

ORGANIZATION THEORY MEETS STRATEGY

Edited by Giada Di Stefano
and Filippo Carlo Wezel

ADVANCES IN STRATEGIC
MANAGEMENT

VOLUME 43

ORGANIZATION THEORY MEETS STRATEGY

ADVANCES IN STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

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ORGANIZATION THEORY MEETS STRATEGY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To my parents
– Giada Di Stefano

*To the colleagues, students, and friends
who contribute to feed my curiosity and to
broaden my research interests*
– Filippo Carlo Wezel

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CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures and Tables</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>About the Authors</i>	<i>xv</i>
Organization Theory Meets Strategy: Fostering a Dialogue Between Research Fields	1
<i>Giada Di Stefano and Filippo Carlo Wezel</i>	
Beyond the Hype: Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nanotechnology	11
<i>M. Paola Ometto, Michael Lounsbury and Joel Gehman</i>	
Have You Tried This? Field-Configuring Spaces and Implementing Moral Mandates	47
<i>Tae-Ung Choi, Grace Augustine and Brayden G King</i>	
On the Inauthenticity of First Movers and Authenticity of Second Movers: How Demand Is Shaped by Legitimation Work	91
<i>Jaekyung Ha, Stine Grodal and Ezra W. Zuckerman Sivan</i>	
Flipping the Coin Again – Redefining Strategy Through a Relational Class Approach	115
<i>Rodolphe Durand, Pierre-Antoine Kremp and Tomasz Obloj</i>	
Collaborative Dynamics Among Market Incumbents in the US Airline Industry, 1989–2010	141
<i>Wei Guo, Tieying Yu and Greta Hsu</i>	
Reputation Research at a Crossroads	171
<i>Anastasiya Zavyalova</i>	
Voluntary Standards and Ceremonial Adoption: Strategic Registration, Competition, and Audience in LEED Certification	189
<i>Anne Bowers and Hyeun J. Lee</i>	

Doing Well by Doing Bad: Toward an Organizational and Strategic Perspective on the Rational Choice Model of Corporate Misconduct	211
<i>Ivana Naumovska</i>	
For the Love of Change: How Strategic Leaders Design Organizational Processes to Shape Dynamic Capabilities	235
<i>Violina P. Rindova and Antoaneta P. Petkova</i>	
Organizational Identity: Paradoxes and Open Questions. Does Organization Theory Meet Strategy?	275
<i>Gino Cattani</i>	
<i>Index</i>	283

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Chapter 2

Figure 1.	Nanotechnology NYT Articles.	18
Figure 2.	NNI Budget 2004.	25
Figure 3.	NNI Budget 2008.	26
Figure 4.	NNI Budget 2011.	27
Figure 5.	NNI Budget 2013.	27
Figure 6.	Relative Prominence of ELSI Versus EHS Frames, 2004–2016.	28
Figure 7.	Budgets Related to ELSI Versus EHS Research, 2004–2016.	29
Figure 8.	Constructing a Naturalizing Frame.	35

Chapter 3

Figure 1.	Change in Forum Composition.	54
Figure 2.	Data Structure of the Themes, Interactions, and Activities on the Online Forum.	69
Figure 3.	The Cross-Organizational Construction of a Repertoire of Implementation for Moral Mandates.	76

Chapter 4

Figure 1.	Implications for Legitimacy and Authenticity Perception of Legitimation Work and Its Appropriation.	99
Figure 2.	How the Evidence of Legitimation Work (or Lack Thereof) May Shift the Authenticity Perception by the Order of Entry.	105

