available for the involved individuals. Organizational praxis as individual action is distinguished from social practice by s-as-p advocates when they postulate that “...unlike social practices, which pertain to a pattern in a stream of activity, strategy praxis describes the whole of human action with regard to strategy.”²⁶⁵ From a management fashion point of view, praxis can be recognized as Kieser’s arena (see section 3.1.2) of strategizing in which various players bustle about: strategy consultants, academics who research strategy, managers and editors of management magazines that discuss strategic topics. Within this arena those player compete against each other to push their favored concept of strategy due to the fact that they expect high profits (e.g. financial rewards, influence or academic acceptance) if a certain approach of strategy is applied in ‘praxis’.

²⁶² Jarzabkowski/Balogu/Seidl, 2007, p 8.

²⁶³ Cf. Jarzabkowski/Whittington, 2008, p 282.

²⁶⁴ Cf. Johnson/Langley/Melin/Whittington, 2007, p 27.

²⁶⁵ Cf. Rasche, 2008, p 277.

6.2.3.2 Practices

In sociology, Jon Elster (among others) is well-known for following this lead: "The elementary unit of social life is the individual human action," he argues. From a sociological perspective, practices refer to a social construct which has emerged over time, which reflects, sustains and reproduces norms, values and knowledge. According to these insights, practices reduce complexity by defining and institutionalizing what can be said and accepted within a society or group and what not – thereby ordering the social world.²⁶⁶ Although the concept of practices is not used consistently by s-as-p researchers, all papers use a relatively broad definition of the term to highlight the multiple aspects of practices. For example Reckwitz (2002) defines practices as "...routinized types of behavior which consist of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge."²⁶⁷ Thus practice in the s-as-p approach can be seen as performative routines (in contrast to ostensive routines), that are stored in the collective memory of the organization and consequently applied in various episodes of praxis by practitioners. Practices are therefore not situated in the individuals mind and in individual action, but rather in the 'collective brain' of the organization and consequently in the macro-level of strategizing. Connecting this idea of practice with Bourdieu's concept, practices in the s-as-p sense can be compared with the phenomenon that Bourdieu calls 'habitus' (a collective characteristic) –the generating principle of individual routines.²⁶⁸

Strategy's practices occur at multiple levels. S-as-p identifies them primary as organizational specific embodied in the routines, operating procedures and cultures that shape local modes of strategizing. Moreover, some strategy practices are influenced by the social environment of the specific company. At a higher level social practices, for instance, include norms of appropriate strategic scale, scope or structure that are diffuse across nations and the world.²⁶⁹ Summarizing, it can be said that practices within s-as-p are related to the supra-individual structures, such as social and cultural norms, shared routines and ways of thinking and thus represent the objectivist tradition. Practices 'supply' subjects with cognitive and discursive resources

²⁶⁶ Cf. Geiger, 2009, p 191.

²⁶⁷ Cf. Reckwitz, 2002, p 2049.

²⁶⁸ Cf. Hurtado, 2008, p 134.

²⁶⁹ Cf. Whittington, 2006, p 620.

to take actions in social contexts.²⁷⁰ Practices can furthermore reflect the organizational culture. If new employees become part of an organization or others leave the company after a certain time, practices will still stay the same. Even if they are not written down explicitly, practices influence how individuals act within the organization, how they dress and how they make (strategic) decisions.

Organizational practices are applied in episodes of praxis in every day organizational life. When they are applied, they are evaluated and reproduced at the same time. If the evaluation process concludes in favor of the practice, it finds their way into the collective knowledge of the organization and can be applied in prospective episodes of praxis. Furthermore, such practices can be refused if they are evaluated negatively, adopted from outside practitioners, created by individuals for specific situations and modified to fulfill certain requirements of the praxis situation. Connecting those considerations with management-fashions I can conclude, that practices are applied management fashions. Similar with practices, fashionable approaches are commonly introduced by outsiders of the organization and applied by strategists. Consequently strategists are management fashion users if they apply fashionable techniques (and therefore practices) in their organizational praxis. In contrast to that, those practitioners or institutions that implement external practices in the inner organizational process of strategizing (e.g. strategy consultants) can be conceptualized as management fashion setters. Of course practices are commonly organization specific and fashions are wide spread among various industries. Therefore, fashions are not the same phenomenon as practices. Rather if a fashionable technique is applied frequently in praxis situations of strategizing the fashion (in the way it is been applied) the management fashion becomes an organizational practice.

6.2.3.3 *Practitioners*

Whittington (1996) states that the focus of the s-as-p approach is "... on how the practitioners of strategy act and interact."²⁷¹ The approach of researching individual action is, by using a widely known term from marketing, commonly mentioned as the 'unique selling proposition'²⁷² of the strategy-as-practice approach. "Strategy-as-practice is essentially concerned with strategy as activity in organizations, typically the interaction of people, rather than strategy as the property of organizations."²⁷³ S-as-p

²⁷⁰ Cf. Seidl/van Aaken, 2007.

²⁷¹ Cf. Whittington, 1996, p 731.

²⁷² A unique selling proposition (USP) defines the competitive advantage of an organization. A company what makes you different from your competitors and emphasize these advantages in your marketing.

²⁷³ Johnson/Langley/Melin/Whittington, 2007, p 3.

scholars claim that, although traditional approaches recognize the importance of individual actions, they are more or less concerned with the outcome of those individual actions on an organizational (macro) level. S-as-p advocates frequently mention one point to distinguish their approach from traditional ones: They do not research the practice itself, but the individuals who carry out the practice or as Feldmann (2000) summarizes it: "When we do not separate the people who are doing the routines from the routine, we can see routines as a richer phenomenon. Routines are performed by people who think and feel and care. Their reactions are situated in institutional, organizational and personal contexts."²⁷⁴ Researchers attend strategy meetings as a guest or analyze communications between strategists. Palmer/O'Kane put it that way: "The strategy-as-practice school of thought, broadly explore what strategists do which means that this approach places more emphasis on how corporate managers 'do strategy' – the getting of ideas, the spotting of opportunities and the grasping of situations."²⁷⁵

Strategy practitioners are thereby those individuals who do the work of strategy. Consequentially, not only the company's top management is considered as a practitioner. Rather the definition includes managers at multiple levels of the firm, external actors like consulting companies that bring in new ideas (and therefore new practices), market analysts as well as governmental regulators. When practitioners strategize, they use social, symbolic and material tools that support their activities – strategy practices.²⁷⁶ Although the interest in individual action is commonly mentioned at first in s-as-p literature, strategy-as-practice scholars are not exclusively concerned with the actions of strategizing. In addition to that, they are interested in the outcome of those individual actions and therefore with the performance of practitioners in terms of their local effectiveness and in a third level with the performance of the organization as a whole. To be effective, practitioners are required to use their 'resources' (e.g. strategic tools) skillfully. This skillful adaptation results consequently in the creation of routinized behavior and furthermore in social practices if the routinized behavior is stored in the collective memory of the organization. If a strategist carries out certain practices he adopts organizational practices that were used in the past and evaluated by other practitioners in a positive way. If a strategist learns a practice, that person learns to dispose him- or herself and to move his or her

²⁷⁴ Cf. Feldman, 2000, p 614.

²⁷⁵ Cf. Palmer/O'Kane, 2007, p 520.

²⁷⁶ Cf. Jarzabkowski/Whittington, 2008, p 282.

body in a certain way (including activities such as talking, reading and writing).²⁷⁷ The key issue is thereby the reflexivity of a strategist, most notably their ability to 'choose the appropriate move at the appropriate time' and consequently the combination of this practical and procedural activity. Practitioners are the actors, which reproduce not only blind practice: practitioners have the possibility to reflect their individuality and change their behavior intentional. Actors are therefore involved in a specific situation of praxis and interpret and apply practices context-specific.²⁷⁸

Once again I would like to connect the idea behind practitioners with the theory of management fashion. By referring to the management setting process of Abrahamson, practitioners can be both: management fashion setters but also fashion users. As mentioned above, a management fashion is only successful if the concept is used within a large number of companies and therefore by many practitioners. Practitioners apply fashionable techniques to act like they are expected to do. Sometimes their environment (e.g. stakeholders) expects them to implement certain practices due to the fact that these techniques are recognized as especially gainful and future-orientated at a specific point of time. Unfortunately, management fashions are not a long lasting phenomenon as we have already heard. Therefore, those practices are modified or dropped down once it is discovered that the outcome of the practice is not as expected. Furthermore, fashions are commonly introduced by consulting companies. Within this approach, those companies are practitioners that are integrated in the process of strategizing – for instance through strategy workshops or strategy consulting projects. If those new approaches (e.g. strategic tool) are implemented within the process of strategizing, an external practice has found its way into the broad range of possible practices of the practitioners. In the short term, such external practices – and therefore also fashionable techniques – may be evaluated as gainful and adopted in ensuing episodes of praxis. In addition to that, there is also a possibility that practitioners adopt new ideas from best-selling – and therefore new practices – in the process of strategizing. If those ideas are used by practitioners frequently, a new fashion has found its way into organizational praxis.

