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From Germination to propagation: Achievements from two decades of SAP research and future opportunities and challenges

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Abstract

Over the last two decades, Strategy as Practice (SAP) has developed from an embryonic, fringe perspective on strategy to a consolidated field of strategy research. The 2007 Special Issue of *Human Relations* on “Strategizing: The Challenges of a Practice Perspective” played a pivotal role in bringing this field to fruition. Reflecting on the development of SAP over the past years, we distinguish three phases in its development associated with different types of work on its agenda. We identify an initial Germination Phase of agenda-seeking work as scholars established and defined new concepts and terminology, in an effort to differentiate SAP from other fields of strategy research. A Blossoming Phase then followed, involving the agenda-setting work of establishing a community of scholars and papers that identified as SAP by referencing and building upon each other, in the process establishing and defending the boundaries of the new field. As the field became established, it entered a Harvesting Phase, characterized by agenda-confirming work of using SAP lenses to explain core strategy and organization phenomena and connecting with other fields. Based on these reflections, we discuss potential future developments of SAP, noting that the field appears to be in transition to a new phase, which we label the Propagating Phase. We propose that, if SAP is to remain fertile, this will involve agenda-expanding work of differentiating and connecting different sub-communities and sub-fields within SAP and reaching out to other research traditions beyond its boundaries.

Keywords: micro strategy, practice theory, Strategy as Practice, strategizing, practices, praxis, practice turn

Introduction

In 2004, we published a call for papers for a special issue of *Human Relations* entitled “Strategizing: The Challenges of a Practice Perspective” aimed at taking stock of and promoting the embryonic stream of research studying how people do strategy work. With its multi-level focus on the social practices associated with strategy (Jarzabkowski, 2004; Whittington, 2006), Strategy as Practice (SAP), seemed to speak directly to the *Human Relations*’ mandate of studying “social relations in and around work – across the levels of immediate personal relationships, organizations and their processes, and wider political and economic systems” (mission statement). At the time, SAP was known to only a small circle of strategy scholars interested in developing an alternative to the prevailing microeconomics-based strategy research that downplayed the role of human actors and agency. As we wrote in our call, there is “a move to study strategizing from a practice perspective, on the basis that large-scale quantitative studies of firm assets, technologies and performance variables provide disembodied and asocial accounts that offer little theoretical or practical insight into the dilemmas of practitioners engaged in doing strategy.... This special issue calls for papers that can address these issues through a focus upon the everyday practices and activities involved in doing strategy”.

When we put together the papers for the special issue, the future of SAP was entirely uncertain. At the time, many people in the wider strategy community considered SAP a somewhat misguided and largely irrelevant stream of research that would eventually disappear. One senior strategy scholar, for example, notoriously likened the ambitions of early SAP research, with its focus on the myriad, day-to-day activities, to “observing individuals flipping hamburgers” (see Mantere, 2005: 258). Some of those senior scholars who had already made their careers were politically motivated to assert that SAP had nothing new to offer, beyond, for example, early strategy process research, while others warned that it was simply not relevant to the dominant concerns of strategy research to explain performance (see the 2008 *Journal of Management Inquiry* Dialog, 17.4). Junior scholars at the time were often warned of the risk of building their future careers on SAP research. Yet, the publication of the Special Issue marked a turning point in the development of this nascent perspective. As Kohtamäki and colleagues (2021: 5), in their recent review of the SAP field, noted: “the field took off around 2007, the year of the *Human Relations* special issue.” With about 500 papers (see Figure 1) published since the special issue, SAP has now become one of the most prominent and vibrant approaches in strategy research. In their assessment of the state of Organization and Management Theory, Lounsbury and Beckman (2015: 301) identified SAP as one of five most exciting developments in the field. They write:

“In summary, seeded in Europe and transplanted to North America and elsewhere, Strategy-as-Practice scholarship is a very exciting development that highlights how broader theoretic movements can help motivate the creation of new organization and management theory.”

In this essay, we reflect on the development of SAP research over the last two decades. We first explain the institutionalization of SAP as a field, before distinguishing three phases in its development. With reference to SAP’s pluralist ethos of ‘letting a thousand flowers bloom’, we label these phases using a plant-based metaphor, identifying a Germination Phase, a Blossoming Phase and a Harvesting Phase. Based on these reflections, we discuss potential future developments of SAP, noting that the field appears to be in transition to a new phase, which we label the Propagating Phase.

Consolidation of SAP

The launch of SAP as an official research program is often traced back (e.g. Johnson et al. 2003) to a research workshop in Bruxelles that was hosted by the European Institute for the Advanced Studies in Management (EIASM) exactly 20 years ago. This workshop was attended by scholars from all around the world who were studying the micro-level activity and practice of strategy. In line with the “practice turn” in the social sciences in general (Nicolini, 2012; Schatzki et al., 2001) and in management studies in particular (Orlikowski, 1992, 2000; Orr, 1996), there was an increasing interest in understanding the actual doing of strategy. This ‘practice turn’, which has become increasingly prominent as a research approach in many fields of social science research, coincided with persistent calls to pay more attention to the role of human beings in strategy (e.g., Bettis, 1991; Lowendahl & Revang, 1998). Over the years, a range of different studies had emerged, largely independently of each other, that had drawn attention to strategy work as a complex and effortful social activity (Barry & Elmes, 1997; Oakes et al, 1998; Knights and Morgan, 1991; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), which strategy researchers increasingly turned to for inspiration. The confluence of interest in practice theorising, with its focus on people’s everyday practices (.e.g., Nicolini, 2012; Schatzki et al, 2001), it’s growing appeal as a lens to explain people’s social action in other fields, such as the use of technology (e.g. Nicolini, 2011; Orlikowski, 1992), and the growing momentum for a more social approach to strategy came together in an opportune way to give momentum to the emergence of scholars identifying themselves as interested in strategy as a social practice.

