

TOWARD A THEORY OF PUBLIC STRATEGIC IMPLEMENTATION

David Mitchell

Assistant Professor
School of Public Administration
University of Central Florida
David.mitchell@ucf.edu

ABSTRACT

In US government and other similar political systems, the public policy and strategic management disciplines have each successfully defined a robust process model of change. The once-neglected study of implementation in both fields has emerged with a bounty of scholarship; though there is little overlap in these bodies of research. This conceptual article examines the treatment of implementation in strategic management and public policy theory; exposing a gaping hole when it comes to the micro-organizational implementation of strategic initiatives. Next, the author constructs an expanded strategic management framework that clarifies commonly confused strategic concepts and establishes the domain of public strategic implementation within it. The article concludes by reviewing the potential of various theoretical contributors to a new public strategic implementation research discipline, ultimately endorsing its creation.

Keywords: policy implementation, strategic implementation, strategic management

Introduction

In US government and other similar political systems, the public policy and strategic management disciplines have each successfully defined a robust process model of change. The once-neglected study of implementation in both fields has emerged with a bounty of scholarship; though there is little overlap in these bodies of research. The public strategic management field has primarily focused on the formulation and impact of macro-level strategy within an individual government organization (Walker, 2013); from a public policy perspective, implementation primarily refers to the diffusion of a policy solution within a network of multiple organizations (Sandfort and Moulton, 2014). Neither approach captures the core activity of implementation, though; which is to incorporate a previously-adopted change initiative into the micro-level practices and routines of an organization.

The first section of the article examines in detail the treatment of implementation in strategic management and public policy theory; exposing a gaping hole when it comes to the micro-level implementation of strategic initiatives. The article then establishes the domain of public strategic implementation by first constructing an expanded framework of public strategic management then delineating the implementation aspects. From this simple framework sketch, the article concludes by reviewing the potential of various theoretical contributors to a new public strategic implementation research discipline—ultimately endorsing its creation.

Strategic Management and Policy Implementation: Two Ships Passing in the Night Strategic Management: Missing the Trees for the Forest

Broadly speaking, strategic management means the same thing to governments and businesses: the orientation of an organization toward addressing present and anticipated needs dictated by its environment (Chandler, 1962; Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967; Miles and Snow, 1978). In the public management literature, Bryson et al. (2010, p. 1-2) state that “strategic management is the appropriate and reasonable integration of strategic planning and implementation across an organization (or other entity) in an ongoing way to enhance the fulfillment of its mission, meeting of mandates, continuous learning, and sustained creation.”

Strategic management is comprised of several components, all of which have bred their own subfields of study. The best known component—strategic planning—was also the first to be developed in both the private and public sectors (Poister and Streib, 1999). However, it was recognized in both sectors that strategic planning was not enough; organizational structures and resources must also be tied to executing strategy (Mintzberg, 1994; Vinzant and Vinzant, 1996). Thus, the concept was broadened from planning to management—which incorporated resource acquisition, implementation, and evaluation (Poister and Streib, 1999).

Borne from the private sector in the 1960s, strategic management theory is rooted in the fields of economics, sociology, and psychology (Ramos-Rodriguez and Ruiz-Navarro, 2004). Since its introduction to the public sector in the 1970s and 1980s, the public use of strategic planning and management has increased dramatically. By 2003, strategic planning was being utilized by a majority of U.S. local and state governments, in most nonprofit organizations, and the U.S. government (Bryson, 2003; Poister and Streib, 2005), with a portion of these organizations tying budgeting and performance systems to organizational strategy (Poister and Streib, 2005). Strategic planning and management now appear to be mainstays in the field of public management and are recognized as a means “by which [public] organizations can improve their performance and provide better services” (Boyne and Walker 2010, p. S185).

Strategic management implicitly endorses an organizational development cycle. Whether the strategic management process is conceived as linear, parallel, emergent, or learning, they all emphasize the need for scanning, planning, implementing, and evaluating. The traditional scholarly focus upon strategic planning readily addresses most of these activities, all but implementation. In order to build elegant and comprehensive theory, scholarship must be built in all four areas, individually and in relation with one another; requiring distinct theory development in the area of strategic implementation.

The implementation issue within strategic management theory largely rests in the definition of “strategy”, as it determines what organizational changes will occur in implementation. Strategy can be a singular or compound noun—one can use the term to discuss a particular strategic initiative, or a collection of them bundled together as part of a broader organizational approach to tackling one or more strategic issues. The strategic management literature has not taken a definitive stance on this distinction, with scholars utilizing one or the other without providing a clear justification for doing so. To quantify this, the author conducted a 2018 review of the top 50 public administration journals (as determined by 2017 ISI Journal Citation Reports) to identify articles via Google Scholar that contained within their respective titles: 1) “strategy” or “strategic”, and 2) an additional term associated with strategic management¹; 81 articles matched the criteria. To further validate, the author individually reviewed the articles and determined that 69 of them were indeed focused primarily upon public strategic management.

The use of “strategy” can first be distinguished by identifying the level of analysis in these studies. Of the 69 articles, 60 utilized “strategy” in its collective form as a macro-level unit of analysis, 5 at the micro-level of strategic initiative, and 4 utilizing both levels. Going further, the author reviewed the 18 articles with over 100 citations² in this group to evaluate the use and definition of “strategy” in their studies, with 7 directly addressing this topic. Boyne and Walker (2004, p. 232) make an important initial distinction, arguing that “strategy” that can be conceptualized at two levels—as “strategic stance”, or the macro-level and enduring approach to how the organization interacts with its environment³; and as “strategic actions”, or the “specific [micro-level] steps that an organization takes to operationalize its stance”⁴. Weschler and Backoff (1986) echo this bifurcation, referencing “strategic actions and decisions” repeatedly as they develop a typology of strategy; however they do not distinguish the two terms. Two subsequent highly-cited articles either use the “strategy” term to interchangeably refer to strategic stance and actions, or do not adequately define the term (Nutt and Backoff 1993; Poister and Streib 1999). The final three highly-cited articles include applications of the Miles and Snow (1978) strategic stance typology without reference to strategic actions (Andrews et al., 2007; Boyne and Walker, 2010; Meier et al., 2007).

