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# STRATEGY AS PRACTICE AND THE ROLE OF MIDDLE MANAGER IN ORGANIZATIONS: THE FUTURE OF THE FIELD

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Paulo Alberto Battazza Iasbech<sup>1</sup>

Rosalia Aldraci Barbosa Lavarda<sup>2</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Research on strategy as practice (SAP) or strategizing focuses on understanding the development of strategy as a situated and socially acquired activity, based on the interaction between various actors and micro activities carried out by people within the organization (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Whittington, 2006). In this scenario, middle manager (MM) plays the role of an articulator in the strategy formation process and sensemaking activities (Balogun; Johnson, 2004; Rouleau, 2005). Since both research topics are gaining notoriety in the scientific community, we conducted a systematic analysis of the literature on SAP and the role of the MM inside organizations, covering the scientific production related to the subject between 2005 and 2015. This resulted in the selection of 77 relevant articles from the Web of Science<sup>TM</sup> Core Collection database. This set of articles may serve as a milestone to future theoretical background studies, to assist scholars leading new researches related to SAP and the role of MM since this study indicates an avenue concerning the relations and behaviors of the practitioners in the action of making strategy in different levels of involvement in that process.

**Keywords:** Strategy as Practice, Middle Manager, Systematic Analysis, Bibliometry

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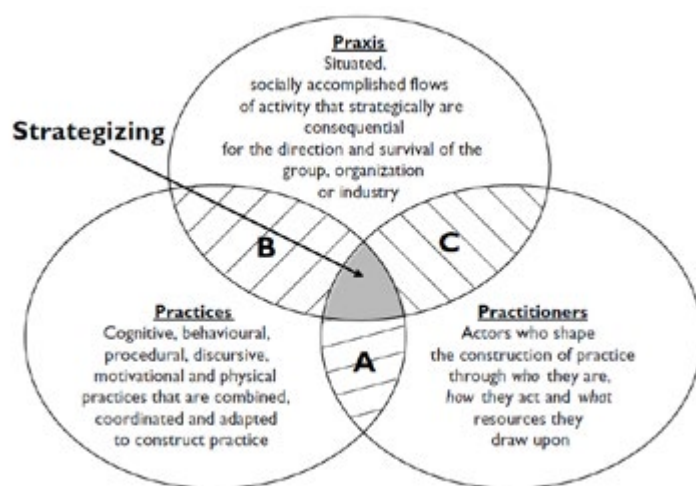
1 Graduated Degree and a master in Administration at Federal University of Santa Catarina - UFSC. Doctorate in Administration at Fundação Getúlio Vargas - FGV. São Paulo - SP, Brazil. E-mail: paulo@iasbech.com

2 Graduated Degree in Business Administration at Federal University of Santa Maria - UFSM. Master in Organization and Business Management from Universidad del Museo Social Argentino - UMSA (Buenos Aires). PhD in Administration at University of Valencia - Spain. Professor, Department of Management Sciences, UFSC. E-mail: rosalia.lavarda@ufsc.br

# 1 INTRODUCTION

Since the seminal article “Strategy as Practice” written by Whittington (1996), strategy studies began to focus on a more sociological and process-based view of activities within organization. Studies such as Johnson *et al* (2003); Jarzabkowski (2005, 2008, 2010); Maitlis (2005); Whittington (2006); Johnson (2007); Maitlis and Lawrence (2007); Mantere (2008); Golsorskhi *et al* (2010); Jarzabkowski and Kaplan (2014) represent this advance in the field among others, which consolidate in a Strategy as Practice (SAP) research community.

Studies on SAP gained importance by shedding light into the interaction between actors and micro activities carried out within organizations. It focuses on the analysis of three main elements: practice, praxis and practitioners. It is on the intersection of these elements that the strategy formation process occurs (JARZABKOWSKI *et al.*, 2007), Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** A conceptual framework for analysing strategy-as-practice

**Source:** Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007)

Inside organizations, it is possible to identify the MM in the role of “practitioner” especially when related to strategic changes (FLOYD; WOOLDRIDGE, 1992; BALOGUN; JOHNSON, 2004; ROULEAU, 2005; PAPPAS; WOOLDRIDGE, 2007). Likert (1962) first identified the role of MM, however, it was only after advances proposed by Floyd and Wooldridge (1992), Nonaka (1994), Regnér (2003), Balogun and Johnson (2004, 2005), Rouleau (2005), Balogun (2006) and Mantere (2008) that its social, interpretative, linguistic and cognitive aspects were used to better understand how their actions interfere in the strategy formation process. Furthermore, Vaara *et al.* (2004); Pappas *et al* (2004); Mantere (2005); Rouleau (2005); Ambrosini *et al.* (2007); Laine and Vaara (2007) define MM as one of the dominant “practitioners” inside an organization and thus the key to the success of the strategy formation process.