6.2.3.4 Profession

As mentioned above, Whittington (2007) introduced a fourth P into the s-as-p approach. He highlights, that the interaction between practitioners as general classes result in a professionalization of strategy. Whittington underlines "...the importance of strategy as a specialized institutional field" where both, strategy researchers and

²⁷⁷ Cf. Rasche/Chia, 2009, p 721.

²⁷⁸ Cf. Seidl/van Aaken, 2007, p 178.

teachers, do their work in a professional environment. Therefore, he compares strategy research with professions like law, medicine or journalism and identifies a group of strategy researchers "...with a collective identity and a set of connections that goes far beyond particular organizations". The involved actors in this profession or institutional field are thereby multiple. He mentions for example consulting firms, business schools, business media, academic journals, professional societies, enterprises and managers that deal with strategic issues.²⁷⁹ Unfortunately, the question how the consideration of strategy research as a profession influences the strategy-as-practice approach is not answered at all. Moreover, it can be criticized, that strategy research was always been carried out professionally in organizational theory. The research on organizational strategy has been one of the key interests of organizational research since the introduction of the discipline. Therefore, the question has to be posed, if it makes a difference whether the professionalization of a single approach (in our case s-as-p) is emphasized by its advocates or if the research work is done professionally without mention this explicitly (as I would assume that it's the case regarding traditional approaches).

6.2.4 The micro and macro perspective

In different papers a broad range of terms and phrases are used to describe the research interest respectively the research focus of strategy-as-practice: 'activity-based view', 'core micro-strategies', 'micro-activities', 'micro-behavioral', 'micro-context', 'micro-level processes', 'micro-practices', 'micro-perspective' or 'micro-sociological'. Apart from the different terms that are used, one common characteristic is quite obvious: The s-as-p approach direct attention away from macro-processes to varying aspects of the minutiae of strategizing.²⁸⁰ Thereby practice theorists in general and s-as-p advocates in particular claim to overcome the problem of agency and structure (duality) and consequently bypass the 'micro/macro' distinction that can be found in traditional approaches of social science and strategy research.

Based on Anthony Giddens theory of practice, all human actions are constrained by material circumstances but in contrast to radical structuralist approaches, individuals are nevertheless able to act deliberately. Humans are, following Giddens' terminology, competent, reflexive and knowledgeable 'agents' whose interactions, whether at a macro (i.e., society, class) or at micro (i.e., organizational, group) level, are on the one hand structured by social constraints but on the other hand human agency also

²⁷⁹ Cf. Whittington, 2007, p 1580.

²⁸⁰ Cf. Chia/MacKay, 2007, p 223.

influences those structures.²⁸¹ By leveling the traditional difference between structure and micro-processes, s-as-p research is able to determine organizational practices as phenomena of self-renewal and change. Furthermore, this approach enables researchers to highlight and research the embedded nature of strategy-making and the way that localized interactions both shape and are shaped by the wider context.²⁸²

However, a clear distinction between micro and macro-level is commonly not made in s-as-p literature. Generally speaking, practitioners and praxis can be found in the individual (micro-) level, whereas practices as collective stored behavior is more situated in the macro-level of the organization. In addition to that, the macro-level is sometimes divided into an organizational-level and a level that is beyond organizational constraints and therefore situated in the social contexts. Based on these considerations, Jarzabkowski/Spée, 2009 mention three levels of strategy research: The micro level at the bottom that explores and attempts to explain strategy practices at levels of the individual or group (e.g. decision meetings and strategy workshops). One level above, the so called 'meso-level' refers to phenomena of strategy praxis that are situated at the organizational or sub-organizational level (e.g. by researching organizational change and the strategy process as a whole). The third level is consequently entitled as the 'macro' and wants to explain strategy praxis at the institutional level with explaining patterns of action frequently within a specific industry.²⁸³ In addition to that, it must be mentioned, that although research tends to be interested in what people do on the micro level, the observed output of the individual actions on the meso and/or on the macro level is as well important for strategy-as-practice researchers.²⁸⁴

Concluding, I want to bring up the connection of the macro/micro distinction regarding practice theories and management fashions. I would argue that management fashions are situated in all three levels (macro-, meso-, and micro) of organizational practices. Institutionalized phenomena like ISO certifications can be found in the macro organizational levels due to the fact that in whole industries such a certification is sometimes a basic requirement to find business partners without putting the usefulness of the certification into question. On the meso level organizational practices like whole management concepts such as BPR can be found, because the whole organization straightened to the requirements of the fashionable concept. In addition

²⁸¹ Cf. S-as-p Workshop, Lausanne, http://www.s-as-p.org/files_workshop/5thws_summary.pdf.

²⁸² Cf. Geiger/Koch, 2008, p 705.

²⁸³ Jarzabkowski/Spée, 2009, p 71-73.

²⁸⁴ Cf. Johnson/Langley/Melin/Whittington, 2007, p 37.

to that, the practitioners that implement the fashion in their everyday routines are situated obviously on the micro level. But in contrast to the assumptions of practice theory, there is a lack of reflexivity among those practitioners due to the fact that it is not questioned whether these practices make sense or not.

6.2.5 *The relationship between the 3 p's*

Figure 13 illustrates the relationship between practitioners, praxis and practice that build the foundation of the s-as-p approach respectively the interdependence between the macro and the micro level of strategy. No matter on which level of analyses the term 'practice' is used, the connection between the individual action of the practitioners and practices, that are beyond the individual, is in the spotlight.

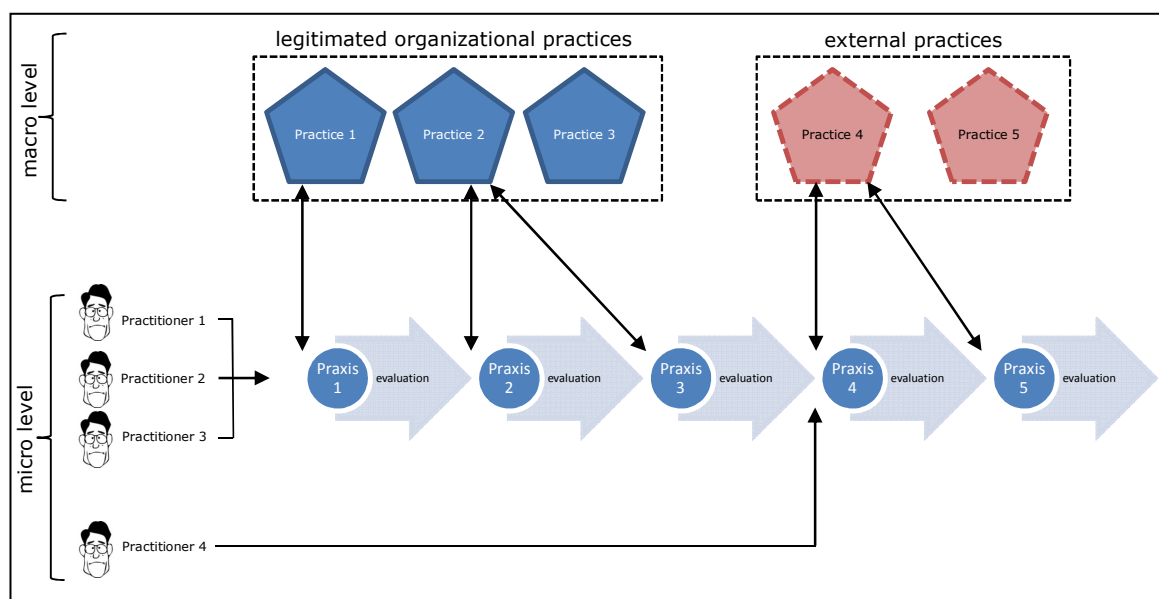


Figure 13: The relationship between practitioners, praxis and practice adopted and modified from Whittington, 2006, p 621.