Overwhelmed by the apparent interest in this new approach to strategy, a series of regular workshops and conference subthemes were organized and a community website (www.sap-in.org) with an informal research network (“Strategy as Practice International Network”) was set up. Eventually, standing working groups and interest groups were founded at all major academic associations including European Group of Organization Studies (EGOS), the Academy of Management (AoM) and the Strategic Management Society (SMS). These fora contributed to the development of a recognized community of SAP scholars that acknowledged and built upon each other’s work.

This community of scholars was united by a general understanding of and interest in strategy “not [as] something that an organization *has* but something its members *do*” (Jarzabkowski et al. 2007: 6, original emphasis). Yet, the conceptualizations of what they were studying varied between the scholars, which is reflected in the wide range of labels that were used to describe the approach, which ranged from “Activity Based View” and “(Micro-)strategizing” (Johnson et al. 2003) to “Strategy Activities and Practice” and “Strategy Practice” (which became official names of the SAP interest groups at the AoM and SMS respectively) and “Strategy as practice” (a label which Whittington had already mooted as early as 1996). As these labels carry different meanings (see e.g. Tsoukas, 2010), they are an important part of the definitional work of an emerging field, carrying opportunities for inclusion or exclusion.

The labels did matter. As Langley (2015: 112) reflected on the earlier development of SAP research, noting that SAP “means different things to different people. It is not clear that the body of knowledge – even as expressed in the [*Cambridge Handbook of Strategy as Practice*] – yet hangs together with any degree of coherence.” Similarly, Rouleau (2013: 549) critiqued SAP research as a body of knowledge, highlighting that SAP researchers do not even agree on what to consider as practice; “There are at least five different underlying views of practice. These have coexisted since the foundation of strategy-as-practice research.” This type of struggle appears to be a key point in the development of scholarly fields. For example, Van de Ven (1999) noted the struggles over whether a few narrowly, and therefore clearly defined, paradigms should define the development of the Organization and Management Theory (OMT) division of the Academy of Management, or whether it should be open to multiple paradigms. Similarly, this lack of agreement about the definition of SAP was initially seen as a major problem for the development of the field. Struggles ensued, as some advocated repeatedly for an aligned understanding of the field’s key concepts. Yet,

others warned that this could have constraining effects, stifling the vibrancy and creativity of the community.

Over multiple discussions at conferences and in workshops, eventually a shared understanding emerged that this heterogeneity of views could work to the community's advantage and that pluralism should be embraced. As Van Maanen had previously advocated in OMT (Van de Ven, 1999), people adopted the slogan "let a thousand flowers bloom" to advance this "explicitly pluralistic ethos" (Seidl et al, 2021: 484). As SAP was a lens with which to view strategy phenomena, rather than a narrow theory with a few key constructs, enabling multiple labels and associated stream of research to flourish would generate an open community and encouragement for others to join and help develop the field. Indeed, this has been the case, as some core scholars have remained within the field, albeit increasingly differentiating their approaches (see Harvesting Phase, Table 2), while others have moved in and out of the field (e.g. see authors and chapters in the 1st and 2nd edition of the SAP handbook).

This openness in defining the field has contributed to the vibrancy and productivity of SAP research, which manifested in a rapid growth of publications over the first ten years and a steady stream of publications since. Figure 1 shows the number of SAP articles published each year (the graph comprises all papers in English that, according to the Web of Science, include "strategy as practice" or "strategy-as-practice" in their title, abstract or keywords and/or are listed in the bibliography of the Strategy-as-Practice International Network as SAP papers). Over the years, eight special issues on SAP have been published in different journals, ranging from *Human Relations* (HR), the *Journal of Management Studies* (JMS), and the *British Journal of Management* (BJM), to the *Strategic Management Journal* (SMJ) and *Long Range Planning* (LRP), to more specialized journals like *Business History* (BH) and the *Journal of Strategic Information Systems* (JSIS). Without a doubt, SAP has become a mature field of research. However, the evolution process is never a neutral or linear one. Each turning point in this process had important implications for what the field studies and its respective challenges and potentials, as we now discuss.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Phases in the development of SAP over the last two decades

We allude to the SAP scholarly community aims to let a thousand flowers bloom, by bringing this plant-based metaphor to our identification of four phases of maturity in the SAP field: Germination, Blossoming and Harvesting. While these phases are not clearly demarcated by a particular chronological turning point, we distinguish between them, qualitatively, according to the dominant type of work being done in each phase. We characterized the *Germination Phase*, as predominantly *agenda-seeking* work, generating new concepts and terminology and defining them, to differentiate SAP from other fields of strategy research. This led into a *Blossoming Phase*, which we characterized as involving *agenda-setting* work; establishing a community of scholars and papers that identified as SAP by referencing and building upon each other, consolidating differentiation from other fields and defending boundaries over what constitutes SAP work. Finally, we identified a *Harvesting Phase*, which is characterized by *agenda-confirming* work; scholars taking the SAP lenses for granted, rather than justifying or defending it, in studying and explaining core strategy and organization phenomena, in the process connecting with other fields. In Table 1 we summarise each of these phases, the core agenda-making work and associated papers that characterise each phase, and the implications of that phase for the growth of the field. While Figure 1 may show a consistent trajectory, throughout the phases in Table 1, key concepts came into being, were contested, evolved, and some of them became taken-for-granted while others were discarded. We now explain these phases and their implications for field growth.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Germination (2001-2007/8) can be defined as causing a seed to put forth shoots, beginning to grow or bring a plant into existence. In 2001, as a call went out for a special issue of *Journal of Management Studies* on “micro strategy and strategizing”, SAP was already a seed, as a couple of early papers had alluded to the notion (e.g. Knights & Morgan, 1991; Hendry, 2000; Whittington, 1996), and a few graduate students were using SAP concepts loosely within the PhDs that they were completing at that time. Throughout the next six to seven years, SAP scholars engaged in what we term agenda-seeking work. This work was

about demarcating SAP from other strands of strategy scholarship as well as developing and defining the field's own terminology, concepts, and objects of study. Critically, during this phase, two key concepts of 'micro strategy', i.e. focusing on the minute details of strategy, and what became known as the 'three Ps framework' were developed. One of these – micro strategy – would become something of a burden, while the other progressively began to shape the field.

