Discordant Theories of Strategic Management And Emergent Practice In Knowledge-Intensive Organizations

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ABSTRACT:

This paper argues that there is a significant gap between theories of traditional scientific management and theories attending to practice and self-organisation as they apply to knowledge-intensive organisations. Knowledge work and innovative endeavours in organizational settings are often approached from contrasting perspectives: strategic, top-down direction on one hand and emergent, practice-based on the other. This paper describes the discord that can result from these disparate approaches. In outlining the polarities evident in current theories and perspectives of strategic management and emergent practice and in establishing a troubled space between them, the paper suggests that opportunities exist for more effective facilitation of knowledge activities in organizations by attending to the gap.

Keywords: *Practice-based studies, Strategic management, Knowledge-intensive work*

Introduction

This paper examines theories of strategic management, organizational knowledge, and work in organizations and emphasises two discordant theoretical sets which underpin the facilitation of knowledge work in knowledge-intensive organizations. A traditional view of managing knowledge work and innovation emphasises high-level organizational strategy, the direction of work and the representation of knowledge in plans, strategies, policies, standards, and other formulated approaches. Pursuit of efficiency is enacted by laying out plans, budgeting, managing projects and minimizing deviation from best practice. However, organizational adaptability and innovation that are required in the modern economy are often not served by this scientific approach to management.

Recent literature questions the traditional thinking represented in the dominant discourse about knowledge work in organizations. Practice-based theories offer an alternative view of knowledge in organizations, whereby learning and knowing are embedded in everyday practices and experience, knowledge emerging from and contributing to workplace activity. Knowledge in this view is viewed in active, anti-cognitivist terms. The notion that knowledge emerges in practice in the absence of direction and control is acknowledged and accommodated.

Attention to the void that exists between these polarised perspectives offers an opportunity for organizations to consider knowledge endeavours in organizations in a different way and to advance their ability to foster knowledge work. Ehin (2008) argues the case for 'un-management' in an attempt to lead organizations away from the scientific management of

knowledge work. It is a field that requires greater attention by practitioners and researchers alike.

This paper argues that the space between the theories of traditional scientific management and those theories that attend to practice and self-organization is a neglected one. It provides a closer examination of each perspective and in doing so leaves open the possibility that they might inform and complement each other. From a closer examination of the extremes of approaching knowledge work and innovative practices, the absences and disconnections are revealed to expose opportunities for more effective knowledge development in organizations.

Strategic Management

A significant emphasis in organizations is to direct work and represent intended activity in plans, strategies, policies, standards, and other formulated approaches. Strategic management, with its roots in scientific management and its focus on business resources and process, has been enormously influential on the management of knowledge work. The knowledge-based view of the firm (Grant, 1996) rests under the umbrella of strategic management and highlights the role of organizational design and management choice. The mechanisms for the integration of specialist knowledge is seen as existing in managerialist interests – the development of rules and directives, the sequencing of production activities, the development of organizational routines and the facilitation of group problem solving and decision making (Grant, 1996, p. 114-115). The control of knowledge production and (especially) utilization is central in this field and highlights the centrality of the manager in knowledge work.

Notwithstanding the extensive work by Mintzberg and others (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985) on the range of ways that strategies exist in organizations (and the limitations of the assumption in the strategic management literature on the alignment of intended and realized strategies in organizations), strategic management continues to be regarded as a set of activities through which identified goals drive a rational process of implementation. In this process the determination of goals and the implementation of action are seen as separate – planning and activity separate, with planning prior to activity. Indeed, the definition for strategic management as '…an analytical process for establishing long-range goals and action plans for the organization; that is, one of formulation followed by implementation' (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985, p. 257) is premised on the possibility that at a fixed point in time there is a single best alternative to pursue. This best alternative sets a goal toward which a clear and executable path may be laid. This teleological perspective is one which drives a singular focus within which planning, standardisation and measurement against goals are privileged. In this mode, it is only through carefully planning that the final end can be most effectively achieved. New strategic plans may be laid against new goals, but this process is one that progresses at a rate which is largely pre-determined by the plan and on which participants make decisions based on careful, rational thinking informed by 'benchmarking' information and examples of 'best practice' in the field.

