



Strategy as practice at 30: Humanist and post-humanist

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ABSTRACT

Thirty years after *Long Range Planning* published the first article in the field, this Perspective proposes a continuum for Strategy as Practice (SAP) research, stretching from humanist to post-humanist. Post-humanism is increasingly relevant in the face of Artificial Intelligence and climate change and demonstrates SAP's capacity to continuously renew itself.

1. Introduction

It's thirty years since *Long Range Planning* published a five-page 'report' article with the title "Strategy as Practice" (Whittington, 1996). The article coined the term Strategy as Practice (SAP) to map out a new terrain distinct from established Strategy as Planning, Strategy as Policy and Strategy as Process streams of research. By contrast with the other streams, Strategy as Practice would be "concerned with how strategists 'strategize'" (Whittington, 1996: 732). That short article certainly had an impact - it has well over 2000 Google Scholar citations – and it helped establish a highly productive research community. There have been Strategy as Practice special issues at the *British Journal of Management*, *Business History*, *Human Relations*, the *Journal of Management Studies*, *Long Range Planning*, *Organization Studies* and the *Strategic Management Journal*. Grossman-Hensel et al.'s (2026) *Encyclopedia of Strategy as Practice* has 186 entries by 218 scholars located in 26 countries.

However, there are differences within SAP. This Perspective article identifies a continuum between two theoretical poles. At one end is a well-established humanist pole, placing humans at the centre and concerned with what people do with the various social practices and material resources available to them. At the other end is an emergent post-humanist pole: less defined for now, post-humanism decentres the human actor and introduces the nonhuman (e.g. technology and the natural environment) as potentially equivalent sources of agency. The aim is not to promote one pole over the other, but to help SAP scholars be more reflexive about the first and to give form to the second. The continuum between these poles offers a wide range of theoretical possibilities, allowing scholars to place themselves differently according to the specific research question they have in hand. As in the title of this Perspective, SAP can be both humanist and post-humanist. However, changes in the contemporary world, from Artificial Intelligence to climate change, give the post-humanist strand a newly urgent agenda.

The next section introduces the double decentring of practice theory, first of organizations and then of humans. The following section outlines four key dimensions along which humanist and post-humanist positions in SAP vary. The concluding discussion brings together implications for research methodology, practitioner development and organizational strategy. This conclusion runs against fears that the maturity of three decades implies exhaustion, compelling SAP to look outside strategy *per se* for new ideas and issues to pursue (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022). Immersed in a changing world, and theoretically responsive, Strategy-as-Practice shows a continuing capacity to renew itself. SAP is 30 years young.

I thank Paula Jarzabkowski, David Seidl, Violetta Splitter, the reviewers and the editor, Tom Lawton, for their comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this Perspective.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lrp.2026.102673>

Received 13 March 2026; Received in revised form 22 July 2026; Accepted 22 July 2026

Available online 24 July 2026

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2. A double decentring

Li and Jarzabkowski (2025: 1) recall how Strategy as Practice “started as a ‘radical’ movement offering an alternative view to traditional economics-based strategy research”. The heart of this alternative view was a fundamental decentring of organizations and the promotion of human actors in their place (Whittington, 2007). The focus shifted from the performance of organizations to the performance of people. Humans took centre stage in strategy.

The theoretical inspiration for this centring on the human was the work in the 1970s and 1980s of first-generation practice theorists such as Bourdieu, de Certeau and Giddens. Their humanism lay in a strong emphasis on human agency – minimally, the independent capacity to affect change – contra the deterministic social theories prevailing before (Gherardi, 2025). Thus, De Certeau (1984) celebrated the opportunistic agency of the “ordinary man” as he negotiated the constraints of urban spaces and domestic arrangements, while Bourdieu (1977) likened social life to a card game, where the hands that are dealt can be played differently according to the skills of the players. Drawing on Bourdieu, Whittington (1996: 732) focused on human skills, proposing that “the practice perspective on strategy shifts concern from the core competence of the corporation to the practical competence of the manager as strategist”. This shift from the corporation to the strategist stamped SAP with humanism right from the start.