First, the special issue and editorial by Johnson, Melin and Whittington (2003: 3), developed and defined micro strategy as a focus "on micro-activities that, while often invisible to traditional strategy research, nevertheless can have significant consequences for organizations and those who work in them". In line with this focus on the micro, Samra-Fredericks (2003), for example studied how strategists employed their linguistic skills in strategy talk to engage others and thereby influence the strategy process; and Rouleau (2005) described how middle managers enact the organization's strategy in their day-to-day interactions with external stakeholders. In establishing the term "micro strategy", the editors of the special issue differentiated SAP from the resource-based view and strategy process research. This offered an important point of differentiation around which SAP studies could coalesce as they sought to establish their own research agenda, as the seven empirical, methodological, and conceptual papers in the special issue demonstrated. Second, the practice language began to take shape, as Jarzabkowski (2004) established that social practices comprised an unacknowledged basis of existing strategy research across multiple levels, while Jarzabkowski (2005) and Whittington (2006) set out what came to be a core SAP meta-framework based on the 'three Ps' of practices, practitioners, and praxis. Research flourished in each of these three Ps. For example, particular discursive, recursive and adaptive practices (e.g. Mantere, 2005; Rouleau, 2005; Vaara et al, 2004), specific types of practitioners identified by function or hierarchy (e.g. Regner, 2003; Paroutis & Pettigrew, 2007), or streams of praxis such as top managers talk-in-interaction in strategy meetings (e.g. Samra-Fredericks, 2003). Yet the framework sat in the background as a legitimating device for a raft of scholarship that, whilst it might foreground one of these three Ps, also obliquely referenced its entanglement with the other Ps. As Jarzabkowski, Balogun and Seidl (2007) examined the conceptual integration of these three Ps in their *Human Relations* special issue, the framework was consolidated as the backbone of the SAP field going forward.

The implications of the germination phase for the SAP field were very rich. Many papers sprang up with different theoretical lenses, from structuration theory (Jarzabkowski, 2008; Rouleau, 2005), to sensemaking (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2003; Rouleau, 2005), to Heideggerian approaches (Chia & Mackay, 2007) and Luhmanian systems theory (Hendry & Seidl, 2003; Seidl 2007); methodological lenses from ethnography (Jarzabkowski, 2003), to discourse analysis (Vaara et al, 2004) and ethno-methodology (Samra-Fredericks, 2003); and different objects of study, from middle managers (Balogun & Johnson, 2004) to strategy workshops (Hodgkinson, Whittington, Johnson & Schwarz, 2006) and meetings (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008; Hoon, 2007), to strategizing at the periphery (e.g. Regner, 2003). Many such theories, methodologies, and objects of study were either entirely new to, or very rare within, the traditional strategy field. The work of differentiating SAP was under way.

Yet this germination phase, characterised by agenda-seeking work, also drew to its natural close. Evidence that the field had gone beyond germination, with its attendant agenda-seeking work, came in the form of extensions and criticisms that moved beyond solely differentiating from other strategy fields, to identifying or proposing new boundaries for SAP research. For example, in the *Human Relations* special issue, Denis, Langley & Rouleau (2007) pointed out the pluralism that characterises many aspects of strategy work, while Chia & Mackay (2007) emphasised the importance of going beyond the micro-actions identified by Johnson et al (2003), to study the flow of experience within which strategy is socially accomplished. At the same time, the seedlings of SAP had grown sufficiently that they were visible. The field began to attract criticism on the basis that it was a misinterpretation of existing process studies (e.g. Hodgkinson & Wright, 2006), and that it was not radical enough in differentiating from traditional strategy research (e.g. Carter, Clegg & Kornberger, 2008). The field was no longer seeking an agenda, but rather, that agenda was being noticed and critiqued.

Blossoming (2008-2015/16). The publication of papers that began to critique SAP, characterised a turning point. The SAP field moved into a Blossoming phase, characterized by a mass of blooms, i.e. papers. As Figure 1 shows, during this period, with a set of frameworks from which to grow, critiques to respond to and disprove, and a growing group of scholars doing work they labelled as SAP, publications proliferated. The field now had sufficient roots to move to the agenda-setting work of establishing and defending boundaries

over what constituted SAP work, much of it by bringing that work to fruition in key publications that built upon and referenced the initial papers and each other. Thus multiple papers began to build substantive SAP contributions to everything from strategic planning (e.g. Abdallah & Langley, 2014; Jarzabkowski & Balogun, 2009; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011; Vaara et al. 2010), to detailed foci on the work of middle managers (e.g. Mantere, 2008; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Teulier & Rouleau, 2013), and their participation in strategy making (Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Balogun et al, 2011) as well as resistance to it (McCabe, 2010; Ezzamel & Willmott, 2008) to the strategic role of front-line managers (Balogun, Best & Le, 2015), consultants (Nordqvist and Melin 2008) and regulators (Jarzabkowski et al. 2009). From detailed emotional dynamics (Liu & Maitlis, 2014) and power differentials (Mueller et al. 2013; Whittle et al 2014) to the temporal and spatial dimensions of strategy work (Hydle, 2015; Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2013), to the strategic role of strategy texts (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011; Vaara et al., 2010), various strategy tools (Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015; Kaplan, 2011) and other types of materialities engaged in strategy work (Jarzabkowski et al. 2013; Werle & Seidl, 2015), it was evident that the SAP field was blooming.

