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Rethinking the concept of performance in strategy research: towards a performativity perspective

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Abstract
Organizational performance is an important concept in strategy research. In this paper, we interrogate the predominant focus on organizational performance as an aggregate organizational-level dependent variable and review three ways in which its role might be fruitfully reconsidered: (1) broadening consideration of performance to more disaggregated levels of analysis, (2) orienting research around the idea of performance as both input and outcome and finally (3) recasting performance in terms of performativity. We provide examples of research that has adopted each of these alternative approaches. We then examine the contributions and drawbacks of each perspective, before proposing an agenda for future research.

Keywords: performance, performativity, strategy as practice, strategy process

INTRODUCTION

Performance is a central concept in strategy research. According to Furrer, Thomas and Goussevskaia (2008), out of 2125 articles on strategic management published in the Academy of Management Journal, the Academy of Management Review, Administrative Science Quarterly and the Strategic Management Journal between 1980 and 2005, 36.6% are concerned with organizational performance and "performance" is the most frequent keyword. Performance is sometimes even considered to be part of the definition of strategy (Nag et al., 2007), differentiating it from other fields (Meyer 1991). In most studies, performance is treated as an aggregate firm-level outcome or a dependent variable (Richard, Devinney, Yip, & Johnson, 2009), which can be operationalized in various ways, ranging from financial and market-based indicators to dimensions of social performance (Orlitzky, Schmidt, & Rynes, 2003).

As studies of the impact of strategy on firm-level performance have flourished, so have critiques of this kind of research (Kieser & Nicolai, 2005; March & Sutton, 1997; Miller, Washburn, & Glick, 2013). Scholars have noted numerous inconsistencies and even contradictions between different definitions of firm level performance and their respective operationalizations (Richard et al., 2009). Furthermore, researchers have pointed to a host of fundamental problems in demonstrating the causal link between specific strategic factors and aggregate firm-level effects. This has led some scholars to question the validity of such studies (e.g., March & Sutton, 1997; Miller et al., 2013).

In reaction to these criticisms there have been efforts to better conceptualize and measure firm-level performance in order to more adequately appreciate its multiple dimensions (Combs, Crook, & Shook, 2005; Hult et al., 2008; Miller et al., 2013; Richard et al., 2009; Venkatraman & Ramanujam, 1986). These are potentially valuable but they do not address fundamental conceptual problems. In this paper, we review some of these problems and discuss what alternatives there are to treating firm performance as a dependent variable. These include (1) a movement to notions of more proximal performance, (2) the notion of performance as both input and outcome of the strategy process and (3) a performativity perspective. We explore in some detail the third perspective and suggest that it offers some of the most interesting and novel opportunities for future research. In particular, we argue that proponents of a strategy-as-practice perspective might be more faithful to the practice-based ontology that inspired them if they were to more seriously consider the performativity perspective.

FROM AGGREGATE FIRM PERFORMANCE TO PROXIMAL PERFORMANCE

One of the problems with the dominant approach to performance in the literature described above (where firm performance is viewed as a dependent variable) is that the independent explanatory variables that are considered can sometimes be quite conceptually distant from the aggregate indicators of firm performance one is attempting to explain. This means that their influence is masked by a myriad of other factors, with the result that the chances of being able to detect the distinctive role of the focal predictor are often severely

reduced (March & Sutton, 1997). This problem is sometimes made worse by coarse-grained independent variable measures that may not reflect the full richness of the phenomena studied (Harrigan, 1983).

A case in point concerns the research on the financial performance consequences of strategic planning or the use of other strategic management techniques and practices. This area of research is notorious for its production of inconsistent or weak findings (Boyd, 1991; Burke, Fraser & Greene, 2010; Miller & Cardinal, 1994). Although, meta-analyses have identified positive relationships, these are contingent on methodological factors (Miller & Cardinal, 1994). Moreover, the findings are not helpful to practitioners because the evidence remains shaky and the descriptions of the focal practice are so thin that there is very little to go on. Especially for practice constructs, the path between the practice itself and the aggregate bottom line is improbably long and winding, with the possibility of numerous things happening that would alter the outcome.