Strategic management maintains alignment with the first principles of 'scientific management' described by Taylor in 1903 (cited in Hamel & Breen, 2007, p.12), where 'knowing what you want men to do, and then seeing that they do it in the best and cheapest way' is the path to effective management. Chandler's 1962 work (Hoskisson et al, 1999) is useful in defining the core preoccupations of strategic management in strategic decisions,

'…decisions on what kind of business the firm should seek to be in' and toward which business policies dictate the functions and responsibilities of managers toward those goals. In these core definitions the separation of formulation and implementation of plans is evident and primary.

Hamel and Breen (2007, pp. 4-6) suggest that 'the machinery of modern management' is very accomplished in laying out plans, budgeting, managing projects and minimizing deviation from best practice, activity created in pursuit of efficiency. Indeed, the language of strategic management is one of the machine. Mechanistic metaphors dominate discussion in a field littered with 'drivers', 'path dependence', 'milestones', 'alignment' and 'consistency'. The notion of the organization operating as a machine indicates the philosophy at the core of much strategic management literature – that the careful construction of plans which coordinate the coupling of man and tools with clearly defined outcomes is the key to efficiency; and that efficiency is central to organizational success.

Of course, in contexts where organizational effectiveness indeed lies in the production and reproduction of standardised materials and services, this philosophy and its attendant practices is one that successfully endures. However, in contemporary environments, there is a pervasive and increasingly critical focus on the value of new knowledge, innovation, continual change, organizational flexibility and creativity – and the role of the employee in their achievement. The knowledge economy is one that craves novelty and demands response. In this environment, replication and standardisation of traditional management are stripped of their privileged position.

Defining strategy as 'patterns in streams of action', Mintzberg and Waters (1985, p. 257) note that 'emergent strategy' takes place without the direction of deliberate or formulated plans and emergent strategies are incorporated into organizational action and contribute to realized strategy. Emergent strategy can be seen as a fundamental response to ubiquitous novelty in organizations and their environments. But Mintzberg and Waters (1985, p. 258) claim that 'for strategy to be perfectly emergent, there must be order – consistency in action over time – in the absence of intention about it'.   Whilst this definition shares some of practice-based theory's preoccupations with emergence, Mintzberg and Waters' concern is with strategy which is retrospectively revealed. It neglects the immediate response, the shifts and the continual readjustments of complex work (and workers) as knowledge work is performed. Mintzberg and Waters (1985) present a notion of strategy that fits imperfectly with the constant learning and change in the activity of knowledge work and innovation where the tacit knowledge of employees is privileged and consistency is defied.

Practice-based Perspectives

In the field of knowledge management, recent literature (Stacey, 2007; Ehin, 2008; Hamel & Breen, 2007) is critical of the uptake of traditional management theories. It questions the traditional thinking and dominant discourse about knowledge work and innovation in organizations. Greater attention is being given to knowledge within organizations from the perspective of activity – the situated achievement of complex tasks (Blackler, 1995; Brown & Duguid, 1999; Cook & Brown, 1999; Orlikowski, 2002; Tsoukas, 2005).

Brown and Duguid (1999) contribute to the consideration of knowledge as action, claiming that 'know-how' and 'know-what' knowledge are both essential components of a core knowledge competency in any organization. 'Know-how is critical in making knowledge

actionable and operational' and 'know-how embraces the ability to put know-what into practice' (Brown & Duguid, 1999, p. 31). Although noting that work activity creates knowledge, Brown and Duguid (1999) continue to conceptualize know-how as objective knowledge about a practice or needed action, suggesting that intention and knowledge occur prior to activity.

