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# **The Performativity of Strategy: Taking Stock and Moving Ahead**

**Laure Cabantous**

Cass Business School  
City, University of London  
[Laure.cabantous.1@city.ac.uk](mailto:Laure.cabantous.1@city.ac.uk)

**Jean-Pascal Gond**

Cass Business School  
City, University of London  
[Jean-pascal.gond.1@city.ac.uk](mailto:Jean-pascal.gond.1@city.ac.uk)

**Alex Wright**

Sheffield University Management School  
[alex.wright@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:alex.wright@sheffield.ac.uk)

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## **The Performativity of Strategy: Taking Stock and Moving Ahead**

### **Abstract**

This special issue groups a set of contributions that together question and extend the boundaries of strategy research by examining strategy work as a performative pursuit. In this introduction, we position the special issue papers within the broader context of performativity studies in organization and management theory. To do so, we ground the analysis of the performativity of strategy in the recent developments of strategy-as-practice research, clarify the ambitions of a performative turn in the study of strategy, introduce the plurality of performativity meanings and uses in prior research and specify the conceptualizations of performativity mobilized in the seven contributions that form this special issue. Taking stock of their rich insights, and reflecting on our editing of this special issue, we then identify key challenges underlying the constitution of the body of studies on the performativity of strategy, and propose three avenues of research that together sketch a research agenda for advancing the study of strategy as a performative endeavour.

**Key words:** Performativity; Strategy; Strategy as Practice; Research Agenda.

## **The Performativity of Strategy: Taking Stock and Moving Ahead**

### **From Strategy Practice to the Performativity of Strategy**

Since strategy research undertook something of a practice turn (Whittington, 2006) dominant economics-framings of strategy and strategy work have been complemented, and in certain cases challenged, by ideas and conceptualizations drawn from theorists who see with more of a “sociological eye” (Whittington, 2007). Where these thought-provoking and insightful works have succeeded is in highlighting the importance of understanding how it is that strategy is accomplished (Burgelman et al., 2017; Vaara and Whittington, 2012). Scholars who have adopted this stance have centered their efforts on learning more about “the doing of strategy; who does it, what they do [and] how they do it” (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009: 69). And their efforts have been largely successful in helping us appreciate the importance of, for example, the role of middle managers in strategy work (e.g. Rouleau and Balogun, 2011), how different material affordances are drawn from by strategists (e.g. Jarzabkowski and Kaplan, 2015), how spaces where strategizing is accomplished matter in how it is produced and experienced (e.g. Jarzabkowski et al., 2015), and how strategizing practices shape firm- and industry-level competitive dynamics (Burgelman et al., 2017). All of which, it is reasonable to say, would have been unlikely to have been considered worthy of study had the practice turn not been taken.

While we are more familiar with who strategists are, what they do and how they do it, there are still a number of strategy-related phenomena that we have not yet fully explored. For instance, we are less knowledgeable about why strategy is accomplished in the ways that it is; where the theories, ideas, models, and assumptions informing strategy work come from; or how and why strategy practice,

populated by entwined human and non-human actors, manifests in the forms we observe.

These questions call for scholars to examine the practice of strategy as a performative endeavor and for mobilizing the concept of performativity to investigate further strategy, strategy work, strategy making and strategy knowledge as a set of puzzling social phenomena. While performativity is not as a single construct universally agreed upon by those who contribute to its development, its multiple conceptualizations share two common underlying characteristics (Gond and Cabantous, 2016; Muniesa, 2014) that are useful in understanding what performativity studies of strategy can bring to the table of strategy scholarship. First, all performativity conceptualizations invite strategy scholars to embrace the post-structuralist paradigm (Hassard and Cox, 2013; Law, 2008). A performative analysis:

“argues that *realities* (including objects and subjects) and representations of these realities are being enacted or performed simultaneously. It is (...) post-structuralist in inclination, albeit in a particular and materially oriented mode (...). Shift the verb from making to doing – to doing *realities* – and we catch what is at stake. To put it in formal language, what is at stake is not simply epistemological. We are also in the realm of ontology.” (Law, 2008: 624; original emphasis)

Such an analysis of strategy therefore invites scholars to question the ontology of strategy. Strategy research thus far has tended to focus on epistemological questions (Wright, 2017) and as a consequence the ontological status afforded to strategy has gone unaddressed. This means that while sociological eyes have been cast onto strategy work, they remain only half-opened and in need of further stimulus. What is needed is a reconsideration of the material agency of strategy practice, by showing, for instance, how the worlds that strategists navigate “are always being constituted, de-constituted and reconstituted through the sayings and doings of the

multiple actors who become [materially] entangled with one another over multiple issues, thereby generating overflows.” (Raghu et al., 2018: 5)

Second, all conceptualizations of performativity invite strategy scholars to adopt a pragmatic take (Austin, 1962) on strategy discourses by considering that they do not mirror (or represent) a reality that pre-exists, but co-construct (or bring about) that reality through their performance. A performative analysis of strategy therefore foregrounds the close examination of the performative power of strategy discourse and knowledge. But, beyond the vital study of the intended and unintended effects that strategy discourses and theories can have on strategy and organizational practice, it is most importantly an invitation to study how strategy knowledge and practice are co-constituted during strategy work.

