Bridging the gap between researcher and practitioner in the field of *Strategy as Practice.* A toolbox put together step by step

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ABSTRACT

How is strategy produced? This is a question that the 'strategy as practice' (SAP) current of thought has been trying to answer since the early 2000s, emphasising the importance of connecting strategic decision-making with the context of its production.

Particular attention is paid to the practitioners, who are the main beneficiaries of the work of the SAP approach. This implies close collaboration between researchers and practitioners, which tends to challenge the traditional axiological neutrality of the researcher. Apart from a necessary epistemological discussion, we need to question the researcher's project and ethic. How may we reconcile epistemology, method, data-collection technique, and the researcher's ethic?

In this context, the aim of this article is to show how the rapprochement of researcher and practitioner may be organized. The case studied allows us to place these questions in a real-life context and open up avenues for further thought on the part of both researchers and practitioners.

INTRODUCTION

How is strategy produced? This is a question that the 'strategy as practice' (SAP) current of thought has been trying to answer since the early 2000s, emphasising the importance of connecting strategic decision-making with the context of its production. It involves studying strategy while it is being produced, by positioning the researchers as close as possible to the practitioners so that the former may observe what the latter do.

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The SAP approach thus falls within a perspective of renewing the questioning connected with strategy, and to do this it places its research as close as possible to actions and decisions on the scale of the individual that take the form of diverse activities culminating in the production of a strategy. It is these micro-activities that are the subject of research (Johnson et al., 2003). Nevertheless, observing these micro-activities does not prevent us from acknowledging that the practices are immersed in a context that is rich (socially, institutionally, ideologically, politically, etc.) which exerts its own influence on them (Seidl & Whittington, 2014; Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Johnson et al., 2003).

Particular attention is paid to the practitioners, who are the main beneficiaries of the work of the SAP approach (Balogun et al., 2015). This implies close collaboration between researchers and practitioners (Whittington, 1996; Johnson et al., 2003; Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Balogun et al., 2015), which tends to challenge the traditional axiological neutrality of the researcher (Weber, 1965). In this context, the aim of this article is to show how the rapprochement of researcher and practitioner may be organised.

The stated desire of the SAP approach to bring researcher and practitioner closer together leads to questioning the place of the researcher in his/her research field. If researcher and practitioner co-produce knowledge, how is the validity of that knowledge to be assessed? What of the axiological neutrality of the researcher? Apart from a necessary epistemological discussion, we need to question the researcher's project and ethic. How may we reconcile epistemology, method, data-collection technique, and the researcher's ethic? The case studied allows us to place these questions in a real-life context and open up avenues for further thought on the part of both researchers and practitioners.

To show how researcher and practitioner may be brought closer together in the context of the SAP approach, we shall begin by tracing the outlines of this approach (1). We shall then go on to present the case of a strategy during a production stage involving the rapprochement of

researcher and practitioner (2). On the basis of this case, we shall go on to discuss the epistemological, methodological and ethical implications of the 'strategy as practice' (SAP) approach (3). This will lead us to question the validity of the research and the place of the researcher in strategic management committed to this approach, and to propose a framework for further consideration for testing the validity of the knowledge produced in the SAP field.

STRATEGY AS PRACTICE

Strategy is not a disembodied activity on the part of organisations. It is the product of human actions immersed in a network of social interactions that are themselves influenced by political, organisational, material, technological, social, psychological, etc., parameters. Understanding this property of strategy makes it possible to define its limits: strategy is both made possible and limited by its context.

How is strategy drawn up?

The 'strategy as practice' (SAP) current of thought is concerned with the way in which strategy is devised rather than with the results of strategic decisions (Chia and Holt, 2006). Why is it that drawing up a strategy is an activity that falls within the scope of social interaction, far removed from the rational activity we like to think it is? We need to move beyond the image of the manager drawing up his plan of strategic actions with a small group of employees who then pass his instructions on to their subordinates (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007). A strategy is as much the fruit of context and planning (Ansoff, 1965; Chandler, 1962) as of rational choices (Porter, 1980). We are not interested so much as in why a particular strategy has been chosen as in understanding how the choice came to be made (Whittington, 2006). In this sense the SAP approach is in keeping with Mintzberg's work on the triple dimension of strategy (Mintzberg, 1978), although the connection is rarely

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made explicitly (Carter et al., 2008).

The SAP approach explores an organisation's process of drawing up strategy not on the basis of its visible results but by looking at the processes employed by the players (Johnson, Melin, & Whittington, 2003). This has three consequences, which have been highlighted by Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl, & Vaara (2015):

- Strategy is not a stable object that can be understood merely by observation. It is in perpetual flux; this statement echoes that made by Tsoukas and Chia (2002), who establish that change is in the very nature of an organisation.

- Strategy is not drawn up on a single scale, that of the organisation (meso). It is equally present at the level of individuals (micro) and institutions (macro). Consequently, the process of its elaboration cannot be located specifically within the organisation.

- Strategy is the product of interactions between players both inside and outside the organisation; this means it has a social dimension. Thus the approach draws largely on sociological work (Bourdieu, 2000; Certeau, 1990; Giddens, 1984) that has attempted to show how everyday actions contribute to maintaining, reproducing and transforming social structures (institutions, roles, rules, representations, etc.), which themselves influence the same everyday actions. The perceived reality takes the form of a social construct, as Berger & Luckmann (1991) pointed out in the mid-1960s.

The SAP approach is in keeping with the "practical turn" (Cetina, Schatzki, & Savigny, 2005) that shows that individual actions are immersed in a social context and that each influences the others (Schatzki, 2005; Whittington, 2006; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Practices within an organisation are influenced by external practices, and vice versa (Whittington, 2006). This contextualisation of strategy through a practical approach helps to emphasise the human dimension that is a feature of any social construct (Berger & Luckmann, 1991) and make it possible to "see and value the complexity and dynamics of the socio-material world"

(Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011: 11).

Practitioners at the heart of practices

Studying strategy on the scale of the individual contributes to acknowledging that strategy is the product of human actions ("human agency" - Whittington, 1992; Giddens, 1984), immersed in a social context and not an abstract property of the organisation or the product of a perfectly rational decision-making process (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). In simple terms, the programme of the SAP approach ultimately consists of putting the human being (both as an individual and as a social being) at the heart of strategy (Jarzabkowski, 2004; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Whittington, 2003), which makes the conception we may have of drawing up strategy considerably more complex.

The notion of 'practice' is rather vague and may be confusing (Corradi, Gherardi, & Verzelloni, 2010). Whittington (2006) defined a framework for research carried out in the SAP field: 'practice' may be divided into three main groups: "practice, praxis and practitioners". "Briefly, the distinction between praxis and practices follows Reckwitz's (2002: 249–251) interpretation of the dual sense of practice in social theory, both as something that guides activity and as activity itself. Accordingly, 'practices' will refer to shared routines of behaviour, including traditions, norms and procedures for thinking, acting and using 'things', this last in the broadest sense. By contrast, the Greek word 'praxis' refers to actual activity, what people do in practice. Practitioners are strategy's actors, the strategists who both perform this activity and carry its practices. The alliteration of the three concepts is intended to reinforce the sense of mutual connection." (Whittington, 2006: 619)

This definition emphasises the interdependence of the three concepts but probably makes insufficient mention of what forms the links between the three: practitioners (Balogun et al., 2015). It is the situated actions of the agents (the practitioners) that form praxis. The practices

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represent "ways of doing" that influence the practitioners' praxis. These "ways of doing" are the result of routines, procedures, norms, traditions, representations, tools, etc. It is nevertheless the practitioners who are the subject of the research since they co-produce actions aimed at achieving the organisation's survival through their capacity to improvise, experiment and project themselves into the future (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997). Practitioners co-construct the strategic activity through what they are, how they act (praxis) and the practices they mobilise in their actions (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007).