On the micro level we can see individual actors (practitioners) within the organization which are acting together to achieve a common organizational aim. In case of strategy as practice those practitioners would probably be managers that are involved in the process of strategy formulation. The five sequenced arrows symbolize various episodes of praxis, where the three practitioners meet and carry out collective actions. Thereby those episodes of praxis can appear in many different ways. For example, an organizational praxis can be a normal strategy meeting, a strategy workshop or informal talks at the coffee machine or in the company's canteen. In each episode of praxis the individual actors apply legitimated organizational practices that are situated in the macro level (and therefore beyond the individuals mind). Those practices reflect historical established ways of how things are done within the company. This can be conceptualized as a 'guideline' for practitioners that tells them which kind of behavior is appropriate and suitable in which situation and which is not. From a strategy point

of view those practices can be for example the course of strategy formulation, how the company's mission is elaborated or how certain tools are used in the strategy formulation process. Thereby, the practices are reproduced in every episode of praxis. After a practice is carried out and the result is evaluated in a positive way the practice is confirmed (of course subconsciously) by the practitioners as useful. It finds its way back to the macro level of legitimated organizational practices. As figure 13 illustrates, in praxis episode one, practice number one is applied by the three practitioners whereas the individual actors think that practice number two is more suitable for praxis episodes two and three. A certain practice can not only be reproduced by actors but rather modified according to the requirements of the particular episode of praxis. If the modified praxis works well, it is likely that the new practice finds its way to the macro level of possible practices. As illustrated in Figure 13 s-as-p does not recognize the organization as a self-contained system. Rather, there is a possibility that practices from the organizational environment are adopted. Those new ideas can result from a new practitioner that are involved in the strategy formulation process, from techniques and concepts that were demonstrated by strategy consultants in strategy workshops or from strategy journals and books that are read by the practitioners but also from a new problem that occurs at the first time. Therefore, also management fashions can be seen as external practices which find their way into organizational praxis in most cases through popular bestselling books or consultant companies. In figure 13, practitioner four brings practice number four for the specific praxis situation four. Practice number four is evaluated positive and consequently also used in praxis episode five. Furthermore, it is also possible that practices disappear from the set of possible practices in the macro level. On the one hand, if their application was frequently evaluated in a negative way, or if they are simply forgotten because they were not used in a long period of time on the other hand.²⁸⁵

Concluding and with respect to the various fields of s-as-p research, the interaction between strategy practitioners and strategy practices highlights the various practices that different practitioners use in the doing of strategy. If the relationship between strategy practices and strategy praxis is in the research focus, scholars examine how strategy practices influence praxis which can happen twofold. Either scholars research how standard practices (e.g. predefined planning procedures) impact the strategy praxis within an organization or they investigate how strategy practices emerge from the undifferentiated strategy praxis in organizations. Finally, researches regarding the interactions between strategy praxis and practitioners try to answer the question how

²⁸⁵ Cf. Seidl/van Aaken, 2007, p 179-180 and Whittington, 2006, p 620-621.

practitioners make sense of their daily strategy praxis and which consequences for the entire company are implicit.²⁸⁶

6.3 Distinctions from traditional approaches

When I started to think about possible topics for my master thesis, I thumbed through various journals and other sources to find an interesting and novel field that seemed to be worth discussing in detail. The practice-based approach to strategy gave me this impression at first, as it is frequently postulated as 'new' and 'promising'. To get an overview about the concept, I tried to find literature that was frequently mentioned as the 'origin' of the approach or 'standard literature' regarding the practice-based movement.²⁸⁷ By reading those articles I got more and more the impression that I have heard most of the ideas behind the concept in different courses on business school regarding organizational theory. After a certain time, I recognized that I was not the only one who had difficulties to distinguish the new approach from traditional concepts. As Hurtado (2010) quotes: „There are also disagreements as to what distinguishes the new field from already established ones such as the process approach to strategy, the institutional approach, or the resource-based view.“²⁸⁸ For that reason, and based on the considerations in section 4, I will now summarize some points that are frequently mentioned by s-as-p advocates, when they try to emphasize the novelty of their field of research.

To begin with, the resource-based view is particularly significant, because similar to the RBV of strategy, s-as-p is concerned with organizational practices and activities that could presumably constitute bases of competitive advantage.²⁸⁹ The RBV in general and the corresponding dynamic capability theory in particular are interested in sustainable competitive advantage that derives from valuable, rare, difficult to imitate and imperfectly substitutable resources. According to RBV scholars, those commonly detailed and subtle differences on the organizational micro level, explain differences between competing firms at the macro level.²⁹⁰ Although s-as-p advocates mention the RBV frequently as especially useful for their research, they criticize the macro-orientation and the research design of RBV theories. Generally speaking, they argue that even though RBV scholars identify micro-activities as important distinguishing

²⁸⁶ Cf. Rasche/Chia, 2009, p 279-281.

²⁸⁷ Cf. Whittington, 1996 Jarzabkowski, 2003 Johnson/Langley/Melin/Whittington, 2007.

²⁸⁸ Hurtado, 2010, p 53.

²⁸⁹ Johnson/Melin/Whittington, 2003, p 6-7.

²⁹⁰ Cf. Ambrosini/Bowman/Burton-Taylor, 2007, p 61.

factors between organizations, they are only concerned about the macro level results of those differences. Furthermore, it is mentioned that empirical work into the RBV consists commonly of quantitative studies with large number of samples that are subject to statistical analysis. S-as-p theorists conclude that the RBV is of little use to practitioners and risk ending up as little more than a tautology: firms do better than others because they have (invisible) assets superior to those of their rivals.²⁹¹ Practice based scholars claim to go beyond this conceptual problem by researching micro activities. Of course the question occurs, in what way the final result of their studies would differ. It can be assumed that s-as-p researchers identify differences in the micro activities (of strategizing) and explain certain macro differences by those micro activities. Consequently, they would conclude that various firms have different strategies (resulting of micro differences) and some micro practices are more suitable for a certain economic environment than others. Of course those scholars would argue that their approach is able to make those 'invisible assets' visible, but the usefulness of those insights is questionable. S-as-p scholars would advise practitioners to learn from strategy practices from more successful companies to make their own organizational strategy more competitive. The weaknesses of this (of course simplified) consideration are obvious. On the one hand, micro activities are hardly imitable and reproducible in general, due to the fact that they are influenced by a broad range of visible and invisible factors. On the other hand, it is hardly imaginable that a change in single micro activities would influence the organization and the organizational strategy as a whole²⁹². I would argue that a strong organizational culture will shape the 'new' practices towards a 'fit' with traditional ones. In addition to that, copying strategies are barely successful in general (on the macro level), so it can be assumed that implementing micro practices from other companies wouldn't be very fruitful either.

The second distinction that is frequently debated in literature is the extent to which s-as-p is distinct from traditional strategy process research. While Carter et al. (2008) claim that the term practice is used interchangeably for process, and Langley (2007) views s-as-p as a category of process, others suggest that s-as-p differs from traditional process research in several respects. The differences are manifest in its view of agency, its focus on the production and reproduction of strategic action, rather than seeking to explain strategic change and firm performance, and its perspective on

²⁹¹ Cf. Johnson/Langley/Melin/Whittington, 2007, p 21.

