

Sociomateriality

Viviane Sergi, Université du Québec à Montréal
Consuelo Vásquez, Université du Québec à Montréal
François Cooren, Université de Montréal
Nicolas Bencherki, Université TÉLUQ

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Origins of the concept

The concept of sociomateriality appeared in the broad field of management and organization studies (MOS) at the end of the first decade of the 2000s. Orlikowski's (2007) seminal article introduced MOS scholars to Karen Barad's agential realism and was instrumental in popularizing the concept of sociomateriality. At that time, strategy as practice scholarship had already recognized that strategy involved objects and tools, which were used, produced or circulated in strategizing. The concept of sociomateriality furthered discussions on the materiality of strategy, on non-humans, and on the location of agency, discussions that remain to this day relevant – and may even become more important to address currently, in the context of climate change or the rise of generative artificial intelligence.

Agential realism criticizes the boundaries that are usually drawn in Western thought, such as those between subjects and objects, or between the material and the discursive. In place of fixed boundaries creating clear-cut categories, agential realism puts forward a relational and dynamic onto-epistemology that redefines all phenomena not as fixed entities but as entangled. Barad's conception of entanglement is not about intertwinement, but corresponds "to lack [of] an independent, self-contained existence" (2007, p. ix). This implies that objects do not have properties by themselves, but that any property derives from the *agencement* of what comes together in a given practice. **Agency** is reconfigured in relational terms, which distributes it with whatever comes into play in a phenomenon and decenters it from humans.

In this line, the concept of sociomateriality encapsulates one of agential realism's key propositions, i.e., that the social and the material are inseparable and mutually constitutive. Sociomateriality has been espoused with the aims of 1) affirming a fully relational and **processual** understanding of phenomena and 2) exposing the non-separation of the material and the social in such becoming. Given its radical proposition about non-separation, debates about the place of materiality emerged in the 2010s, questioning whether "the material" was distinct or inseparable from "the social."

Adopting the concept of sociomateriality is a different project than simply including and focusing on specific material elements. The mutual constitution it posits may be what most visibly distinguishes sociomateriality from other streams of scholarship that have paid attention to other-than-human contributors. The concept has been mobilized in MOS in various ways, more or less in line with the original propositions that gave birth to the concept. It has especially been applied and discussed in information systems (IS) scholarship as a way to better explain and theorize technology. For strategy as practice scholarship, sociomateriality can be understood as continuing inquiries of materiality in strategy as practice, while at the same time representing a departure from most of the previous studies on this topic, given the non-separation and mutual constitution it suggests.

Applications in strategy as practice research

The importance of materiality is acknowledged de facto in the concept of practice (see **Practice theory**). While oft-quoted definitions of practice, like **Schatzki's** (2001) and Nicolini's (2012), include a material aspect, most of early strategy as practice studies did not pay specific attention to this material dimension of practice, neglecting its importance (Lê and Spee, 2015). Indeed, congruent with what we can see in other studies of organizational phenomena (such as leadership), strategy as practice scholarship began with a strong interest in human actors, building on a human-centered view of human agency and on a sensitivity to discursive dimensions, as commonly found in social sciences after the cultural turn (Coole and Frost, 2010). However, interest in the tools of strategy, as well as influences from various streams of scholarship outside strategy as practice (such as **actor-network theory** or **activity theory**) raised awareness for objects. Hence, early works in strategy as practice attending to materiality considered **artefacts**, **strategic tools** and **boundary objects**, as used in situation by strategy actors in the process of strategizing. In particular, researchers paid attention to documents and **strategic texts**, which can be seen as a type of material objects involved in strategizing.

As studies considering how different objects played a part in strategizing multiplied, the reflection on materiality's status diversified. In their introduction to the special issue on "Materializing Strategy and Strategizing Material: Why Matter Matters" (British Journal of Management, 2015), Dameron et al. (2015) identify five types of material involved in a practice view of strategy: strategy tools, objects/**artefacts**, **technologies**, built **spaces**, and human bodies (see **embodiment**), all defined in physical terms. They further propose three conceptions of the relationship between the material and the social: a weak (fully separated), a moderate (in interaction but still distinguishable), and a strong (entangled or mutually constitutive) view. In strategy as practice scholarship, the vast majority of studies either adopt a weak or a moderate view. The studies that may be closest to developing a sociomaterial account of strategy may be those that have explored **performativity** (Lê and Spee, 2015) or that have focused on the agency of strategic texts and documents (Myllykoski and Rantakari, 2023). Because of the non-separation that it postulates, sociomateriality corresponds to a strong view on materiality that may be challenging to adopt, onto-epistemologically and methodologically speaking. This may explain why sociomateriality remains underexplored in SAP (Lê and Spee, 2015).

A notable exception to this is Myllykoski and Rantakari's (2023) study, which identifies two forms of material agency that appear in discursive strategizing and orient its outcomes. By building on a strong view of materiality—and thus espousing sociomateriality in its original

definition—the authors document the discursification of a firm’s product in strategy talk, showing “how material agency may contribute to strategic outcomes by both hindering and promoting strategic renewal.” (p. 14). Their study exposes the entanglement of the material and the discursive, as a firm’s product will actively participate in the elaboration of new strategies, which leads them to suggest extending the original 3Ps (practice, praxis and practitioners) of strategy as practice to add a fourth one, “product.”