Later generations of practice theorists have pushed for a second decentring, challenging human actors' special place in action (e.g. Barad, 2003; Gherardi, 2025). This post-humanist impulse does not deny the human, only rejects the anthropocentrism of earlier practice theories. For example, Actor-Network Theory both displaces and dissolves the human. The displacement of the human actor comes by adding the material – e.g. technology and nature – as potentially an equivalently impactful actant in the world. A concrete “sleeping policeman” across a road can have as much effect on traffic as an alert human policeman beside the road (Latour, 1996). At the same time, Actor-Network Theory dissolves the boundaries of the human. Callon and Law (1997) imagine the indefinite figure of “Andrew-the-Strategist”, whose agency is situated not in some unambiguous self but in a heterogeneous and spatially-diffuse network of trains, laptop computers, fax machines, offices and colleagues of which Andrew is only a part.

Contemporary technological and environmental developments only accentuate this decentring of the human. Artificial Intelligence has become “agentic” in its ability first to create logical plans for the achievement of goals and then to enact those plans without human intervention. AI even advises on strategy: the large British bank Lloyds deploys a “board bot” that checks for bias in top-level decision-making. Nature too is an actor, not only in its physical power but with a personhood increasingly acknowledged in law: rivers and species can now be legal persons. The British companies House of Hackney and Faith in Nature give “nature” formal board positions. In today's world, humans are not so special.

As in later examples, many SAP studies already exhibit elements of posthumanism, even if not expressed as such (Dameron et al., 2015). Indeed, some SAP scholars are now more explicit in moving towards post-humanism, albeit taking one aspect at a time. Thus Jarzabkowski et al. (2026) extend the set of strategic stakeholders beyond the human to include “more-than-human” actors such as ecosystems and natural resources. Myllykoski and Rantakari (2024) adopt the post-humanist label explicitly in studying how a company's managers grant agency to the materiality of their software products. This Perspective develops a comprehensive post-humanist frame, so that all aspects of materiality – e.g. technologies, space and nature – can be seen together as equivalent in their potential for actorhood. This frame resists reflex anthropocentrism, helping SAP scholars be more conscious in their choices about which of many possible and intertangled actors they emphasize. Moreover, by articulating an explicit and coherent post-humanism, the frame responds to some of the most pressing challenges of our times. As nature becomes fiercer, and technology more intrusive, SAP needs to incorporate the nonhuman more fully in its theorizing.

3. Humanist and post-humanist poles in SAP

The decentring first of organizations and then of humans establishes for SAP two theoretical poles: humanist and post-humanist.

Table 1

SAP's humanist/post-humanist continuum.

	Humanist SAP	Post-Humanist SAP
Human Actors	Central (e.g. managers, strategy consultants, employees etc)	Decentred: displaced and dissolved
Empirical Focus	Activity (e.g. strategizing, planning, organizing etc)	Practices (e.g. discursive, spatial, sociomaterial etc)
Materiality	External resources: interactive with humans	Constituting actants: intra-active combinations
Action Source	Human characteristics (e.g. competency, emotion, identity, values, power)	Heterogeneous networks (embracing human and material actants)

The two poles share many assumptions and there is a continuum between. Practice theories of all kinds are fundamentally concerned with the hidden infrastructures of social life and in this respect they have in common at least some recognition of the nonhuman. Differences are a matter of degree. As Maller (2025) suggests, the theoretical distinctions between the poles follow a gradient according to the relative importance they afford to human actors. Post-humanism does not negate the human; it just gives the nonhuman a larger role on this gradient.

Setting out these poles makes two contributions therefore. First, defining the poles help articulate their constituent dimensions, especially for post-humanism whose features are still emergent in SAP. Second, demarcating the two poles provides scholars with reference points for their own work: they can specify where they stand on the gradient between the two ends of the continuum. Appropriate positions depend upon the empirical investigation in hand. The two poles are less about dividing SAP than spelling out dimensions and clarifying scholarly positions. There are lively research agendas to be found all along the continuum. Humanism and post-humanism are big tents, each with internal differences of their own.

While acknowledging internal differences, Table 1 proposes four key dimensions of humanism and post-humanism relevant to SAP. The first and most fundamental dimension regards different understandings of the human actor. The other three dimensions – empirical focus, materiality and sources of action – are interrelated consequences of the first. The centrality of the human actor in humanism leads naturally to a focus on activity, the externalization of materiality and the tracing of action to human characteristics and endeavours. The post-humanist decentring of the human actor implies a prioritisation of practices, the internalization of materiality and the location of action in heterogeneous networks. These dimensional differences have methodological, developmental and strategic implications.