As this review illustrates, “strategy” can be conceived broadly in terms of an organization’s stance or more specifically as organizational actions; however, the most cited public strategic management articles either focus exclusively on strategic stance, use “strategy”

¹ The additional terms, determined by inductive and deductive coding, are as follows: management, organization, thinking, planning, agenda, decision-making, performance, leadership, change, approach, choices, content, process, formation, structure, implementation, mapping, styles, governance, and stance.

² As reported by Google Scholar in September 2018.

³ Based on Miles and Snow (1978)

⁴ Based on Porter (1980)

without distinction, or do not define the term. The result is that micro-level strategic actions are rarely, if at all, studied in the most prominent of public strategic management articles.

Thus, most examinations of strategic implementation only skim the surface with macro-level study of public organizational strategic stances or general approaches to goal achievement. While it is true that many strategic stance studies endorse contingent explanations that lead to greater understanding, these stance contingencies generally do not extend down to the micro-level activities where additional and significant variation in implementation activities has been consistently observed (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009; Mitchell, 2019; Nutt, 1989; Pinto and Prescott, 1988; Whittington, 2017). Therefore, examining strategy at a macro level of a public organization may be confounded by micro-level variation, limiting understanding and explanation. This may help unpack the findings of the Walker (2013) meta-analysis regarding strategic stance, which concludes that this macro-level organizational variable is unable to explain more than half of variation in strategic outcomes.

These macro-level public strategic management studies also ignore growing bodies of micro-level research in the generic management literature that emphasizes strategy-as-process, strategy-as-practice, project management, and change management. Tsoukas has fostered the evolution of strategic process-as-variable studies to accommodate and then focus on human activity and interactions within the broader strategic cycle (Langley et al., 2013; Langley and Tsoukas, 2010; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). Strategy-as-practice scholars go further, examining the micro-level strategic activities of individuals in relation to an organization (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009; Whittington, 2017). The project management field has long utilized the micro-level strategic initiative (as a type of project) for a unit of observation and analysis (Cooke-Davies et al., 2009; Kalali et al., 2011; Miller, 1997; Okumus, 2003; Pinto and Prescott, 1988). Implementation is considered a “core task” in the change management field as well (Kruger, 1996). These efforts have spurred limited forays into micro-level strategic implementation research in public organizations, including that conducted by Bryson (Bryson et al., 2009; et al., 2010), Hansen and Ferlie (2016; Hansen, 2011), as well as George and Desmidt (2014; George et al., 2018).

Despite these efforts, the general theoretical neglect of these micro-level implementation activities within the public strategic management discipline fails to answer the critical issues of *how* a public organization’s strategic stance translates into strategic actions that produce strategic outcomes, and to what degree do implementation activities serve as a moderating variable in these conceptual relationships. For public strategic management theory to advance, these questions should be addressed. Walker (2013) concurs by stating that aligning strategic stance with the appropriate implementation approach is key to strategic success—even more so than strategy formulation. This echoes the call from Andrews et al. (2011), whose finding that strategy should be aligned with the implementation process concurs with previous research in the corporate context. Mitchell (2019) extends this research by demonstrating that a strategic initiative’s implementation approach should vary based on situational context, advocating for a project management approach. Summarizing this perspective, Walker (2013) concludes his retrospective on Miles and Snow strategic stance studies by declaring that strategic implementation matters and that more systematic knowledge needs to be developed in this area of public strategic management.

Policy Implementation: An Instrumental View of Service-Delivery Organizations

Based on their similarities, it may be tempting to look to the public policy theory to address the implementation problem in strategic management theory. Indeed, policy implementation is a robust field of research that has firmly established itself among the various public policy disciplines. Sandfort and Moulton (2014, p. 11) provide a contemporary definition of policy implementation: “Deliberate, institutionally sanctioned change motivated by a policy or program oriented toward creating public value results on purpose.” Originally conceived as a top-down, hierarchical linear process driven by a parent federal or state agency (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973), policy implementation constructs have given way to more complex bottom-up, networked approaches propelled by peripheral organizations and individuals (Sabatier, 1986; Goggin et al., 1990).

Indeed, the traditional goal of policy implementation was to incorporate an adopted “ideal” central policy into local service-delivery operations in a way that produces the desired effect upon the group of individuals targeted by the policy, known as implementation fidelity (Emshoff et al., 1987; Smith, 1973). However, in practice, implementation fidelity is generally low (Durlak, 1998); varying by such a large degree to warrant the creation of the Type III Error concept, which suggests that evaluators should consider the impact of local implementation design when conducting policy evaluation (Scanlon et al., 1977). Recognizing that service-delivery organizations (often local governments) can no longer be conceived as mere “throughputs” of broader policy initiatives, theorists began to highlight the unique implementation contexts (local goals and issues, internal capacity to effectuate change, available resources, etc.) that significantly shape the way policy is ultimately delivered to the target group (Sandfort and Moulton, 2014).

These varied implementation contexts are not necessarily contained within a single organization either. Hall and O’Toole (2000) assert that not only are the institutional settings associated with public policy programs more often multi-organizational and networked rather than unitary and hierarchical, but their analysis finds evidence of this pattern since at least the 1960s. Kenis and Schneider (1991) concur by stating that complex policy implementation (like that typically required of US federal policy) often requires a policy network of corporate actors to jointly pursue implementation objectives and diffuse solutions. Moulton and Sandfort (2014) also highlight the concept of “policy fields” as “bounded networks among institutions and organizations carrying out a substantial policy and program area in a particular place (p. 107)”, leading these authors to “concentrate [their research] on change that spans the responsibilities of more than one organization” (p. xvi) and often multiple levels of government.

But what of implementation activity that occurs inside each individual service-delivery organization? Policy initiatives typically enter the organizational strategic process as a strategic stance to achieve a local strategic objective. Could an organization-specific conception of policy implementation address the need for micro-level implementation theory? One logical candidate is the concept of program implementation. The program serves as the operationalization of a policy, translating the abstract into concrete (Smith, 1973). Van Cauwenberg and Cool (1982) tie policy, programs, and organizations together by asserting that policy refers to the formulation of calculated action while organization refers to the implementation aspects of formulated policy programs. Within these organizations, the success of a program implementation is evaluated by implementation fidelity, the internal logic of programs and processes, and program “fit” (Sandfort and Moulton, 2014); a conception which draws closer to micro-level implementation principles.