This involves actionable knowledge, making academic work converge with manager's specific concerns in order to offer "practical, actionable guidance to practitioners" (Johnson et al., 2003: 14), such as the way of leading a strategic reunion, organising adversarial debates to encourage organisational creativity, and devising work areas that facilitate collaboration.

More generally, it is a matter of enlightening strategic decision-making in an environment that is both highly uncertain and complex, and to contribute to the training of "reflective practitioners" (Johnson et al., 2003 quoting Schön, 1983).

This leads to close collaboration between practitioners and researchers (Whittington, 1996; Johnson et al., 2003; Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Balogun et al., 2015) because knowledge about organisations is not only produced in academic circles but also within the organisations themselves (Balogun et al., 2003). The aim of the SAP approach is therefore to produce actionable knowledge that is more about tools for reflexive practitioners than about good managerial practices for almost automatic implementation (Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008).

This close collaboration supposes a profound ontological break (Golsorkhi, Rouleau, & Vaara, 2015) which necessarily results in epistemological and methodological questioning (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Are we still able to make do with the existentialist vision of reality we find in

the positivist paradigm?

The type of ontology for the SAP approach

Proponents of the 'practical' current are calling for another concept of the nature of reality (ontology): "site ontology" for Schatzki (2005), "relational ontology" for Chia & Holt (2006), "practice ontology" for Feldman & Orlikowski (2011), "existential ontology" for Sandberg & Tsoukas (2011), "taller and flatter ontologies" for Seidl & Whittington (2014), "ontological societism" for (Orlikowski, 2015). Beyond the specific features of each approach, they all share – implicitly or explicitly – the three major principles of the practical current stated by Feldman and Orlikowski (2011):

- everyday actions produce the structural contours of social life;

- the rejection of a dualist approach to social reality (body/mind, structure/agency; individual/institutional; free will/determinism, etc);

- the principle of mutual influence ("relations of mutual constitution") that implies, for example, that practices influence institutions that themselves influence practices.

The ontological criticism raised by the 'practical' current is a long-standing one and proceeds from the supposed lack of pertinence of positivist epistemology in grasping the ideas behind research on management (Knights, 1992; Knights & Morgan, 1991). This criticism has been taken up and deepened (Chia & Holt, 2006; Chia & Rasche, 2009, 2015; Corradi et al., 2010; Cunliffe, 2015; Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011) although, paradoxically, a large quantity of research in the SAP field still relies on positivist epistemology (Carter et al., 2008; Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Corradi et al., 2010), which retains a high degree of legitimacy on the basis of the Aristotelian heritage that considers the construction of knowledge rests on the use of reason and confrontation with reality (Aristotle,

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2017).

The persistence of a positivist epistemology may also be explained by the duality of the notion of 'practice' (Corradi et al., 2010):

- this may take the form of an empirical manifestation (of a process, decision, etc) that may be observed. Here we return to a definition of "praxis" (Whittington, 2006) that suits work falling with a positivist framework;

- this notion of 'practice' may also be understood as a way of seeing things, a reflection on how knowledge is constructed (epistemology), precisely by practice, by action: "The basic idea is that knowledge is not something present in the heads of people; nor is it a strategic productive factor located in the organization's management: rather it is a 'knowledge-in-practice' constructed by practising in a context of interaction." (Corradi et al., 2010: 274)

The first meaning of the notion is compatible with a positivist epistemology, whereas the second is not. The ambiguity of the term allows this incompatibility to persist (Corradi et al., 2010). Sandberg and Tsoukas (2011) put forward a complementary explanation based on the coexistence of two forms of rationality: a scientific rationality that refers to a positivist epistemology, and a practical rationality that is more suited to understanding organisational problems because it contextualises them. "Therefore, what constitutes the logic of practice is not the epistemological subject-object relation but the entwinement of ourselves, others, and things in a relational whole, in the sense that we are always already engaged in specific socio-material practices." (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011: 345)

Sandberg and Tsoukas admit the complementarity of these two forms of rationality and recognise that scientific rationality (positivism) aims at objectivity. They nevertheless emphasise the simplistic, not to say caricatural, nature of this scientific rationality. Chia & Rasche (2009, 2015) put forward criticism of the same kind. They consider that a strategy

approach that is disconnected from the complex reality of practices (which may be summed up in the three principles already mentioned: Feldman & Orlikowski - 2011) leads to a 'naïve' approach to strategy "in that it does not take into account the fleeting, transient and shifting nature of competitive realities, whereby competitive advantage may last for only a short while" (Chia & Rasche, 2015: 55).

Ultimately, the matter of the choice of a rational or epistemological approach depends on the relationship there may be with the uncertainty connected with changes in the environment and the organisation (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Getting close to the practitioners promotes a realisation that they evolve in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world (Johansen, 2007; Vallat, 2016) where the traditional (positivist) tools of scientific (positivist) rationality are not particularly effective (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). A different epistemological approach would appear to be needed. This would involve:

- not limiting oneself to describing reality by seeking to simplify it (according to the second Cartesian principle: analysis);

- aiming to contextualise the problems by taking into account their immersion in a social reality made up of complex interactions and uncertainties (Grand, von Arx, & Rüegg-Stürm, 2015).

The consequences of such an approach are far-reaching for researchers since they question the validity of the knowledge produced (epistemology), their relationship with the field (method), and their data collection technique (methodology).

From a methodological point of view, the SAP approach valorises qualitative approaches of the ethnographical type (Balogun et al., 2003; Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Johnson et al., 2003; Balogun, Beech, & Johnson, 2015), regardless of the epistemological approach adopted. This is presented as a rupture with the practices used previously by researchers on strategy

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(Vaara & Whittington, 2012: 291). The problems become intelligible because they are observed and discussed in the field with the players (Balogun et al., 2003; Balogun, Beech, & Johnson, 2015).

The immersion of researchers in the field and the co-production of knowledge with practitioners involves reflexive feedback from the researchers on their work (Vaara, Whittington, 2012: 289) and a questioning of the validity of that work (Johnson et al., 2003; Nicolini, 2009). What heuristic scope can it have beyond providing the players with occasional specific assistance? We find here a dilemma that is characteristic of action research approaches – the dilemma of rigour and pertinence (Argyris & Schön, 1989): strong involvement in the field allows an excellent perception of the problems, but does it not veil the researcher's critical eye? Answering these questions is the purpose of this contribution.

A great deal of research in the SAP field provides very precise descriptions of practices (in a ethnological perspective according to the principles of "thick description" (Geertz, 2016: 3-30) and, on the basis of this, draws up explanatory models. For this research to be of actual use to the practitioners, however, it is essential to bridge the gap between scientific and practical rationalities (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011).

To sum up, it is necessary to question the way research is carried out so that the objectives of the SAP approach are consistent with the resources implemented to achieve it (Cunliffe, 2015), which implies close collaboration between researchers and practitioners (Balogun, Beech, & Johnson, 2015; Cunliffe, 2015; Grand et al., 2015). This is what we shall attempt to demonstrate in our case study.