For performativity scholars, the concept of strategy is intriguing for the high status it enjoys in management and organization theory. It is accepted that strategy is important for firms and further that it matters to society more broadly (Gond et al., 2017; Knights and Morgan, 1991; Whittington et al., 2003), not least for the effects it has on organizations and markets, so studying the processes and practices needed for it to be formed, constituted, de-constituted and re-constituted, promise greater insight into the work of strategy and its place and space in society. Those few strategy studies that have examined the performativity of strategy have succeeded in providing novel insights into how: the doing of strategy constitutes its subjects and shapes its objects (Carter et al., 2010; Kornberger and Clegg, 2011); how strategy theory, valuation metrics, and a rhetoric of justification cohere in the performing of strategy practice (Ottosson and Galis, 2011); and, how strategic discourses are absorbed and resisted in the way strategist subjectivities are formed (Laine et al., 2016).

With this special issue, our aim is to further leverage the generative—if not ‘magic’ (Bourdieu, 1991; Butler, 1999)—social properties of performativity in order to construct novel insights on strategy that other practice-related constructs fail to fully grasp. We want to develop a broader research agenda focused around the following questions: *What new conceptions of strategy (and organizations more broadly) does the performativity programme offer? How does a performative understanding of strategy push or question current boundaries of strategy thinking and knowledge? How can researchers analyze and develop the performative power or potential of strategy work?*

We regard this special issue as a first step in this direction. It is designed to bring together scholars interested in the performativity of strategy, and more broadly those who want to question what we know about strategy work and the assumptions that underpin them by adopting a “performative mindset” (Garud et al., 2018). In the following sections, we present the plurality of performativity meanings and uses in prior research and specify the conceptualizations of performativity mobilized in the seven contributions that form this special issue. We then identify some of the challenges associated with performative studies of strategy, and offer a research agenda for moving ahead.

### **Acknowledging the Variety of Performativity Conceptualizations**

The concept of performativity, which originates in Austin’s thinking about performative utterances – i.e., utterances that are not describing a state of affair, but instead are bringing it about, such as ‘I pronounce you husband and wife’ – has generated much fruitful work in philosophy (Derrida, 1979; Lyotard, 1984 [1979]),

economic sociology (Callon, 1998; MacKenzie et al., 2007), gender studies (Barad, 2003; Butler, 1997), and organization theory (Cooren et al., 2011; Gond et al., 2016).

In their review of the uses and abuses of performativity in organization and management research, Gond et al. (2016) identify five foundational conceptualizations of performativity, developed in philosophy, linguistics and sociology used in management research. *Performativity as doing things with words* – the first perspective that these authors identify – builds on Austin and Searle’s work to explain how discourses, such as strategy discourses, can, in some circumstances, bring about the reality they describe. Kornberger and Clegg’s (2011) analysis of the Sustainable Sydney 2030 strategy project exemplifies this perspective, by showing the performative effects of strategizing.

Second, Lyotard’s perspective, which approaches *performativity as a search for efficiency*, has been mobilized to critically denounce management scholars’ “intent to develop and celebrate knowledge that contributes to the production of maximum input for minimum input” (Fournier and Grey, 2000: 17). Third, organization scholars have used Derrida and Butler’s concept of performativity that focuses on *actors’ subjectivities and constitution of the self* to explain how gender and organizational identities are constituted through a myriad of repeated ‘acts’ that reiterate norms. Tyler and Cohen (2010) for instance, rely on Butler to develop a performative analysis of gender in the workplace in relation with organizational space.

Finally, organization scholars have imported two other conceptualizations of performativity: *performativity as bringing theory into being* that relies on Callon’s (1998) performativity of economics thesis according to which economics does not describe the economy but performs it; and Barad’s conception of *performativity as sociomaterial mattering*. While Callon’s concept of performativity has been used to

study the constitutive role of management theories, such as rational choice theory (Cabantous et al., 2010; Cabantous and Gond, 2011), modularity theory (d'Adderio and Pollock, 2014), or the theories of the corporate social responsibility–corporate financial performance relationship (Marti and Gond, 2018) on organizational practices; Barad’s conception of performativity has been mobilized to rethink the role of “matter” (or materiality) in organizations, to show, for instance, the agency of material entities in organizational life (Nyberg, 2009; Orlikowski and Scott, 2014) or the “material presence” of leaders (Ford et al., 2017).