²⁹² Of course, if all (or many) micro activities would change in a short period of time, there would probably be an influence on the organization as a whole. Nevertheless it is hardly imaginable from my point of view that a change of all (or many) micro activities is possible simultaneously and intended. Rather such changes have to start probably with considerations on the macro level (e.g. organizational culture) that influence the micro behaviour.

strategy at multiple levels of actions and interaction rather than at the level of the firm.²⁹³

To begin with, I want to mention a frequently quoted sentence that was postulated by Henry Mintzberg already in 1974: "The first step in providing such help is to find out what a manager's job really is"²⁹⁴. Mintzberg (1973) has studied the daily routines of managers and their fragmented way of working (and strategy making). Although s-as-p researcher admit that his work "certainly generated a set of new and exciting insights" they point out that his research "did not demand a specific practice perspective, rather a focus on processes and activities."²⁹⁵ Similarly, Whittington (2007) recognizes Mintzberg's work as useful to define the boundaries between process and practice research although he claims that "...his processual focus on organizational outcomes diminishes strategy praxis, while marginalizing strategy's practices, practitioners and the profession as a whole"²⁹⁶ In general, traditional strategy process research seeks to capture the internal reality of organizations 'in flight'. Issues relating to "time, agency, structure, context, emergence and development"²⁹⁷ are central to the 'processual' approach to strategy theorizing.²⁹⁸

Generally speaking, both approaches to strategy are based on the same underlying philosophical assumption - namely a 'methodical individualism' view on the organization that emphasizes individual agency.²⁹⁹ In contrast to traditional process research that is interested in the overall processes of organizational decision-making and organizational change, s-as-p is interested in the practical activity and tools necessary to make these processes happen. To meet this claim, strategy-as-practice researchers have mainly followed their key consideration towards a greater commitment to ethnography or similarly intimate methodologies, rather than the interview-based, organizational-level case studies typical of the process tradition.³⁰⁰ Some s-as-p scholars entitle their approach as 'post—processual' because they claim to shift the focus away from studying exclusively individual activities and situations like actions talk and the work of strategic practitioners in workshops. Although s-as-p

²⁹³ Cf. Jarzabkowski/Spee, 2009, p 70.

²⁹⁴ Mintzberg, 1973, p 54.

²⁹⁵ Cf. Geiger, 2009, p 197.

²⁹⁶ Whittington, 2007, p 1581.

²⁹⁷ Pettigrew, 1997, p 337.

²⁹⁸ Cf. Chia/MacKay, 2007, p 220-221.

²⁹⁹ Cf. Chia/Holt, 2006.

³⁰⁰ Cf. Whittington, 2007, p 1578.

research interest looks quite similar, the consideration of the term 'practice' makes a difference in their view. Viewing actors and processes as subordinate to practices enables them to implement a much broader view towards the institutionalized character of practices. Consequently the individual actions are not only observed itself but always in connection with impacts that are situated beyond the individuals' work. Summarizing the difference between practice and praxis is once again in the center. Practices are beyond the individual practitioners and praxis episode. I would argue that the benefits from that view are more or less unclear. Of course, those research results are interesting, but I would argue that in the end the only thing that really matters is the outcome of the strategy making process on the organizational level. Especially managers, but also students in business schools are mainly interested on the process of strategy making on a macro level. Detailed information about the various individual's activities that are underlying the whole process would result in an information overflow rather than in an improvement of the strategy process. In addition to that, in my opinion organizational research should be aimed at making general statements about strategy on an aggregated level. Of course, individual actions must be considered but in the end strategy research can only be applied in the economic world if it provides general statements and assumptions on a macro level.

Similar with the considerations above, the connection with institutional theories is obvious. S-as-p recognizes micro activities as institutionalized practices. Therefore, the 'new' approach claims to "...extend neo-institutional theory insights at the macro level to detailed interactions at the micro level."³⁰¹ Similar with the practice based approach of strategy research neo-institutional theory also emphasizes the connection between organizational routines and institutionalized rules or cultural norms that predetermine organizational behavior. In addition to that, some scientists note that 'strategy' itself is institutionalized in modern societies due to the fact that organizations in general are required 'to be strategic' in their activities.³⁰² Strategy-as-practice research can be distinguished from traditional neo-institutional theories through their level of analysis. Neo-Institutional research discusses the existence of institutions in general and asks whether they exist at all. In contrast to that, practice based scholars treat institutionalized properties as methodologically 'given' (although they are reproduced through human agency) by emphasizing the role of actors and practical consciousness in making sense of institutions.³⁰³

³⁰¹ Cf. Johnson/Langley/Melin/Whittington, 2007, p 43-44.

³⁰² Cf. Nelson/Winter, 1982.

³⁰³ Cf. Hellman/Rasche, 2006.

A third time the same points of critics could be added. From a 'practical' point of view the institutionalized norms that constrain individual actions are probably more interesting than the individual actions itself. Of course insights on institutionalized practices are valuable, but I would argue similar with above that in the end it's the macro level that counts. From my point of view, s-as-p have failed until now to make clear statements how the observed micro activities can be connected with macro outcomes and therefore with general statements about organizational strategies.

6.4 Empirical research

Empirical research into s-as-p is manifold and can be differentiated in terms of their level of analysis (top-managers, middle-managers, and project-managers), their level of practice (company-level or activity-level) and regarding their theoretical basement (social theories of practice or traditional approaches).³⁰⁴ Also their content differs widely. Studies examine strategic process failures in a major British symphony orchestra³⁰⁵, the construction of social order and the use of language and discourse in shaping strategic direction³⁰⁶, the use of formal administrative practices in three different university contexts³⁰⁷, the development of specific skills and the career patterns of strategy practitioners³⁰⁸ or the role of strategy meetings in the process of strategizing.³⁰⁹ From a methodological point of view, the majority of empirical strategy-as-practice research is based on attending strategy meetings as a guest, top-management interviews, and practitioner diaries or on analyzing the work of management boards and away days in action. Without going too much into detail, I want to discuss four representative examples for s-as-p research to reflect methodical issues, practical relevance and possible points of critics of the approach.

Jarzabkowski (2003) for example observed formal administrative practices in three different university contexts to examine the relationship between continuity and change of strategy practices. Her research was based on 49 open-ended interviews that were held with all current top management team members. The considered factors were thereby fourfold: The collective structures of the organization, the primary actors and their practical activities in which they interact and the strategic

³⁰⁴ A good overview can be found in Jarzabkowski/Balogu/Seidl, 2007; Chia/MacKay, 2007, S. 223 and Jarzabkowski/Spée, 2009.

³⁰⁵ Cf. Maitlis/Lawrence, 2003.

³⁰⁶ Cf. Samra-Fredericks, 2003.

³⁰⁷ Cf. Jarzabkowski, 2003.

³⁰⁸ Cf. Hendry/Seidl, 2003.

³⁰⁹ Cf. Jarzabkowski/Seidl, 2008.

practices through which interaction was conducted. Her research concluded basically in the statement that strategic practices were associated with continuity of strategic activity in one case study but are also involved in their reinterpretation and change of strategic activity in the other two cases.³¹⁰

In addition, Jarzabkowski/Spée (2008) were mainly interested in written texts that were involved in the strategic planning process (such as PowerPoint presentation or planning documents). The research was based on the strategy formation in a British university (Unicon) which occurred over a 10-month period. Thereby, their research interest focused on different periods of the strategy formation process and the corresponding formulations within the strategy text in each period. Out of that reason each content change per strategy element that occurred from one version of the strategy document to the next one was traced. Consequently strategy formation in their view was set to be a "communicative process that occurs through the iterative and recursive relation of talk and text". Based on their research findings, they argue that "...strategy formation occurs through an iterative and reciprocal cycle of talk (spoken discourse) and text (written discourse)" and present three (in my view quite trivial) results:

1. An organizations strategy (in written form) is formed by multiple individuals;
2. Strategy formation occurs through iteration of multiple individuals constructing the content expressed in the strategy text over time
3. Strategy formation as a communication process involves an iterative cycle of decontextualisation and recontextualisation that shapes both the input of different individuals to the strategy text that is produced, as well as the content of the text itself.³¹¹

Another empirical study from Jarzabkowski/Seidl that was based on a data set of 51 meeting observations, examines how strategy meetings are involved in either stabilizing existing strategic orientations or proposing variations that cumulatively generate change in strategic orientations. According to the authors, their findings make four main contributions: First, they contribute to the literature on strategy-as-practice by explaining how the practice of meetings is related to consequential strategic outcomes. Second, they contribute to the literature on organizational becoming by demonstrating the role of meetings in shaping stability and change. Third, they extend and elaborate the concept of meetings as strategic episodes and fourth they contribute to the literature on garbage can models of strategy-making.

³¹⁰ Cf. Jarzabkowski, 2003.

³¹¹ Cf. Jarzabkowski/Spée, 2008.

From my point of view, contribution one seems to be primary interesting regarding the legitimization of s-as-p. The authors identify eleven practices that had implications for stabilizing or destabilizing strategic orientations and three evolutionary paths that show how components of an organizational strategy emerge are maintained and developed and selected or de-selected.³¹² In this article, Jarzabkowski and Seidl mention the limitation of their study and implicitly also the weakness of the whole s-as-p approach when they quote: "A limitation of this study is that it has been conducted in a single sector [universities]..." and has therefore only relevance in "... other context that share characteristics with universities."