3.1. Human actors

As earlier, SAP had a strong humanist stamp right from the start. In what became a cliché, strategy was defined as “something that people do” (Whittington, 2004: 62). For Johnson et al. (2003), the resulting research objective was simple: “The micro-strategy and strategizing perspective should be practical, capable of actually helping managers do their work differently” (Johnson et al., 2003: 13). There is a moral contract here. The pledge of more practical help is due exchange for the course fees paid by the managers – present or future – seated in our classrooms. Student fees pay for SAP research. And managers give up organizational time by granting research access.

This moral contract stands: we still owe students and managers practical help. However, since the early days, SAP research has broadened the set of relevant human actors (Jarzabkowski et al., 2025). Now SAP embraces other strategy professionals such as strategy consultants (Whittington, 2019) as well as the lower-level employees increasingly sucked into Open Strategy (Hautz et al., 2017). The sensitivity to agency exemplified by de Certeau's “ordinary man” helps reveal both the role of frontline workers in the realization of strategy (Balogun et al., 2015) and the unmanaged, bottom-up employee initiatives that sometimes crystalize into formal strategic processes (Stjerne et al., 2024). More people are producing strategy and more people are consuming it than initially understood. SAP's original promise to managers now includes a much larger set of human actors needing help in strategy influence and interpretation. SAP has a continuing responsibility to these various actors.

For post-humanists, however, the material displaces humans from their exclusive actorhood and dissolves their discrete individuality. In doing so, post-humanism does not delete the human, only offers a more comprehensive understanding of what it takes to be a strategic actor. Managers, consultants and employees are more than discrete individuals. As for Callon and Law's (1997) *Andrew-the-Strategist*, they are parts of the diffuse networks of technologies (faxes and computers) and places (offices and trains) which together allow for agency. Technologies and places are “more than human” elements that shift SAP along the gradient from pure humanism. The humanist impulse to help managers, consultants or employees remains a worthy one. It is just that recognizing the material infrastructure of actorhood changes how SAP undertakes its responsibility to these actors. The development of strategy skills cannot rely only on isolated classrooms or textbook abstractions. Help needs delivering where strategy is practised, in the midst of all the people, technologies and spaces involved (Splitter et al., 2024). From a more post-humanist perspective, crucial developmental techniques are forms of action research and coaching that are attentive to the diffuse networks through which strategy work occurs. Strategist skill involves not only formal analytical frameworks, but technologies, space and colleagues. Putting humans exclusively at the centre side-lines a good deal of what makes them effective. For post-humanists, SAP's responsibility to human actors is more completely served by their decentring.

3.2. Empirical focus

SAP scholars' original humanism lent itself to a strong empirical focus on human activity. The foundational *Journal of Management Studies* special issue (Johnson et al., 2003) had the sub-title “Towards an Activity-Based View”. This fascination with activity is reflected in SAP's fondness for the “ing-thing”, the gerundive verb form denoting action. “Strategizing” was a recurring motif in Whittington (1996), reinforced by a prolific use of other gerunds: “Practice is concerned with the work of strategizing—all the meeting, the talking, the form-filling and the number-crunching by which strategy actually gets formulated and implemented” (Whittington, 1996: 732). Jarzabkowski et al. (2007) chose “strategizing” as the title for their influential *Human Relations* special issue.

Strategizing works well as a mobilizing slogan for SAP and, as empirical phenomenon, activity is indeed an appropriate starting-point for research. There is a rich humanist tradition of close examination of snatches of managerial talk or decisive interventions in the moment. However, within practice theory, activity is limited as a concept (Rouleau and Cloutier, 2022; Seidl et al., 2024), tending to emphasize the idiosyncratic. As a minimum, therefore, post-humanism requires detachment from the surface busyness of human

activity, prioritising instead the more abstract concept of practices: i.e. routines, patterns or norms of action characterized by sociomateriality and with a shared and repeated nature that endows them with generality. The original practices-praxis-practitioners framework (Whittington, 2002) was proposed precisely to reconceptualize activity in terms of practices. Activity is fundamentally praxis, specific instantiations of more general practices. Importantly, these practices are spatially and temporally extensive. The close examination of moments of human praxis remains a distinguishing strength of SAP research but, as praxis, it is always something more than the local and momentary. Accordingly, post-humanism's minimal commitment is to the extensiveness of practices, encouraging observation across time and organizations. Comparative analysis rather than single instances becomes the preferred method. It is in its reflection of the general that praxis becomes significant: underlying practices - the use of consultants, Open Strategy or reliance on AI - have widespread and continuing repercussions in society. Responding to Jarzabkowski et al.'s (2021) call for consequentiality, the post-humanist move from specific activity to general practices is fundamental for SAP's significance.