Cook and Brown (1999, p. 381) describe knowledge, both tacit and explicit, as having an 'epistemology of possession'. They interpret knowledge as static. Humans possess knowledge about things and how to do things; it is when they act with that knowledge that there is a shift to knowing. Cook and Brown (1999, p. 381) claim a 'generative dance' between organizational knowledge and organizational knowing. Knowledge is a tool that brings discipline to knowing and the practice and engagement of knowing can create new knowledge.

rate notions of knowledge and 'the stable disposition embedded in practice', Orlikowski (2002, pp. 249-250) turns to the study of 'an ongoing social accomplishment, constituted and reconstituted as actors engage the world in practice'. Blackler (1995) had earlier explored this conception of knowledge as action, preferring the term 'knowing'. He describes the active process of knowledge as 'mediated, situated, provisional, pragmatic and contested' (Blackler, 1995, p. 1021).

Viewing organizations as systems of knowledge, Tsoukas (2005) emphasises the 'crucial role of human interpretation, communication, and skills in generating effective organizational action' (Tsoukas, 2005, p. 3). He claims 'the locus of individual understanding is not so much in the head as in the situated practice' (Tsoukas, 2005, p. 3). Complex forms of knowing that see 'the world as being full of possibilities, which are enacted by purposeful agents embedded in power-full social practices' are part of organizational life (Tsoukas, 2005, p. 5).

Ciborra (2006) traces the notion of *situatedness* used variously by scholars. He outlines the early use of the term by Heidegger in 1962, who uses the notion to stay close to 'everyday factical life' (Ciborra, 2006, p. 138). Ciborra (2006, p. 131) writes that the use of situatedness is often limited to 'context' or 'emerging circumstances of action and knowledge' and that it lacks a consideration of the inner life or situation of the actors. 'A rich and multiple notion of situation, in which inner life is as important as surrounding circumstances, where the pre-theoretical is preserved by giving space to the moods, emotions and dispositions not linked to thinking' is required by Ciborra (2006, p. 138). More recent use of the term (Suchman, 1987, Lave & Wenger, 1991) continues to build distance from cognitivist and rationalist theories.

When the knowing involved in situated activity is taken into a work and organizational context, Cook and Brown (1999, p. 386) use the term *practice,* which they define as 'the coordinated activities of individuals and groups in doing their "real work" as it is informed by a particular organizational or group context'. Shaw (2002, p. 119) writes of a similar understanding of practice. It is usually interpreted, she suggests, as 'patterns of activity that can be mapped and grasped as wholes distinct from the persons acting in particular times and places'. Bjorkeng et al (2009, p. 145) describe practice as 'novel patterns of interaction developed into predictable arrays of activities, changing and transforming while at the same time continuing to be referred to as 'the same''. The nature of practice is not individual, nor is it universal, write Brown and Duguid (1996, p. 51); it is very much a situated, collective

activity. Practice-based theories offer an alternative view of how knowledge exists in organizations.

Suchman (1987), pioneered a move away from prescription and standardization, contributing the development of practice theory. She examines the relationship between situated action and planning for that action. Suchman (1997, p. 50) brings the focus of intelligent action into the circumstances or situation where it takes place and away from attempts to abstract action and 'represent it as a rational plan'. She claims that:

> *'it is frequently only on acting in a present situation that its possibilities become clear, and we often do not know ahead of time, or at least not with any specificity, what future state we desire to bring about."* (Suchman, 1997, p. 52)

For Suchman, plans and accounts of our actions say more about the nature of our analyses than our situated practice. 'Our descriptions of our actions come always before or after the fact, in the form of imagined projections and recollected reconstructions' (Suchman, 1987, p. 51). She sees value in scrutinising and describing everyday social practices, to 'render our world publically available and mutually intelligible' (Suchman, 1987, p. 57), but emphasises that these descriptions do not determine situated activity.