THE 'PRACTICAL' CASE

In France, the health sector currently employs almost five million people – three million in health, social and medico-social services and establishments, plus two million in health industries (10% of the active population between the ages of 15 and 64; 1.2 million are

employed in the health sector, and nearly 1.7 million in the social and medico-social sector; Zanda and Funès, 2012).

The research field is an associative group comprising seventy health, social and medico-social establishments each with between 10 and 300 beds/places: establishments providing post-acute care and re-education, homes for dependent elderly people, homes for children with social needs, establishments and services with sheltered workshops, etc. The establishments are mainly located in the south of France and operate thanks to the activity of more than 2500 medical, paramedical, administrative, logistics, etc., staff (doctors, nurses, nursing assistants, specialised educators, re-education therapists, administrative and technical staff, etc).

Defining a digital strategy

The group's managing director wanted the heads of the establishments to start thinking about the implications of digital technology for their organisation's activities; he expressed this in the following terms: "I would like to think about the social networks and the Internet and discuss with the managers how they may be used to the advantage of the users, families, residents and patients of our institutions." The director was also certain of the need for jobs to be adapted and the organisation to change: "We are moving towards the organisation of a group in five to ten years' time which will be emerging from its infancy and entering an adult, professional age, capable of cultivating the service it provides."

This initial intention and the issue of what digital strategy to adopt resulted in research work with the group over a period of more than two years. As the authors of the SAP approach suggest, a qualitative study of the ethnographical type was carried out (Balogun et al., 2003; Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Johnson et al., 2003; Balogun, Beech, & Johnson, 2015;

Cunliffe, 2015; Grand et al., 2015); it consisted of about a hundred hours' presence in the field for two researchers, about eighty hours being devoted to work sessions with the managing director and managers at the group's headquarters and the heads of the establishments in the group, twelve hours to informal meetings with the same people (mainly over lunch with members of the working party), and six hours to three individual interviews with the managing director.

Getting closer to the practitioners

To be as close as possible to practitioners and their practices, it is suggested that the production of knowledge in the field should be the result of collaboration between practitioners and researchers (Johnson et al., 2003): each becomes more aware of the other's role and the issues they face. Each learns from the other. This is what is meant by "walking the path together" (Calori, 2002). One possible methodological framework for producing this rapprochement is that of "action research" (Balogun et al., 2003; Cunliffe, 2015). This framework involves the research itself being a practice shared by researchers and practitioners (Cunliffe, 2015). Naturally, as a co-produced practice, it requires a reflexive look at itself, not to eliminate subjectivity but to keep it under control.

Our action research[1] is based on a single case study (Yin, 1981). So as not to introduce bias in the representation of the players by comparing them with preconceived analysis grids, the methodological approach of *grounded theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was chosen in order to 'ground' the process in the research field. Grounded theory makes it possible to grasp a reality in all its complexity in an innovative fashion (Guillemette, 2006). It requires the researcher not only to "let the field speak" (by leaving preconceptions aside, putting personal thoughts on hold), but also to enter personally into discussion with the field. This involves gradually adjusting the theoretical construct by a constant two-way flow of observation and formalisation according to the principle of abduction (Bergman & Paavola, 2012; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), since it is just as important to have empirical knowledge about a subject as to have theoretical frameworks.

The discussions during the work sessions were recorded so that reports could be produced and circulated to all the participants and validated at the start of each session.

The stages in the research

The objective of this action research was thus to accompany the heads of the health, social and medico-social establishments in the translation and actual implementation of the strategic vision of the group's managing director. On this basis, the work was carried out in two stages: firstly, identification of the perceived risks of the intrusion of digital technologies in the establishments and the changes they entail; secondly, translating the managing director's vision into strategic objectives while at the same time taking care to introduce objectives making it possible to reduce (or even eliminate) the risks perceived by the heads of the establishments comprising the group.

During the three preparatory interviews (see details of the work sessions in Table 1), we

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[1] We shall return to our work method in the discussion.

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stated the issues involved in this research and the possible modes of collaboration.

Table 1. Lists of interviews and work sessions

Date and duration	Topic	Number of people (apart from the two researchers)
27/01/2014 Interview 1 (2 hrs)	• Presentation of the questioning regarding the group's digital strategy	1 person: managing director (MD)
24/04/2014 Meeting 1 (2½ hrs)	• Presentation of the questioning regarding the group's digital strategy • Discussion of the framework for "action research" (AR)	7 people: MD, quality manager (QM), IT director (ITD), management assistant (MA), 3 heads of establishment (HEs)
04/07/2014 Interview 2 (2 hrs)	• Definition of the framework for the AR	1 person: MD
04/09/2014 Interview 3 (2 hrs)	• Definition of the framework for the AR	1 person: MD
08/12/2014 Work session 1 (7 hrs)	• Brainstorming session on the group's digital strategy (definition of the domain, identification of opportunities and threats, mention of potential solutions) • Definition of the objectives of the 8 work sessions	10 people: MD, ITD, QM, communication manager (CM), 6 heads of establishment (HEs)
27/01/2015 Work session 1A (7 hrs)	• Brainstorming session on the group's digital strategy (definition of domain, identification of opportunities and threats, mention of potential solutions) • Definition of the objectives of the 8 work sessions	22 people: MD, deputy director (DD), CM, 19 HEs
27/02/2015 Work session 2 (7 hrs)	Work session on: • Definition of changes to the internal/external environment (complexity, uncertainty) of the establishments • Decision-making by managers in their uncertain environment • The issues involved in leading change in their uncertain environment • Collaborative management within the establishments and the group, and the collaborative construction of knowledge (*epistemology* 1)	13 people: CM, 12 HEs
07/04/2015 Work session 3 (7 hrs)	Work session on: • Organisational learning within the group • Knowledge – a construct (*epistemology* 2) • The digital tools for collaboration within the establishments in particulier and within the group in general	9 people: CM, 8 HEs
19/05/2015 Work session 4 (7 hrs)	Work session on: • Co-construction of the group's digital strategy (objectives, perimeter, example of use) • Complex thinking – a guide for action (*method*)	9 people: CM, 8 HEs
11/09/2015 Work session 5 (7 hrs)	Work session on: • Hierarchisation of objectives and actions to be carried out as part of the group's digital strategy	9 people: CM, 8 HEs
13/11/2015 Work	Work session on: • Articulation of projects to establish the group's digital strategy	9 people: MD, CM, ITM, 6 HEs

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session 6 (7 hrs)		
09/12/2015 Work session 7 (7 hrs)	Work session on: • Implementing a learning organisation on the scale of the establishments and the group • The need to raise defensive routines • Deepening complex thinking and systemic vision	7 people: CM, 6 HEs
11/02/2016 Work session 8 (7 hrs)	Work session on: • Guiding digital strategy using the *balanced scorecard* (BSC) • The co-compilation of guidance indicators on the BSC, linked to the group's digital strategy	7 people: CM, 6 HEs
08/03/2016 Work session 9 (7 hrs)	Work session on: • The co-compilation of guidance indicators on the BSC, linked to the group's digital strategy	8 people: CM, 7 HEs

One investigation process

The idea of researchers and practitioners co-producing content was adopted immediately. The uncertain and complex nature of the environment (particularly in its digital dimension) made it possible to justify a collaborative approach to the construction of knowledge (see Illustration 1). Collaboration took place over a number of work sessions with groups of between 7 and 22 practitioners (Table 1). Thus the researcher was not perceived as one knowledgeable person delivering knowledge making it possible to solve the problems, but as a partner facilitating the implementation of an "investigation process". We borrow this term from Dewey (1938), with reference to the "practical rationality" (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011) that has governed our own process. The process passed through a number of stages:

- identification and formalisation of the problem;

- contribution of conceptual and operational tools for identifying co-produced potential solutions;

- contribution of a methodology making it possible to formalise the potential solutions and help in decision-making.