A fourth empirical study that is frequently mentioned in literature was done by Samra-Fredericks in 2003. Her research aimed to "...map out a number of analytical routes for a fine-grained analysis of strategists' linguistic skills and forms of knowledge for strategizing" though "... the observation and recording of strategists talk-based interactive routines and from drawing upon seminal studies within the social science" (p 141). The observed and recorded strategists constituted thereby a specific sense of 'organization' through talking (negotiating, contesting, evaluating, blaming, etc.) that was used by Samra-Fredericks for explaining organizational weaknesses on the macro level. Furthermore, their research pointed out that most practitioners have problems of identifying explicitly how they manage their organization (due to the fact that a lot of managerial work is based on intuition).³¹³ Thereby, two possible weaknesses of the approach can be observed. On the one hand the linkages between talk and outcomes are a general problem of ethnographers (as Samra-Fredericks mentions on page 168) and on the other hand the distinction between 'saying' and 'doing' in general (if the research is based on qualitative interviews).

6.5 Criticism

Although the practice based approach on strategy research seems to be promising in general, there are several weaknesses that look quite problematic for the future development of this school of thought. Most of them were already mentioned (whether implicitly or explicitly) within this thesis. Those points of critique are thereby threefold. Firstly, there seems to be no unity in focus, research methodology and theoretical understanding of what practice based research in organization studies actually entails. Secondly, the distinction from traditional approaches is more or less unclear, although some advocates try to define exact distinguishing features in their papers. Thirdly, but

³¹² Cf. Jarzabkowski/Seidl, 2008.

³¹³ Cf. Samra-Fredericks, 2003.

maybe most importantly, concrete connections between organizational practices on the micro level and the resulting outcomes of those practices on the macro level are barely made. Consequently, those points will now be discussed and used afterwards with respect to the research question of this thesis.

One frequently mentioned problem in literature is the confusing use of the word "practice itself and the theoretical engagement with the concept of practice that varies significantly".³¹⁴ Terms like activities, practices, processes and routines are sometimes treated interchangeably and viewed as ultimately epi-phenomenal and hence reducible to the actions and intentions of individual agents.³¹⁵ In addition to that, the appropriation of the well elaborated theories of practice is very limited. Although practice theories like Bourdieu's meta-theory are commonly mentioned as foundation of the new field, their use is virtually inexistent. I would argue that most s-as-p scholars pick out some parts of Bourdieu's work that seem to be appropriate for their considerations but do not use the full potential of his theory in general.³¹⁶ Therefore, Hellmann/Rasche note that the new field "...suffers from the absence of a more detailed discussion of the term 'practice' [...] partly due to an insufficient reflection of the term 'practice' and its sociological interpretation"³¹⁷ and Carter/Clegg/Kornberger, 2008 add that the strategy-as-practice-approach is, as currently configured "...philosophically and sociologically naive."³¹⁸

Furthermore, the methodical borders of the new approach seem to be quite diffuse. Jarzabkowski/Spée, 2009 for example summarize theoretical and empirical articles in the strategy-as-practice field³¹⁹. For that reason they compare the articles regarding their underlying theories (e.g. resource-based view, sense making, social theory, activity theory and institutionalization), their definition of practice (inter-team coordination practices, practices at group or individual level, recursive and adaptive practices) and the outcome of those individual actions (group outcome, personal outcome, strategizing process outcome). If all these articles are part of the s-as-p field (as the authors assume), s-as-p seems to be an 'umbrella term' for all research activities that are interested in individual actions in the strategy formation process, rather than an independent approach of strategy research.

³¹⁴ Cf. Geiger, 2009, p 201.

³¹⁵ Cf. Chia/MacKay, 2007, p 219.

³¹⁶ Cf. Hurtado, 2008.

³¹⁷ Hellman/Rasche, 2006, p 3.

³¹⁸ Carter/Clegg/Kornberger, 2008, p 95.

³¹⁹ Cf. Jarzabkowski/Spée, 2009, p 85.

The second problem that arises from practice based strategy research is the relationship with traditional approaches. Although various differentiations are elaborated by s-as-p researchers, all of those are based on the same argument (e.g. section 4): Traditional approaches are mainly concerned with macro level outcomes of individual actions whereas s-as-p approach is primarily interested in the micro-activities itself and only secondary in effects on the organizational level. Even if this micro focus is accepted as a sufficient distinction factor (which I would call into question) the question remains whether the strong focus on the empirical detail through which strategy is constructed, may lack an outcome or as some authors put it: "so what?"³²⁰

This question leads us consequently to the third problem that is commonly mentioned regarding s-as-p. The micro approach taken by much strategy-as-practice research leads probably to explanations that are inconsequential in any wider sense than the specific situation to which they pertain. Although micro insides are interesting, strategy research should provide universal applicable answers to various organizational problems. The term 'universal applicable' requires consequently the aggregation of observed micro phenomena towards a consistent theory. Of course s-as-p advocates mention two types research outcomes: On the one hand they use detailed analysis of the generative mechanisms of practices to explain how a particular outcome is constructed. On the other hand they examine how differences in strategists' individual behavior do explain variation in the outcome (on the macro level).³²¹ Unfortunately, research results are commonly vague and case-specific but this (invisible) macro orientation undermines in addition to that the unique selling proposition of s-as-p. When scholars claim that strategy-as-practice may "...rise to the challenge of explaining outcomes that are consequential at more macro-levels of the firm and industry" respectively "...at all levels from the most micro-details of human behavior to the broader institutional levels"³²² the definite distinction from traditional approaches (which try to explain macro variances through detailed inner-organizational differences) remains unclear.

³²⁰ Cf. Jarzabkowski/Balogu/Seidl, 2007, p 14.

³²¹ Cf. Jarzabkowski/Spée, 2009, p 87.

³²² Cf. Jarzabkowski/Balogu/Seidl, 2007, p 19.

7.S-as-p: just a fashion?

This chapter combines the two main parts of this thesis. The various characteristics and specifications of so called 'management fashions' on the one hand and those regarding the 'strategy-as-practice' approach on the other. Based on the mentioned considerations, the research questions should be brought to an answer. Unfortunately, despite the proceeding preparation, one is not allowed to give clear answer whether s-as-p can be characterized as fashion or not. Fashions, either regarding management techniques or organizational theories, can only be definitely identified retrospectively. As mentioned, fashions go through a certain life cycle. However, not all management concepts go through the same one. Some concepts are displaced by others or dropped early on, either because their perceived strategic potential is insufficient or because rival concepts are considered more effective.³²³ Therefore, secured empirical evidence whether a concept can be classified as a fashion or not, can only be gained after the life cycle is finished. A definite forecast of the fashions future development, especially regarding the various phases of the cycle is barely possible a priori.

Against this background, a management concept will be strictly classified only as a management fashion, after going through the entire life cycle.³²⁴ As illustrated in figure 14, s-as-p research seems to have already reached the peak of its popularity. More and more papers have been published in recent years which discuss the concept either theoretically or empirically. A definitive answer whether the number of publications will be increasing, stabilizing or decreasing in the future is not possible at this point. Of course it is reasonable to make various assumptions based on the qualitative and quantitative characteristics that have been elaborated within this thesis. With respect to these considerations, it can be assumed, if it is likely that the concept will be recognized in a few years as a temporarily fashion in organizational theory or whether it will become even more important and offers the potential to build the basement of a long lasting stream in strategy research. Once again it has to be mentioned that the concepts of management fashions are primary used to discuss management techniques that are applied by managerial staff in their everyday work. Therefore, not all characteristics seem to be suitable for considerations regarding academic strategy research. Nevertheless, I will try to reframe those qualitative points to make them more applicable for scientific strategy analysis.

³²³ Cf. Fink, 2003, p 54.

³²⁴ Cf. Fink/Knoblach, 2008, p 564.

7.1 Soft facts

Based on the considerations in section 3.1.3, various qualitative characteristics of 'management fashions' will subsequently be connected with various basic assumptions and explanations that are postulated by s-as-p advocates.