Bjorkeng et al (2009) follow the development and establishment of a practice from its beginning. Established practices are always changing and evolving, but Bjorkeng et al (2009) move their attention to practices that are still becoming recognised, practices that are yet to stabilise. Neither propositional knowledge, nor shared understandings, skills, habits or goals can be assumed. Bjorkeng et al (2009, p. 149) find three important mechanisms in becoming a practice. Firstly, a*uthoring boundaries* is their explanation of the constant and energetic construction of rules and norms. Without the silent sanctioning and legitimacy of established practice, much energy is expended on boundary establishment. Secondly, once activities have been constructed as belonging to the emerging practice, *negotiating competencies* will take place. Nascent practices construct the expectations and norms of competence (Bjorkeng et al, 2009). Thirdly, *adapting materiality*, is proposed. The necessary tools for the practice are established in myriad forms such as technologies, plans, budgets and physical spaces. The 'becoming' practice will adapt and optimise artefacts and material objects that will become intrinsically bound and part of the practice (Bjorkeng et al, 2009, p. 153).

Gherardi (2009b, p. 115) sees more to practice than just 'routine' or 'what people really do'. For her, practice is located in the significant pattern of how conduct or activity takes place.

> *Theories of practice assume an ecological model in which agency is distributed between humans and non-humans and in which the relationality between the social world and materiality can be subjected to inquiry'* (Gherardi, 2009b, p. 115).

Materiality includes objects, reports, money or texts conveying knowledge produced in other places (Gherardi, 2006, p. 226). Considered from a practice perspective, knowledge work in organizations is separated from a rational and strategic decision-making approach (Gherardi, 2006, p. 228).

Geiger (2009) points to two main camps of practice-based studies: the first, 'practice as what actors do', focuses on the analysis of actions, routines and activities within organizations (Geiger, 2009, p. 131). 'This 'performative' understanding of organizational

practices/routines emphasises the processual nature of practices/routines and places actions and their respective actors as central to our understanding of process' (Geiger, 2009, p. 131). The theoretical construct of practice is of less interest than the revealing of the processual nature of the phenomenon under study.

In his second suggested stream of practice-based study, Geiger (2009, p. 132) finds 'practice as epistemic-normative concept'. Gherardi (2006, p. 34) agrees with the notion of practice as ordering and normalising, defining practice 'as a mode, relatively stable in time and socially recognised, of ordering heterogeneous items into a coherent set'. She adds that practice constrains and forbids some alternatives and choices, while approving others as preferable or easier. Thus, practice becomes a normative construct where 'actors share a practice if their actions are appropriately regarded as answerable to norms of correct or incorrect practice' (Rouse, 2001, p. 190).

Practices are made socially recognisable or legitimized by being stabilized and institutionalized (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Gherardi, 2009a). Practices stabilize to provisional agreed ways of doing things – even if that understanding is contested (Gherardi, 2009a). A negotiated, shared and recognised way of working collectively means that practices shift and evolve from a relatively firm, but not fixed, foundation. In this way, the identity of both practitioners and the practice is established and can be observed from outside the practice (Gherardi, 2009a, p. 356).

For many, practice is also about knowing (see for example, Gherardi, 2006, 2009a; Marshall, 2008); hence the epistemic attribute given by Geiger (2009). Bruni et al (2007, p. 85) claim an equivalence between knowing and practice 'in the sense that practising is knowing-in-practice'. For Gherardi (2006, p. 14), learning and knowing are not separate practices, they are embedded in everyday practices and flow of experiences and are part of human existence. Knowledge is viewed in active, anti-cognitivist terms. Strati (2007) explores how people work and know with their bodies. Sensory and aesthetic knowledge is also a part of practice and will not allow abstraction and representation. Gherardi (2009a, p. 355) notes the importance of dualism of mind/body, knowing/doing in practice-based studies. For her, practice is found at the place of union of these extremes.

Gherardi (2009b) sees practice as a powerful concept in managing and organising studies because of the plurality of its semantic possibilities. 'Practice is a malleable term which can be put to numerous uses and employed to denominate many aspects of the phenomenal reality under study' (Gherardi, 2009b, p. 116). Research using a practice-based approach exhibits a desire 'to shed new light on organizational phenomena by getting closer to the "real" work in organizations' and a move away from structural notions of organizations (Geiger, 2009, p. 129). Practice-based studies in general provide a counter to the extensive use of cognitivist and rational approaches to understanding work in organizations (Gherardi, 2006, p. xii, 2009a).