In part, this blooming was facilitated by the agenda-setting work of some key special issues that directed the SAP focus into important new avenues of research. For example, Balogun et al (2014) brought together a special issue that examined how sociomateriality, sensemaking and power shaped strategy making. Their editorial not only legitimated several different discursive lenses for studying SAP phenomena, from narrative to conversational to critical discourse analysis, but also linked them to other key approaches, so expanding the field to a more nuanced understanding of, for example, how emotions (Liu & Maitlis, 2014) displayed and discursively expressed during strategic conversations influenced the organizational strategies pursued within an organization. Importantly, this special issue also began to more explicitly incorporate the examination of power dynamics (e.g. Hardy & Thomas, 2014), an issue that had been critiqued as markedly absent from SAP research (Carter et al, 2008; McCabe, 2010; Mueller et al, 2013). At the same time, Dameron, Le, & Lebaron, (2015) focused on materiality, an increasingly important theme for the practice turn in management studies more broadly (e.g. Jarzabkowski & Pinch, 2013; Leonardi & Barley, 2010; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). Their special issue, comprising six empirical papers, broadened the SAP focus to encompass the interplay between human bodies, strategy tools (Belmondo & Sargis Roussel, 2015; Paroutis, Franco and Papadopoulos, 2015) and other material and spatial

arrangements (Demir, 2015; Jarzabkowski, Burke & Spee, 2015; Werle & Seidl, 2015) in strategy making.

Importantly, during this phase of blooming, review papers were developed that summarised the corpus of papers included in the SAP field, but also their weaknesses in developing the SAP agenda. For example, Jarzabkowski & Spee (2009) noted that much SAP work focused upon the micro and meso levels of analysis inside organizations, rather than taking up the more radical challenge of studying actors outside organizations, or the extra-organizational implications of SAP work. Similarly, Golsorkhi et al. (2010: 13) in their introduction to the *Cambridge Handbook of Strategy as Practice* stressed the need to explore the impact of the larger societal context on local strategy making: “Whether we call it institutionalization, legitimation, naturalization, or normalization, there is a great deal of work still to be done to explain how widely-held assumptions about appropriate strategizing methods influence what is actually done in organizations, and how these activities, then, reproduce or at times transform prevailing understandings and practices.” Vaara and Whittington (2012) in turn noted in a critical review that apart from neglecting the institutional dimensions of strategizing, SAP scholarship had gaps in the way it examined phenomena, due to a lack of focus upon agency, materiality, and strategy emergence. These agenda-setting pieces did important political work, enabling field participants to critically assess their own work and also attract others who could address some of the gaps.

Such critical reflection also enabled some of the early buds to be re-examined, cultivated, or removed, to encourage more robust growth. For example, work began to focus upon a fourth P, considering strategy as a profession (Whittington, Cailluet & Yasak-Douglas, 2011). At the same time, the term micro strategy from 2003, initially raised as problematic by Chia & Mackay (2007), was robustly reviewed by Seidl & Whittington (2014: 1408), who highlighted that the focus on micro activities associated with the term carried the danger of “micro-isolationism”. They wrote: “Fascination with the detailed understanding of local praxis can produce what we term ‘micro-isolationism’, whereby a local empirical instance is interpreted wholly in terms of what is evidently present, cut off from the larger phenomena that make it possible”. Increasingly, the agenda-seeking definitional work done in the germination phase was being refined through agenda-setting work. This work would, eventually, recast micro as an inappropriate term that constrained the scope of the SAP

agenda, even as scholars acknowledged its convenience as a non-theoretical word for those less-versed in practice theorisation (see Nicolini, 2016).

This blossoming phase began to draw to a close as the proliferation of papers, and the focus on practices, led to efforts to appropriate the term by those outside the field (e.g. Bromiley & Rau, 2016). SAP scholars, while beginning to turn a critical eye on their own scholarship, were rapidly able to dismiss these attempts. Lacking a comprehensive grasp of the core meta-frameworks of the SAP agenda and the considerable body of work that it had spawned (Jarzabkowski, Kaplan, Seidl & Whittington, 2016a, b), these efforts at appropriation failed to gain traction. Such confidence in identifying the type of work that lay within the SAP domain marked a turning point as the field shifted from blossoming to harvesting.

Harvesting (2016-2020/2021). In the harvesting phase, SAP scholars were able to gather the fruits of their increasingly mature field. This phase was characterised by agenda-confirming work. Rather than explaining, developing, or justifying SAP concepts and approaches, scholars were drawing on prior SAP work to contribute to specific phenomena and connect with existing theories. This phase showed two key developments; a taken-for-granted use of SAP concepts to address questions in strategy and organization scholarship, and collaborations between SAP scholars and those in adjacent theoretical areas.

First, the corpus of papers drawing upon or referencing the SAP field continued to proliferate. However, these papers no longer engaged in extensive explanations of what SAP was, or why they took the practice turn. Rather, the term strategizing, the focus on people doing strategy work, their practices, and the flow of strategy making were taken-for-granted analytic objects of study among SAP scholars. In this harvesting phase, scholars examined phenomena, not because they were SAP-oriented, but because a SAP lens could shed light upon them. Importantly, these papers also began to address some of the critiques raised from the agenda-setting work of the blossoming phase. For example, increasingly studies went beyond the organization, drawing upon the power of a practice approach to explain large-scale phenomena (Nicolini, 2016), to examine the competitive dynamics of an entire global industry (Jarzabkowski & Bednarek, 2018), cross-sector collaboration (Deken et al, 2018; Seidl & Werle, 2018), and strategizing in extra-organizational, non-market contexts (Sorsa & Vaara, 2020). Studies also began examining the evolution of the strategy profession (Whittington, 2019) and the emergence of Open Strategy as a new approach to strategy work

(Hautz et al., 2017; Seidl et al. 2019). Additionally, issues of agency and strategy emergence were increasingly addressed, such as how people, including those not usually studied as strategic actors (Pettit & Crossnan, 2020), and their practices become strategic (e.g. Mantere & Whittington, 2020; Gond, Cabantous & Krikorian, 2018; Hengst, Jarzabkowski, Hoegl & Muthuel, 2020). At the same time, SAP scholars re-visited old questions, such as the relationship between strategy and structure, strategy and design thinking, strategy formulation, and planned and emergent strategy, bringing new and dynamic insights through the application of a practice lens (e.g. Jarzabkowski, Le & Balogun, 2019; Knight, Daymond & Paroutis, 2020; Mirabeau et al. 2018; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2017). The concepts of the SAP field were clearly ripe for use in examining multiple different issues.