Gond et al. (2016) also identified three “creative re-appropriations of performativity” (p. 457) developed specifically to account for organizational phenomena. *Performativity as constitutive organizational communication* focuses our attention on the processes of conversation and textualization by which organizations are constituted and accomplished (Cooren et al., 2011; Taylor and Van Every, 2000). Whereas, *performativity as an expression of routines* conceptualizes organizational routines as made up of ostensive aspects that express the routine’s principle and a performative aspect that refers to the expression of the routine (Feldman, 2000; D’Adderio, 2008; Feldman et al. 2016). Finally, critical management scholars have developed an original conception of *performativity as making critical theory influential* in order to discuss the possibility of management scholars’ subversive interventions and engagement (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Cabantous et al., 2016; Fleming and Banerjee, 2016; Schaefer and Wickert, 2016).

Gond et al.’s (2016) repertoire describing the variety of performativity conceptualizations used in organization studies offers a useful heuristic to clarify the perspectives that have inspired the authors who have contributed to this special issue.

As Table 1 shows, all together the seven papers that compose this special issue on the performativity of strategy invoke six conceptualizations of performativity.

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Three papers in this Special Issue study the performativity of strategy by building on just one perspective: Vásquez et al. (2018) and Pälli (2018) are both rooted in the communication as constitutive of organization (CCO) approach, while van den Ende and van Marrewijk (2018) builds on Barad's approach. But the other papers that compose this Special Issue mobilize two or more perspectives to develop further our understanding of the performativity of strategy. Vargha's (2018) account of strategy making at RU Bank combines insights from Callon and Butler's conceptualizations; while Ligonie's (2018) analysis of the performativity of the Shared Value concept revisits the Austinian's roots of Callon's concept of performativity. Our two invited pieces span a even higher number of approaches: In their essay on the implications of the "performative mindset" for strategy, entrepreneurship and innovation, Garud et al. (2017) build on thinkers such as Austin, Barad and Callon; and Muniesa's (2018) provocation adopts "a broad, loose understanding of performativity" (p.1) to examine how performativity, defined as "philosophical mood" or a "cultural condition", can shed a new light on strategic management.

### **Unpacking Strategy Performativity: An Overview of Individual Contributions**

The first two contributions of this Special Issue appraise the potential of the concept of performativity as developed in the CCO approach, for rethinking strategy. Vásquez et al. (2018) offer a fascinating account of strategy formulation by examining how strategy formulation emerges in and through communication. They focus on how

issues and topics materialize as a formulated strategy and show how matters that are of concern to organizational actors gain the necessary authority through their authoring to result in them appearing in a strategy text. As a strategy is an authoritative text, what is included in it also gains authority. Therefore, matters of concern become matters of authority when they become instantiated into a strategy document.

Building on their prolonged experience in a non-profit community-based housing association in Montréal where three of the authors were on the strategic team, they identify three communicational practices central to how strategy is formulated. First, matters of concern need to be voiced, and for a matter to take hold and travel beyond the actor who voices it, others need to add to it and co-author it. Second, once established as a matter of concern it becomes a text (whether written or not) that becomes stable enough to be transported so that it can influence and shape further conversations. And last, as the matter of concern is stabilized as a text it gains in legitimacy such that it becomes authorized; the matter of concern has become an acknowledged matter of authority. With its authority assured, the matter legitimates the strategy, which recursively legitimates it and those that authored it, as they are now authors of strategy, or strategists who strategize.

Vásquez et al. (2018)'s investigation into how communicative acts constitute strategy offers up an insightful and intriguing consideration of how strategies come to take on the form that they do. Their CCO perspective, which holds that strategy is a communicatively produced and sustained body of knowledge, enhances our understanding of how strategy work is accomplished by highlighting the performative practices necessary for ideas to cohere as strategy. Their paper reminds us that what

appears as strategies begin as concerns that are transformed through communication into plans.

While Vásquez et al. (2018) are interested in how strategy is formulated in and through communicative acts, Pälli (2018) advances a compelling rendering of how strategies, once formulated, shape and influence senior manager/manager conversations. His interest lies in how embodied language and gesture can materialize the performative position of strategy, and he also draws from a CCO approach to explain and describe how in dyadic one-to-one encounters strategy is invoked and appropriated. In so doing, he offers insights into how strategy is constructed as a material ‘thing’ that matters, and how through its mattering it makes a difference to inter-managerial relating. His data are 14 ‘leadership conversations’ from two very different sources in Finland; an insurance company and a church organization. Striking is that although the two organizations are unlike, the conversations and gestures he accesses are similar and this strengthens his claim to have captured socially patterned linguistic representation and language use that are both reflective of and constitutive of the performative quality of strategy.

Through his close analysis of the interactions, Pälli is able to observe how different meanings are ascribed to strategy both verbally and nonverbally and then drawn upon during conversations concerning the direction of both organizations. Specifically, he records how strategy is made present as a box, a container, or package that has been put together from other elements, and out of which things can be chosen to emphasize specific points. Strategy’s material form is further illustrated in the way the managers depicted and oriented to it as something that can be touched and held. The physicality of strategy in textual form is clearly defined when managers handled or pointed to documents. The agency of strategy texts is demonstrated in how

managers locate their talk and gesture with the strategy, legitimizing both it and themselves. Pälli's (2018) article, then, offers much-needed insight into how formulated strategies materialize and matter in senior managers/managers' interactions.