However, this application is for naught; as program implementation scholars have ultimately opted for a multi-organizational conception. More specifically, the intergovernmental management literature emphasizes the importance of an “implementation structure” (Mandell 1994) comprised of a subset of members from multiple organizations who individually view a particular policy program as their primary interest (Hjern and Porter, 1981). Therefore, implementation structures do not describe the interactions of organizations, rather that of policy program-related individuals generally from all levels of governments along with the private and nonprofit sectors (Hanf and O’Toole, 1992).

Indeed, an organization can be concerned with many programs and the implementation of a given program can involve many organizations. This multi-organizational perspective of program implementation leads Sandfort and Moulton (2014, p. xvi) to view policy and program implementation synonymously, as any difference “depends more on one’s reference point than on any characteristic of the change.” Since program implementation primarily operates in multi-organizational networks, Hall and O’Toole (2000) conclude that studying it in single organizations is inherently flawed.

Thus, policy implementation theory also does not appear to provide a solution for understanding micro-level implementation within public organizations. Although policy implementation studies do look inside its service-level organizations, it is generally done in the context of the policy itself—whether measuring implementation fidelity or as part of a broader, networked implementation structure, for example. While it is true the public policies often co-opt organizational implementation processes, policy implementation scholars have rarely explored what organizational factors drive successful implementation within the walls of individual service-delivery governments.

Synthesis

At the micro-level of implementation, public organizations expend a tremendous amount of time, effort, and resources creating change within their structures, processes, and operations in hopes of improving organizational outcomes; which is some of the most vital work they do. Yet, the two scholarly disciplines best suited to explore and explain these implementation activities—public strategic management and public policy—have largely failed them. Instead, both bodies of theory have tackled broader, more abstract conceptions of implementation to the peril of initiative-specific activities. Those who assert that abstract studies of strategic stance and implementation fidelity provide appropriate guidance for practitioners ignore the increased reliance on contingent explanations for organizational implementation (Mitchell 2019); which require more nuanced examination to detect and identify micro-level variation. While efforts to incorporate strategy into collaborative public management philosophies such as New Public Governance are laudable for multi-jurisdictional issues of complexity (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2020), they do not address the multitude of implementation activity occurring within a public organization. In short, while public management and public policy contemplate implementation, they both have not yet incorporated the change activities occurring at the micro-level of public organizations. In an effort to address this gap, the remainder of this article establishes the boundaries for a new public strategic implementation research discipline by situating it within the broader strategic management framework.

Making Sense of Strategic Management

When one opens a box to discover a product that requires assembly, she hopes to find a neatly arranged set of parts with a clear set of instructions. Unfortunately, this is not the case for

those interested in public strategic management. Instead, concepts are muddled, missing, or redundant; a host of external theoretical influences are necessary to make sense of the phenomenon; and explanatory models are superficial and fleeting. Since the purpose of this article is to better understand micro-level implementation efforts in public organizations, one

Strategic Concept	Definition	Confused Terms
Issue	A condition or pressure on a fundamental aspect of an organization that must be addressed to fulfill its mission and move toward a desired future.	Problem
Goal	Broad, aspirational, and abstract statements of desired results drawn from the organization’s mission and the threats to it posed by identified strategic issues.	Objective
Objective	Sets the parameters for strategic success by establishing a quantifiable and measurable target for an improved organizational or community outcome directly impacted by the change.	Goal, Strategy, Action, Initiative
Stance	The macro-level and enduring approach to how the organization interacts with its environment.	Strategy, Position, Activity, Action, Action Plan, Model, Plan, Task, Implementation Plan, Projects, Change Effort, Objective
Initiative	A temporary, coordinated undertaking for improving and expanding the capability base of an organization that has the potential to substantially impact its evolution and performance.	Strategy, Activity, Action, Action Plan, Implementation Plan, Projects, Change Effort, Objective

Figure 1 – Defining Strategic Concepts

must first understand their role in strategic management change processes—beginning with a much-needed clarification of concepts (summarized in Figure 1).

Unpacking the Parts: Strategic Management Elements

Public strategic management suffers from a seemingly unfathomable conceptual quagmire that generally diminishes its explanatory power as well as practical application; and specifically contributes to the negligence of micro-level implementation activities. Terminology and concepts are confused within strategic planning and management as they are applied interchangeably without standard usage—used in different ways in differing contexts, without

rhyme nor reason (Corrall, 2003). Halachmi (1987) refers to the semantic problem of strategic management as he strives for conceptual clarity. As an example, Hofer (1977) identified thirteen different definitions for “strategy” in the early strategic management literature, a number that surely has increased over the past 40 years. Similar confusion abounds when reviewing the definitions of other strategic concepts.

One familiar strategic planning construct—the hierarchy of issues, goals, objectives, strategies and tasks—has been useful in providing some structure to these concepts; but it has not been without its problems. Many of these terms are confused or used synonymously, and even applied out of order; diminishing the hierarchy’s usefulness (Corrall 2003). In an attempt to salvage the strategic hierarchy, this section provides independent and mutually exclusive definitions of its components in a manner that justifies their hierarchical arrangement.

A *strategic issue* serves as a logical starting point for the strategic process. Also known as a strategic problem, it represents a deviation from a desired set of acceptable conditions resulting in a symptom or web of symptoms needing to be addressed (Baer et al., 2013). The use of “issue” instead of “problem” should be preferred as a Google Scholar search indicates it appears twice as often in the literature and is endorsed by leading scholars (e.g., Bryson 2018); indicating relative congruence on its utility and definition. Scholars have typically defined “strategic issue” word-by-word; describing “strategic” as impacting or affecting an organization’s current and future strategy and performance, and “issue” as an emerging development or pressure affecting the organization (Dutton et al., 1983; King, 1982). Ultimately, it is a combination of two definitions (King, 1982; Lerner, 1999) that best describes a strategic issue: A condition or pressure on a fundamental aspect of an organization that must be addressed to fulfill its mission and move toward a desired future. A well-crafted strategic issue should elicit organizational action, especially when presented in the form of a question (Bryson, 2018).