Between The Extremes: Discord In Organizations

The gap between strategic intent and the actual practice of knowledge work has been noted for many years in the literature. One case tells of an executive discovery that staff were not using the new state-of-the-art intranet for any of the reasons for it was intended (Donoghue et al 1999) and another reports that a large consumer products company attempted to create a 'knowledge depository' but ended up creating what later came to be known as an

'information junkyard' (McDermott, 1999). Moffett and McAdam (2003, p.35) warn against organisations 'objectifying and calcifying knowledge into static, inert information with complete disregard for *the human element* of Knowledge Management' [italics added]. Studies of knowledge management interventions talk of 'KM failures', attributing these to mismanagement of knowledge activities and citing factors such as organizational culture, technological issues, content risk and poor project management (Lam & Chua, 2005; Chua & Goh, 2008).

To consider and probe the extreme perspectives in organizational attention to knowledge, knowledge work and innovation, the construct of communities of practice is examined. Communities of practice highlight the discord when organizations and researchers grapple with the polarised perspectives of strategic management and emergent practice. First proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991), the concept of communities of practice attended to the learning that was achieved by novices as they actively participated in a particular trade or craft. Communities of practice were strongly contrasted to purposeful, cognitive and formal settings for learning.

In a later work, Wenger et al. (1998, p. 241) take the study of communities of practice into a formal organizational setting and contrasts the 'living practices' or communities of practice with the 'designed organization' or 'institution'. Wenger et al.'s (1998, p. 243) 'institution' is concerned with the 'production of reflexive reifications such as policies, curriculum, standards, roles, job descriptions, laws, histories, affiliations, and the like'. Encouraging an interaction between these two organizational 'structures', the authors note that 'institutionalization must be in the service of practice' and that it must 'support rather than displace the knowledgeability of practice' (p. 243).

In attempting to reconcile the designed organization with emerging practice, Wenger et al (1998) note that, as different entities, the two structures can never be merged.   Rather these authors seek a 'negotiated alignment'. What is pivotal in this work is that the authors agree that a community of practice can be formed, albeit by its constituents, in response to an institutional mandate. Subsequently, in the uptake of knowledge management, numerous strategic managers (see for example, Loyarte & Rivera, 2007; Swan et al, 2002) have seized on the notion of communities of practice and attempted to design, plan and mandate them into existence – in doing so the attribute of emergence is ignored.

Gherardi (2006, p. 105) writes that communities of practice are increasingly conceived as 'social objects' and subject to 'explicit organizational design' and 'managerial intervention'.   Current research by Burford and Ferguson (2011) reveals such a case.   In an enquiry into how large government organizations manage their knowledge capability by intention and use the Australian Standard for Knowledge Management, one research participant revealed that his organization had attempted to mandate participation in communities of practice. The decree came down: *everybody's got to spend an hour or two a week doing community of practice*.   Money for communities of practice was seen by management as facilitating and was made plentiful:

> *"The organization set aside half a million dollars or something to help them do things;*
> *none of that money was ever actually sought by any of the communities of practice,*
> *because the people in it know that it's got nothing to do with getting money to do jobs, or*
> *fund jobs".* (research participant)

With the managerial decision to introduce thirteen communities of practice within the organization to improve efficiency, this knowledge worker reported to his executive: *I think we're off the rails here… we've lost it*. The enforced communities did not survive and with their own *life-form* they reportedly evolved back into four on-going communities of practice. Insightfully, the research participant states that:

> *"We ended up with exactly… what we were going to end up with if we hadn't tried to*
> *formalize it and do that. But we went through an awful amount of pain, just to get back to*
> *where we should have been, you know, two years!"* (research participant)

It appears that communities that come into existence around a practice are not responsive to the dictates of strategic managers in the designed organization. Nor can they be designed into existence. Gherardi (2006, p.108) maintains 'that practice "performs" the community'; 'a community does not exist before the practice that brings it into being as a community of practice'. The discord, tension and misunderstandings between practice theory and traditional management are demonstrated in the notion of communities of practice.