Second, SAP, which had always demarcated strongly from other fields in its early phases, began to identify other fields that held potential for practice theory, such as institutional theory (Suddaby et al, 2013), information systems (Whittington, 2014), and dynamic capabilities (Salvato, 2003). This was a notable turning point, because it contrasted with earlier phases, when SAP scholars were keen to differentiate in order to promote the distinctive nature of the practice approach in their agenda-seeking and setting work. Growing confidence in SAP as merit-worthy in its own right enabled key SAP scholars to move from differentiating to consider collaborating with like-minded scholars in other fields (e.g. Lounsbury, Anderson & Spee, 2021; Feldman, D'Adderio, Dittrich & Jarzabkowski, 2019).

Notably, a 2018 special issue of the *Strategic Management Journal* focused upon the dialogues and intersections between strategy process and practice. While agenda-seeking work during the germination phase had differentiated SAP from strategy process (e.g. Whittington, 2006), there had been various efforts at dialogue (e.g. Jarzabkowski, Lê & Spee, 2017; Langley, 2007; Tsoukas, 2010) that acknowledged a 'family' similarity between the two (Whittington, 2007). This special issue demonstrated SAP's distinctiveness and yet complementarity to strategy process by taking a combinatory approach to the two (Burgelman, Floyd, Laamanen, Mantere, Vaara & Whittington, 2018). Many of the resultant 13 papers went further towards addressing critiques of the SAP field from the blooming phase. For example, both Kouamé and Langley (2018) and Jarzabkowski and Bednarek (2018) specifically addressed the call by Seidl & Whittington (2014) to examine how the 'macro' flow of strategy-making is instantiated within the 'micro' strategizing practices of actors. Similarly, some of Vaara & Whittington's (2012) calls were addressed, such as

examining the agency of key actors (e.g. Wenzel & Koch, 2018; Ma & Seidl, 2018), strategy emergence (e.g. Dapliaz & di Stefano, 2018; Mirabeau et al, 2018), and materiality (e.g. Knight, Paroutis & Heracleous, 2018), while other scholars, as emphasised by Jarzabkowski & Spee (2009), moved beyond the organization to inter-organizational phenomena (e.g. Jarzabkowski & Bednarek, 2018; Seidl & Werle, 2018).

Thus, during this harvesting phase, papers in the SAP field began, steadily, to confirm and develop the agenda that had been set in the preceding phase, including addressing critiques of that field. At the same time, SAP scholarship had arrived at a point of confidence within which differentiation from other fields became less important. Instead, SAP as a lens could be applied to study wider questions in strategy and organization theory. Nonetheless, further work to address the existing critiques remain, even as new ones have arisen.

Where is SAP heading: The contours of an emerging new phase of development

As 2021 has drawn to a close, we can make out the contours of an emerging new phase, that we might term the ‘propagating phase’. Building from the root stock of the SAP field, this future propagating phase is essential for spreading SAP ideas and engaging in cross-pollination that will enable the field to continue to thrive. We now examine three critiques, published in 2021, and consider what they might mean for the future development of the SAP field.

A review paper by Kohtamäki, Whittington, Vaara and Rabetino (2021) finds that research in the SAP field has developed into six distinct clusters of research around themes of praxis, sensemaking, discourse, sociomateriality, institutional and process theory. Papers inside these clusters are strongly integrated in drawing upon each other, but less integrated across communities, indicating the formation of sub-communities with the SAP field. While these sub-communities have been important in developing coherent streams of SAP research, in accordance with the many flowers enabled during the blooming phase, the authors note that they also present dangers due to their dispersion. They therefore propose areas that are ripe for further propagation between communities, emphasising the potential for cross-pollination between micro and macro; sociomaterial and discourse; critical and mainstream; and practice and process perspectives to further develop the SAP field.

A critique by Mackay, Chia and Nair (2021) provides potential avenues to further propagate the SAP field and address some of its oversights. The authors expand on their own (Chia & MacKay 2007) earlier critique of the term “micro” that characterised differentiation from traditional strategy research during the germination phase of SAP research. As we noted, this term became a legacy constraint upon the field (e.g. Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Seidl & Whittington, 2014; Jarzabkowski & Bednarek, 2018; Kouamé & Langley, 2018). In an effort to dissolve the false distinction between micro and macro, Mackay et al. (2021) propose a process philosophical approach to strategy emergence that also bridges some of the earlier differentiation between strategy process and SAP (e.g. Whittington, 2006; 2007). Adopting the phrase ‘strategy-in-practices’, they explain how strategy is immanent and emerges within socio-culturally propagated practices that cohere into a pattern of action that we as scholars recognise as strategy.

An agenda-expanding paper by Jarzabkowski, Kavas & Krull (2021) addresses a different legacy issue. This legacy arises from early SAP efforts to speak to traditional strategy work through reference to existing performance and process definitions of what types of activities are strategically ‘consequential’ (e.g. Johnson et al, 2003; Jarzabkowski et al, 2007; Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008). As the authors show, this narrow framing of consequentiality, while important for establishing legitimacy as a branch of *strategy* research during the germination and growth phases of SAP, also constrained the power of a practice perspective to find patterns of strategic action that are often unobserved and neglected in traditional strategy research. Yet an initial premise of the SAP agenda was to find strategy, even within the taken-for-granted everyday activities of actors who are not typically considered ‘strategists’ (e.g. Jarzabkowski & Bednarek, 2018; Pettit & Crossnan, 2020). Limiting the scope of SAP study to those activities already defined as strategic prevents SAP scholars from developing the truly novel findings that will enable the field to grow. In an effort to embrace the radical agenda of an SAP perspective, Jarzabkowski et al (2021) therefore empower SAP scholars to define mundane, everyday practices as strategic and to explain their consequentiality both in situ and for strategy theory.