In response, *strategic goals* indicate how the organization will address identified strategic issues, in aspirational terms. Some scholars and practitioners use “strategic goals” and “strategic objectives” interchangeably or combine the terms (Corrall, 2003; Lerner, 1999). In retort, Steiss (2003, p. 64) decries treating of goals and objectives as if they were “Siamese twins”, claiming instead that strategic goals should be stated in broad, immeasurable, abstract terms to increase awareness of upcoming change while allowing stakeholders the flexibility to react from their individually-held perspectives. Steiss and Lerner therefore collectively define a strategic goal as a broad, aspirational, and abstract statement of desired results drawn from the organization’s mission, in response to the threats posed by identified strategic issues. Note that a goal is not *the* response, but *a* response, as strategic issues can be addressed in a multitude of ways; meaning that strategic goals are normative in nature (Stone 2012). Strategic goals provide general direction in tackling a strategic issue; but since they are abstractly worded, one encounters difficulties when trying to demonstrate progress—requiring specification of a measurable outcome that can serve as a proxy for goal achievement.

Strategic objectives are one of the most misunderstood and widely defined concepts in strategic management, right behind strategy itself. They are mistaken with strategic goals, but also with action-based concepts like strategy, strategic actions, and strategic initiatives. Just as goals and objectives should be uncoupled, so should objectives and strategies as they each play an independent role in the strategic process (Richmond, 1997; Steiss, 2003). Strategic objectives should be measurable, setting performance targets as they translate strategic goals from abstract to concrete (Monahan, 2008). They also reflect the expected change in organizational and/or community outcomes that should occur by taking chosen strategic action. Therefore, strategic

objectives serve as a critical bridge between the broad goals of an organization and specified action commitments (Steiss 2003, p. 64). With the setting of abstract goals and specific, measurable objectives in place, the strategic process now turns to action.

Strategic planning and management hinge on the development of *strategy* to effectuate change. Strategy generally contains two components: 1) a pursuit of organizational goal and/or objective achievement (Lerner, 1999; Sadler, 2003), and 2) calculated action to alter an organization through its structures, process, and operations (Van Cauwenberg and Cool, 1982). Broader notions view the organization as a monolith where strategy and mission interact, strategic position is defined and implemented, and programmed decision-making flows through strategic planning processes (Hax and Majluf, 1996; Jauch and Glueck, 1988; Quinn, 1980). These definitions align with the *strategic stance* conception introduced earlier, a term utilized to represent more general descriptions of strategy.

Alternatively, strategy is also conceptualized at the micro-level as “actions and tasks taking the organization toward its goals and [objective] targets” (Corrall, 2003, p. 2). Indeed, Eadie (1983, p. 448) finds it “useful to treat strategies as courses of actions at differing levels of specificity.” However, the terminology employed to represent these actions is quite varied: tasks, tactics, action plans, implementation plans, projects, change efforts—just to name a few (Corrall, 2003; Lerner, 1999; Pellegrinelli and Bowman, 1994). Due to its implicit bias toward improvement and its project-oriented nature, the *strategic initiative* serves as the most appropriate term to represent micro-level organizational strategic action; defined as a temporary, coordinated undertaking for improving and expanding the capability base of an organization that has the potential to substantially impact its evolution and performance (Lechner and Kruezer 2011).

Assembly Required: An Expanded Framework of Strategic Management

Existing public strategic management models lack sophistication and specification; with scholars generally opting for a simplistic stages approach. However, by applying three influential theoretical models, one can create a detailed framework of strategic management based on stages, processes, layers of emphases, and feedback loops; as constructed by the author in Figure 2.

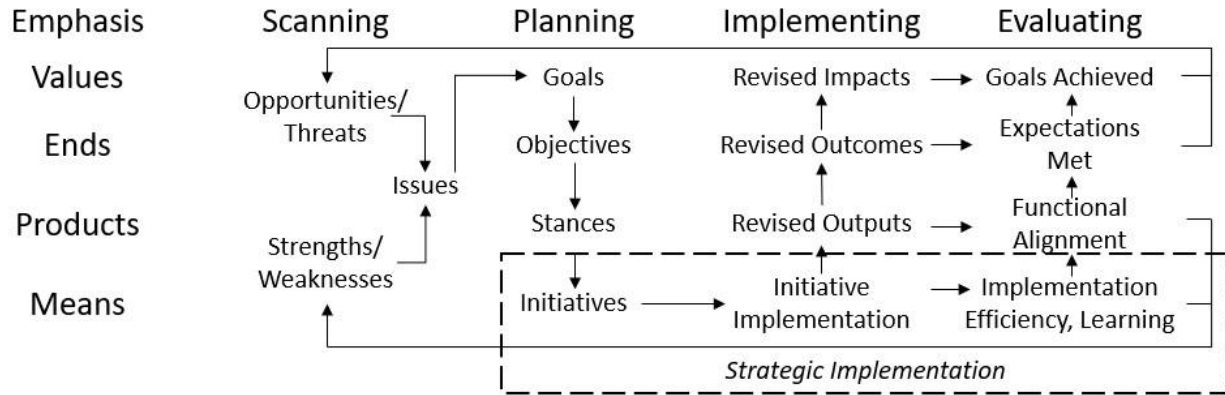


Figure 2 – An Expanded Framework of Strategic Management

Assembly of this strategic management framework begins by applying the *organizational adaptation model* put forth by Thomas et al. (1993), based on the work of Weick (1979) and Milliken (1990); comprised of four key stages—scanning, interpretation, action, and performance. While the scanning process is appropriate considering the environmental scans conducted within strategic planning, the interpretation process does not seem to have a natural fit. Instead, the identification of issues, goals, objectives, stances, and initiatives that follow the scanning activity indicate this should be referred to as “planning”. To better fit with strategic management nomenclature, the action and performance processes should also be renamed to “implementation” and “evaluation” processes.

Scanning, planning, implementing, and evaluating collectively create a longitudinal framework. To form a second dimension, four layers of emphases add richness to the framework: from most to least abstract, values followed by ends (both community-oriented), then products and means (both organization-oriented). Across these two dimensions, the *strategic planning process* (Bryson, 2018) is first incorporated as the strategy formulation component. To begin, the internal and external environmental scans that initiate the strategic planning process comprise the scanning stage. The two scans address all four layers of emphasis in the framework: the internal scan identifies the strengths and weaknesses associated with organizational products and means, while the external scan identifies environmental opportunities and threats associated with community ends and values. The SWOTs then identify strategic issues formed to establish the basis for planning activities. The strategic hierarchy represents that planning stage, as follows: 1) values-based goals are defined to broadly respond to the strategic issues, 2) ends-based objectives define goal achievement in quantifiable and measurable terms, 3) product-based stances dictate general prescriptions for change, and 4) means-based initiatives implement the specific elements of change.