The researcher acts not only as a facilitator but also as the guarantor of the investigation

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process.

Illustration 1. Extract from meeting report circulated to all participants in the first work session and result of discussions between researchers and practitioners.

What the process is not:

- a mechanism for providing ready-made answers to technical problems (how to use Facebook, how to get referenced properly on Google, which operating system to use on our computers, etc) or operational problems (how to set up a viral communication campaign, how to do web marketing, how to manage our external communication, etc);

- a mechanism for providing a ready-made managerial way of thinking that is compatible with information and communication technologies of the type: 'this is how the company/organisation 2.0 ought to operate';

- a place for discussions cut off from the reality of the field and operational issues.

On the other hand, the process allows:

- the collective construction of questions (face-to-face days and possibly daily interactions on the community of practices on Google+: https://plus.google.com/u/0/communities/xxx) linked to the explosion of digital technologies in order to adopt a strategic vision, likely to provide a network for digital practices or practices fostered by digital technologies;

- the participants to situate themselves in the domain of vision, strategy, intention (what do we want for our organisation, our employees, our patients, our residents, the other parties involved, etc?), in order to sustain consideration of operational issues. The aim here is to prepare ourselves for change so that we do not have to suffer it;

- accepting our personal limits, which become all the more visible because digital technologies facilitate a questioning of our expertise [...];

- trying out ideas, producing action models;

- collectively producing actionable knowledge, i.e. knowledge that is meant to be experimented in practice.

A gradual, incremental approach that was developed in the course of holding the meeting of the working group was therefore adopted, in accordance with the principles validated by all the participants. The high level of flexibility this practice achieved was regulated by the relatively standardised organisation of the work sessions (See Illustration 2). Each work session was spread over about seven hours of actual work (interrupted by a lunch break of

between one and a half and two hours, with a meal taken together in the meeting room). This sustained pace encouraged us to:

- plan the work sessions in such a way as to intersperse actively productive phases (brainstorming, role-play, serious gaming, etc.) and phases that were less active for the practitioners (training / conceptual contributions);

- organise a degree of redundancy in the contribution of content and provide regular reminders of the points raised during the preceding sessions, mainly to retain an equivalent level of knowledge among the participants, since the group could change from one session to the next.

Illustration 2. Organisation of each collective work session

1) Validation of the minutes of the previous session after discussion and reminder of the main points covered at that session (½ hour)
2) Contextualisation / discussion of the topic selected at the previous session; formulation of questions (1 hour)
3) Simulation exercises (serious gaming, problem-solving, experimentation with tools); reformulation of the questions (2 hours)
4) Concept-related contributions and discussion (2½ hours)
5) Conclusion, and validation of next topic (1 hour)

Also, in order not only to maintain a continuity of thinking between the work sessions, but also to facilitate exchanges with those heads of establishment who were unable to attend (because of geographical distance or unexpected constraints), the researchers set up a community of digital practices (on the Google+ social network). It was also a matter of joining theory to practice. This community has made it possible to share more than about forty documents and discuss information and comments.

How the work sessions would function began to be envisaged after a fairly conventional initial brainstorming (sessions 1 and 1A in Table 1). The opportunities, threats, advantages,

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constraints, etc. were developed.

A strategy drawn up step by step

The initial work consisted of jointly developing an understanding of the environment, particularly its ontological uncertainty and the impossibility of controlling this uncertainty (session 2), which justified a constructivist epistemological positioning (Grand et al., 2015)[2] on the way to learn in order to adapt to that environment and hence on the nature of the knowledge constructed (session 3). These initial elements of understanding made it possible to reformulate the original question and co-construct a strategic project devoted to digital technologies (session 4) and select priority actions according to their anticipated impacts and the resources to be committed to them (session 5).

Session 6 was devoted to thinking about how to articulate the strategic projects specific to each establishment (care policy, policy on receiving the public, hotel policy, etc.) with the digital strategy common to all the group's establishments. Thereafter, the question was how to organise the change and combat defensive routines (session 7). The last two sessions (8 and 9) consisted of preparing the guidance of the strategy by identifying the actions to be implemented and constructing a balanced scorecard (Kaplan & Norton, 1996).

During these work sessions, a strategy was drawn up step by step. Table 2 (below) indicates the evolution of the conception of the strategy.

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[2] We also find here Dewey's principle of investigation, the purpose of which is to remove uncertainty (Dewey, 1938: iii).

Table 2. Drawing up a strategy step by step

January 2014 Interview with MD	Indication of the managing director's determination to "*share with management personnel this thinking about the social networks and the Internet in order to make them work for the users, families, residents and patients of our institutions*" (verbatim report, 14 January 2014)
July 2014 Interview with MD	Indication of the managing director's determination to *"improve the overall performance of the group by means of a digital strategy in keeping with its values of subsidiarity and empowerment"* (verbatim report, 4 July 2014)
December 2014 to May 2015 Collective work sessions 1 to 4	As a result of the first five work sessions, the outlines of the digital strategy were formalised as follows: • development of the use of digital technologies to improve the practices and quality of life of the teams at work; • development of the use of digital technologies to improve the quality of service and the quality of the life of the people being accommodated; • ensuring the technical feasibility of developing the use of digital technologies. These objectives were set out in various objectives and sub-objectives.
September 2015 Collective work session 5	This work session made it possible to supplement the digital strategy already drawn up by adding various objectives and sub-objectives.
November and December 2015 Collective work sessions 6 and 7	These two work sessions enabled the heads of the establishments to begin thinking about adjusting the establishments' projects according to the group's digital strategy in such as way as to ensure its implementation.
February and March 2016 Collective work sessions 8 and 9	The strategic objectives identified were set out in 72 actions and a balanced scorecard was constructed.

The collaborative work helped not to simplify the initial questionings (brainstorming during the first session), but to contextualise them and thereby complexify them (following Tsoukas - 2017a). As this process of thinking and training was gradually set up, the vague fears regarding the negative impact of the social networks on the reputation of the establishments were replaced by strategic thinking about digital technologies, taking into account both the social dimension (evolution of society and patient expectations) and an organisational dimension (the impact of digital technology on staff management). Table 3 makes it possible to visualise the gradual complexification of the approach (including the transition from 18 to 72 actions to be carried out).