Our next paper is firmly located in the strategy-as-practice research domain. Van den Ende and van Marrewijk (2018) provide an insightful multi-site ethnographic study of rituals that mark kick-offs, launches, milestones and deliveries during the execution of largescale infrastructure projects in the Netherlands. Their motivation for writing this article rests in a belief in the constitutive power of rituals and in the importance of the strategic effects they produce. They investigate how rituals are orchestrated and the implications this has for strategy work. Their article extends that of earlier research that has examined how rituals can enhance the strategic potential of workshops, meetings, 'away days' and business dinners, through conceptualizing them as phenomena whose effects are strategic rather than merely symbolic or representational. They show that the rituals they studied are simultaneously pragmatic, strategic and constitutive.

Their performative perspective is influenced by Barad and leads them to craft strategic rituals as sociomaterial matterings that construct meanings and realities. This privileges a view of sociomaterial entities as entangled agencies in a world's becoming. Such a performative rendering highlights that rituals do not solely manifest something, but rather constitute ongoing organizing through their relational unfolding. This means that their accomplishment is always related to other socialmaterial activity to which they are coupled. Their performative approach to rituals supplies strategy scholars with a means of studying the material, corporeal and aesthetic nature of strategizing, something that the authors claim is regularly neglected in prior studies.

Centering their study on the strategic effects of rituals allows van den Ende and van Marrewijk (2018) to identify ways in which they are strategically performed to contribute to the practice of strategy: (1) as a means for engaging an audience, (2) as a way of legitimizing planned strategic activity, and (3) through signifying transitions as ‘points of no return’ during strategy work.

In the fourth paper of this special issue, Ligonie (2018) approaches the performativity of strategy from a Callonian perspective to study a strategic change at GamblingCo – a European firm operating in the gambling industry – that actualizes (or brings into being) the strategic management concept of ‘Creating Shared Value’ (CSV) developed by Michael Porter and Mark Kramer. This case is fascinating because the concept of CSV focuses on the creation of social value, and therefore is at odds with the firm’s core business. Building on a rich data set composed of 36 interviews with organizational actors and a 14-month long ethnography at GamblingCo, Ligonie (2018) theorizes a process of “forced performativity”, where a strategy concept is performed despite the infelicitous context. She highlights three important moments of this “forced performativity” process, which map with MacKenzie’s (2006) three ‘subsets’ of performativity (i.e., generic, effective, and Barnesian performativity).

First, “authori-sation” whereby an author’s name – in this case Harvard Professor Michael Porter – grants legitimacy to the strategy concept making it possible to influence strategy practices (i.e., generic performativity). Second, “causality creation and distortion”, whereby the establishment of causal links between the practical use of the CSV concept and business performance changes the firm’s strategy practices, and increases the concept’s effective performativity. Third, “incitement of friction” whereby tensions between actors in relation to the firm’s

strategy are resolved through sociotechnical assemblages that connect the CSV strategy concept to measurements of performance, and ultimately allow CSV to “make a difference” (Barnesian performativity).

Overall, Ligonie’s (2018) paper adds to the current discussion, among performativity scholars (e.g., Cochoy, 2015; Makī 2013), on the complementarity between Austin’s linguistic perspective on performativity and sociological research that highlights the importance of sociomaterial assemblage in the processes enabling theory “performance” (Callon, 2007). Finally, Ligonie’s (2018) paper contributes to strategy research by showing the performative power of corporate social responsibility concepts during processes of strategic change.

In the last empirical paper of this special issue, Vargha (2018) sheds a different light on strategy making by mobilizing both Callon and Butler’s conceptions of performativity. Her paper is based on an ethnographic study at a large Hungarian retail bank (RU Bank) that decided to use customer relationship marketing (CRM) technology to develop personalized services to its customers, and meet its strategic growth objectives. In line with Callon’s perspective, she shows how the inscription into sociomaterial devices – here the CRM software – of the assumptions supporting the bank’s “high-level” strategy contributed to make the bank’s strategy performative. But, she also shows that in order to be performative, the bank’s high-level strategy had to be embodied in the situations where employees sell to customers: RU Bank clerks had to bring into being the figure of the customer that is taken for granted in the CRM technology thanks to new types of practices such as the handling of the hybrid customer. The concept of “strategy scripts” – understood as patterns of interaction between people and technologies – allows her to capture the interaction between the Callonian and Butlerian dimensions of performativity, and to theorize the process

whereby a firm's "high level" strategy becomes performative.

In short, Vargha (2018) renews our understanding of the performativity of strategy theories and discourses, by showing that in order to be performative, a "high level" strategy needs not only to be inscribed into technologies and tools, but also to be embodied: organizational actors – even those who are located in remote sites of the organization – have to create the world that the strategy pre-supposes through new types of embodied performance.