This suggests that there would be value in finding proximal indicators that are much closer to the phenomena studied. Strategy-as-practice scholars have thus called for more investigations into performance at less aggregated levels of analysis (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Johnson, Langley, Melin, & Whittington, 2007), such as outcomes at the group or individual levels. For example, scholars interested in understanding the impact of particular strategic practices have examined proximal performance indicators such as success or failure in implementing a strategy (Balogun & Johnson, 2004), success in pushing a strategic initiative (Lechner & Floyd, 2011) or the success of a particular practice in meeting its objectives as in Johnson, Prashantham, Floyd and Bourque's (2010) study of strategy workshops. Recently, scholars of strategic planning have also become more attuned to proximal outcomes such as integration, coordination and communication (Wolf & Floyd, 2013).

In summary, while many strategic management scholars will continue to feel the need to find links to the bottom line (while profiting from the convenience of readily available secondary performance data), it is, in many cases, a tenuous enterprise. There is a lot to be gained from being able to see the chain of consequences leading from individual and collective strategic actions to outcomes at a lower level of analysis. This is one way (although not the only way) in which notions of performance might be usefully reconsidered in strategy research.

FROM PERFORMANCE AS OUTCOME TO PERFORMANCE AS INPUT AND OUTCOME

As noted, strategic management literature often appears to be obsessively preoccupied with performance as an outcome or a dependent variable. However, another way to consider the role of performance is to turn the equation around to examine how performance assessments influence a variety of organizational and strategic phenomena, i.e. to view performance as an input. Practitioners spend a good deal of time creating, interpreting and poring over performance indicators (Denis, Langley, & Rouleau, 2006), attempting to make sense of what has happened and use this to work out what to do next. Performance feedback is clearly a potentially important resource

for learning and adaptation (Cyert & March, 1963; Greve, 2003). Indeed, based on this, it seems probable that performance plays a more powerful and tighter role as an independent variable in explaining behavior than as a dependent variable in describing that behavior's consequences (Cyert & March, 1963; Kimberly & Quinn, 1984). Scholars have documented, for example, that in periods of success, managers make refinements to their strategies, while in periods of poor performance, they are more likely to engage in change (Greve, 1998, 2003; Park, 2007; Starbuck & Milliken, 1988). A body of literature that looks at performance from this perspective has therefore developed, often tracing its inspiration to Cyert and March's (1963) behavioral theory of the firm. However, this perspective is less dominant in strategic management research than the reverse.

Scholars who generally consider performance as a dependent variable have, despite this, begun to realize that the performance equation can often be turned around. They have noted that this actually creates problems in testing relationships and accurately estimating their size and statistical significance, an issue of endogeneity (Bascle, 2008; Hamilton & Nickerson, 2003). Taking the planning example, a plausible argument can be made that financial performance provides resources that enable firms to invest in planning processes. Moreover, the firms that decide to plan are the ones which, for various reasons, are most likely to benefit from doing so, making it very hard to separate out true performance effects. While techniques are now available to mitigate these issues, little of the older planning-performance literature is in fact corrected for endogeneity, further undermining the knowledge claims generated by it.

Even more interesting than considering performance solely as an input or solely as an outcome is a perspective that takes a dynamic view incorporating feedback loops and including performance both as an input and as an outcome. March and Sutton (1997) identify at least three ways in which performance feedback loops may occur. First, performance in the future may be affected by performance in the past because people react positively to high-performing firms. Second (and in direct contradiction to the first loop), high performance can lead to a narrowing of attention which can damage future performance (Amason & Mooney, 2008; Miller, 1993). Third (and with greater problems for organizational research), the publication of information on which factors contribute to performance in a competitive environment should result in all firms imitating these factors, thus eliminating their value in the future.

This perspective suggests a need for longitudinal studies on how performance as input and performance as outcome relate to each other over time. Dynamic effects could be analysed quantitatively using agent-based simulation models or quantitative time series data (e.g., Gomez-Mejia, Haynes, Nunez-Nickel, Jacobson, & Moyano-Fuentes, 2007; Kim & Miner, 2007; Sastry, 1997). However, some of the most interesting studies in this vein are process-based qualitative analyses that track in depth the evolution of organizations over time, showing how their behavior shifts in reaction to perceived performance outcomes and how that behavior may go on to generate unexpected consequences that in turn input into future actions (Burgelman, 2002; Burgelman & Grove, 2007; Cardinal, Sitkin, & Long, 2004; MacKay & Chia, 2013). Process studies like these over long periods of time can provide a richer understanding of performance as both an input to and outcome of strategy.