Chapter 5

Figure 1.	Examples of Outcome Patterns.	121
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- Figure 2. (a) Relationality Network of 3,655 Firms. Vertices are firms; 127
edges are weighted as a function of relationality, i.e.,
the absolute value of the correlation coefficient of 18
performance measures between each firm dyad. Vertex
size is proportional to degree centrality – larger vertices
represent firms whose performance vectors follow common
patterns. (b) Relationality Network With Class Partition
Using Newman’s Algorithm. Vertices are colored according
to their relational class.
- Figure 3. (a) Visualization of the Adjacency Matrix of the Network 128
Graph (With the Diagonal Removed). Firms are in the
rows and columns of the matrix. Each colored dot indicates
the presence of an edge between firms; darker edges indicate
greater edge weights (higher absolute correlation of
performance measures across firms). The average edge weight
is 0.15. (b) Representation of the Same Adjacency Matrix
After Permuting Rows and Columns Simultaneously, So
That Firms Appear Sorted by Relational Class. Average
edge weights are higher in Classes 2 and 3, indicating
greater relational similarity, and therefore contributions to
modularity, in these classes.
- Figure 4. Visualization of the Correlation Matrix of Performance 129
Measures for All Firms. Performance measures are sorted
by category from top to bottom and left to right (corporate
governance, environmental, social and community, workplace
and financial performance measures). Each circle represents a
correlation coefficient between performance measures; the
circle diameter is proportional to the absolute value of the
correlation; negative correlations are in white, positive
correlations are in black. The diagonal is not shown.
- Figure 5. Visualization of the Correlation Matrices of Performance 130
Measures in Each of the Three Relational Classes. Perfor-
mance measures are sorted by category from top to bottom
and left to right (corporate governance, environmental, social
and community, workplace and financial performance
measures). Each circle represents a correlation coefficient
between performance measures; the circle diameter is
proportional to the absolute value of the correlation; negative
correlations are in red, positive correlations are in blue.
Diagonals are removed.
- Chapter 6**
- Figure 1. Estimated Interaction Effect Between Entrant Nonconformity 158
and Incumbent Similarity on Extent of Cooperation.

Figure 2.	Estimated Interaction Effect Between Entrant Nonconformity and Market Share Instability on the Extent of Cooperation.	159
Chapter 7		
Figure 1.	Trends in Public Companies Going Private.	184
Chapter 10		
Figure 1.	A Conceptual Model of How Strategic Leaders Design Organizational Processes to Shape Dynamic Capabilities.	264
Chapter 2		
Table 1.	Data Sources.	21
Table 2.	Vocabularies.	23
Table 3.	Some Key Events Related to Negative Hype in the Emergence of the US Nanotechnology Field.	25
Chapter 3		
Table 1.	Data Sources.	56
Table 2.	Descriptive Statistics and Correlations.	61
Table 3.	Discrete Event History Models Predicting Submission of STARS Reports.	62
Table 4.	Interactions and Activities Present in the Online Forum Conversations.	65
Table A1.	STARS Categories and Credits (STARS Version 2.2).	86
Table A2.	Panel Logit Estimation of Forum Participation.	88
Table A3.	Discrete Event History Models Predicting Submission of STARS Reports.	89
Chapter 4		
Table 1.	Puzzling (In)authenticity Perceptions by the Sequence of Arrival.	95
Table 2.	The Role of Legitimation Work in (In)authenticity Perceptions by the Sequence of Arrival.	100
Chapter 5		
Table 1.	Data Description: Firm Size.	123
Table 2.	Data Description: Firm Origin.	124
Table 3.	Data Description: Industries.	124
Chapter 6		
Table 1.	Mean, Standard Deviations, and Correlations.	155
Table 2.	Fixed-Effects Regressions Explaining Extent of Cooperation.	157

Table 3.	Propensity Score Matching Statistics.	160
Table 4.	Fixed-Effects Regressions Explaining Extent of Cooperation Using Propensity Score-matched Sample.	161
Chapter 7		
Table 1.	Comparison of Social Evaluations Constructs.	174
Table 2.	Current Shifts and Future Pathways for Reputation Research.	175
Chapter 8		
Table 1a.	Descriptive Statistics for Project-Level Analysis.	194
Table 1b.	Correlations for Project-Level Analysis.	195
Table 2a.	The Effects of the Types of Projects on Certification of a Project (Ordinary Least Squares Model).	196
Table 2b.	The Effects of the Types of Projects on Certification of a Project (Logit and Probit Models).	197
Table 3a.	Descriptive Statistics for Area-Year Level Analysis.	198
Table 3b.	Correlations for Area-Year Level Analysis.	199
Table 4.	Analyses on Overall Certification in an Area.	200
Chapter 9		
Table 1.	Legitimacy and Profitability of Corporate Practices.	212
Chapter 10		
Table 1.	Description of Case Data and List of Strategic Change Initiatives.	240
Table 2.	Informants Interviewed at Each Firm.	242
Table 3.	Micro-processes Associated with Sensing, Seizing, and Reconfiguring Observed in the Four Firms.	246

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ORGANIZATION THEORY MEETS STRATEGY: FOSTERING A DIALOGUE BETWEEN RESEARCH FIELDS

Giada Di Stefano and Filippo Carlo Wezel

ABSTRACT

This volume was born out of two considerations. On the one hand, we recognized how the identity boundaries that define Organization Theory and Strategy are crucial to emphasize the distinctiveness of these different research traditions, facilitate our engagement with them, and delineate our contributions. On the other, we felt a growing need to cross those boundaries, and broaden the conversation between these fields. Our wish thus was to create a forum where Organization Theory and Strategy may meet and bring together some of the scholars who work at the intersection between these fields. In this introductory piece we share our understanding of what may distinguish Organization Theory from Strategy, and also illustrate how the research intersection between those fields looks like. In closing the chapter, we explain how the different contributions to this volume map onto one another and elaborate on several avenues of future development.