Future direction for the concept

While the word “sociomateriality” may appear on some occasions in strategy as practice studies, the concept has not been fully embraced. Approaches to materiality in strategy as practice remain closer to a ‘weak sociomateriality’ than to a ‘stronger’ one. In the face of this observation, two directions can be pursued. The first one is a direct response to this critique: to adopt sociomateriality as a radical stance toward reality. Interestingly for strategy as practice scholars, agential realism is nonrepresentational, placing at its core not objects as already existing, but rather their becoming, eventfulness, situated doings, and sayings—hence also *practices*. It should be noted, however, that since sociomateriality rests on a decentered view of agency, building on this concept implies moving away from a humanist view of practice to adopt a relational, processual, and performative one—in a word, a posthumanist view. The important connection between agential realism and practice could hence reinvigorate the reflection on strategy as practice’s core concept of practice, and could stimulate methodological innovation (see, for example, the entry on **shadowing**).

The second direction derives from the criticism recently formulated by Cooren (2020), who remarked that the concept of sociomateriality, because of its very name, runs the risk of keeping present the separation it rejects. Even if “the social” and “the material” are defined as entangled, keeping a reference to both realms in the word may evoke distinctions. This risk is specifically formulated for MOS studies and does not stem from Barad’s writing, as their work makes it very clear that there is no such separation and that there is no a priori fixed definition of subjects or objects. However, the tendency visible in some MOS studies to allude theoretically to strong sociomateriality but to perform an analysis closer to weak sociomateriality points to the challenges of adopting Barad’s conceptualization.

For organizations studies, it is works from the adjacent field of organizational communication, in the communicative constitution of organization (CCO) and more specifically in the Montréal school of CCO that provides inspiration for the second future direction the concept could take. Inspired by several traditions (ranging from pragmatism, **ethnomethodology** to actor-network theory, among others), the Montréal school develops a processual, relational and performative view of phenomena as produced in communication.

This ontological reflection reverberates on materiality and has two important implications. First, it articulates a processual and dynamic view on materiality (Cooren, 2016). Building on new materialisms (Coole and Frost, 2010), Cooren (2020) proposes to use the word *materialization* to push forward a reconfiguration of materiality, suggesting that the latter be seen as a *property* of *every* phenomenon. Second—and consequently—it calls into question the usage of the terms “the material” and “the social” by arguing that this way of speaking tends to recreate the separation it claims to question. Cooren indeed defines materiality as “the state of being material” (2016, p.

86), which means that anything considered to be social must also, by definition, be considered material, that is, made of something. In this way of conceiving materiality, there is however a way to assess the *degrees* of materialization, as things can become more or less material. For instance, a strategy as it pops up as an idea in someone's head is less material (or more immaterial) than the same strategy when it then materializes in various discussions that lead to the conception of an official strategic plan. This strategy can then keep materializing more and more through its concrete applications in various decisions and actions that are made in its name. Through the following of this trajectory, we can therefore observe how this strategy materializes more and more through its various materializations. In earlier developments, Cooren, Fairhurst and Huët (2012) have argued that we did not need to choose between “discourse” or “materiality” when considering organizational phenomena. They highlight that a reference to *matter* is present both in the verbs *matter*ing and *material*izing, suggesting that materiality encompasses both what sustains the existence of something (substance) and what is relevant (importance); they further point that what matters to people tend to materialize (and vice versa) in communication. Hence, materialization is preferred to sociomateriality to explicitly counteract the risk of separation, as the wording of this concept eschews the risk of considering what is social as having a possibility of existing without being materialized. For Cooren (2020) anything social or discursive has by definition to also be material, that is, made of something.

These insights offer stimulating new lines of inquiry for attending to matter in strategy as practice. Generally speaking, combining processuality with the idea of degrees offers to strategy as practice researchers the possibility of attending to both materialization (what becomes more material/matters more) and *dematerialization* (what becomes less material/matters less), which may prove to be highly significant when it comes to strategic concerns. In this line, Bencherki et al. (2021) have explored how concerns evoked during strategy workshops become gradually strategic (or not) through communicative practices that materialized strategy. As they argue, “for an issue to become strategic it must go through a series of instantiations that can solidify the issue—or will dismiss it. The question here is less about how materiality participates in strategizing, and more about the degree of materialization needed for a concern to become strategic.” (2021, p. 631). Moreover, their study, just like that of Myllykoski and Rantakari, offers much needed methodological guidance to pursue inquiries that aim to avoid reiterating the separation between material and social or discursive.

Focusing on materialization not only highlights the processuality of strategy as practice, but also shows how what matters is not simply tangible (Lê and Spee, 2015). This hence allows to better integrate what tends to be viewed as more ‘immaterial,’ like **emotions**, **affects**, ideas, values and ideals, which may play an important role in understanding how strategy **emerges** and is practiced. Lê and Spee suggested that such an expansion would be fruitful to explore, in particular, the links between strategy as practice and organizational **identity**. On this specific topic, articulating a study on the process of materialization could allow to further the investigation not only on what, during specific events, becomes strategic and contributes to strategy, but also what remains strategic over time, hence shedding light on the connections between strategy as practice and historical traces (see for example Basque and Langley, 2018). In this sense, while opting for sociomateriality comes with challenges linked to how it reconfigures taken for granted concepts and separations, doing so may help strategy as practice to connect with other areas of inquiry, hence enriching its understanding of strategy.

See also

Activity Theory (Theories)
Actor-network theory (Theories)
Affect (Phenomena)
Agency (Concepts)
Artefacts (Phenomena)
Boundary objects (Concepts)
CCO (Relations to SAP)
Embodiment (Concepts)
Emergence (Concepts)
Emotions (Phenomena)
Ethnomethodology (Methods)
Identity (Concepts)
Performativity (Concepts)
Practice theory (Theories and theorists)
Process perspectives (Methods)
PowerPoint (Phenomena)
Schatzki (Theories and theorists)
Shadowing (Methods)
Space (Concept)
Strategic plans (Phenomena)
Strategic tools (Phenomena)
Strategic texts (Phenomena)
Technology (Concept)

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