Moving into the implementation and evaluation stages, the act of implementing the strategic initiative ignites a chain reaction up through the organization that follows the *logic model of performance*—an activity-based system of inputs, outputs, efficiencies, outcomes, and impacts (Wholey, 1979). In strategic management, the implementation effort itself demonstrates organizational efficiency via internal change processes (the means of implementation), evaluated

by the ability to complete the initiative in a timely and cost-effective manner. Then, the organizational change achieved via implementation alters relevant programmatic outputs (the products of implementation) according to the design of the selected stance(s), evaluated by gauging the functional alignment between these outputs and strategic goals. Next, the revised output portfolio affects relevant community and organizational outcomes (the ends of implementation), evaluated by comparing the actual outcome to the target established by the objective to determine if expectations were met. Finally, the affected outcomes produce a societal impact (the values of implementation) that helps achieve a broader goal, evaluated by alignment with prevailing public values. To complete the feedback loop, the evaluative performance data flows into the next strategic planning effort; with evidence about whether prior goals were achieved and objectives were met that informs the new external scan while data on functional alignment and implementation efficiency enlighten the internal scan.

Although this expanded framework can be considered generic due to its linearity, it is assembled with enough flexibility to allow for, and in fact encourage, contingency within and between its components. For example, the planning process is not bound to formal strategic planning, but open to any process that identifies organizational goals, defines objectives, and adopts one or more strategic stance(s) to achieve those objectives—even a number of Mintzberg’s strategy types fit inside this broad conception. Additionally, the framework does not dictate what type of strategic implementation tactics are best to enact strategic initiatives; it merely situates that activity between the planning and evaluation processes. Indeed, it is recommended that use of contingency theory be maximized this framework to accommodate as many of the theoretical perspectives that follow.

Potential Contributors to a Body of Public Strategic Implementation Theory

The conceptual scope of a strategic implementation discipline is also defined in Figure 2. The “Strategic Implementation” box by no means should be considered a complete framework of this new discipline, but instead an initial illustration of its boundaries and core components. It is incumbent upon the future theorists of strategic implementation to expand upon this rudimentary draft. Due to the varied perspectives housed within the strategic management field, there are no shortages of candidates to inform a new public strategic implementation research discipline. Whittington (2017) offers a framework of strategy scholarship that can help make sense of these diverse approaches; viewing strategy as institution, process, and practice. This concluding section reviews the potential application of strategic management theories (and related fields) to the strategic implementation framework presented earlier, identifying avenues for future theory development and empirical research.

Strategy as Institution

Although institutional theorists have typically taken a macro approach to studying the spread and evolution of strategic practices, Whittington cites early examples from prominent institutionalists DiMaggio (1988) and Fligstein (2001) to demonstrate the importance of examining individual entrepreneurial actions in these broader studies. For all of its emphasis on society-wide practices, there is a growing acceptance that institutional constructs are actually the product of “institutional work” (Suddaby et al., 2013) performed by individuals.

The field of public strategic implementation benefits from this connection between individual effort and society-wide practice by linking implementation activity and process to public management and policy approaches that generate strategic initiatives beyond the deliberate organizational strategic plan. For example, the emergence of New Public Governance

and other networked, collaborative public management philosophies have drawn the attention of strategic management theorists; prompting the exploration of joint strategic planning and management to address complex public issues (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2017; Osborne, 2010). Extended further, the concepts of public value (Moore, 1995), public service logic (Osborne, 2018), the resource-based view of strategy (Barney, 1991), new institutional theory (Lowndes and Wilson, 2003; Powell and DiMaggio, 1991), and value co-creation (Eriksson et al., 2019) all have implication for strategic formulation, especially on the actors involved and in terms of collaboration. As explored earlier, the multi-organizational approach of policy implementation also requires that individual organizations to implement change in pursuit of desired societal outcomes.

Indeed, from an organizational perspective, these all serve as examples of emergent strategies that are generated outside of the internal formal strategic planning process (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). While deliberate organizational strategy is deliberately linked to organizational implementation processes, emergent strategy does not enjoy this natural flow. Therefore, strategic implementation theory not only has application to formal strategic planning processes, but provides an improved effectuating mechanism for multi-organizational public management and policy approaches. To be nimble, contingent perspectives should be generously applied at all levels of strategic implementation theory (Mitchell, 2019; Walker, 2013; Whittington, 2017). More broadly, the study of strategy as institution shows potential in simultaneously linking public management with strategic implementation while disseminating successful strategic implementation practices across society.

Strategy as Process

Whittington argues that process studies have also been evolving to incorporate individual activity and perspective, increasing its application to micro-level public strategic implementation theory. Traditional process research attempts to reduce processes to object variables that can be utilized in large-sample quantitative analysis (Van de Ven, 1992); however, this approach ignores the humans who drive these processes. Thus, Langley (2007) pushes for “strategizing” activity to be linked to larger processes while incorporating context into the process. In this way, process can accommodate for individual activity and varying situations.

For strategic implementation, the established generic fields of project management and change management offer the most theoretical promise. The strategic initiative shares many traits with a project (Bardh et al., 2011). Both are temporary, non-routine endeavors that strive to achieve an objective. For Grundy (1998), both have a common enemy—overcoming the constraints and threats posed by strategic implementation. Going further, he terms implementation as “the graveyard of strategy” (p. 43) and concludes that strategic implementation projects are an increasingly important application of project management. Much of the discussion in the project management literature center upon success factors (Kalali et al., 2011; Miller, 1997; Okumus, 2003; Pinto and Prescott, 1988), which can be equally applied to strategic implementation. From a public perspective, Poister (2010) concludes that project management is appropriate for public agencies to use to implement strategic initiatives.

Change management presents an opportunity to humanize project management and the process ontology upon which it rests. A subset of the organizational development discipline, change management concerns the continual renewal of an organization’s direction, structure, and capabilities to serve the needs of not only external and but also internal stakeholders (Moran and Brightman, 2001); inseparable from organizational strategy (Rieley and Clarkson, 2001). Thus, change management addresses the human side of project implementation, including its effect on

organizational culture and user acceptance (Levasseur, 2010). Incorporating tools such as Kotter's 8-step change methodology (Kotter, 1996) into project management and forms of synthesis should benefit implementing organizations as a whole (Hornstein, 2014; Kolodny, 2004). Thus, project management principles, accompanied by change management practices, form the process backbone of public strategic implementation theory.