More recently, Andersen (2013) introduces a model of integrative strategy formation process considering MM as an essential actor that articulates the negotiation process between the organizational hierarchical levels. Setting a practical framework that exemplify the roles played by the MM.

A systematic analysis of the literature consists on the use of quantitative methods to define the relevance of any scientific production based on its scientific impact. It helps to identify the most relevant publications, authors and journals about a specific subject of study. Based on the results of a systematic analysis of the literature becomes clear to a researcher to identify

which articles, authors and journals are more or less relevant to his subject of study, and so obtain a solid theoretical background to his work.

Therefore, we believe that a systematic analysis of the literature covering the scientific production related to SAP and the role of MM between 2005 and 2015 may serve as a milestone to further studies on this subject.

Based on these concepts, we defined the research question of this study as “What are the most relevant articles, according to the citations, in research on SAP and the role of the MM inside organizations?”

In this research, we processed 3,688 references into a selection of 77 articles aligned with the research subject. These selected articles represent the most relevant scientific production about SAP and the role of MM, during the defined period, ranking the articles, authors and journals according to their volume of citations.

We organize this paper as follows. In the next section we present the methodology (2) applied, followed by the systematic analysis of the literature made (3). Finally, we offer our final considerations (4) based on the results we obtained, presenting the future directions of the research field.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

The definition of the methodology to be used on a scientific research must be directly related to the research problem (MORGAN; SMIRCICH, 1980). Therefore, the use of a misaligned methodology with its object of study could be characterized as a lack of discipline of the researcher (DEMO, 1985); and could result on the incoherent use of conflicting authors, quotes and methodologies.

This study is characterized as a quantitative study with a descriptive approach (HAIR *et al.*, 2009), due to its description of a process and defined characteristics of a set of articles, through a systematic analysis of the literature.

Regarding the study nature, this research is defined as theoretical applied, due to the practical application of a structured process of bibliographic review, in which secondary data were used (SAUNDERS *et al.*, 2009).

To elaborate this research, we used the constructivist instrument of knowledge creation called ProKnow-C (Knowledge Development Process – Constructivist) (ENSSLIN *et al.*, 2010; LACERDA *et al.*, 2012) which helped during the process of systematic analysis of the literature that supported our findings.

## 3 SYSTEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE LITERATURE PROCESS

Although recent, the scientific production on SAP has obtained a significant amount of international papers and recurrently being related to the role of MM. The identification of the current stage of knowledge of these two topics, which are strongly related, is critical for a researcher to be able to position one's research goal correctly (TRANFIELD *et al.*, 2003).

Thereby, we consider important the elaboration of a set of articles about SAP and the role of MM in the organization. According to Karlsson (2009) the elaboration of a systematic analysis of the literature assists the researcher to obtain a solid scientific background to his work, as it allows identifying the state of art about a topic and creating solid basis for the advance of the research. The object and justification of the research, as well as the methodological framework also benefits from these processes.

Based on the arguments mentioned we present the procedures of this work in the following section. We divided this section into two parts: 3.1 Preliminary Definitions and 3.2 Collection and Selection for the set of articles.

### 3.1 PRELIMINARY DEFINITIONS

To initiate the articles set elaboration process it is necessary to define the database, which will delimitate the number of articles available to be part of the selection process of the final set of articles. We understand that Web of Science (ISI) is the database that contains the major relevance about the topics selected because it is the database that generates JCR (Journal Citation Report). For this reason, we chose to use the Web of Science™ Core Collection as the database. Then we defined a chronological timeframe of the articles publication, according to the research goal, between the years 2005 and 2015.

After the definition of the research database and timeframe, we began to organize the set of keywords that served as a first filter of articles selection. Therefore, we chose the keywords most used on a selection of 12 articles that have significant impact on the field, regardless of their publication year. Based on this analysis, we selected the main keywords and its combination.