These three papers arising at the end of two decades of SAP research have commonalities in pointing the way forward for future propagation of the field. Whilst acknowledging the enormous work done, they emphasise the need to both establish more robust points of differentiation from other streams of strategy research, that are grounded in the radical

agenda of practice theory (Jarzabkowski et al, 2021; MacKay et al, 2021), whilst also ensuring cross-pollination among the sub-communities that have arisen (Kohtamäki et al, 2021). We now reflect on these papers in terms of a future agenda.

First, we consider the notion of differentiation and cross-pollination with the SAP field. Kohtamäki et al's (2021) finding of sub-communities within the SAP field are an inevitable consequence of allowing a thousand flowers to bloom. To be sure that they are speaking to somebody, SAP scholars have, perhaps unwittingly, formed communities, each with their own concepts and interests. One possible evolution is that each of these communities might develop more distinct boundaries, similar to fields like institutional theory, in which each community does different types of work (e.g. Lawrence et al, 2011; Leibel et al, 2018; Zeitsma et al, 2017). The benefit of stronger boundaries is that each of these sub-communities will build a set of core concepts and scholars, so growing into a distinct subfield.

The caveat is that each sub-community, in defining their boundaries, may, to continue our farming analogy, engage in strip-farming. While the owners of any particular plot, and its crop of papers, will be easily identified, this differentiation may also lose some of the benefits of being part of a wider field. Although clarity over core concepts facilitates cumulative knowledge development, strong conceptual boundaries can also constrain novelty and diversity in research (Cunha & Putnam, 2019; Seidl et al. 2021). As Schad et al. (2019), note, it is necessary to set free some centripetal forces in theoretical fields, to compensate for the overly cohesive effects of the existing centripetal forces. Such 'setting free' constitutes a "spur [to] exploration and creativity, challenging, spanning, and extending its boundaries." (Schad et al., 2019: 108).

In order for a more differentiated SAP field to embrace potential extension of boundaries, we advocate two key avenues: thematic differentiation with the field, and cross-pollination outside the field. First, scholars might differentiate along thematic lines, such as the underlying practice theory approaches they draw on (e.g. Bourdieu, 1990; Schatzki, 2002) or by the phenomena studied, such as open strategy (Seidl et al. 2019), or materiality (Dameron et al, 2015). By differentiating explicitly along clear thematic lines, including those identified by Kohtamäki et al (2021), scholars within the different communities could both benefit from establishing strong definitions but also have clear reasons for connecting with others; such as

using a discourse theoretical approach (Balogun et al, 2014) to examine the phenomena of open strategy (Hautz et al, 2017), or a multi-modal approach (LeBaron et al, 2018) to examine the use of bodies and materials in strategy making (e.g., Knight et al, 2018; Wenzel & Koch, 2018). Paradoxically, as theories of organization have shown (e.g. Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967), clear points of differentiation can be the grounds for equally clear points of integration (Bednarek et al, 2021). We therefore propose that the differentiated sub-communities found by Kohtamäki et al (2021) and others that may emerge, could be the grounds for future propagation at the nexus of these communities, as they draw upon each other to explore new phenomena. The theoretical apparatus from such communities, may provide the means for scholars to study strategy as it emerges (Mackay et al, 2021) within actors and activities not typically defined as strategy (Jarzabkowski et al, 2021). Beyond our suggestions here, for example, we note that conference themes over the past two to three years have begun to look at the relationships between SAP and other phenomena, such as grand challenges (EGOS, 2019). It is, therefore, open to the existing and emerging scholars in the field to decide what those themes might be, in order to facilitate both clear differentiation and the potential for integration across communities within SAP and, leading to our next point, outside SAP.

Second, we advocate for cross-pollination outside the field. Here, the most obvious points of contact are those other areas of research that are already akin to SAP, because they also draw upon practice theories. For example, Routine Dynamics is a large and vibrant research community that emerged around the same time as SAP, taking a practice theory to study organizational routines (Feldman et al, 2021). Conceptualizing organizational routines as particular types of practices, Routine Dynamics scholars have generated important insights about routines as effortful and emergent accomplishments (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). Focussing particularly on the inner dynamics of routines, they have revealed how routines are performed, transformed, and interrelated with other routines to generate group-level or organization-level outcomes (Feldman, 2000; Birnholz et al, 2007). Cross-pollination between SAP and Routine Dynamics opens fascinating new phenomena to be studied as potential sites of strategy (see also Seidl et al, 2021). In particular, SAP might learn from Routine Dynamics how the dynamic enactment of mundane operational routines could inadvertently shape the direction of the organization (e.g. Rerup & Feldman, 2011); a topic that has been on the SAP agenda from its very beginning but which scholars have struggled to explain (Jarzabkowski et al, 2021; MacKay et al. 2021). Routine Dynamics research might

also help SAP researchers in better capturing the non-discursive aspects of strategy work. While the seminal SAP papers have highlighted the importance of studying both “sayings” and “doings” (Seidl & Whittington, 2014), most work still treats strategy as a discursive phenomenon (Hendry, 2000; Balogun et al, 2015), with only a few studies accounting for its non-discursive aspects (see Dameron et al, 2015).