However, stronger forms of post-humanism give practices a deeper role. Practices are more than shared and repeated patterns of activity; they enter the actors who enact them. Here practice theory departs from cognitivist approaches in which action depends on the information-processing capacities of the human brain (Seidl et al., 2026). When focusing on the human, post-humanists are concerned with sociological actors not biological individuals. Humans are the products of the practices that come before: they are defined by the shared values, habits and routines they engage with over the course of their lives (Whittington, 2025). The very term "practitioner" has practices embedded within it. In an important forerunner to SAP, Knights and Morgan (1991) showed how strategy's evolving discursive practices have shaped managers' subjectivities, in the late twentieth century rendering them as accountable subjects whose strategic responsibilities are thoroughly internalised. Similarly, practitioners have tacit knowledge about how to perform strategy practices inscribed into their very bodies (Tsoukas, 2026). In leading a strategy meeting, a seasoned executive's body will follow established norms of prominent positioning, authoritative tone of voice and gestural confidence without conscious thought. Humans are the embodiment of prior practices. For post-humanists, therefore, any empirical focus on the human requires for completeness examination of the practices that form them. Important are actors' "practice biographies", the accumulated practices absorbed during their past trajectories through life. This insinuation of practices into the human actor is still more recognizable in post-humanist understandings of materiality.

3.3. Materiality

Even when leaning towards humanism, SAP scholars have always acknowledged the material. Whittington (2007: 1576) adds materiality in defining strategy as "something that people do, with stuff, in societies". Here "stuff" includes flipcharts, computers and software and strategy is something done in interaction *with* these materials. Jarzabkowski et al. (2015) extend this humanist recognition of material stuff to show how insurance agents use space and bodies in their strategizing. In such humanist-leaning accounts, the material is an external resource to be used or "drawn upon". For humanists, stuff is an accessory in strategy, lying out there in the world ready to be activated at the right moment. The material is the servant of the human.

Post-humanist perspectives tend towards a fuller incorporation of the material in two senses. First, like Actor-Network Theory's sleeping policeman, the material can be an actant in its own right. Thus a strategic planning document can have "textual agency" of its own, a "force potential" that changes events (Vaara et al., 2010). Today, AI too is becoming a material actant in strategy, carrying out research, producing reports, acting as sparring partner and evaluating options. Such materials work in complex ways. Werle and Seidl (2015) show how basic material technologies such as white-boards, Post-it notes, pens and PowerPoints influence the generation of paper and digital charts which in turn shape how managers conceptualize and finally determine their strategies. In Werle and Seidl's (2015) case, a whole set of materials is involved in scripting strategy, while also being mixed with discursive concepts such as "flexible production", the physical locations of strategy workshops, the technologies of phone conferencing and the managers' own self-identification as strategists. As here, materials are typically entangled with many practices and actants. For post-humanists, little is stand-alone and the material is more than optional accessory. Practices are not social or material but sociomaterial.

The second post-humanist incorporation of the material is one in which actors are expressions not just of practices, but specifically sociomaterial practices. Sociomateriality is internal to the actor, rather than external. Artificial Intelligence epitomizes this mutual constitution of the human and the nonhuman. As AI interrogations join the internal dialogues taking place within decision-makers' own heads, the technology merges with the human individuals themselves. As AI chatbots participate in practitioners' discussions, they become a part of strategy teams. AI and humans do not simply interact *with* each other; their agency is produced by "intra-action" *within* the combination of actants. Andrew-the-Strategist's agency now combines AI, video conferencing, enterprise systems and much, much more. Post-humanist practice theory, blurring the lines between human and nonhuman, anticipates the emergence of today's strategy cyborgs.

3.4. Action source

Humanist practice theory traces action to the agency of human actors, part of the reaction against older determinisms. Such practitioner agency is a consistent thread through SAP. For example, in introducing activity theory to SAP, Jarzabkowski (2010: 138) proposes that "the language of strategy is, at its heart, a language of choice, agency and intentionality ... Practitioners purposively construct themselves as strategic actors ...". Whittington's (2019) study of the evolving strategy profession insists that managers and consultants are agents in the sense that they can improvise on established strategy practices and even innovate through the creation of new practices. In humanist versions of SAP, therefore, the human actor is the primary source of action, whether in strategic choice or the creation of new practices.