Turning the performance equation around and seeing performance as something that people in organizations attempt to make sense of and react to in making future choices also draws attention to another issue: performance for whom? How do conceptions of performance vary among different groups within and around organizations and how and with what consequences are differing interpretations of performance negotiated, aggregated and traded off against one another when making important organizational decisions? Vaara (2002) shows how managers interpret the success and failure of acquisitions in ways that reflect positively on their own roles. In a conversation analysis study, Samra-Fredericks (2003) shows how one manager succeeds in constructing another as responsible for an organizational weakness. Attributions concerning which people, organizations and activities are more or less highly performing are very political and have implications for both individual careers and organizational destinies. More research is needed that delves into these dynamics, taking the consideration of performance as both input and output to a more micro-political level.

The approaches described in this section and the previous one offer ways to broaden and enrich consideration of performance in strategy research. Yet they remain for the most part embedded in a positivist ontology in which "performance" is viewed as a separable "construct" that can be related to other conceptually distinct constructs either as a predictor or outcome. In the next section we consider another related concept that offers a more radical rethinking of the nature of performance in relation to strategy. This concept seems a priori more compatible with the practice-based ontology favored by strategy-as-practice scholars, in which ''practices are understood to be the primary building blocks of social reality'' (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011): the notion of performativity.

FROM PERFORMANCE TO PERFORMATIVITY

So what is meant by the term "performativity" and how might it relate to the notions of "performance" discussed above? The literature on performativity is characterized by two broad perspectives: the Lyotardian view and the enactment views. Lyotard (1984) developed his notion of performativity in the context of his discussion on the generation and use of knowledge in postmodern society. For him, the term "performativity" refers to "the predominance of the performance criterion" in knowledge development (p. 53). That is, knowledge is being developed and evaluated not with regard to its truth but with regard to its ability to increase efficiency. While Lyotard's view has mainly been applied to the field of education (Ball, 2003; Dey & Steyaert, 2007), its extension to the field of strategy seems valuable since strategy work is often preoccupied with measuring, evaluating and ensuring the contribution of the different parts of an organization to its overall performance. Lyotard's critique suggests that an emphasis on performance can drive out other values (such as aesthetics and justice) and result in a potential narrowing of attention towards what can be measured rather than to the raison-d'être of the enterprise. As Townley, Cooper and Oakes (2003) express it, an emphasis on performance can cause a displacement from "reasoned justification" to a narrower "instrumental rationality". The trend towards performance measurement might also have

important consequences for strategists who are under extreme pressure to "perform" in order to avoid being replaced (Whittington, Basak-Yakis, & Cailluet, 2011). While accounting scholars have paid considerable attention to the upsides, downsides and dynamics of a preoccupation with technical performance and measurement (Power, 1997; Robson, 1992), strategy scholars, with a few exceptions (e.g., Denis et al., 2006; Ezzamel & Willmott, 2008), have not.

The more common enactment view of performativity groups together a series of influential authors such as Austin (1962), Callon (1998) and Butler (1988, 1997) and is mainly concerned with the repetitive enactment of discourse and theoretical models. Austin (1962) developed his notion of performativity in the context of speech act theory. He argues that there are utterances that are performative in the sense that they do something, as in the now classic example of "I declare you husband and wife" that accomplishes what it declares. Kornberger and Clegg (2011) draw on Austin's concept of performativity to show how strategizing in the city of Sydney became performative in the sense that it began to discursively create the concept of the city as something much larger than simply the municipal administration. This helped to construct a sense of community.

While Austin shows how specific speech acts might generate the effects they describe, Callon (1998) argues that a broader discursive form such as economic theory may work in a similar way by actually shaping markets rather than simply describing them. Callon (1998) and Mackenzie (2006) suggest that for models to become performative, they have to be embodied in tools, and skillful agents need to be able to transpose these models into practice. The Callonian perspective on performativity has inspired several others. For example, Carter, Clegg & Kornberger (2010) make the case that Porter's (1980) competitive strategy framework deeply influenced the way strategists think and consequently the way organizations function in line with the model. Cabantous and Gond (2011) show how rational choice theory is enacted in organizations in different ways such as through the use of the SWOT analysis to support the rational formulation of strategy. Cooren's (2004) notion of "textual agency" also builds on the Callonian/ Austinian notion of performativity. He argues that because texts as forms of discourse are materially available to be read across space and time, they help in producing and reproducing organization. In a concrete example, Sorsa, Vaara and Langley (2010) examine the "textual agency" of strategic plans in producing what they describe.