With the intention to ensure that the keywords were aligned with the research topic, we tested each of them on the database, checking the results by a nonstructural reading of the titles and abstracts of the articles on the top of the list, according to the citation volume. As a result of the process, we obtained the keywords set presented on Table 1.

| Keyword number | Description                                    |
|----------------|------------------------------------------------|
| KW1            | "middle manager"                               |
| KW2            | "strategizing"                                 |
| KW3            | "strategy-as-practice"                         |
| KW4            | "middle manager" AND "strategizing"            |
| KW5            | "middle management" AND "strategizing"         |
| KW6            | "middle manager" AND "strategy"                |
| KW7            | "middle management" AND "strategy"             |
| KW8            | "middle manager" AND "strategy-as-practice"    |
| KW9            | "middle management" AND "strategy-as-practice" |

**Table 1:** Set of keywords used on the research

**Source:** The authors

Other preliminary definitions were necessary, besides timeframe, database and keywords set, to enable the research. Thus, we decided to use the software Endnote (THE THOMSON CORPORATION, 2008) to insure an appropriate management of the references; Google Scholar application (2011) for the citations and scientific impact inquiry; as well as the postulate of Pareto (1896) as the criterion to establish the desired scientific impact of the articles in relation to the portfolio. The following subsection will detail the application of these preliminary definitions.

On the beginning of the selection process of the articles, there were 3,688 references, which according to the chosen database keywords were aligned with the research. Using the reference management software, we discarded 710 duplicated references and 253 references

related to books, book chapter or book reviews. After this first filtering, there were still 2,725 references of articles that meet the keywords, but are not necessary aligned to the research topic.

We started the process of reading the title of the 2,725 articles to verify the alignment of each one with the research topic. As a result, 2,344 articles were discarded for being misaligned with the research topic. 381 articles remained, that according to its titles, they appeared to be aligned with the research topic.

After identifying the 381 articles, which according to its titles appeared to be aligned with the research topic, we used the web application Google Scholar to analyze the volume of citations of each article and consequently its relevance and scientific impact. From the 381 articles checked, Google Scholar did not find nine, remaining 372 with its scientific impact measured. For those 372 articles, there were 16,757 citations.

Based on the postulate of Pareto (1896), as the criterion to establish the delimitation of relevance and scientific impact, we verify that the articles with 49 citations or more represented 80 per cent of total of citations. This criterion enabled to create a set of articles with confirmed recognition (SACR), which had 79 articles that according to its titles were aligned with the research topic.

We initiated the reading of the abstracts of the 79 articles of the SACR, to verify their alignment with the research topics. As a result, 28 articles were discarded for being misaligned, remaining 51 articles aligned with the research topic. These 51 articles constituted what we called Repository A.

However, the 293 items that had less than 49 citations were not discarded immediately after the selection process. On a second moment, these articles were analyzed considering two different criteria: (i) if they were published within less than two years and (ii) if one of their author was already on the Repository A, repository of articles with confirmed recognition.

We understand that an article published within less than two years have not had enough time to acquire the relevant scientific impact criteria established in this research. Further, we also believe that it is important to consider articles with less scientific impact from authors that are already in the Repository A.

After the reanalysis of the 293 articles that were under the established scientific impact criteria (<49 citations), we identify the existence of 114 articles published on the years 2013, 2014 and 2015, besides of 10 articles with authors in the repository A. Among these, 54 articles had their abstracts aligned with the research topic, were denominated Repository B.

As final proceeding, the repositories A and B were merged and denominated Repository C. We started the full reading of these articles, in order to evaluate their adherence to the research topic. Of the 105 articles integrating the Repository C, 27 articles were discarded for not being aligned with the research topic. The result was a final set of 77 articles with the most relevance, according to the number of citations and criteria described before.

### **3.2 RESULTS OF THE SYSTEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE LITERATURE**

In this section we present the set of articles resulted from the systematic analysis of the literature, on which we based the findings and conclusions presented on section 3. The analysis was conducted considering the citations volume, also considered as the scientific impact, registered on Google Scholar. As a result, we present the scientific recognition of each article, according to the total of citations. Due the size of the table, we decided to present only the top 12 articles in Table 2. The full table (table 2.1) can be find on the appendix of this paper.