The next two papers differ from the empirical articles in that they are invited thought-pieces, provocations, that lead us to question what we think we know about performativity and to challenge our assumptions. Muniesa, and Garud, Gehman and Tharchen are experts in their field, but are not bound by conventional thinking when it comes to strategy scholarship. Their unconstrained ruminations on the performativity of strategy delight and confuse, captivate and bemuse, and charm and frustrate. That is their intention.

As all good provocations should, Muniesa's (2018) short essay leaves us with more questions than answers, and importantly, the questions it evokes are unlikely to be ones we have considered before. For Muniesa it is the very performative condition he is concerned with and how such a condition manifests. His central question is what (anthropological) puzzle does the performativity of strategy constitute? To discuss this he takes us on a whirlwind of an intellectual tour of ideas, imaginings, thoughts and half-thoughts that takes in Jean-François Lyotard, Peter Sloterdijk and performance artist and musician Laurie Anderson, among others, as he encourages us to reflect upon a sense of the performative as a philosophical mood.

For Muniesa, the performative is above all a fuzzy cultural condition, and within this state decision – the acts of decisioning and the decision maker – is a

crucial and fundamental element. He sees the strategic decision as the epitome of the performative condition in managerial life; as being where the performative life is given its ultimate expression. He ruminates on Harvard Business School's (HBS) amphitheatres as performative venues where countless MBA students have lived out the fantasy of live decision making as they perform their roles, embodying as he sees it HBS's performative slogan of "knowing, doing, being." He summarises the performative syndrome as involving three levels of meaning: performance as execution, performance as excess and performance as estrangement, which invites us to question the very nature of performativity. Muniesa's is an absorbing piece that informs, confuses, entertains and inspires us. Perhaps we should heed his advice and read it again after having listened to "Oh Superman" by Laurie Anderson?

Garud et al.'s essay on performativity as ongoing journeys is a provocative invitation to broaden our perspective on performativity. The authors invite us to approach performativity not as a theory but rather, as a mindset. But their conceptualization of performativity is quite different from that developed by Muniesa, since for them, performativity is "an onto-epistemological position (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011) that considers the constitution, de-constitution, and re-constitution of the worlds we live in through material-discursive practices (Barad, 2003)." (Garud et al., 2018, p. 3). In so doing, like the article by van den Ende and van Marrewijk (2017), they clearly anchor performativity within Barad's agential realist theory.

Garud et al.'s (2018) essay is also especially useful because it specifies three very important characteristics of the performative condition that should help strategy scholars grasp the specificity of the performative mindset. First, performativity implies the presence of sociotechnical agencements. Second, performativity can never lead to a settled state of affairs. Third and finally, performativity is best approached

through the notion of overflow and experimental probes, rather than through the ideas of misfires/failures and felicitous conditions that Callon and MacKenzie, building on Austin, might advocate. If performativity is approached as an “ongoing journey” (instead of as a discursive success), what matters, then is not so much to understand the conditions under which performative efforts succeed or fail, but instead to understand how states of affairs are temporally constituted – and can be de-constituted or re-constituted – through performative probes; and how performative efforts continuously generate overflows.

To conclude, Garud et al.’s (2018) essay helps us navigate complex onto-epistemological issues and is a much needed conceptualization of performativity that goes beyond a limited understanding focused on felicitous conditions. It will be much appreciated by strategy, innovation and entrepreneurship scholars who want to understand the implications of the performative mindset for their research, and the way they approach strategy-related phenomena.

### **What next? A research agenda on/for the performativity of strategy**

While we believe the adoption of a performative approach in strategy shows considerable promise, as the papers published in this Special Issue show, such an endeavor is also associated with important challenges. In what follows, we outline some of these and offer three avenues of research, which can help strategy scholars engage in a process of creative reappropriation of the performativity concept and develop a promising performative agenda on strategy.

### ***Challenges: Ontological mismatching and methodological imagination***

Developing a performative understanding of a phenomenon (e.g., strategy) does not

simply consist in using a new “lens” to shed a different light on this phenomenon. In research fields that mobilize theories rooted in the structural and anti-structural paradigms, the adoption of a performative approach resembles more a paradigm shift than a mere change of “lens”, since it requires scholars to inscribe their work in the post-structural paradigm, and therefore to reconsider the ontological and epistemological assumptions that prevail on the phenomenon. Thus, in many ways, the adoption of a performative approach on strategy comes with challenges that are similar to those related to the production of post-structuralist (e.g., ANT) accounts in organization studies (Hassard and Cox, 2013; McLean and Hassard, 2004). Such considerations have ontological as well epistemological implications for how strategy is conceptualized and studied.