7.1.1 Highlighting of one key factor

Commonly, fashionable approaches try to highlight one key factor that has not been considered enough in traditional strategy research. Obviously, this frequently highlighted key factor is the explicit consideration of individual action and organizational practices. Almost all articles that discuss the 'new' approach introduce their concept similarly. The contributions of traditional strategy are mentioned as gainful, however the exclusive focus on organizational outcomes are criticized. Therefore, s-as-p authors introduce their concept by emphasizing the big difference to traditional approaches: The research on individual actions in the process of strategizing in contrast to the attribution of individual behavior on the basis of observed outputs. In addition to that, authors mention possible advantages that result through the consideration of this key factor. For example Jarzabkowski/Whittington, 2008 emphasize it when they quote: "The work, workers and tools of strategy are center stage. Understanding these better can feed from business school classrooms directly into practice, because strategy-as-practice teaching helps shape more effective practitioners, whether as managers, consultants, or entrepreneurs."³²⁵

7.1.2 Connection with important values

Management fashions commonly connect their new principles with important values of the reader. Fashionable management techniques for example promise high profits, increased employee satisfaction or long lasting organizational success. Similar strategy researchers predict favorable results, if their concept is applied. Some authors notice that their approach brings the specifics of action and doing to the strategy field, due to the fact that mainstream strategy research is characterized by the reliance on an abstraction of explanations. A second benefit that some advocates mention frequently is that investigating activities and praxis may answer questions that were "...raised over the years in research on strategy" for example by making "... divisions such as strategy content and process" redundant.³²⁶ Apart from these more theoretical benefits, also certain practical and educational advancements are postulated. For example, s-as-p scholars note that in recent years strategy teaching at Harvard

³²⁵ Cf. Jarzabkowski/Whittington, 2008, p 285.

³²⁶ Cf. Johnson/Langley/Melin/Whittington, 2007, p 214-215.

Business School has been “hijacked by economic theories of profit maximization” and they appeal “...for a return to practice, reinstating the strategy practitioner in reaching as an individual with whom students can identify”.³²⁷ The benefits of an activity-based view of strategy are set to be thereby at least threefold: “extending existing traditions of research; transcending divisions within the discipline; and offering practical actionable guidance to practitioners.”³²⁸

Concluding, important values of strategy researchers are obviously addressed. On the one hand the possibility to go beyond weaknesses of traditional approaches, on the other hand to increase the abilities of their students towards more ethical behavior in contrast of teaching them exclusively techniques of profit maximization. Of course this (commendable) claim is questionable. Firstly, it has to be challenged, whether s-as-p is able to give generalized answers on strategic questions that are applicable not only in a specific situation. Secondly, I have my doubts if business students really increase their social responsibility only, to put it bluntly, because they learn in their courses how managers use PowerPoint slides in the process of strategizing.

7.1.3 Inevitability of the approach

Moreover, the application of new management techniques is set to be inevitable by fashion setters because the old approaches are set to fail due to environmental changes and new threats. Although this point is more suitable for considerations regarding bestselling books, also s-as-p advocates recognize changes in the environment and constraints of traditional theories. Johnson/Melin/Whittington (2003) for example note: “The economic drivers for a more micro approach are twofold. First there has been a change in resource markets. The economic environment is moving rapidly towards open markets, mobile labour and information abundance. Resources are increasingly tradable and security from market entry and strategic imitation is falling.”³²⁹ Of course s-as-p is much more situated in an academic environment than traditional management fashions. Therefore, no author suggests that this approach is ‘the only possible solutions’ to go beyond the constraints of traditional approaches. Rather s-as-p is set to be a possibility (among others) to bring strategy research forward. At this point, I would not agree that s-as-p in its current arrangement has the potential at all, to leave constraints behind. Accurate answers how exactly s-as-p is

³²⁷ Cf. Jarzabkowski/Whittington, 2008, p 283.

³²⁸ Johnson/Melin/Whittington, 2003, p 14.

³²⁹ Cf. Johnson/Melin/Whittington, 2003, p 4.

able to provide universal applicable and general contributions to strategy research have not been given yet, although some empirical insights are of course interesting.

7.1.4 Examples and excuses

Bestselling books highlight commonly examples of areas of excellence where their concept was introduced successfully. Furthermore, no manager is blamed for not applying the approach until the book was published. In addition to that, fashion setters mention possible difficulties in the process of implementation and cite various empirical studies.

With respect to this characteristic, it has to be considered that s-as-p research is mainly engaged in empirical and theoretical analysis of organizations. Commonly, empirical s-as-p studies analyze individual behavior in the process of strategizing and try to elaborate connections with macro level outcomes afterwards. Unfortunately, those connections are more or less case specific. For example, they postulate that an elaborated strategy X results from the individual actions of practitioners 1 and 2 in praxis situation Y. Examples how those insights can be applied in the strategizing activities of other organizations are commonly not made. Therefore, (from my point of knowledge), I can mention no single example where an example of a practical implementation of empirical findings is given. Presumably resulting from the scientific environment, traditional strategy researchers are also not blamed for their macro perspective on strategy although various constraints of traditional approaches are identified. However, some authors use quotes from other colleagues when they claim that traditional research has lost sight of the individual. Johnson et. al. (2007), for example, mention the remark of a strategy colleague who postulated: "I am interested in strategies, not what people do."³³⁰

7.1.5 Simplicity and ambiguity

If a book about management techniques shall become a potential bestseller it has to be readable easily. Potential bestsellers are moreover characterized by a mix of simplicity and ambiguity.

When I made my thoughts about this characteristic, I initially wanted to neglect it definitely. S-as-p is an academic approach and consequently the corresponding papers are of course quite scientific and therefore not easily readable. Especially the underlying meta-theories of practice are very complex and confusing at the first glance. Nevertheless, the picture gets clearer after a certain period of time. Especially

³³⁰ Cf. Johnson/Langley/Melin/Whittington, 2007, p 7.

the s-as-p approach itself seems to be quite trivial after reading several papers. In general, all papers provide the same arguments why s-as-p is able to go beyond the constraints of traditional approaches. Moreover, empirical research is constructed the same way in every paper: By researching micro activities (with the help of various techniques), s-as-p scholars want to deduct macro outcomes. Similar explanation why a practice turn is needed and methodological approaches (the focus on individual action and deducting organizational outcome) are presented. In addition to that, I have shown that the whole concept can be summarized with one sentence. The only aspects that remain complex are the underlying (philosophical) theories of practice. Unfortunately, most papers do not apply those theories as whole regarding their considerations, although they mention their contribution explicit (even if the way of the contribution remains unclear). Nevertheless, s-as-p papers are of course not as easily readable as a bestselling management book but also not as complex as for example Bourdieu's meta-theory of practice.

In addition to that, the confusing use of the term practice seems to be by a mix of simplicity and ambiguity. As mentioned above, s-as-p looks like an umbrella term for a lot of different research designs. Consequently, all strategy research that is interested in individual agency can probably be summarized under the term 'strategy-as-practice' which increases publications and popularity of the concept.

7.1.6 Appropriate timing and mass media

In general a connection of scientific papers and mass media should always be observed with certain awareness. Although it is understandable that also strategy researchers aim to widespread their ideas and thoughts, most of them are not suitable for publication in real mass media (due to their complexity). If a concept is easily understandable for a broad range of users, there may be a lack in scientific foundation. Therefore, s-as-p has not found its way to mass media until now. Rather strategy-as-practice advocates are primary connected via their internet community (www.s-as-p.com) where working papers are published and discussions take place. Although the utilization of Web 2.0 is state of the art (in general), this way of representation has presumably also a positive correlation with the popularity of the concept in question. In addition to that, the main advocates of s-as-p are explicitly concerned how the popularity of the concept can be increased when they note "... we focus on publishing in high-ranked academic journals, which is both legitimate and important. But we should also think about communication channels, maybe new types of media (in the internet age) and arenas (beyond the MBA context) that could support dialogues with practitioners of strategy, with the aim to influence and

stimulate them to reflective learning based on the growing knowledge about practices of strategy.”³³¹

Concluding, it can be said that also s-as-p researchers aim to make their approach popular through various channels. Of course no best-selling book that is based on the concept has been published until now. Hereby one could argue that even scientific empirical research into s-as-p has not provided generalized answers and references how individual actions of strategizing should look like which makes it impossible to transfer these insights to an easily readable potential bestseller. Furthermore, I would presume that the increasing popularity of the approach is (partly) a result of the economic environment. As mentioned above s-as-p scholars aim to teach their students managerial behavior apart from simple and exclusive profit maximization. From my point of view, this aim reflects to a certain degree the general dissatisfaction with the ethical behavior of various companies.