Table 3. Gradual complexification of the strategy

	Topics and objectives	Sub-topics	Actions to be carried out
Brainstorming (work carried out during S1)	**4 topics,** e.g. "digital-related risks"	None	**18 actions to be carried out,** e.g. "being vigilant about your own image on the social networks"
Plan of action for digital strategy (work carried out during S4)	**3 principal objectives,** e.g. "developing the use of digital technology to improve the quality of service and the quality of life of the people accommodated"	**14 secondary objectives,** e.g. "improving the referencing of the establishments on browsers"	**36 actions to be carried out,** e.g. "identifying the cost effectiveness of a better presence in the Internet's yellow pages"
Exhaustive digital strategy (S5)	**8 topics** 3 principal objectives 3 strategic expectations 2 types of means	**34 sub-topics** 14 secondary objectives 12 strategic expectations 8 sub-topics re resources	**36 actions to be carried out**
Priority digital strategy /actions (S6)	Identification of 7 priority operational objectives		
Digital strategy exhaustively reported on a balanced scorecard (BSC) (S8-S9)	**4 sections on the BSC**	**16 secondary objectives**	**72 actions to be carried out**

DISCUSSION AND AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

From an epistemological point of view, the "practical" turn (Cetina, Schatzki & Savigny, 2005; Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011) questions the way in which researchers produce knowledge. Several authors have carried out epistemological thinking within this framework (Chia & Holt, 2006; Chia & Rasche, 2015; Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Balogun, Beech, & Johnson, 2015; Balogun, Huff, & Johnson, 2003; Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Rasche & Chia, 2009) without, we feel, defining a unified epistemological framework. Methodological individualism (Weber, 2013) is criticised (Chia & Rasche, 2015; Vaara & Whittington, 2012) since it refers to actions resulting from proven intentions (that are perfectly rational or have a rationality presented as limited in reference to the work of Simon – 1996).

More generally, the epistemological criticism levelled at the SAP approach is that a form of underlying positivism persists: "From an epistemological point of view, the strategy as practice approach seems to resemble a crude version of positivism that understands practice

as being 'closer' to reality and delivering a 'more accurate' description of the real world" (Carter et al., 2008: 89). This tends to give a very restrictive definition of "practices" (Chia & Rasche, 2015: 51–52) which are seen as no more than objects of study and not the product of social interactions (Cunliffe, 2015: 441). The case studied nevertheless shows that the initial intentions begin by being vague and are co-constructed gradually; the strategy is drawn up in stages.

An epistemological questioning emerged in the field being studied as it rapidly transpired that there were two central elements: the need to reformulate the initial question in order to get to the root of the problem raised, and the need to create a framework for the construction of knowledge in which co-construction (by researchers and practitioners) would be legitimate. That is why two work sessions (S2 and S3) on the construction of knowledge (epistemology) were quickly scheduled and held. These sessions made it possible to question the nature of the knowledge, the place of the researcher in the construction of knowledge, and the validity of the knowledge produced. The questioning shared at this stage remained with us thereafter.

It is not a matter of ours minimising the heuristic scope of the research work that claims to use the SAP approach and stands implicitly or explicitly within a positivist epistemological framework. The positive sciences (Comte, 2009), which can be traced back to Aristotle (2017) via Descartes (2008), have made and still make it possible to make considerable progress. However, they imply a type of rationality that is scarcely compatible with that of the practitioners (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011), even though it is they who are explicitly intended as the beneficiaries of the work of the SAP approach (Balogun et al., 2015).

A number of points for discussion (treated *infra*) emerge from these observations. We list

them here:

- If the research project involves working with practitioners, which research method should be selected in order to make the collaboration effective?

- The choice of method results in an epistemological positioning – what is it?

- For the researcher, the choices of method and epistemological positioning lead to deepening the thinking on the relationship they may have in relation to his/her research field.

- What are the motives for the (research) action on the part of the researcher? What it his/her ethic?

Such questioning is only valid if the process makes it possible to produce valid and generalizable knowledge, otherwise we are not within the scope of a scientific process, so:

- How are we to ensure the validity of the knowledge created?

- How is this knowledge to be passed on?

Choice of method: a practice for the benefit of the practitioner?

Do researchers working on the SAP approach work *on* the practice (which can be divided into three major topics: "practice, praxis and practitioners" - Whittington, 2006) or *with* the practitioners? It appears that the matter has long since been decided in favour of collaboration between researcher and practitioner (Whittington, 1996; Johnson et al., 2003; Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Balogun et al., 2015). Thus many researchers in the field of SAP are able to share the observation made by Kurt Lewin in 1946 when he wrote: "Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice" (Lewin, 1946: 35). The term *action research* used by Lewin has been generalised to characterise the approaches that claim a two-fold objective of real change in the social system and in the production of knowledge about the system. Argyris

uses the phrase *action science*, meaning the integration of science and practice (Argyris et al., 1985: 7), emphasising the interventionist/active nature of the research: "Action science is centrally concerned with the practice of intervention" (Argyris et al., 1985: 35). The production of knowledge will be born out of a practice of change and reflexive feedback on research. Argyris' *action science* approach, although transformative, has explicitly as its primary function the production of knowledge. Other, more militant, approaches such as Participatory Action Research (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013) that are brought together under the banner of "Cooperative Inquiry" (Heron & Reason, 1997) stress the societal pertinence of the changes they produce, their moral dimension grounded in practice: "The focus on practical purposes draws attention to the moral dimension of action research—that it is inquiry in the pursuit of worthwhile purposes, for the flourishing of persons, communities, and the ecology of which we are all a part" (Reason, 2006). Despite some differences, the approaches grouped together under the banner of "action research" consider the research activity to be a practice embedded in a societal context.

Here we are talking about the research method. The method is both the way and the direction (intention), i.e. the search for a path. Etymologically, the term 'method' is composed of *meta,* used to refer to something expressing development, and by extension 'research', and *hodos:* way[3].

The choice of way (of the method) does not affect the data collection technique used (methodology[4]), even though in the SAP field the data collection techniques used are essentially qualitative (interview, observation, questionnaire, ethnography, *grounded theory*, etc. - Cunliffe, 2015; Balogun et al., 2003; Czarniawska, 2008; Vesa & Vaara, 2014), with a

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[3] https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/method
[4] Taking up the work of Piaget, Avenier (2010: 1235) distinguishes between methodology and epistemology by stating that methodology is the study of the constitution of knowledge whereas epistemology studies the production of valid knowledge. We use the expression "data collection techniques" to lift the ambiguity between 'method' and 'methodology'.

preference for ethnographic approaches likely to produce a dense description (Geertz, 2016) of practice (Balogun et al., 2003; Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Johnson et al., 2003; Balogun, Beech, & Johnson, 2015).

The choice of technique for collecting data does not necessarily imply the choice of a method or an epistemological positioning. It seems to us, however, that as soon as we consider the research activity (particularly in the SAP field) as a practice (Cunliffe, 2015: 442), which moreover has the vocation of transforming social reality (*action researchers)*, epistemological questioning is the obvious choice because it makes it possible to do "objective science".

Towards an alignment of method and epistemology

Bridging the gap between researcher and practitioner (Balogun et al., 2003; Vaara & Whittington, 2012) involves much more data collection techniques. Adopting an ethnographical approach is not a sufficient guarantee of reaching beyond rationalities that appear to be irreconcilable (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). Opening up to a "practical rationality", as Sandberg & Tsoukas (2011) invite us to do, involves a change of epistemological paradigm.

One observation very rapidly emerged from our field study: the very uncertain nature of the environment in which the practitioners move and for which the researcher cannot provide a ready-made recipe. The uncertain nature of the environment of the group of establishments studied (the application of digital technologies to the health, social and medico-social sectors, of course, but also the substantial increase in dependency in France because of the ageing of the population, the volatility of the legislation in the sector, strong competition, etc.) leads to humility. From an ontological point of view, it is difficult to make do with an essentialist vision of reality: the Cartesian distinction between subject and object is no longer so clear

(Cunliffe, 2011). Indeed we have seen that for a great many researchers in the 'practical' current it is necessary to revise our concept of the nature of reality (ontology).