One of the most difficult tasks that performativity scholars face is related to the conduct and writing up of performative studies that fully convey the post-structural assumptions of the performative approach. As Simpson, Hardy and Sergi (2017) explain “performative inquiries require new ways of writing that admit the possibility of explicating what is almost inexplicable. Such writing would be conscious not only of its part in the on-going flux and flow of becoming, but also of the need to resist containment with the strait-jacket discipline of academic texts (Philipps et al. 2014)”. Yet, performative accounts require the adoption of a specific way of writing that originates (and ends) with relations and relationality, and expresses the idea that the phenomenon under study is produced by the entanglement of various “elements” that do not pre-exist their relations. Adopting a post-structural onto-epistemology is especially challenging for performativity scholars who embrace Barad’s agential realist approach and consider that practices are always material and discursive. As for Barad, “to be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with one another, as in the

joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence’ (Barad, 2007: ix) (Orlikowski and Scott 2015: 699). Writing such accounts might require the use of a specific vocabulary – including the creation of neologisms – in order to convey a relational ontology. For instance, Barad proposes the term “intra-action” to shift our focus from relations between entities (i.e., inter-action) and “avoid presumptions of there being separate and distinct entities.” (Harding et al., 2017: 1213). This new vocabulary, however, can produce an academic jargon difficult to understand (Kautz and Jensen, 2013).

Another challenge associated with the production of performative accounts is related to the treatment of agency. Like Actor-network theorists, performativity scholars have to write accounts that reflect the distributed and heterogeneous character of agency. Instead of ascribing actions to individual (or groups of) human beings, they must find creative ways of writing that associate actions to collectives made of human and non-human actants (McLean and Hassard, 2004). Conveying the idea that agency is dispersed could be done, as suggested by Garud et al. (2018), by the adoption of a specific language, such as the “we” rather than the “I” in order to “evoke matters of concerns raised by a plurality of people”; we could also expand the “the dispersion of agency across space by invoking ‘what’ speak, and across time by using diachroning terms (that are both nouns and verbs) such as building and work” (Garud et al., 2018: 5).

Finally, as performativity scholars are invited to adopt a “flat” ontology, they have to move away from traditional questions related to the “links” between levels (e.g., micro, meso, macro). Such a move also has some methodological and writing implications, since they require the production of accounts that show how webs of interconnection (Seidl and Whittington, 2014: 1415) or associations of actants

produce both connections and “macro” phenomena.

To sum up, the conduct and writing up of performative studies come with important methodological challenges, some of which are common to process and ANT studies. It requires scholars to adopt a “performative mindset” (Garud et al., 2018), be innovative in their writing, and methodologically creative, since they should follow human and non-human actants, and importantly to be aware of the “effects” of their research on the phenomena that they study (Strum and Latour, 1987).

### ***Area of research 1: Strategy practice, performativity and performance***

A first area of research for strategy scholars willing to embrace a performative mindset concerns the study of a central concern for strategy practitioners: performance. Guérard, Seidl and Langley’s (2013) paper is a first promising step in that direction. These authors argue that the concept of performativity can help strategy-as-practice scholars “recast” the notion of performance. They show how four conceptualizations of performativity – those of Lyotard, Austin, Butler, Callon – can help rethink the notion of performance by outlining specific research questions that have been neglected so far. They explain, for instance, that a Lyotardian approach to performativity should lead strategy scholars to study the implications of strategy practitioners’ obsession with performance criteria and outcomes. Accordingly, they invite strategy scholars to “examine how performance control and incentives co-evolve with strategies over time” (p. 573). Similarly, their analysis of the implications of Butler’s concept of performativity for strategy scholars allows them to identify a whole range of questions that deserve further enquiry: strategy scholars have seldom studied how the repetitive enactment of strategic discourse produce specific subject positions, but also create specific strategic objects and practices. Much remains to be

done, both empirically and conceptually, in order to fully embrace the move that these authors advocate from performance to performativity in the strategy field.

Generally, the adoption of a performative understanding of organizational performance is a promising area of research, which can enable strategy scholars to engage in a process of creative re-appropriation, since most performativity approaches do not consider the notion of performance. For instance, in their review of the performativity literature in organization studies, Gond et al. (2016) explicitly exclude the notion of “performance” in the Goffmanian sense. Yet, some authors in linguistics (e.g., Loxley, 2006) and sociology (e.g., Callon, 2007; Muniesa, 2014) connect the concept of performativity to performance studies and promote a broad understanding of performance. In his essay published in this Special Issue, Muniesa (2018) for instance, defines the performative condition as a tension between the three directions that “performance requires: stabilization (performing measuredly and steadily), elevation (performing excessively and excellently) and demotion (performing critically and disturbingly)” (p. 2). Strategy scholars could build on these ideas to empirically study how the practice of strategy – by organizational actors, consultants, etc. – relates to such understanding of performativity and an enhanced and more nuanced and sophisticated take on performance.