Adopting a knowledge-based approach to organizations, Collison and Wilson (2006) examine the management of innovation in two large Japanese organizations in times of turbulent international economic change. They find that embedded and rigid knowledge management routines cause an inertia that constrains necessary responses to the economic context. Innovative processes are inhibited. Collision and Wilson (2006, p. 1360) claim that Japanese firms have been 'eulogized in management theory as revealing "best practice"' in 'lean production, efficient inventory processes and total quality' – all aspects of traditional scientific management. They argue, however, that these characteristics have become rigidities in organizations and do not allow for agile innovation in the face of changing circumstances.

In particular, Collison and Wilson (2006) find that in the two studied organizations, there is an emphasis on developing employees as company people first and specialists in their field second. Discipline expertise is considered individualistic and generalist managers are favoured. This is enacted in routines of job rotation, jobs for life, a strong company-based mentoring scheme and in-house training rather than formal external education. Application of expertise and knowledge to continuous improvement of the company's production was rewarded but engaging in the broader, worldly discipline was not. The organizations suffered from the strength of their long-term relationships and business groupings. Collison and Wilson (2006) report embeddedness and inertia in these organizations' obligatory relationships with customers and an inability to form new, agile, rich relationships as circumstances changed. What had served these organizations well in terms of organization-centric process and product development, failed when the organizations were required to innovate and adapt. Strategic management did not demonstrate the agility to facilitate the changing knowledge endeavours of these organizations. Individual knowing and spontaneity were not encouraged.

Where traditional management privileges formalized and cognitivist processes (planning, measuring, comparing, tracking, controlling), practice-based theory privileges emergent, self-organising, spontaneous activity (problem-solving, innovating through work and sense-making). Where high-level strategy presumes the separation of intention from performance, practice-based studies presume the integration even entanglement of the two. In this paper, these views are shown as discrete, located in separate domains, and supported by different

theoretical frames. As a consequence, the gap between high level strategy formulation and intention and the self-shaping, evolving and negotiable nature of practice and the gap between canonical, evidence-based, best practice knowledge and practice-based knowing gain attention.

For organizations operating in environments of flux, management becomes an activity dependent on the setting of flexible goals, of probing the environment for opportunities and successful actions and of responding quickly to changing conditions to maximise advantages which emerge in the interaction of organization and environment (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003). Challenges to the traditional notion of determined strategy and rationalist strategic management continue beyond 'strategic flexibility' (Hoskisson et al, 1999) to be posited within discussions in which intention and activity are seen to co-emerge – discussions which progress alongside developments in knowledge management and practice theories.

This paper suggests that organizations are comfortable in activities and positions of strategic management and are quite naturally composed of many instances of emergent practice. Yet neither of these extremes will fully underpin and support the knowledge endeavour of modern organizations. To a large degree, theorists and researchers also remain positioned in isolated, discrete perspectives about how knowledge work and innovation should be engendered in organizations. The authors of this paper see benefit and opportunity in examining a more fluid and integrated perspective that can be used with awareness when approaching the knowledge endeavours so central to organizations of the 21st century.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the dissonance between strategic, top-down management and situated practice-led approaches to knowledge work. The separation of intention from activity in the former and its focus on determination distances traditional management from new perspectives offered through practice-based studies. Two examples of knowledge-based activity and management intention highlight the discord in knowledge-intensive organizations as they engage in these polarized approaches. Management intervention in communities of practice and rigidity in knowledge processes in Japanese organizations highlight the tension and dysfunction that can result when inappropriate interpretations and actions are invoked by adherence to traditional management theories when practice theories hold a dominant place. Research which seeks to investigate the (apparently contrary) perspectives through a single theoretical frame remains unavailable. This paper establishes the discord and calls for further theoretical development in the space between strategic management and practice-based studies.

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