Keywords: Organization theory; strategy; evaluations; categories; value-based strategy; abduction

INTRODUCTION

One of the most valuable privileges of our profession is the freedom to choose which topics to examine. Some of these topics sit squarely at the heart of a given research field and help us to be “categorized” as scholars of that domain. For instance, if your focus is on resources and capabilities, you will most likely be

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recognized as a Strategy scholar. If you are interested instead in the social and institutional forces that shape organizational outcomes, it is likely that you will be identified as an Organization Theory scholar.

This is only one side of the story, though, as our research identities lie not only in the eyes of the beholder. Many of us, in fact, hold more complex research identities. While we may be perceived as belonging to a primary research community, in the background we engage with different conversations and with different streams of work. Sometimes this is a conscious choice to contribute to a broader debate. At other times, the topics we investigate naturally call for a multifaceted approach. Research on evaluations, for instance, implicates the related issues of ranking and ratings, status and reputation, identity, and image (Bowers & Prato, 2019; Naumovska & Lavie, 2021; Podolny, 2010; Rindova, Pollock, & Hayward, 2006; Rindova, Williamson, Petkova, & Sever, 2004; Wang & Jensen, 2019; Zavyalova, Pfarrer, & Reger, 2007). The study of deviance and conformity is entwined with issues like innovation, positioning, categories, and authenticity (Dupin & Wezel, 2023; Gehman & Grimes, 2017; Kovács, Carnabuci, & Wezel, 2021; Phillips & Zuckerman, 2001; Suarez, Grodal, & Gotsopoulos, 2015; Zhao, Fisher, Lounsbury, & Miller, 2017; Zuckerman, 1999).

This volume was born out of these considerations. On the one hand, we recognized the importance of the identity boundaries that define fields of study to ease the recognition of different research traditions, facilitate our engagement with them, and delineate our contributions. On the other, we felt a growing need to cross boundaries and bridge fields, to be able to study complex phenomena and contribute to a broader conversation. Animated by this spirit, we wish to create a forum in which Organization Theory and Strategy can meet. These fields have much in common, and a sharp distinction between them is hardly motivated by any specific problem under discussion. This volume, therefore, should be interpreted as an attempt to bring together some of the scholars who – implicitly or explicitly – have explored the intersection of these two research fields.

We aim to speak to a community of like-minded researchers who view firms as bundles of capabilities and resources but are also aware of the constraints and opportunities generated by the social forces that shape decisions above and beyond the agency of those firms. The different angles and methodological approaches illustrated in this volume speak well to the richness of this research intersection. We celebrate and embrace such a diversity and the multiple research opportunities it generates.

Before getting the conversation started, however, we feel the need to share our understanding of what may distinguish Organization Theory from Strategy, and how this research intersection looks like. Our goal is to allow the reader to make better sense of how the different contributions to this volume map onto one another and to develop a clearer intuition about some potential avenues of future development. In this respect, our introduction might be a little unorthodox for an edited volume. We hope our choice will be helpful to new scholars who will decide to join the conversation.

A FEW EXEMPLARY DIFFERENCES

To develop a better understanding of what it means to be working at the intersection of Organization Theory and Strategy, we briefly discuss a few selected topics that, in our opinion, belong to this “Middle Earth.” These topics may not appear proximate at a first glance. We thus begin by highlighting a few ways in which the terminology, as well as the underlying processes and actors involved, may vary between the two fields. Hopefully this overview will clarify that the divide between fields is very salient and actively preserved; at the same time, it is so often crossed and increasingly elusive to nail down in its substantive relevance.

Organizations Versus Firms

A first, fundamental difference between Organization Theory and Strategy is related to the distinction between “organizations” and “firms.” A structural and sociological approach has prevailed in Organization Theory and molded its focus on interdependencies, environmental constraints, and survival (Hannan et al., 2019; Hannan & Freeman, 1989; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Thompson, 1967). The ambition of organization theorists is to theorize about any type of organization, including but also beyond for-profit ones. Strategy, meanwhile, has been dominated by a more agentic economics-flavored view, which has shaped its prevalent attention to decision-making, resources and capabilities, innovation, competition, and profits (Leiblein, Reuer, & Zenger, 2019; Mahoney & McGahan, 2007; Makadok, 2011). As a result, Organization Theory puts processes and structures at the center of the discussion, and hence also emphasizes a (de)centralized conception of the “organization.” Conversely, Strategy emphasizes managerial actions and their outcomes. The complex organization, with its processes and structures, is viewed in a more unified and centralized fashion, and often referred to as the “firm.”