Butler's (1988) perspective on performativity was developed in the context of gender studies and is distinctive in illustrating the recursive nature of performative discourses. Specifically, Butler argues that gender is not an intrinsic characteristic of individuals but that it is culturally produced by people drawing on ambient understandings of what is implied by masculinity and femininity and repeatedly rehearsing these in their everyday practices. She also draws on Foucauldian ideas to suggest that discourse produces its effects by creating and assigning "subject positions" (in this case, genders) that channel behaviours. This line of argument has been transposed to the field of strategy, sometimes without explicitly referring to performativity. For example, studies have examined how the subject position of "strategist" is taken up and how strategy discourse may have power effects – generally privileging senior management (Knights & Morgan, 1991; Mantere & Vaara, 2008). Knights and

Morgan in this sense write that "the concept of strategy needs understanding in terms of its role in reproducing specific sets of hierarchically organized social relations" (1990: 475). Another application of Butler's work might be to argue that strategy, like gender, can only exist to the extent that it is repeatedly enacted. This recalls Mintzberg and Waters's (1985) notion of emergent strategy in which strategy is enacted in the performance of everyday activity (Rouleau, 2005), as people appropriate the subject positions organizationally constructed for them.

Finally, Hardy, Palmer and Phillips (2000) draw explicitly on the notion of performativity to discuss the conditions under which new discursive statements aimed at generating particular objects or activities may "take" and therefore come to be accepted and enacted. In particular, they suggest that discourses become performative when the concepts they invoke have meaning for the discourses' targets, when enunciators' subject positions are recognized and give them "voice" and when the symbols and objects created have "receptivity", becoming familiar to listeners and given credence. When this happens, there is potential for discursive initiatives to effect substantive change. However, Hardy et al. (2000) note that even when they are successful, discursive activities generate chains of consequences that are not always predictable. For example, they may create newly legitimized subject positions and practices over which initiators may not always maintain control. Hardy et al.'s (2000) ideas could be generalized to all strategy discourses, both those generated within organizations and concerned with implementing new directions, as well as those in the wider context. Table 1 summarizes the different alternatives for rethinking the concept of performance in strategy research.

Table 1. Approaches to Rethinking Performance in Strategy Research

Approaches	Description	Examples	Suggested Research Agenda and Research Questions
Proximal performance	Outcomes at the group or individual level	Success of strategy workshops as a particular strategic practice (Johnson, Prashantham, Floyd & Bourque, 2010). Success and failure in pushing particular strategic initiatives (Lechner & Floyd, 2011).	Identification of suitable indicators for the success/failure of activities and practices on the micro- or meso-level. Investigating the chain of consequences leading from individual and collective strategic actions to outcomes at a lower level of analysis.
Performance as both input and output	Feedback loops between past and future outcomes of strategic actions	Time series analysis linking input and output performance indicators in terms of hazard rate, index of capital risk, asset quality, management earnings and leverage in the banking industry (Kim & Miner, 2007). Process-based qualitative studies tracking the behavioral effects of perceived long-term performance outcomes and their unexpected long-term consequences in the microchip industry (Burgelman & Grove, 2007).	Tracking the evolution of organizations over time via a process-based qualitative analysis by examining performance as both input and output. Understanding how organizational behavior shifts in response to performance outcomes and how that behavior in turn generates (unexpected) consequences. Understanding how and with what consequences the nature and meaning of performance is negotiated among different stakeholders.
Performance as performativity			
1. Lyotardian perspective	The predominance of performance criterion in the practice of strategy	The dynamics of a preoccupation with technical performance and measurement in relation to a strategy (Denis, Langley & Rouleau, 2006). Pressure on strategists to perform in order to avoid being replaced (Whittington, Basak-Yakis & Cailluet, 2011).	Investigating how the obsession with performance and performance measurement shape strategic practices and orient organizational activities Examining how performance controls and incentives co-evolve with strategies over time. Tracking the interpenetration and interaction between strategic initiatives and between multiple sources of performance measurement & assessment.
2. Austinian perspective	Strategy discourse enacting what it refers to	The strategy discourse of the city of Sidney discursively created a particular conception of the city and a sense of community (Kornberger & Clegg, 2011). Strategic plans produce what they describe (Sorsa, Vaara & Langley, 2010).	Examining how, why and to what degree what is said and claimed about strategy and what is accomplished in daily activity mutually constitute one another over time.
3. Callonian perspective	Enactment of theoretical models of strategy producing corresponding strategies	Porter's model of competitive strategy creates corresponding strategic activities (Carter, Clegg & Kornberger, 2010). By using decision-making tools that are based on rational choice theory, actors produce behavior in line with rational choice theory (Cabantous & Gond, 2011).	Investigating the role of material tools, conventions and actor-networks in making strategy Tracking how different strategy tools embed references to different objects, subjects and activities, each channeling or orienting behaviors in different ways.
4. Butlerian perspective	Strategy as repetitive enactment of strategic discourse	Strategy is repetitively enacted in everyday activities (Rouleau, 2005). Different strategy discourses produce different subject positions and different opportunities for participating in the strategy (Mantere & Vaara, 2008).	Examining how through repetitive enactment strategy discourse creates subject positions, strategic practices and strategic objects.