### ***Area of research 2: Acknowledging the performativity of strategy knowledge***

A second area of research concerns the reconsideration of strategy as a broad social phenomenon encompassing both strategy knowledge and practice, and ultimately to bridge strategy and its worlds. As we have argued above, one of the distinctive features of the performative perspective, which distinguishes it from the practice and material perspectives in strategy, is to generalize a non-representational view of

discourse and language to scientific statements (Callon, 1998; Hacking, 1983). This perspective therefore invites us to rethink the place of theories, defined as “broadly analytical systems that link different concepts in order to explain or predict empirical phenomena” (Marti and Gond, 2018: 3), in social life.

As applied to strategy theories, the performative perspective could help strategy-as-practice scholars develop further their analysis of the practice of strategy as a type of social practice, which overflows the limits of organizations. It could support empirical investigations of the “making” of strategy that would encompass a whole range of human actors – including organizational actors, strategy consultants, academics and strategy scholars – and non-human actants, such as strategy tools and frameworks. Such studies could help understand how strategy knowledge is generated through exchanges between different social spheres, and how it circulates across organizations, sometimes from the competitive space (market firms) to public and not-for-profit organizations. For instance, it could be useful to study how a strategy framework such as Porter’s diamond has traveled from the narrowly defined world of strategy – that of firms operating in competitive markets – to nations.

More broadly, a performative perspective on strategy could help us to understand how strategy frameworks, models and tools, such as Porter’s five forces framework, Kim and Mauborgne’s Blue Ocean Strategy, or Prahalad’s Bottom of the Pyramid, are co-created by strategy scholars, consultants, and practitioners, in an effort to define new strategic practices aimed at improving firms’ performance. By inviting strategy scholars to follow all the (human and non-human) actors who participate in the making of strategy, these studies can help to re-define the boundaries of the strategy space in society, as well as better comprehend its unique status, and its ability to travel across different social spheres. To bring new insights to

bear on strategy, such enquiries will most likely need to go beyond the simple import of one performativity conceptualization and instead, cross-fertilize multiple conceptualizations. In so doing, they might help develop a creative re-appropriation of the performativity concept in strategy and organization studies.

### ***Area of research 3: Towards reflexive strategy theorizing: Making strategy research socially impactful***

As we have alluded to in the sections above, the performative perspective invites strategy scholars to challenge prior dichotomies that prevail in the strategy field such as the ‘theory vs. practice’ one and to reconsider reflexively what researching and teaching strategy *does* to the phenomenon under study. As Garud et al. (2018) explain in this special issue, a “performative mindset” has important implications for management scholars, as it invites us to see “strategists, entrepreneurs, and intrapreneurs as embedded-embodied actors, who engage in material-discursive practices in their attempts at constituting phenomena” (p. 1).

But such an insight applies also to strategy scholars who should reconsider reflexively their practices as material-discursive and co-constituting our common world. Academics, together with their institutions such as business schools, form a central stakeholder of the strategy field, broadly defined. A performative analysis suggests that strategy scholars, through their teaching, advising or consulting practices co-constitute to a large extent their phenomena of interest, contributing to bring into being “strategies” and their associated “worlds”—be it a “competitive” or a “blue ocean” one. Whittington et al. (2003) reminds us how strategy scholars have contributed to constitute phenomena like the Enron scandal, whereas strategy as a concept and a discourse has already colonized the space of third-sector organizations

or policy-making, potentially limiting their capacity to deliver on their social and environmental agendas. Ghoshal (2005) warned us of the social implications of teaching “bad” strategy theories to future managers, using the case of transaction cost theory, a central item in most strategy textbooks, as an illustration. Adopting a “performative scholarship mindset” should lead us to consider reflexively our academic practices to understand the multiple processes by which teaching and researching strategy “add” to the world in ways that are more or less socially beneficial, and by investigating why strategy, as an expert body of knowledge, has become absent from important arenas, such as the financial regulation domain (Marti and Scherer, 2016) that shape the corporate world and strategy-making. Recent debates about political and material forms of performativity suggest that management scholars could play a more proactive role in shaping the world according to their assumptions (Cabantous et al., 2016; Prichard and Benschop, 2017), notably by promoting alternative organizational models (Esper et al., 2017).

Equipped with a reflexive performative mindset, strategy scholars could contribute to this debate, by approaching strategy as a broad social phenomenon constituted by and through strategy knowledge, tools, and practices. The social usefulness of strategy research, and its capacity to impact and transform the world could thus become not only an item for academic discussions about the “academic-practitioners” gap, but rather the central purpose of performing strategy as theory and as practice.

## **Conclusion**

The prolonged and growing attention on the practice of strategy has led to an increasing interest in how strategy work is accomplished. Performativity enhances our understanding of strategizing through its dual focus on post-structural

conceptualizations, and on its rejection of the assumption that strategy discourses, tools, methods and approaches pre-exist their embodiment by strategists.

Performativity encourages researchers to focus their inquiries on how strategy work is achieved when human and non-humans interrelate in its unfolding. Framing strategy as a performative accomplishment adds nuance and depth to our practice understanding through highlighting ontological questions yet to be engaged with and epistemological possibilities not fully explored. A strategy as performativity research agenda is one rich in promise and possibility. This special issue is but the first step in this journey.