Audiences Versus Stakeholders

A second difference between Organization Theory and Strategy is related to an emphasis on “audiences” vis-à-vis “stakeholders.” In both cases, the emphasis is on the set of internal and external actors to whom the organization pays attention. However, the two fields have depicted those actors quite differently. For organization theorists, audiences play an active role in the construction of strategic fields and control key symbolic and material resources (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Hsu & Hannan, 2005). Conversely, Strategy scholars tend to depict stakeholders as providers of inputs to firms and as recipients of firms’ actions (Dorobantu & Odziemkowska, 2017; Gao, Zuzul, Jones, & Khanna, 2017; Henisz, Dorobantu, & Nartey, 2014).

Value Versus Evaluation

A third difference is related to a focus on “value” and the effort of firms at creating and capturing it vis-à-vis “evaluations” as the process aimed at

comparing different offerings and producers. Strategy scholars have widely referred to value-based strategy, a framework whose emphasis is on the firm that creates value for its stakeholders, captures some of this value, and adds value to the economic system through innovation (Brandenburger & Stuart, 1996; Chatain & Zemsky, 2011; Gans & Ryall, 2017). The second perspective, centered on evaluations, is more often adopted by Organization Theory scholars. This involves the process through which the relevant audiences reach consensus about how to evaluate different organizations and assess their standing against their peers (Bowers & Prato, 2019; Hsu, Hannan, & Koçak, 2009; Kovács & Sharkey, 2014).

Different Ways of Building Theory

The emphasis on agency in Strategy has led its scholars to highlight managers as key decision makers within firms and data as capable of objectively measuring a firm's actions and outcomes. This has pushed the field predominantly (yet not exclusively) toward a positivistic approach, for instance by discussing more effective identification strategies (Goldfarb & King, 2016; King, Goldfarb, & Simcoe, 2021; Oxley, Rivkin, & Ryall, 2010). Despite following a similar route, Organization Theory has remained more sensitive to contextual differences in structures and processes among organizations that are recognized to operate in different industries and cultural contexts. This emphasis has sustained, much more than in Strategy, the development of an interpretivist approach to research (e.g., Buchter, 2021; Pratt, Kaplan, & Whittington, 2020).

A FEW IDEAS TO BRIDGE THE DIVIDE

Now that we have underlined a few differences across the fields of Organization Theory and Strategy, let us turn our attention to how those perceived differences might generate research opportunities for scholars who wish to work at the intersection of these fields.

Markets as Fields

Markets as conceived by most Strategy scholars involve well-defined preferences and a shared conception of value. Through an Organization Theory lens, however, a few relevant questions emerge: Where do such preferences come from? How do different audience members negotiate and reach consensus on value? Does this process of social construction vary across cultural contexts and institutional fields? Does such a conception of value change over time? Conversely, if we embrace a Strategy-oriented approach and apply it to an Organization Theory-inspired view of markets, we could ask: What role do costs and benefits play for evaluating audiences? Do evaluations converge or diverge over time? How are they interpreted by the evaluated organizations? Some of these questions find increasing interest in the literature (Chatterji, Durand, Levine, & Touboul, 2016; Delmestri & Greenwood, 2016; Hannan et al., 2019), but it would be unfortunate

if Organization Theory and Strategy scholars would not build on each other's knowledge.

An Agentic View of Evaluated Firms

It is hard to conceive firms as passive objects of evaluations. In fact, they do undertake a variety of strategic actions to cope with and/or shape those evaluations. A few scholars have already started to challenge the depiction of organizations as mere recipients of audiences' evaluations and begun to wonder whether firms may take a more active role in responding to them (Askin & Bothner, 2016; Wang, Wezel, & Forgues, 2016; Zavyalova, Pfarrer, Reger, & Shapiro, 2021). Possible research questions include: Which strategic actions do firms undertake in the face of challenging evaluations? How do they react to reputational rankings and status-based classifications? Which strategic actions do they take to improve their relative ranking? Again, we see some signals of emerging interest in the literature (Favaron, Di Stefano, & Durand, 2022; Gouvard & Durand, 2023; Sharkey, Kovács, & Hsu, 2022), but believe there is much more room to further explore these questions.