SO WHAT? HOW PERFORMATIVITY INFORMS THE STRATEGY-PERFORMANCE NEXUS

A variety of scholars have questioned the strategic management field's fixation on performance as a dependent variable (March & Sutton, 1997), taken issue with existing approaches to firm performance (Miller et al., 2013; Richard et al., 2009) and suggested the need to look beyond understandings of performance that are narrowly economic (Vaara & Durand, 2012; Whittington, 2012). At the same time, there have been various attempts to consider more proximal indicators of performance and to explore performance as an independent rather than dependent variable. There are clearly further opportunities in this direction, with some of the most interesting prospects centering on a dynamic conception of performance as both input to and outcome of strategic activity.

Yet beyond these initiatives, strategy-as-practice scholars in particular have always been ambivalent about the notion of performance. On the one hand, the concept is so deeply embedded in the self-definition of the strategy field that it sometimes seems difficult to lay claim to a legitimate contribution without somehow invoking the concept – hence, the interest in more proximal notions of performance (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007; Johnson et al., 2010). Yet, one may question the degree to which this "solution" is fully compatible with the ontological and epistemological assumptions of a practice perspective. If practices are understood to be the primary building blocks of social reality (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011), not only strategy but also performance should be seen as something people do, rather than something that organizations have. The notion of performativity brings researchers closer to such a conception. Lyotardian and enactment perspectives on performativity are somewhat different but each offers ways to move towards a more genuinely practice-based perspective on the strategy-performance nexus. Both suggest novel agendas for research.

Lyotardian views of performativity describe what recent analyses of the strategic management field actually reveal: an obsession with performance and its measurement among both practitioners and academics (Furrer et al., 2008; Nag et al., 2007). This view suggests that there could be an opportunity for strategy scholars to investigate the ways in which the discourse of performance, as well as its concrete manifestations, constitute strategic practices and orient organizational activities, for better or worse (Townley et al., 2003). Here, practices and discourses of performance become the focus of study. This perspective bears some relationship to the idea of performance as input, although with a closer attention to the concrete practices by which notions of performance penetrate organizational activity. Longitudinal studies that examine how performance controls and incentives co-evolve with strategies over time would be particularly interesting. The interpenetration and interaction between strategic initiatives and between multiple sources of performance measurement and assessment are likely to become increasingly complicated as firms respond to pressures from multiple stakeholder groups.

The enactment perspective on performativity has a different starting point and invites scholars to focus attention on what it is that makes discourses (at societal, field or organizational levels) self-fulfilling. For strategy, this means examining how, why and to what degree what is said and claimed about strategy and what is accomplished in daily activity mutually constitute

one another over time. The various conceptualizations of performativity in the literature offer different angles for understanding this. While Callonian perspectives emphasize the role of material tools, conventions and actor-networks in making the world, the Butlerian perspective emphasizes how discourses construct subject positions whose repetitive enactment recursively reproduces them. There seem to be multiple research opportunities under this banner. For example, different strategy tools may embed references to different objects, subjects and activities, each channeling or orienting behaviors in different ways. A careful study of how they achieve this would enrich the currently rather thin understanding of the performative effects of strategic planning.

Overall, we suggest that the notion of performativity can help researchers think differently about performance, as an activity rather than as a "variable", developing a richer understanding of how strategy is produced and performed in situated contexts. Such a notion of "performance" may at first sight seem far removed from that of the traditional literature. However, the idea of achievement – of getting something done, of "performing" – bridges, we think, these disparate ideas. Performance viewed from a performativity perspective focuses however not on an ephemeral endpoint but on the rich web of doing and achieving that constitutes organizations as places for performing strategy.

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