7.1.7 Old wine in new bottles?

The synonym of old wine that is just served in new bottles is frequently used by fashion theorists to highlight that a management technique is not as revolutionary as it seems at the first glance. As mentioned several times, in fact all ideas that are underlying the s-as-p approach can be found in established theories of social science in general and of strategy research in particular. Nevertheless, I cannot accuse s-as-p scholars of plagiarism in general. Some authors note that they “...do not claim that all of this is entirely original”³³² due to the fact that the concept “...builds on and extends a tradition”³³³ and s-as-p scholars therefore “... do not intend to dismiss the contribution of traditional content strategy research”.³³⁴ However, some more critical comments notice that “...the practice approach follows (without referencing) organizational theory that has been analyzing what it is the managers actually do when they manage.”³³⁵ From my point of view, I agree to the last quote only partly. Traditional concepts like the RBV and the process-based view are mentioned frequently and explicitly whereas underlying social practice theories are mentioned - if at all - only briefly without explaining them or their contribution to s-as-p.

³³¹ Cf. Johnson/Langley/Melin/Whittington, 2007, p 216.

³³² Cf. Rasche, 2008, p 287.

³³³ Johnson/Langley/Melin/Whittington, 2007, p 205.

³³⁴ Cf. Johnson/Melin/Whittington, 2003, p 6.

³³⁵ Carter/Clegg/Kornberger, 2008, p 88.

However, the distinction from traditional approaches and concepts is unclear (cf. section 6.3). The assumption of individual actors who create mental maps to aid decision-making and then act in accordance to such cognitive schemas has become widely accepted in strategy research and in neo-institutional theories. The view of practices as institutionalized behavioral patterns beyond the individuals' mind can therefore only be recognized as the application of traditional neo-institutional theories. In addition to that, RBV and dynamic capabilities theory highlights differences on the micro level that are crucial for variances on the macro level. Furthermore, the process of strategizing is discussed by a wide range of process based studies, although most of them did not demand a specific practice perspective, rather a focus on processes and activities.³³⁶ Therefore, s-as-p seems to be rather a combination of those three approaches than an independent one.

The point that makes a difference according to practice based scholars is their primary focus on the individual - especially regarding the applied methods of empirical research. They try to research directly individual behavior in relationship with institutionalized constraints and connect those to an output on organizational level. Concluding, I can say that all characteristics of s-as-p can be found in traditional theories, but the combination of those theories seems to be quite new. Furthermore, the research design (studying individual action) definitely makes a difference. Unfortunately, it is not clear, what positive consequences will result from those differences.

7.2 Empirical evidence

To examine the number of publications that are concerned with the practice-based approach in strategy research, I used three bibliographic databases (BLISS; Web of Science and ABI/Inform) and the strategy-as-practice web page. BLISS is integrated in the popular WISO database and offers bibliographic data and abstracts of business management literature by analyzing 350 German and English journals and monographs. The Web of Science (ISI Web of Knowledge) offers search possibilities into five scientific databases among with the Social Science citation indices, as well as the Science Citation Index. ABI/Inform Global is a database that is available through the webpage of ProQuest and focuses mainly on the English language business press. Besides those scientific databases I have analyzed the s-as-p webpage. The page is primarily used by researchers to post their work in progress, discuss ideas and problems and give feedback to other papers. From my point of view, the number of

³³⁶ Geiger, 2009, p 197.

working papers that are available from this source reflects the interest in the concept appropriately. The three scientific databases were scanned for papers that discuss strategy-as-practice itself. From my point of view, it makes more sense to analyze just the concept itself, and not all of the broad range of definitions (p.e. micro activities) that are sometimes mentioned with s-as-p research. In fact this would result in incorrect figures because papers would be included that have nothing to do with the 'new' approach. Therefore, the y axis in figure 14 represents the number of publications in the three mentioned databases that discuss the term strategy-as-practice explicitly. Regarding the s-as-p web page the number of publications reflects the amount of uploaded working papers per year.

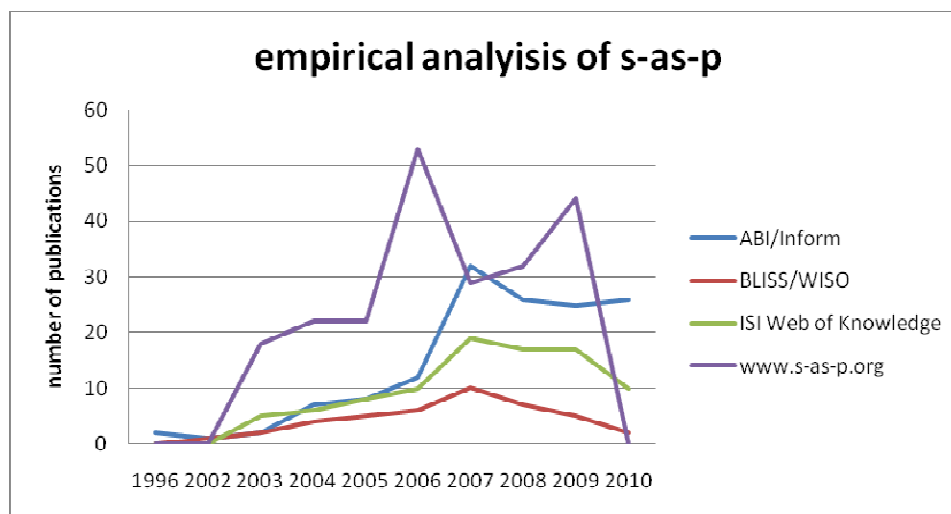


Figure 14: The life cycle of s-as-p

Summarizing figure 14 I can say that s-as-p has reached its peak of popularity between 2006 and 2007 although there curve is not decreasing significantly. In fact the number of publications is more or less constant since 2007.³³⁷ Therefore, the future development of the curve remains unclear. Especially if scholars are able to eliminate the various weaknesses, it is likely that the number of publications will stay constant or increase in the future.

³³⁷ Although the year 2010 is not finished yet, I decided to implement those figures to demonstrate that also in 2010 a comparable (in contrast with the previous years) amount of papers has been published.

7.3 Conclusion

In general it must be questioned if management fashions are a bad thing at all. In recent years there has been a trend towards criticizing every new management technique as 'fashion' in. Alfred Kieser notes therefore: "Criticizing management fashion has become a fashion within management science." This view of connection novelty with fashion thereby neglects reflexive abilities of managers. According to Kieser, some managers differ clearly in the way of the use different (fashionable) techniques and only implement the concepts that seem to be promising (from an obvious point of view). Therefore, many fashion followers will critically consider how they want to use a concept and which of its notions appear useful in their particular circumstances. This may hold the stronger the more experienced managers are. Similiar we have to be aware of disqualifying scientific approaches as 'short-lasting fad' just because some weaknesses can be discovered that result from their relatively novelty and a lack in empirical and theoretical research. Nevertheless, there should be a certain awareness regarding every approach that is promising to leave old constraints behind and to be the 'latest' and 'best' one at the moment. Therefore, discussing and criticizing those concepts through the lens of management fashions seems to be adequate even if the concept is quite 'new'. Therefore, figure 15 summarizes and illustrates the two theoretical streams that have been elaborated within this thesis and connects them with the practice-based approach of strategy.