It is not our purpose here to draw up a panorama of the different epistemological approaches applicable to management science (see, for example, Guba & Lincoln). We are seeking rather to demonstrate the consistency of a constructivist epistemological positioning with a research project that is part of action research within the SAP approach. Our epistemological questioning took as its starting point the notion of uncertainty.

This question of uncertainty is central. Like Dewey's investigation (1938: iii) that aims to remove uncertainty, strategy in practice may be understood quite simply as the production of reliable knowledge in order to reach a decision (Spender, 1996; Tsoukas, 1996) since "in an economy where the only certainty is uncertainty, the one source of lasting competitive advantage is knowledge" (Nonaka, 1991). Here the practice and study of strategy are able to converge via a co-construction of representations (Grand et al., 2015).

The constructivist paradigm includes a number of currents (three for Grand et al., 2015; two for Avenier, 2010)[5]. Apart from this diversity, the constructivist epistemologies stand within a rich and complex history that can be traced back to Leonardo da Vinci, Montaigne, Pascal, Vico, and Kant (Le Moigne, 2003, 2012). This epistemological base became more solid in the 20th century with Piaget (1998), who showed how children construct reality, and with Bachelard and his *Nouvel Esprit Scientifique* (Bachelard, 1934) when he says: "Science generates a world, no longer via a magical impulsion emanating from reality, but truly via a rational impulsiveness emanating from the spirit" (Bachelard, 1934: 15)[6]. Constructivist

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[5] We are more particularly in the framework of the "teleological constructivist paradigm" (Avenier, 2010), close to what Grand et al. (2015) call "systemic constructivism".
[6] Free translation

~~etymology~~ epistemology comprises two epistemic hypotheses (shared by all the currents) that contribute to characterising it: a phenomenological hypothesis and a teleological hypothesis.

The first hypothesis indicates that it is impossible to have a knowledge of the reality in itself (noumenal reality). We only know the experience we have of the phenomena (phenomena reality), and only the latter may be the subject of a scientific study. In other words: "Everything I know about the world, even through science, I know from a view that is mine or from an experience of the world without which the symbols of science would have no meaning"[7] (Merleau-Ponty, 1952).

The second hypothesis supposes that developing knowledge about the real world alters the experience we develop of that real world and hence the knowledge of it we may have. The construction of knowledge cannot be conceived of without confronting it with action ("all doing is knowing, all knowing is doing" - Maturana & Varela, 1992), which influences the project for the construction of knowledge.

Taking these hypotheses into account, a constructivist epistemology appears to make it easier (particularly in the context of the SAP approach) to:

- call into question practices (*praxis* – routines, for example) that are assumed to be acquired (but are in contradiction with the evolution of the environment);

- call into question the corresponding ways of thinking (*practice*) and hence to authorise creativity by legitimising the right to make a mistake;

- devise an investigation process addressing the removal of an uncertainty (Dewey, 1938), which passes firstly through the stage of identification of the problem since: "Nothing happens automatically. Nothing is for free. Everything is constructed." (Bachelard, 1938: 17);

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[7] Free translation

- realise that the research activity is itself a practice (Cunliffe, 2015) that involves practitioners (the *practitioners* in Whittington's triptych - 2006) (Grand et al., 2015);

- place the collaboration between researchers and practitioners (Heron & Reason, 1997; Balogun et al., 2003) in the framework of a reciprocal relationship;

- assume the socially transformational dimension (*action researchers)* of this research activity;

- emphasise the ability to act, to transform reality, on the part of practitioners (an ability translated by the term "*agency*" - Giddens, 1984; Whittington, 1992), which makes it possible to assume the teleological dimension of strategy which is constructed "on the way" (Avenier, 1997) in the same way as research does.

What place does the researcher occupy? => REFLEXIVE

Adopting a position in a constructivist epistemology in order to carry out research in the SAP approach raises a number of questions for the researcher. What place does the researcher have in the production of knowledge? Can he/she be neutral? What is the validity of the knowledge produced?

Unlike positivist epistemologies, it is not a matter, in the context of constructivist gnosiology, of describing how what is real functions (on the basis of the hypothesis of a reality that exists independent of the observer - a substantial, permanent, ontological reality) and to result in laws (objective truths) on the basis of these observations. For constructivists, it is more modestly a matter of developing a certain degree of intelligibility of the experience we have of the world (Avenier, 2010), which we refer to as phenomenological hypothesis.

Studying what is real means contributing to shaping and modelling it (*design* within the

meaning of Simon, 1996) with an intention (teleological hypothesis). The knowledge produced therefore depends on the researcher, his/her past, his/her project, etc. The scientific process shapes the object and by retroaction shapes the researcher (the recursiveness of cognition – the agency of the researcher). Knowledge of the object retroacts on the knowledge the researcher has of him-/herself. The subject and object separated by Descartes are brought together by the dialogic of constructivist cognition (which leads, more particularly, to an essential ethical questioning which we shall consider later).

Although the researcher may postulate that a reality exists independent of itself, the researcher's experience can only cover a fraction of that reality, a reality in constant flux that we only grasp imperfectly because of our cognitive limits. It should also be borne in mind that some facets of the situations studied escape us, in particular the consequences of our acts.

Whatever our cognitive limits, being as close as possible to the field makes it possible to embrace the complexity of reality (Balogun et al., 2003; Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Johnson et al., 2003). The non-separability of the researcher and his/her subject, in other words the reintegration of the observer in the observation, as well as the teleological nature of the research project, justifies recourse to an action research process. However, the considerable involvement of the researcher in his/her field (in order to understand the problems in a contextualised fashion) raises the question of the rigour of the scientific approach (Argyris & Schön, 1989). The SAP approach encourages reflexive feedback from researchers on their practices (Vaara, Whittington, 2012; Johnson et al., 2003; Nicolini, 2009; Cunliffe, 2016).

Our fieldwork in the associative group in the health, social and medico-social sector described above was started in accordance with a 'grounded' methodology. Very quickly we felt we had to consider the relationship of the researcher to the field. We saw that researchers and

practitioners do not function according to the same rationality (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011), mainly because the research issues are not the same for both parties. The researcher's work is often influenced by the need to publishing the results according to the canons of "true science" (Splitter & Seidl, 2015: 129-130). It was therefore essential for us to include a reflexive look at our research practices not so as to establish its objectivity (according to the principle of the Cartesian separation of subject and object), but to control its subjectivity (particularly via a questioning of the validity of the research – see *infra*). This reflexive detachment, very close to the "participatory objectivation" described by Bourdieu (1978, 2003)[8], makes it possible to:

- state, in relation to ourselves and the practitioners, our method (action research), our epistemological posture (constructivism) and our ethic;

- emphasise its internal consistency, which facilitates the transmission of the message to the practitioners.

This reflexivity is the foundation of the researcher's epistemological questioning (Splitter & Seidl, 2015). While it is consubstantial with the scientific process, it is nevertheless the result of the way in which researchers perceive their place in their research field, which questions the motives for their action and their ethic.