Stakeholder Activism and Management of Expectations

Scholars working at the intersection of Organization Theory and Strategy have helped highlight a more elaborate view of how firms and stakeholders interact. Some scholars have started exploring the extent to which stakeholders take an active role in the form of stakeholder activism and social movements (Flammer, Toffel, & Viswanathan, 2021; Pacheco & Dean, 2015; Reid & Toffel, 2009; Vasi & King, 2012). Various research questions fit into this space. For instance: How do stakeholders' expectations and social movements shape firms' strategic choices and decisions? Related to this, in confronting audiences' activism, do firms attempt to manipulate audiences' expectations by strategically deflecting their attention? When pondering changes, how do firms decide between substantive and ceremonial alternative actions?

Abduction as a Common Platform

As for the different ways of building theory, an interesting development involves abduction. With its emphasis on inference to the best explanation, abduction involves a generative process of creating and evaluating alternative explanations that may help understand an empirical anomaly or phenomenon understandable (Lipton, 2004; Pillai, Goldfarb, & Kirsch, 2023; Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021). It requires that scholars leverage unusual phenomena, explore them from multiple theoretical angles, and adopt a different approach in writing their manuscripts (King, 2023). On the one hand, detecting an interesting anomaly requires extensive experience with a domain and, thus, rich, context-relevant knowledge. On the other, the development and synthesis of divergent hunches requires deductive reasoning. We believe that the growing diffusion of abduction holds the potential to fuel the dialog between Organization Theory and Strategy.

LEARNING FROM SCHOLARS WHO WORK AT THIS INTERSECTION

Our characterization of this “Middle Earth” at the intersection of Organization Theory and Strategy suggests the presence of fertile ground for a proliferation of research opportunities. The contributions to this volume provide a few examples of how to seize those opportunities by engaging with different topics, building on different research streams, and relying on different methodological approaches. Still, this diverse set of contributions is linked together by some common themes, which appear in line with our broad-strokes description of this intersection. In the final chapter, [Cattani \(2023\)](#) reflects on the concept of identity as a possible common thread across the various contributions to this volume.

A first recurring theme among the contributions relates to the stream of research that we labeled “markets as fields.” [Ometto, Lounsbury, and Gehman \(2023\)](#) describe the process through which firms can construct a naturalizing framing aimed at legitimizing a novel and uncertain technological field. [Choi, Augustine, and King \(2023\)](#) theorize how organizations engage in collective action to implement moral mandates whose scope and associated practices are ambiguous. [Ha, Grodal, and Zuckerman Sivan \(2023\)](#) illustrate that it is not the mere order of entry that leads organizations to benefit from attributions of legitimacy or authenticity but rather “legitimation work” that allows audience members to appreciate a certain value proposition.

A second theme relates to our description of “an agentic view of evaluated firms.” [Durand, Kremp, and Obloj \(2023\)](#) describe how firms undertake different sets of committed decisions in response to the demands of different stakeholders pushing them to pursue multiple objectives. [Guo, Yu, and Hsu \(2023\)](#) explore how incumbents engage in collaborative dynamics when entrants adopt non-conforming strategy tactics that unsettle a market’s competitive structure. [Zavyalova \(2023\)](#) articulates a path forward for research on reputation in the light of its malleability by firms, as well as in consideration of an increase in stakeholder empowerment via social media.

A third recurring theme fits into the discussion of how firms “manage the expectations of relevant audiences.” [Bowers and Lee \(2023\)](#) study a sample of firms that, caught between strategic incentives and social ties to their audiences, ceremonially adopt voluntary standards. [Naumovska \(2023\)](#) conceptualizes the engagement in corporate misconduct as a rational choice based on considerations about costs and benefits. Similarly, [Rindova and Petkova \(2023\)](#) focus on the socio-cognitive and organizational processes that allow leaders to make organizational changes and, in particular, develop dynamic capabilities.

Incidentally, we find it interesting that this diverse array of contributions leverages qualitative and quantitative methods and adopts both inductive and deductive approaches to inference. To advance novel conclusions, a few chapters of the volume also build on illustrative case studies and on their authors’ deep understanding of empirical phenomena. In some instances, we believe that the structuring of these ideas reflects the spirit of abductive reasoning.

CONCLUSIONS

We decided to edit this volume out of the conviction that the intersection of Organization Theory and Strategy abounds with research opportunities. Crossing the chasm that divides these fields might be hard, but we believe it is intellectually rewarding. The objective of this introduction was to raise awareness about a few points of contact between these categorically distinct fields and further stimulate a dialogue between different communities of scholars. At the end of the day, agency and structure are just two sides of the same coin (Sewell, 1992). We hope this volume will help fuel discussion at the prolific intersection of Organization Theory and Strategy.¹

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