Given this emphasis on human agency, humanist SAP scholars often attribute action to practitioners' personal characteristics, whether competence, emotion, identity, power or values. As in Jarzabkowski's (2010) activity theory, such personal characteristics are not individualised but exist always in relation to other human actors, artefacts and practices. Nevertheless, actions remain significantly shaped by practitioners' emotions, identities and values, while their impacts are enabled or constrained by their competence and power. For humanist-leaning SAP scholars research priorities therefore include the control of emotion, the forming of identity, the influence of values, the development of competence and the gaining of power in strategy (Mantere and Whittington, 2021; Splitter et al., 2024).

Post-humanism, of course, makes the human less central in strategy, with significant implications for action. For example, Actor-Network Theory's heterogeneous networks – where humans, technology and nature are equivalent and mutually dependent – relativise the impact of human characteristics such as competence, emotion, identity or values. Humans' powers to shape the world appear much smaller; material forces loom larger. The post-humanist move introduces new actors while complexifying the human. Thus Jarzabkowski et al. (2026) point to how the Open Strategy literature has neglected nonhuman entities such as rivers, forests and species, all increasingly represented in strategy by formal proxies. Nature is a source of action too. The same neglect is true for the Strategy-as-Practice literature more broadly. As SAP scholars move from the humanist pole towards the post-human, so do nature and technology take larger roles in action. As human agency's reliance on diffuse and heterogeneous networks becomes more evident, so do individuals appear less determinant in their impact upon organizational strategy. The human actor is no longer the single lever. For post-humanists, strategic agency is diffuse and constrained.

4. Conclusions

This Perspective article has outlined two poles for SAP researchers: humanism decentres the organization; post-humanism decentres the human. In establishing the two poles, the article offers an organizing frame for SAP's approach to the material, but it does not place one unreservedly over the other. Both poles have different strengths. Humanism motivates a moral responsibility for the developmental needs of the practitioners who are present in our classrooms: here human characteristics such as competence, identity and values are all valid parts of the response. There is moreover a gradient between humanism and post-humanism along which scholars can orientate themselves differently according to topic. It is possible to place provisional brackets around some aspects of a complex reality while concentrating on others. What gets bracketed depends on the consequential variations of the phenomena in hand. Thus, a study of entrepreneurial pitching practices might adopt a more humanistic focus on the entrepreneurs' varied personal characteristics while temporarily bracketing presentational technologies and spaces that are broadly standard. Conversely, a study of management teams across a large multinational would recognize the importance of space and communications and hence give analytical prominence to physical locations and digital collaboration tools. The point is to be reflexive about what is bracketed in and what is bracketed out. Editors and reviewers can ask authors to explain their positions on the continuum between humanism and post-humanism.

The Perspective also offers more definition to the nascent post-humanist strand of SAP research. Post-humanist SAP decentres the human and emphasises practices, diffuse networks and materiality. Strategy is no longer something that just humans do. New actors - e. g. technology, nature and space – enter the stage. Key research questions include how such nonhuman actors operate within the strategy process: e.g. how is nature represented and AI involved? For research methodology, post-humanism implies a focus on sociomaterial practices tracked comparatively over time and across organizations; a readiness to trace agency through both human and nonhuman links in relevant networks; and a concern for the accumulated experience embedded in practitioners' practice biographies. In developing strategists, this post-humanist perspective implies coaching or action research approaches, attending to the heterogeneity of relevant networks and delivered at the sites of practice. Strategist skill lies not just in the cognitive mastery of analytical frameworks, but in the capacity to mobilise the body, colleagues, technology and space. Finally, post-humanism moderates expectations of the practitioner's impact on organizations, being filtered through networks and offset by the materialities of technology, space and nature. Networks enmesh as well as enable.

There is great potential in a more explicit post-humanism for SAP. It reflects aspects of our world – especially the impact of materiality – that, once made visible, are hard to unsee. Moreover, it responds to urgent issues of today, particularly Artificial Intelligence and climate change. Introducing post-humanism also answers doubts about the continuing vigour of the SAP agenda as it enters the maturity of its fourth decade (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022). Strategy as Practice continuously regenerates itself as new issues and new theoretical perspectives emerge. As at the start, SAP's first 30 years have already been highly productive. SAP has proven itself plenty able to seize the research opportunities of the future as well.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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