An ethical framework for research action

A researcher applying the SAP approach, if he/she is consistent with the principle of close collaboration between practitioners and researchers (Whittington, 1996; Johnson et al., 2003; Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Balogun et al., 2015), will have to report to the practitioners who end up voicing the fatal question: 'so what?' (Balogun et al., 2015: 457). It becomes less easy here to apply the recipe for academic success: "*get in, get data, get out, and publish*"

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[8] See also Splitter & Seidl, 2011

(Balogun et al., 2015: 459). Ethical questioning is required (Balogun et al., 2015; Balogun et al., 2003). There are two possible directions: taking action according to what seems to be "good" or observing the rules. "It is easy to recognise in the distinction between aiming to live well and obeying norms the opposition of two heritages: the Aristotelian heritage, in which ethics are characterised by teleological perspective (from *telos*, meaning 'purpose'); and a Kantian heritage, in which morals are defined by the obligatory nature of the norm, hence by a deontological point of view (deontological meaning precisely 'relating to obligation')" (Ricœur, 1990: 200)[9].

Thus a researcher whose work is based on constructivism necessarily (in accordance with the teleological hypothesis) accepts the discussion on its purpose, which is evidently diverse (producing reliable knowledge for the benefit of the community, but also publishing that knowledge in academic journals).

Not only is axiological neutrality (Weber, 1965) shaken; the research work here is a society-related project which cannot afford not to be detached from the motives of the researcher's action and his/her place in his/her field and in society. Ethics questions our duties and updates our morals, making them operational, in particular in our research field. Tsoukas (2017b) proposes introducing the ethic of virtues (Aristotle, 2009) as an analytical apparatus for work on the SAP approach. We may extend this proposition to the practices of researchers working on the SAP approach. Perhaps limiting oneself to the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* (practical wisdom: producing the "just action", i.e. suited to the circumstances) would suffice initially. How is this to be done? "Practically wise choices are made not by following abstract rules but by building capacities for practically wise actions: by building one's character, through habituation, in the context of a community and with the help of more experienced others, individuals inductively learn to build an intuitive sense of when, and in what form,

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[9] Free translation

they should experience certain emotions and how to handle particular situations" (Tsoukas, 2017b).

Various work (e.g. Nonaka & Toyama, 2007; Nonaka & Zhu, 2012) on strategic management based on 'practical wisdom' may provide a source of inspiration for transposition to the case of the practitioner-researcher.

"Just action", as far as we were concerned, consisted of:

- constructing a framework for mutual understanding between researcher and practitioner that synthesised the issues for both practitioners and researchers (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011), a framework emphasising the necessary collaboration between researcher and practitioner in the perspective of a co-production of knowledge (Corradi et al., 2010: 274) that was actionable (see Illustration 1);

- transmitting the knowledge, methods and tools necessary for this project (by means of training sessions, for example) (see *infra* "Generalisation and transmission of knowledge");

- allowing feedback from the practitioners on their practices (*praxis*) by deconstructing their representations (*practice*) (Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008: 283; Splitter & Seidl, 2011: 113);

- formalising and sharing the co-constructed knowledge, thereby legitimising the collaboration (Splitter & Seidl, 2015: 138);

- organising and leading discussions, both face-to-face and remote, on the subject of the joint project (the construction of a digital strategy);

- passing the knowledge acquired on outside the research field via translation work (Latour, 2015).

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These different operations are on a modest scale. For example, we did not go as far as some advocated in collectively publishing the results (Balogun et al., 2003). We would nevertheless like to emphasise the turn of mind that governs carrying out these operations and which is located in the field of the ethics of the research as recalled in the European Charter for Researchers: "Researchers should focus their research for the good of mankind and for expanding the frontiers of scientific knowledge" (European Commission, 2005: 11).

Thus we are far from the idea of *"get in, get data, get out, and publish"* (Balogun et al., 2015: 459), particularly because presence in the field takes time (Cunliffe, 2015); it is, however, the price to pay for a real co-production of knowledge.

Also, it is important to tell the practitioners (which we did) that the vocation of research work is its free circulation; this point does not raise any problems when there is a relationship of trust (built up over a period of time) between researchers and practitioners. The broad circulation of knowledge is perfectly understandable in the context of a "practical rationality" and the fear of seeing confidential information revealed lessens as understanding of the research work grows. The question that then arises is that of the validity of this co-produced knowledge.

What is the validity of the knowledge produced?

As soon as the researcher moves away from the protective shade of "true (positivist) science", he/she is exposed to the searchlight of those critics who do their best to emphasise the bias of subjectivity (Cunliffe, 2015: 434; Vesa & Vaara, 2014: 290). The validity of the knowledge produced questions any producer of knowledge, all the more so when that knowledge is co-constructed by interrelations between researcher and practitioner (Corradi et al., 2010: 274) and influenced by the transformation of the researcher's project during the construction of his/her research (teleological hypothesis). The declared demand for bringing researcher and practitioner together (Cunliffe, 2015; Grand et al., 2015; Whittington, 1996; Johnson et al., 2003; Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Balogun et al., 2015) in order to achieve a shared "practical rationality" (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011), places the research project in a teleological and phenomenological dimension. The incorporation of the research project in an epistemological paradigm conditions the way of thinking about and carrying out this research (Chia & Rasche, 2015: 46). Here the teleological and phenomenological dimensions of the project justify considering the validity of the knowledge produced within the constructivist epistemological paradigm. Following on from Avenier (2010), we position ourselves more particularly in the Teleological Constructivist Epistemological Paradigm (TCEP), which has the specific feature that it makes no hypothesis as to the nature of what is real (it is said to be ontologically 'agnostic' – Avenier, 2010: 1233). As a result, it is open to other epistemological paradigms that it encompasses (Avenier, 2010).

In the constructivist epistemological paradigm (and more particularly in the TCEP), the purpose of research is to construct an intelligibility of the phenomena observed. It is thus the purposes of the project that are questionable and questioned. It is not the 'validity' of the

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knowledge that is at issue, but rather its functional pertinence and the match between the artefacts produced and the aims pursued[10]. Generalising, this corresponds to the idea of the match between representations and observed reality. But as our representations are drawn up by ourselves using our limited cognitive apparatus (phenomenological hypothesis), true knowledge is nothing other than a match between representations, the artefacts produced, and the aims being pursued.

The work of the researcher, in the framework of the constructivist paradigm, therefore consists of producing "feasible" knowledge (Le Moigne, 2012: 86) that is used to solve problems. Argyris refers to "actionable" knowledge: "Actionable knowledge has been defined as information that actors could use, for example, to craft conversations that communicate the meanings they intend. Actionable knowledge has to specify how to produce meanings but leave actors free to select the specific words" (Argyris, 1995).

Assessing their operationality is a criterion of validity for research: "Actionable knowledge must not only have high external validity (i.e. a high degree of relevance) it must specify the thoughts and actions required to create the propositions in the real world" (Argyris, 1995). This operationality of scientific knowledge refers to the specific context of the questioning (which is a circumstantial construct): "what matters is not to match an ontic world, but to fit into the experiential one, in the sense of being able to avoid whatever obstacles or traps it might present" (Glasersfeld, 2001). The criterion of validity is based on the match between the response (creation of scientific knowledge) with the problem raised. While Simon refers to a "satisfactory solution" - Simon, 1996: 119), Glasersfeld uses the expression "functional fit" specifically in reference to a constructivist epistemology: "This modification of the role of knowledge, from 'true' representation to functional fit, requires an enormous effort because it goes against a traditional belief that is at least three thousand years old" (Glasersfeld, 2001).

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[10] We find here the principle of design: "Design, on the other hand, is concerned with how things ought to be, with devising artefacts to attain goals" (Simon, 1996: 114).