We acknowledge that the term ‘performative’ does not apply to a single construct universally agreed upon, but argue that this multiplicity is a strength rather than a problem, as it invites researchers from a range of ontological positions to contribute to its development. Strategy scholarship will benefit from such a rich array of possibilities. Performativity’s relational assumption is an inclusive premise that sensitizes researchers to be open in their fieldwork. As the empirical works in our special issue attest, through such an open and inquiring stance can novel theorizing result, as aspects of and the relations constituting strategizing that are frequently passed-over or marginalized are demonstrated to matter and make a difference in how strategy work is fulfilled. Strategy tools, plans, theories and ideas are observed to co-mingle in anticipated and surprising ways, resulting in the practice of strategy that is both recognizable and yet original.

The promise performativity holds and the opportunities strategizing affords, provide a compelling argument for further research. The empirical studies and the provocations we have included in this special issue offer a sound and inspiring platform from which scholars can build their inquiries. Such research will offer

insightful comment and theoretical development extending our knowledge and understanding of strategy. It will also enhance and develop what we know about performativity and its utility for organization studies. Both are important issues, and we invite readers to pursue these dual aims.

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Table 1. Special issue papers by performativity approaches

| <b>Performativity approach</b>                  | <b>Main ideas and authors</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | <b>Connection with our special issue</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Performativity as doing things with words       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ A pragmatic take on language. Performative utterances such as “I pronounce you husband and wife” do not describe a state of affair but bring it into being.</li> <li>▪ Austin, Searle</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | <p><b>Ligonie’s</b> paper on the “forced performativity” of the Shared Value concept at Gambling Co. connects the performativity as bringing theory into being approach to Austin’s approach.</p> <p><b>Garud et al.’s</b> essay on “performativity as ongoing journeys” approaches performativity as a “mindset” – an onto-epistemological position – and mobilizes Austin, Barad and Callon’s approaches.</p> |
| Performativity as searching for efficiency      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Post-modern knowledge is characterized by the taken for grantedness of performativity, defined as performance or efficiency (input/output ratio).</li> <li>▪ Lyotard (1984 [1979)</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | <p><b>Muniesa’s essay</b> approaches performativity as an anthropological condition and defines the “performative syndrome” as an injunction of performance understood in the triple meaning of execution, excess and estrangement. Strategic management is an epitome or exacerbation of this performative syndrome.</p>                                                                                       |
| Performativity as actors’ constituting the self | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Gender, sex, and identity more generally, are an accomplishment achieved through micro-movements of the body as well as discursive and material practices.</li> <li>▪ Butler (1990), (1993); Derrida (1979)</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | <p><b>Vargha’s</b> paper on the performativity of RU Bank’s new customer relationship strategy.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Performativity as bringing theory into being    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Scientific statements and theories do not simply describe the world; they also bring about the world they “describe”. Such an ‘actualization’ of the world of the model (i.e., the performance process) requires a work of “articulating, experimenting, and observing ...[in order to] produce the gradual, mutual adjustment of socio-technical agencements and formula” (Callon 2007, p. 320)</li> <li>▪ Callon (1998), (2007); MacKenzie and Millo (2003); MacKenzie et al. (2007)</li> </ul> | <p><b>Ligonie’s</b> paper on the “forced performativity” of shared value at Gambling Co. connects the performativity as bringing theory into being approach to Austin’s approach.</p> <p><b>Vargha’s</b> paper on the performativity of RU Bank’s new customer relationship strategy.</p>                                                                                                                       |

Table 1. Cont'd

| <b>Performativity approach</b>                   | <b>Main ideas and authors</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | <b>Connection with our special issue</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|--------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Performativity as socio-materiality mattering    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Performativity is an invitation to move beyond the power of language to understand how meaning is constituted through the entanglement of human and non-human elements. A post-humanist understanding of performativity focuses our attention towards the practices that stabilize (or destabilize) boundaries between human and non-human elements.</li> <li>▪ Barad (2003), (2007)</li> </ul> | <p><b>Van den Ven and van Marrewijk's</b> paper on the performative roles of rituals in strategy making.</p> <p><b>Garud et al.</b>'s essay on "performativity as ongoing journey" approaches performativity as a "mindset" – an onto-epistemological position – and mobilizes Austin, Barad and Callon's approaches.</p>                               |
| Communication constitution of organization (CCO) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Organizations are constituted through communicative practices. They are "talked into existence" (Weick et al. 2005, p. 409).</li> <li>▪ Taylor and Van Every (2000); Cooren (2004)</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <p><b>Vázquez et al.</b>'s paper on "matters of concern" and "matters of authority" in strategy making showing how issues materialize as a formulated strategy.</p> <p><b>Pälli's</b> paper on the material agency of strategy, which shows the importance of embodied language and gesture in strategy discussions and "leadership conversations".</p> |