Strategy as Practice

The core of Whittington's thesis is the need to incorporate strategy-as-practice theory into wider process and institutionalist conceptions, broadening strategizing activity temporally and spatially. He believes this helps move strategy-as-practice "from the study of isolated episodes extracted for convenience to more systematic selection and comparison" (Whittington, 2017, p. 11), addressing its "extrapolation problem" (Barzelay, 2007). For strategic implementation, a strategy-as-practice approach—properly linked to process and institutional principles—provides the opportunity to move past implementation-as-object, quantitative methods to best understand the activities, actions, interactions, and relations of implementers.

Public strategic management scholars have begun the import of strategy-as-practice principles into the field, creating an early foundation for a strategic implementation discipline. Bryson et al. (2009) discuss the utility of actor-network methodologies to study public strategic management practices. Hansen (2011) seeks to understand how strategic management practice evolved in Danish upper secondary schools following a New Public Management-inspired reform. George et al. (2018) examine the cognitive factors that affect strategic plan commitment by individual planning team members in Flemish municipalities. The concept of organizational ambidexterity—the simultaneous pursuit of contradictory and competing actions to capture the synergistic value between exploratory and exploitative activities (Tsai and Ren, 2019)—has permeated public strategic management (Bryson et al., 2008; Palm and Lilja, 2017; Smith and Umans, 2015), but also shows applicability at the individual-actor level (Kobarg et al., 2017). These paradigm-shifting studies demonstrate the promise of strategy-as-practice principles for a burgeoning public strategic implementation discipline.

Concluding Discussion

The preceding theoretical examination establishes that there is no shortage of content for a blossoming public strategic implementation discipline. Indeed, organizational implementation is the sole process that can accommodate Whittington's multi-level conception of strategy; it can effectuate any deliberate or emergent *institutional* reform strategy by utilizing change and project management *processes* built by *practices* that are continually utilized and refined by strategic actors. In this way, a discipline of public strategic implementation is not only responsive to contemporary strategic-as-practice theories, but for all conceptions of strategy.

More broadly, this conceptual article puts forth the argument for a distinct research discipline of public strategic implementation. It highlights the lack of attention that broader public strategic management scholarship pays to micro-level implementation activity within government organizations. In addition, the article demonstrates that policy implementation theory is ill-equipped to incorporate strategic implementation occurring within a single organization. However, due to the preponderance of strategic planning occurring in practice that requires implementation and the vast empirical record of important variation occurring within this micro-level activity, public strategic implementation requires its own theoretical home. Nestled between strategic planning and performance evaluation, strategic implementation is where "strategizing" actually occurs. It embodies actual strategic initiative in terms of effort, not the idea behind it or the result that follows. Public strategic implementation focuses on the

process and practices of organizational change through the vehicle of projects. These action steps distinguish it from planning and evaluating strategic change in an organization, and it is high time to establish a research discipline that reflects this.

REFERENCES

- Andrews, R., Boyne, G. A., Law, J., and Walker, R. M. (2007). 'Centralization, organizational strategy, and public service performance'. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, **19**, 57-80.
- Andrews, R., Boyne, G. A., Law, J., and Walker, R. M. (2011). 'Strategy implementation and public service performance'. *Administration & Society*, **43**, 643-671.
- Baer, M., Dirks, K.T., and Nickerson, J. A. (2013). 'Microfoundations of strategic problem formulation'. *Strategic Management Journal*, **34**, 197-214.
- Bardh, M., Bokedal, M., and Stensson, V. (2011). 'Project success: Application of Kotter's functions of managers and leaders when evaluating project success—Using the iron triangle'. (bachelor's thesis, Jonkoping University). Accessed online at <http://hj.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2:423698> on December 8, 2019.
- Barney, J. B. (1991). 'Firm resources and sustained competitive advantage'. *Journal of Management*, **17**, 99-120.
- Barzelay, M. (2007). 'Learning from second-hand experience: Methodology for extrapolation-oriented case research'. *Governance*, **20**, 521-543.
- Boyne, G. A., and Walker, R. M. (2004). 'Strategy content and public service organizations'. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, **14**, 231-252.
- Boyne, G. A., and Walker, R. M. (2010). 'Strategic management and public service performance: The way ahead'. *Public Administration Review*, **70**, S185-S192.
- Bryson, J. (2003). 'Strategic Planning and Management.' In B. G. Peters and J. Pierre (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Public Administration*, 1st ed. London: SAGE Publications.
- Bryson, J. M. (2018). *Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations: A Guide to Strengthening and Sustaining Organizational Achievement*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Bryson, J. M., Berry, F. S., and Yang, K. (2010). 'The state of public strategic management research: A selective literature review and set of future directions'. *The American Review of Public Administration*, **40**, 495-521.
- Bryson, J. M., Crosby, B. C., and Bryson, J. K. (2009). 'Understanding strategic planning and the formulation and implementation of strategic plans as a way of knowing: The contributions of actor-network theory.' *International Public Management Journal*, **12**, 172-207.
- Chandler, A. D. (1962). *Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of the American Industrial Enterprise*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

