

Chapter 12

Implications of the Strategic Agency of Sociomaterial Configurations for Participation in Strategy-Making

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to answer calls for more studies on the role of materialities in enabling or restricting the participation of larger numbers of people beyond managerial ranks in strategy-making. Drawing on sociomateriality as a practice philosophical perspective, the chapter studies strategy-making in a community-based organization and explores how human actions and materialities interweave to enhance the participation of rank-and-file members in strategy-making. The results show how different sociomaterial configurations gain strategic agency in different phases of a strategy-making process and the implications of these for participation in strategy-making. The authors argue that it is not sufficient to focus on technologies or other materialities as such, but it is also necessary to acknowledge the whole sociomateriality of practices. Furthermore, they also argue that participation in strategy could be seen as a dialectic process of exclusion and inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

The digital economy enables more inclusive forms of strategy-making through new social technology, which has been seen in the area of open innovations (Afuah & Tucci, 2012; Baldwin & von Hippel, 2011; Chesbrough, 2006). More inclusive forms of strategy-making may refer to the participation of personnel or customers in strategy-making; joint strategy-making between different organizations; or the collective strategy processes of community-based or network-based organizations (Laine & Vaara,

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2015; Whittington, 2015). However, only a few studies examine how people beyond managerial ranks participate in strategy-making (Balogun, Best, & Lê, 2015; Jarzabkowski, Burke, & Spee, 2015; Jarzabkowski, Spee, & Smets, 2013). This is because the growing interest in the role of materialities, including technology, in strategy practice research (Jarzabkowski & Pinch, 2013) has mainly been actualized by examining how top and middle managers use strategy tools, material artifacts, and technology in various ways to enhance their strategic agency (Dameron, Lê, & LeBaron, 2015; Jarzabkowski & Kaplan 2015). Hence, there is a paucity of knowledge regarding how these materialities are used to enable or restrict the participation of larger numbers of people beyond managerial ranks (Laine & Vaara, 2015; Whittington, 2015).

In our study, we draw from sociomateriality (Barad, 2003; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Suchman, 2007) to examine how human actions and materialities are interwoven such that they enhance the participation of rank-and-file members in strategy-making. Sociomateriality refers to a practice philosophical approach (Orlikowski, 2015) or “strong” view of materiality (Lê & Spee, 2015). It sets aside the distinctiveness of the social and material in favor of the ontological co-constitution of human activity and materialities. Thus, it allows for the full acknowledgement of the inherent immanence of the materiality of practices, which in our case are the practices of strategy-making. The social and material are in a constant process of (re) configuring, which means that they are always situationally interwoven to work together toward certain ends. These sociomaterial configurations exercise agency through their performativity, that is, through the things they do. In our study, we examine the performative effects of the sociomaterial configurations on the participation of rank-and-file members in strategy-making. In other words, we explore the strategic agency of sociomaterial configurations and the implications of this for participation in strategy-making. By strategy-making, we refer to the actions that are consequential for the strategic outcomes, directions, survival, and competitive advantage of the organization (Johnson, Melin, & Whittington, 2003). Strategic agency, in turn, refers to the capability to act and have an impact on organizational strategy-making, such as making decisions concerning the future direction and resource allocation of the organization or interpreting the strategy for employees or customers (Giddens, 2001; Mantere, 2008; Thomas, 2009).

We empirically study the strategic agency of sociomaterial configurations and their implications for participation through an ethnographic study of an “entrepreneurship society” in Finland. Entrepreneurship societies aim to promote entrepreneurship by arranging various activities around entrepreneurship (Pittaway, Rodriguez-Falcon, Ayiegbayo, & King, 2011), and they can be seen as community-based organizations (Keevers, Treleaven, Sykes, & Darcy, 2012). They make an interesting case for studying enlarged participation in strategy-making, since these societies are informal, non-accredited, volunteer-based, and mostly student-led organizations, where organizational actors have few official hierarchical relationships among each other.

Our study makes two contributions to strategy-as-practice research. First, we propose a novel practice theoretical approach to examine strategy-making: sociomateriality as a practice philosophical perspective. Drawing from this approach, we also demonstrate how material actors have strategic agency, but only when understood as ontologically entangled with and inseparable from human actions. Second, we contribute to discussions on participation in strategy-making. We show that it is not sufficient to focus on information technologies or other materialities as such, as it is necessary to acknowledge the inherent sociomateriality of strategy-making activities and practices.

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