Another example of a particularly relevant practice-based research area for cross-pollination with SAP is the growing Entrepreneurship-as-Practice (EAP) movement (Thompson et al, forthcoming). EAP has flourished in recent years as scholars have generated important insights about how various entrepreneuring practices originate, are performed, diffuse, and are interwoven to form new organizations and create new value (Champenois, Lefebvre, & Ronteau, 2020; Teague, Tunstall, Champenois, & Gartner, 2021). Cross-pollinating with EAP could open several interesting areas of research for SAP scholars. For example, SAP scholarship is still seeking ways to explain how ‘things’ become strategic, beyond those that are already designated as strategy by managers in organizations (Jarzabkowski et al, 2021; Mackay et al, 2021). A few studies show how ideas and products emerging at the periphery of organizations are retrospectively reconstructed as an organization’s strategy (e.g. Gon, Cabantous & Kirkorian, 2018; Regnér, 2003). However, we still lack theoretical explanations of how and why some ideas and activities originate and gain momentum to become part of an organization’s strategy, and indeed, how people recognize or act upon potential new ideas in order to make them strategic (Jarzabkowski et al, 2021). Such phenomena are at the heart of EAP studies, providing rich grounds for SAP scholars to learn from collaboration and cross-pollination. In addition to considering entrepreneurial ventures as ‘extreme’ examples of emergent strategy, on which SAP needs greater insight (Mackay et al, 2021; Vaara & Whittington, 2012), EAP also provides opportunities to identify and follow novel practices inside established firms, tracing them from emergence or ideation to their fruition as ‘value-yielding’ activities that are labelled ‘strategy’(Jarzabkowski et al, 2021).

Beyond these adjacent fields, we suggest that there are fields of strategy research that have only barely, if at all, begun to acknowledge practice theory, and that might benefit from the novel theorising that cross-pollination with SAP might afford. An obvious area of cross-pollination is the large field of Upper Echelons research, which focusses on the role of people at the top of the organization in the strategy process (Hambrick, 2007). Researchers in this field have generated many important insights on how the characteristics of upper echelons

managers and the composition of their teams shape strategic decision making (Carpenter, Geletkanycz & Sanders, 2004). For SAP researchers, engaging with this field of research opens several interesting research opportunities. In particular, while SAP scholarship has historically focussed on the distributed nature of strategy work, Upper Echelons research puts the spotlight on the people at the top of the organization, claiming it as topic of research in its own right (although possibly overestimating their strategic impact). The SAP lens can offer a fruitful new conceptualization of upper echelon managers as “carriers of practices” (Whittington, 2006: 625) rather than just as individuals with particular characteristics (see for example recent work adopting a Bourdieusian practice perspective to study top managers; van Aaken et al, 2021). SAP researchers, with their competence in capturing and analysing interpersonal relations, are also in a particularly good position to illuminate the social, rather than psychological, dynamics within top management teams and their composition (e.g. Ma et al, 2015; Ma & Seidl, 2018), providing an important new area for Upper Echelons research.

Another example of an adjacent field of strategy that SAP could fruitfully cross-pollinate is the classic field of corporate governance. Corporate governance research is centrally concerned with the systems and processes through which organizations are directed and controlled (Wright et al, 2013). The focus is thereby on assessing the extent to which various governance mechanisms, such as boards, reporting requirements or incentive systems, help keeping managers’ self-interest in check (Shleifer & Vishny, 1997), compensating for their incompetence (Hendry, 2002), ensuring access to critical resources (Hillman et al, 2000) or resolving conflicts of interest between stakeholder groups (Amis et al, 2020). For SAP researchers this opens fruitful new avenues of study. While existing SAP research has already been concerned with many of the governance mechanisms as part of their study of strategy work, corporate governance research provides a new angle by offering alternative, normative points of reference. With its particular strength in capturing the actions and interactions surrounding various governance mechanisms, such as interactions in committees (Hoon, 2007), or the various actions associated with financial and other reporting (Denis, Langley & Rouleau, 2006), SAP research can make an important contribution to understanding the effects of different corporate governance mechanism. Such research would also resonate with the increasing interest of corporate governance scholars to focus more on the behavioural than just structural aspects of corporate governance (Van Ees et al, 2009). Furthermore, with its interest in the distributed nature of strategy work, SAP research is in a particularly strong

position to expose various informal and implicit governance mechanism, whereas corporate governance research to date has focused on the formal and explicit ones. An example of the kind of insights such work might offer is the study by Whittington and Yakis-Douglas (2020) that show how “unmanaged forms of openness”, such as unintended information leaks, together with the normative pressure of globally networked professionals might help control powerful organizations.

Together, these are some tentative reflections on how SAP research could evolve in the future as the Propagation phase unfolds. We believe that all the identified directions bear great potential in allowing the field to continue to thrive.

Conclusion

On the twentieth anniversary of SAP scholarship, we have reviewed the development of this field of research. We identified three phases in this development, which are associated with different types of agenda seeking, setting, and confirming work. This work, in which the 2007 SAP special issue of *Human Relations* played an important role, has helped SAP to develop into a vibrant research community. To conclude, as central actors in the development of this field, at least during its earlier phases, we reflect briefly upon its growth.

Retrospectively, the development of SAP might seem natural, logical and linear, starting tentatively and then building momentum. However, no field is without its detractors, and neither is a field apolitical or neutral in its development. The development of most branches of science is not due simply to the quality of the scientific material produced. Rather, it is also necessary to engage other scholars, recruit receptive audiences, and make a space within which concepts can gain traction. So it is with the development of SAP. For example, the blossoming phase, within which scholars actively defined their concepts, established boundaries, and differentiated from other avenues of strategy research, is an important phase in developing a field. Such boundaries establish a space within which scholars can develop a niche to advance their own agendas, both in terms of the quality of the work being done, and also as a space of support for their efforts and respite from attack. Developing such spaces need not negate the quality of the work done, even if the development of the space serves multiple purposes in providing some protection during efforts to advance a field. As we have tried to show, the development of SAP has not been free of conflict and tension. At times it

could have taken very different turns, and the establishment of community, differentiation, boundaries and ‘safe spaces’ undoubtedly supported its growth.