- Cooke-Davies, T. J., Crawford, L., and Lechler, T. G. (2009). 'Project Management Systems: Moving Project Management from an Operational to a Strategic Discipline'. *Project Management Journal*, 40, 110-123.
- Corrall, S. (2003). 'Strategic planning in academic libraries.' In M. A. Drake (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences*, 2nd ed. New York: Marcel Dekker.
- DiMaggio, P. J. (1988). 'Interest and agency in institutional theory. Institutional patterns and organizations'. In L. Zucker (Ed.), *Institutional Patterns in Organizations: Culture and Environment*. Cambridge MA: Ballinger.
- Durlak, J. A. (1998). 'Why program implementation is important.' *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in The Community*, 17, 5-18.
- Dutton, J. E., Fahey, L., and Narayanan, V. K. (1983). 'Toward understanding strategic issue diagnosis'. *Strategic Management Journal*, 4, 307-323.
- Eadie, D. C. (1983). "Putting a powerful tool to practical use: The application of strategic planning in the public sector'. *Public Administration Review*, 43, 447-452.
- Emshoff, J. G., Blakely, C., Gottschalk, R., Mayer, J., Davidson, W. S., and Erickson, S. (1987). "Innovation in education and criminal justice: Measuring fidelity of implementation and program effectiveness'. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 9, 300-311.
- Fligstein, N. (2001). 'Social skill and the theory of fields'. *Sociological Theory*, 19, 105-125.
- George B., and Desmidt, S. (2014). 'A state of research on strategic management in the public sector: An analysis of the empirical evidence.' In P. Joyce and A. Dramaux (Eds), *Strategic Management in Public Organizations: European Practices and Perspectives*. New York: Routledge.
- George, B., Desmidt, S., Cools, E., & Prinzie, A. (2018). 'Cognitive styles, user acceptance and commitment to strategic plans in public organizations: an empirical analysis'. *Public Management Review*, 20, 340-359.
- Goggin, M. L., Bowman, A. O'M., Lester, J. P., and O'Toole, L. J. (1990). 'Studying the dynamics of public policy implementation: A third-generation approach'. In D. J. Palumbo and D. J. Calista (Eds.), *Implementation and the Policy Process: Opening up the Black Box*. Greenwood Press.
- Grundy, T. (1998). 'Strategy implementation and project management'. *International Journal of Project Management*, 16, 43-50.
- Hanf, K., and O'Toole Jr., L. J. (1992). 'Revisiting old friends: Networks, implementation structures and the management of inter-organizational relations'. *European Journal of Political Research*, 21, 163-180.
- Hansen, J. R. (2011). 'Application of strategic management tools after an NPM-inspired reform: Strategy as practice in Danish schools'. *Administration & Society*, 43, 770-806.

- Hansen, J. R., and Ferlie, E. (2016). 'Applying strategic management theories in public sector organizations: Developing a typology'. *Public Management Review*, **18**, 1-19.
- Halachmi, A. (1986). 'Strategic planning and management? Not necessarily'. *Public Productivity Review*, **10**, 35-50.
- Hall, T. E., and O'Toole Jr., L. J. (2000). "Structures for policy implementation: An analysis of national legislation, 1965-1966 and 1993-1994." *Administration & Society*, **31**, 667-686.
- Hax, A. C., and Majluf, N. S. (1996). *The Strategy Concept and Process: A Pragmatic Approach*, Vol. 2. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Hjern, B., and Porter, D. O. (1981). "Implementation structures: A new unit of administrative analysis." *Organization Studies*, **2**, 211-227.
- Hofer, C. W. (1977). *Strategy Formulation: Analytical Concepts*. St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Company.
- Hornstein, H. A. (2015). 'The integration of project management and organizational change management is now a necessity'. *International Journal of Project Management*, **33**, 291-298.
- Jarzabkowski, P. & Spee, A. P. (2009). Strategy-as-practice: A review and future directions for the field. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, **11**, 69-95.
- Jauch, L. R., and Glueck, W. F. (1988). *Business Policy and Strategic Management*. McGraw-Hill.
- Kalali, N. S., Anvari, M. R. A., Pourezat, A. A., and Dastjerdi, D. K. (2011). "Why does strategic plans implementation fail? A study in the health service sector of Iran." *African Journal of Business Management*, **5**, 9831-9837.
- Kenis, P., and Schneider, V. (1991). 'Policy networks and policy analysis: Scrutinizing a new analytical toolbox'. *Policy Networks: Empirical Evidence and Theoretical Considerations*. Campus Verlag.
- King, W. R. (1982). 'Using strategic issue analysis'. *Long Range Planning*, **15**, 45-49.
- Klijin, E. H., and Koppenjan, J. (2020). 'Debate: Strategic planning after the governance revolution', *Public Money & Management*, **40**, 260-261.
- Kobarg, S., Wollersheim, J., Welpel, I. M., & Spörrle, M. (2017). 'Individual ambidexterity and performance in the public sector: A multilevel analysis'. *International Public Management Journal*, **20**, 226-260.
- Kolodny, H., (2004). 'Integrating project and change management'. Visiting Speaker Series. John Molson School of Business, Concordia University, (Friday, April 9).
- Kotter, J.P., (1996). *Leading Change*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

- Kruger, W. (1996). 'Implementation: The core task of change management'. *CEMS Business Review*, **1**.
- Langley, A. (2007). 'Process thinking in strategic organization'. *Strategic Organization*, **5**, 271.
- Langley, A., Smallman, C., Tsoukas, H., & Van de Ven, A. H. (2013). 'Process studies of change in organization and management: Unveiling temporality, activity, and flow'. *Academy of Management Journal*, **56**, 1–13.
- Langley, A., & Tsoukas, H. (2010). 'Introducing "perspectives on process organization studies"'. *Process, Sensemaking, and Organizing*, **1**, 1–26.
- Lawrence, P. R., and Lorsch, J. W. (1967). 'Differentiation and integration in complex organizations.' *Administrative Science Quarterly*, **12**, 1-47.
- Lechner, C., and Kreutzer, M. (2011). 'Strategic initiatives: Past, present and future'. In P. Mazzola and F. Kellermans (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Strategy Process*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.
- Lerner, A. L. (1999). 'A strategic planning primer for higher education'. Accessed at <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.498.7012&rep=rep1&type=pdf> on December 8, 2019.
- Levasseur, R.E., (2010). 'People skills: Ensuring project success: A change management perspective'. *Interfaces*, **40**, 159–162.
- Lowndes, V., and Wilson, D. (2003). 'Balancing revisability and robustness? A new institutionalist perspective on local government modernization'. *Public Administration*, **81**, 275–98.
- Mandell, M. P. (1994). 'Managing interdependencies through program structures: A revised paradigm'. *The American Review of Public Administration*, **24**, 99-121.
- Meier, K. J., O'Toole, Jr., L. J., Boyne, G. A., and Walker, R. M. (2007). 'Strategic management and the performance of public organizations: Testing venerable ideas against recent theories'. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, **17**, 357–377.
- Miles, R. E., and Snow, C. C. (1978). *Organizational Strategy, Structure, and Process*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Miller, S. (1997). 'Implementing strategic decisions: Four key success factors'. *Organization Studies*, **18**, 577-602.
- Milliken, F. J. (1990). 'Perceiving and interpreting environmental change: An examination of college administrators' interpretation of changing demographics'. *Academy of Management Journal*, **33**, 42-63.
- Mintzberg, H. (1994). *Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning*. New York: The Free Press.