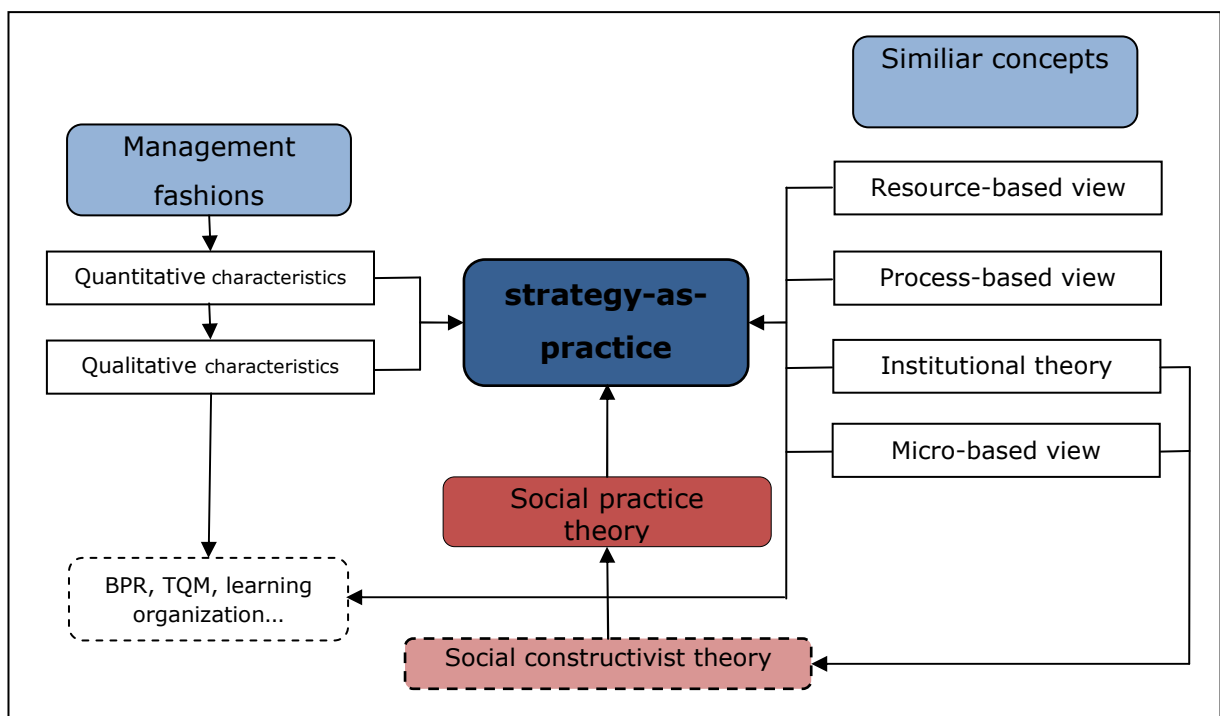


Figure 15: Summarizing the two streams

The theoretical concept of 'management fashions' is shown on the left side of the illustration. Those fashions can be identified by various quantitative and qualitative characteristics. Additionally the figure shows that more or less all qualitative characteristics can be found to certain extend in s-as-p literature. From my point of view, the very broad consideration of the term 'practice' and the extraordinary focus on one key (distinction) factor are the most important ones. Furthermore, figure 15 shows that s-as-p combines various traditional approaches like the RBV, the PBV, institutional theories and various more micro-based views (actor-network theory, knowledge-based view, dynamic capabilities) of strategy research. Of course these contributions are mentioned by s-as-p advocates frequently as especially gainful. In addition to that, differences between traditional approaches and s-as-p are pointed out explicitly by more or less convincing arguments. Therefore, I would argue that the 'old wine in new bottles' metaphor is not true in general. Nevertheless, s-as-p seems to be like a mixture of different old wines in a new bottle where the label of the new bottle gives references (in small letters) to the old bottles and highlights why the old wines taste much better when they are served from the new bottle.

Furthermore, the life cycle of the strategy approach in question follows to certain extend the proposed theoretical life cycle of management fashions. At this point, I presume that s-as-p has reached a peak in popularity. The future development of the approach is thereby probably highly correlated with the ability of advocates to reduce the mentioned weaknesses. Concluding, I am convinced that the concept in its current arrangement is a potential fashion, as distinctions and contributions are more or less unclear. Nevertheless, I can see the potential of the concept if the approach is extended. For my point of view, applicable statements about a practicability of the empirical results are necessary. Otherwise s-as-p research is in danger to be qualified as a temporarily fashion of strategy research in a few years. In order to avoid this development, I can advise s-as-p scholars to fulfill four general requirements:

- Distinct the theoretical and methodical approach convincingly from traditional concepts
- Define a common denotation of the used terms (especially the word 'practice')
- Extend the theoretical foundation by applying different social practice theories in total (and not only partly)
- Show how research results are applicable in various situations of strategy making apart from case specific statements. Strategy research, from my point of view, has to identify and explain differences in organizational strategies by making general prepositions and identify consequently how those considerations can be applied furthermore in economic life.

List of abbreviations

BPR	Business Process Reengineering
PMI	print media indicators
RBV	resource-based view
s-as-p	strategy-as-practice
TQM	Total Quality Management

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ABSTRACT ENGLISH

Strategic decisions are commonly recognized as very important due to the fact that an appropriate strategy is in general set to be essential for the long term success of a company. Therefore all business schools offer courses where students learn to develop appropriate corporate strategies. Moreover, also scientific researchers are highly interested in describing and explaining organizational strategies. For that reason various strategy schools have been developed since the introduction of scientific management research. In recent years, a strategy school called "strategy-as-practice" has become increasingly popular. Generally speaking, strategy-as-practice tries to explain and research organizational strategy by focusing on micro-activities that are carried out by individual actors (practitioners) in various situations (episodes of praxis) by applying routinized forms of behavior (practices) that are situated in the macro-level (and therefore supra individual) of the organization. However, many characteristics of the new approach can be found in traditional strategy schools like the resource-based view or the process-based view. Sociologists commonly speak of fashions if old ideas and concepts are entitled with a different name and marketed as 'new' and 'innovative'. Those fashions can also be observed regarding management research. The aim of this thesis is to elaborate, whether strategy-as-practice can be conceptualized as a management fashion or as an innovative and promising new approach. By combining quantitative and qualitative characteristics of strategy-as-practice and management fashions this thesis shows that strategy-as-practice contains some characteristics of management fashions. The two most important ones are a lack of differentiation from traditional approaches and the unanswered questions of their practical applicability. Therefore, the author assumes that if s-as-p advocates are not able to overcome the examined weaknesses, the new approach is in danger of not delivering its promises and consequently will be recognized as a short lasting management research fashion in a few years.

ABSTRACT GERMAN

Strategische Entscheidungen werden gemeinhin als besonders essentiell für den langfristigen Erfolg von Unternehmen und anderen Organisationen angesehen. Schon allein aus diesem Grund bieten alle Wirtschaftshochschulen Kurse an, in denen den Studenten der richtige Umgang mit strategischen Entscheidungen beigebracht wird. Außerdem haben auch verschiedenste Forschungsdisziplinen ein wissenschaftliches Interesse darin, Unternehmensstrategien zu beschreiben und zu erklären. In den letzten Jahren ist innerhalb der Organisationsstrategieforschung ein als „strategy-as-practice“ titulierter Ansatz immer bedeutender und populärer geworden. Dieser versucht vereinfacht gesprochen Unternehmensstrategien durch die Beschreibung und Beobachtung von Mikro-Aktivitäten zu erklären, bei denen routinierten Verhaltensweisen (Praktiken), die in der organisationalen Makro-Ebene (und damit über-individuell) verankert sind, von einzelnen Akteuren (Praktikern) in verschiedenen Situationen angewendet werden (Praxisepisoden). Dabei lassen sich eine Vielzahl von Charakteristiken dieses „neuen“ Ansätzen auch in diversen traditionellen Strategieschulen wie dem „Resource-based View“ oder dem „Process-based View“ erkennen. Wenn alte Ideen und Konzepte mit einem anderen Namen versehen und in weiterer Folge als "neu" und "innovativ" vermarktet werden, sprechen Soziologen häufig von Modeerscheinungen. Vergleichbar können solche Moden auch im Zusammenhang mit Organisationstheorien beobachtet werden. Darauf aufbauend ist das Ziel der vorliegende Arbeit ein Urteil darüber abzugeben, ob der „strategy-as-practice“ Ansatz nichts weiter als eine vorübergehende Modeerscheinung ist, oder als innovativer und vielversprechender neuer Ansatz betrachtet werden kann. Mit Hilfe einer Analyse von sowohl qualitativen als auch quantitativen Merkmalen von „strategy-as-practice“ und „management fashions“ zeigt die vorliegende Arbeit, dass „strategy-as-practice“ sehr wohl einige typische Charakteristiken von Managementmoden enthält. Die zwei wichtigsten sind dabei ein Mangel an Abgrenzung von bestehenden und etablierten Strategieschulen und darüber hinaus eine bisher vollständig Fehlende praktische Anwendbarkeit der Forschungsergebnisse. Aus diesen Gründen kommt der Autor der vorliegenden Arbeit zu dem Schluss, dass „strategy-as-practice“ in seiner jetzigen Ausgestaltungsform Gefahr läuft, seine Versprechen nicht zu halten und über kurz oder lang als vorübergehende Mode abgetan zu werden, wenn seine Vertreter nicht in der Lage sind, die in dieser Arbeit herausgearbeiteten Schwächen auszumärzen.

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