Action is the link between the researcher and knowledge, as poet and philosopher Paul Valéry (1973: 843) expresses so well: "Between being and knowing lies doing"[11]. Action intervenes as a propaedeutic: action is preparation for knowing. Action is also a test of the model that has been produced, testing it not only on the participants (who expressed objectives) but also on the scientific community. Comparing the map (the model) with the territory (the problem) makes it possible to open scientific practices up to other forms of the production of knowledge (the aesthetic aspect, for example: Corradi et al., 2010: 275) and transmit the scientific process much more widely, almost in a perspective of citizen science (Hand, 2010).

The functional match of the knowledge produced establishes its pertinence. It remains necessary to demonstrate the rigour of its compilation in bridging the supposed gap between rigour and pertinence (Argyris & Schön, 1989; Avenier, 2010). How may this rigour be demonstrated? Certainly not according to the criterion of objective science which submits hypotheses to experimentation tests according to the well-known criterion of falsifiability (Popper, 2005). In a constructivist framework, it is rather a matter of establishing in all transparency the process of drawing up the knowledge produced (Avenier, 2010) without being able to do without reflexive feedback from the researcher on his/her work (Splitter & Seidl, 2011): the "participating objectivation", the reflexivity (Avenier, 2010: 1242). This implies making explicit, both to the practitioner and to the researcher's peers, the epistemological framework, the method used and the techniques for collecting data (methodology) applied, not forgetting the consistency of these choices. Explaining these choices authorise the beginning of discussions with the practitioners and the researcher's peers. The scientific process is thus largely open to discussion and debate (Latour, 2015).

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[11] Free translation

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Generalisation and transmission of knowledge

It takes more than just the functional match of the knowledge produced and the rigour of the process of drawing it up to make this knowledge valid. It also needs to be transmissible and transmitted.

If the purpose of knowledge is to solve problems (firstly by making them intelligible), it is necessary to show that the knowledge produced is reproducible (depending on the circumstances). The criterion of reproducibility (consubstantial with a positivist epistemology) it thus called into question by the contextual dimension of the constructivist production of knowledge. How can this knowledge be implemented again? According to what protocol? It is necessary to be able to argue their reproducibility. It is on this condition that the scientific process can be redefined, no longer on the basis of its object (an objective fraction of the reality to be observed) but by its project (an artefact that is produced according to the objective that is altered by the very process of that production, etc.). It is probably here that the notion of method (as a guide)[12] takes on real significance. It is this significance that could above all be reproduced. Thus it is a matter, particularly through translation work (Latour, 2015), of producing scientific knowledge (as opposed to common knowledge – Dewey, 1938: 60 sq.).

In this article we shall attempt to pass on epistemic thoughts on the case studied. By doing so we place ourselves in the transmission of the method. Conceptual knowledge may, of course, also be extracted from practices and transmitted (Splitter & Seidl, 2015). Bringing researcher and practitioner closer together implies that this transmission work is carried out with real determination to conform to "practical rationality" (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011) on the part of the practitioner, particularly through teaching (Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008). This implies allowing time for transmission and teaching, which was largely the case for us since

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[12] Etymologically, the method is a path that leads to the seeking for a path. Method involves constant questioning, particularly in epistemological terms, as the production of knowledge necessarily requires the "knowledge of knowledge" (Morin, 1986).

all our work sessions included learning time, which made it possible to share the scientific process of the production of knowledge. This concern for transmission is above all in line with the "just action" that guided our process, as we think that one of the duties of a researcher is to transmit the scientific process (the "critical mind" in the proper sense of the term) in order to open it up to the largest possible number of people (Hand, 2010). This goes beyond the mere training of "reflective practitioners" (Johnson et al., 2003) to join up with the ambition expressed by Cunliffe (2016: 748): "If we accept that management education is not just about helping managers become more effective organizational citizens but also about helping them become critical thinkers and moral practitioners, then critical reflexivity is of particular relevance." It is a matter here of questioning the place of the practitioner and the place of the researcher in civic society.

In Table 4 below we propose a framework for the production of knowledge valid in the SAP field on the basis of desire to bring researchers and practitioners closer together. This framework sums up the points already discussed and is the result of our collaborative practices in our field of research.

We feel this could be used as an *aide-mémoire for an SAP researcher embarking on discussions with a practitioner with a view to exercising step-by-step collaboration between researcher and practitioner.*

Table 4. Conventions for the production of valid knowledge in the SAP field

The aim of the research	To open the strategy "black box" (Chia & Holt, 2006). To produce knowledge for the benefit of practitioners (Balogun et al., 2015). This involves **bridging the gap between researcher and practitioner** (Balogun et al., 2003; Vaara & Whittington, 2012), which requires the conciliation of two different rationalities (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011): - Production of valid knowledge - Production of actionable knowledge

Three criteria to be met: validity, rigour, ethics	
Validity of the project	Matching the response (creation of scientific knowledge) to the problem raised: "actionable knowledge" (Argyris, 1995), "satisfactory solutions" (Simon, 1996: 119), "functional fit" (Glasersfeld, 2001). Two dimensions of research practice: - Action as preparation for knowledge - Action to test the model produced
Rigour of the project	The transparency of the research project opens up the possibility of comparing opinions and controversy (Latour, 2015): - Explanation of the epistemological framework and the method - Explanation of the methodological framework Consistency of method, epistemology and methodology
Ethical criteria	Controlling its subjectivity: reflexivity (Avenier, 2010), "participatory objectivation" (Bourdieu, 1978; 2003): - Acceptance of uncertainty (phenomenological hypothesis), resulting in epistemic humility - Questioning of intentions (taking the teleological hypothesis into account) Facilitating the transmission of the scientific method through teaching (Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008; Splitter & Seidl, 2015) in order to train reflective practitioners (Johnson et al., 2003) and more generally develop a spirit of criticism in civic society (Cunliffe, 2016).

CONCLUSION

We have tried to show, on the basis of a practical case, what epistemological, methodological and ethical foundations researchers using the SAP approach may rely on. Our case is based on the drawing up a digital strategy in a group in the health, social and medico-social sectors. Devising a strategy is perceived as a necessity in the face of the volatility of the environment. It is the only means of "facing up to uncertainty". On the basis of work in the field of Strategy as Practice (SAP), we have been able to make out clearly the gradual nature of drawing up a strategy. This would tend to uphold the heuristic scope of the SAP approach, but we feel the most important point lies elsewhere.

The traditional axiological neutrality (Weber, 1965) of the researcher in his/her field of research ceases to hold as soon as he/she realises the uncertainties that the environment brings to bear on both his/her terrain and on him-/herself. He/she realises that strategy is built up step by step. On the basis of this, producing knowledge on this phenomenon also implies an incremental, contextualised process made up of various interactions. In short, the researcher finds him-/herself confronted with the limits of his/her perception (phenomenological hypothesis) and the need to constantly redefine his/her research project (teleological hypothesis). Thus it becomes necessary to clearly define the epistemological framework of his/her research, knowing that any epistemological positioning is necessarily the carrier of a performative dimension (Chia & Rasche, 2015). Demonstrating the teleological nature of both strategy and research on strategy while it is being constructed amounts to questioning the role of the researcher (his/her intentions, his/her ethic), the status of the knowledge created, and the methods for creating knowledge. That is the price to pay for control over the researcher's subjectivity. But his/her role does not stop there. We have shown that the SAP field aspires to develop collaboration between researcher and practitioner. Here we are entering a field that should lead us to question the place of science in society (Hand, 2010) and therefore also the place of the researcher in civic society.

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