- Mintzberg, H., and Waters, J. A. (1985). 'Of strategies, deliberate and emergent'. *Strategic Management Journal*, **6**, 257-272.
- Mitchell, D. (2019). "It all depends, but on what? Testing contingency in public strategic implementation." *Public Performance & Management Review*, **42**, 783-807.
- Monahan, G. (2008). *Enterprise Risk Management: A Methodology for Achieving Strategic Objectives*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Moore, M. H. (1995). *Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government*. Harvard University Press.
- Moran, J.W., and Brightman, B.K. (2001). Leading organizational change. *Career Dev. Int.*, **6**, 111–118.
- Nutt, P. C. (1989). 'Selecting Tactics to Implement Strategic Plans'. *Strategic Management Journal*, **10**, 145-161.
- Nutt, P. C., and Backoff, R. W. (1993). 'Organizational publicness and its implications for strategic management'. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, **3**, 209-231.
- Okumus, F. (2003). 'A Framework to Implement Strategies in Organizations'. *Management Decision*, **41**, 871-882.
- Osborne, S. P. (2010). *The New Public Governance: Emerging Perspectives on the Theory and Practice of Public Governance*. London: Routledge.
- Osborne, S. P. (2018). 'From public service-dominant logic to public service logic: Are public service organizations capable of co-production and value co-creation?' *Public Management Review*, **20**, 225-231.
- Palm, K., & Lilja, J. (2017). 'Key enabling factors for organizational ambidexterity in the public sector'. *International Journal of Quality and Service Sciences*, **9**, 2-20.
- Pellegrinelli, S., and Bowman, C. (1994). 'Implementing strategy through projects'. *Long Range Planning*, **27**, 125-132.
- Pinto, J. K., and Prescott, J. E. (1988). 'Variations in critical success factors over the stages in the project life cycle'. *Journal of Management*, **14**, 5-18.
- Poister, T. (2010). 'The future of strategic planning in the public sector: Linking strategic management and performance'. *Public Administration Review*, **70**, S246-S254.
- Poister, T., and Streib, G. (1999). 'Strategic management in the public sector'. *Public Productivity and Management Review*, **22**, 308–325.
- Poister, T., and Streib, G. (2005). 'Elements of strategic planning and management in municipal government: Status after two decades'. *Public Administration Review*, **65**, 45-56.

- Porter, M. E. (1980). *Competitive Strategy: Techniques for Analyzing Industries and Competitors*. Free Press.
- Powell, W. W., and DiMaggio, P. J. (1991). *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Pressman, J. L., and Wildavsky, A. (1973). *Implementation: How Great Expectations in Washington are Dashed in Oakland*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Quinn, J. B. (1980). *Strategies for Change: Logical Incrementalism*. Chicago: Irwin Professional Publishing.
- Ramos-Rodriguez, A., and Ruiz-Navarro, J. (2004). 'Changes in the intellectual structure of strategic management research: A bibliometric study of the *Strategic Management Journal*, 1980-2000'. *Strategic Management Journal*, **25**, 981-1004.
- Richmond, B. (1997). 'The strategic forum: Aligning objectives, strategy and process'. *System Dynamics Review: The Journal of the System Dynamics Society*, **13**, 131-148.
- Sabatier, P. A. (1986). 'Top-down and bottom-up approaches to implementation research: A critical analysis and suggested synthesis'. *Journal of Public Policy*, **6**, 21-48.
- Sadler, P. (2003). *Strategic Management*, 2nd ed. Sterling, VA: Kogan Page.
- Sandfort, J., and Moulton, S. (2014). *Effective Implementation in Practice: Integrating Public Policy and Management*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Scanlon, J. W., Horst, P., Nay, J. N., Schmidt, R. E., and Waller, A. E. (1977). 'Evaluability assessment: Avoiding type III and IV errors'. In G. R. Gilbert and P. J. Conklin (Eds.), *Evaluation Management: A Source Book of Readings*. Civil Service Commission, Bureau of Training.
- Smith, T. B. (1973). 'The policy implementation process'. *Policy Sciences*, **4**, 197-209.
- Smith, E., & Umans, T. (2015). 'Organizational ambidexterity at the local government level: The effects of managerial focus'. *Public Management Review*, **17**, 812-833.
- Steiss, A. W. (2003). *Strategic Management for Public and Nonprofit Organizations*. New York: Marcel Dekker.
- Stone, D. (2012). *Policy Paradox, The Art of Political Decision Making*, 3rd ed. New York: W.W. Norton Company.
- Suddaby, R., Seidl, D., & Lê, J. K. (2013). 'Strategy-as-practice meets neo-institutional theory'. *Strategic Organization*, **11**, 329-344.
- Thomas, J. B., Clark, S. M., and Gioia, D. A. (1993). 'Strategic sensemaking and organizational performance: Linkages among scanning, interpretation, action, and outcomes'. *Academy of Management Journal*, **36**, 239-270.

- Tsai, H. T. and Ren, S. (2019). 'Antecedents of strategic ambidexterity in the context of internationalisation: A panel study of Taiwan Small and median-sized enterprises'. *Technology Analysis & Strategic Management*, **31**, 986-1001.
- Tsoukas, H., & Chia, R. (2002). 'On organizational becoming: Rethinking organizational change'. *Organization Science*, **13**, 567–582.
- Van Cauwenbergh, A., and Cool, K. (1982). "Strategic management in a new framework". *Strategic Management Journal*, **3**, 245-264.
- Van de Ven, A. H. (1992). 'Suggestions for studying strategy process: A research note'. *Strategic Management Journal*, **13**, 169–188.
- Vinzant, D. H., and Vinzant, J. (1996). 'Strategy and organizational capacity: Finding a fit'. *Public Productivity and Management Review*, **20**, 139–157.
- Walker, R. M. (2013). 'Strategic management and performance in public organizations: Findings from the Miles and Snow framework'. *Public Administration Review*, **73**, 675-685.
- Weick, K. E. (1979). *The Social Psychology of Organizing*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Wechsler, B., and Backoff, R. W. (1986). 'Policy making and administration in state agencies: Strategic management approaches'. *Public Administration Review*, **46**, 321-327.
- Whittington, R. (2017). 'Strategy as practice, process, and institution: Turning toward activity'. In A. Langley and H. Tsoukas (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Process Organization Studies*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Wholey, J. S. (1979). *Evaluation: Promise and Performance*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.