Of course, as parties within the field, we also acknowledge that our review is authored from inside the field. Inside voices, even where they raise criticism, as ours have, separately, at different points in the field development, do so with an understanding of that field. Such understanding is implicitly political, since our own interests and beliefs are, necessarily, part of our authoring. To some extent, this is a kind of many review articles in various fields. Even as review articles aim to evaluate, provoke, and critique, they tend to do so with a view to extending a field, or taking it in a particular direction, favoured by the authors, rather than terminating it. The problem is, to do the work to develop a review, authors are often invested in, or become entrained to the field they are reviewing. We therefore lay no claims of a neutral reflection on the field. Nonetheless, we are pleased, as we reflect, that the aim to let a thousand flowers bloom does indeed seem to have generated pluralism that we hope will continue to provide fertile grounds for future development.

This pluralism is important. SAP is now, again, at a critical juncture. Like other mature fields of research (Barney et al, 2011), SAP needs to find new grounds on which to continue to thrive. There are indications that SAP is already in the transition to a new phase, the propagation phase. We note that, as it does, the objects of interest in SAP scholarship may and should transform. We have sketched out some promising directions for SAP scholarship to go. However, in the spirit of pluralism, and given that we are now only a few of many central actors in this field, we cannot predict in which way it will or should go. Rather, we hope that scholars interested in SAP will be as stimulated, prolific, and passionate over the next two decades, as we have been over the past two.

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TABLE 1. THREE PHASES IN THE PAST DEVELOPMENT OF SAP

Phases of development	Agenda-Making work in growing a field	Implications for the field
<p>Germination (2001-2007/8): Bringing the seeds of SAP as a field into existence and developing it.</p>	<p>Agenda-Seeking work involved generating new concepts and terminology and defining them, in an effort to differentiate SAP from other fields of strategy research. Some core papers informed this agenda-seeking work, even as many empirical papers gave substance to that agenda.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Johnson, Melin, Whittington, JMS, 2003 • Jarzabkowski, Org Studies, 2004 • Jarzabkowski, Sage, 2005 • Whittington, Organization Studies, 2006; • Hodgkinson & Wright, Org Studies, 2006; • Jarzabkowski, Balogun & Seidl, HR, 2007 • Denis, Langley & Rouleau, HR, 2007 • Chia & Mackay, HR, 2007 • Carter, Clegg & Kornberger, SO, 2008 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defining micro-strategizing as a focus on the micro activities, often unobserved in traditional strategy research, that are organizationally consequential. • Establishing the 3Ps, practices, practitioners and praxis, as the core meta-theoretical framework of the field. • Bringing multiple SAP-consistent theories (e.g. systems theory, structuration, activity theory) and methodologies (e.g. ethnomethodology; discourse, sensemaking) to studying strategy phenomena • Opening up the objects of study (e.g. strategy workshops, middle managers, peripheral strategy-making)
<p>Blossoming (2008-2015/16): Sprouting a mass of blooms (i.e. papers) that demonstrate the healthy development of the SAP field</p>	<p>Agenda-Setting work involved establishing a community of scholars and papers that identified as SAP by referencing and building upon each other, in the process consolidating differentiation by establishing and defending boundaries over what constitutes SAP work. Some core review papers and special issues informed this agenda-setting work, either responding to critiques, or reviewing the field, even as special issues, two editions of a handbook, and numerous empirical papers gave substance to that agenda.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whittington, Org Studies, 2007; • Jarzabkowski & Whittington, SO, 2008; • Jarzabkowski & Spee, IJMR, 2009 • Cambridge Handbook, 2010, 2015 • Vaara & Whittington, AMA, 2012 • Balogun et al, JMS, 2014 • Seidl & Whittington, Org Studies, 2014 • Dameron, Le & LeBaron, BJM, 2015 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building a robust body of empirical work that examined SAP-oriented phenomena, such as managers at different levels, strategy-making processes, strategy tools and the materials of strategy making • Drawing together different methodological lenses, such as materiality, discourse, and sensemaking, to broaden SAP-based insights on strategy making • Reviewing and critiquing the growing field, as gaps in focus, particularly on phenomena and issues outside the organization, became apparent • Questioning and further developing the initial frameworks, leading to an emerging strand of work on strategy as a profession (4Ps) even as the term 'micro' was increasingly seen as conceptually inaccurate.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jarzabkowski, Kaplan, Seidl, Whittington, SO 2016; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarifying boundaries over the term practices as a fundamental conceptual underpinning of the SAP field, rather than a common-sense or a-theoretical term
<p>Harvesting (2016-2020/21): Gathering the fruits of the mature field by using SAP tools and lenses to contribute to specific phenomena and/or theories .</p>	<p>Agenda-Confirming work involved taking SAP lenses for granted in studying and explaining core strategy and organization phenomena and also spreading the net more widely to connect with other fields. Core agenda-confirming papers in this phase tended to be special issues that linked SAP to other fields, even as a raft of empirical papers drew on a SAP approach to explain wider phenomena.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Burgelman et al, SMJ special issue, 2018; • Feldman, D'Adderio, Dittrich, Jarzabkowski, RSO routines, 2019 • Lounsbury, Anderson & Spee, RSO institutional theory, 2021 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Going beyond the existing 'SAP-oriented' phenomena to examine a broader set of issues, such as how people and practices become strategic • Expanding into the study of large-scale puzzles and extra-organizational phenomena • Revisiting and generating more dynamic explanations for existing topics such as strategy and structure, strategy formation, strategy and design, planned and emergent strategy • Connecting SAP with other fields, such as institutional theory, routine dynamics and strategy process • Addressing earlier critiques by pursuing flatter ontologies that explain how large-scale phenomena are instantiated within everyday practices.

FIGURE 1. NUMBER OF SAP JOURNAL PUBLICATIONS OVER THE LAST TWO DECADES