| Set of Articles                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Nº Citations |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| WHITTINGTON, Richard. Completing the practice turn in strategy research. <b>Organization studies</b> , v. 27, n. 5, p. 613-634, 2006.                                                                            | 1003         |
| MAITLIS, Sally. The social processes of organizational sensemaking. <b>Academy of Management Journal</b> , v. 48, n. 1, p. 21-49, 2005.                                                                          | 667          |
| JARZABKOWSKI, Paula; BALOGUN, Julia; SEIDL, David. Strategizing: The challenges of a practice perspective. <b>Human relations</b> , v. 60, n. 1, p. 5-27, 2007.                                                  | 623          |
| ROULEAU, Linda. Micro-practices of strategic sensemaking and sensegiving: how middle managers interpret and sell change every day. <b>Journal of Management studies</b> , v. 42, n. 7, p. 1413-1441, 2005.       | 492          |
| BALOGUN, Julia; JOHNSON, Gerry. From intended strategies to unintended outcomes: The impact of change recipient sensemaking. <b>Organization studies</b> , v. 26, n. 11, p. 1573-1601, 2005.                     | 363          |
| JARZABKOWSKI, Paula; PAUL SPEE, Andreas. Strategy-as-practice: A review and future directions for the field. <b>International Journal of Management Reviews</b> , v. 11, n. 1, p. 69-95, 2009.                   | 349          |
| MAITLIS, Sally; LAWRENCE, Thomas B. Triggers and enablers of sensegiving in organizations. <b>Academy of management Journal</b> , v. 50, n. 1, p. 57-84, 2007.                                                   | 321          |
| LÜSCHER, Lotte S.; LEWIS, Marianne W. Organizational change and managerial sensemaking: Working through paradox. <b>Academy of Management Journal</b> , v. 51, n. 2, p. 221-240, 2008.                           | 320          |
| KURATKO, Donald F. et al. A Model of Middle-Level Managers' Entrepreneurial Behavior. <b>Entrepreneurship theory and practice</b> , v. 29, n. 6, p. 699-716, 2005.                                               | 318          |
| DENIS, Jean-Louis; LANGLEY, Ann; ROULEAU, Linda. Strategizing in pluralistic contexts: Rethinking theoretical frames. <b>Human Relations</b> , v. 60, n. 1, p. 179-215, 2007.                                    | 296          |
| CHIA, Robert; MACKAY, Brad. Post-processual challenges for the emerging strategy-as-practice perspective: Discovering strategy in the logic of practice. <b>Human relations</b> , v. 60, n. 1, p. 217-242, 2007. | 274          |
| CHIA, Robert; HOLT, Robin. Strategy as practical coping: A Heideggerian perspective. <b>Organization Studies</b> , v. 27, n. 5, p. 635-655, 2006.                                                                | 272          |

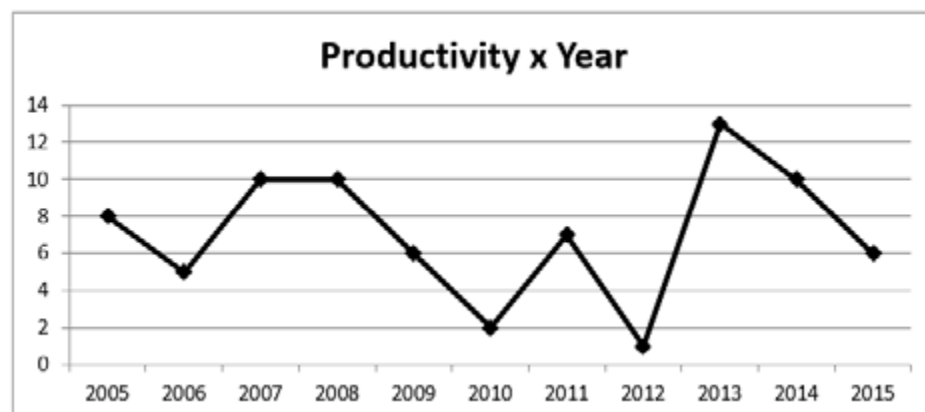
**Table 2:** Scientific recognition of the top 12 articles.

**Source:** The authors

After this systematic analysis of the literature, we identified the five most relevant articles, authors and journals about the research topics considering the criteria established. The five articles most cited are: (i) Whittington, R. 2006. Completing the practice turn in strategy research. *Organization studies*, 27(5). (1.003 citations); (ii) Maitlis, S. 2005. The social processes of organizational sensemaking. *Academy of Management Journal*, 48(1). (667 citations); (iii) Jarzabkowski, P., Balogun, J. and Seidl, D. 2007. Strategizing: the challenges of a practice perspective. *Human relations*, 60(1). (623 citations); (iv) Rouleau, L. 2005. Micro-Practices of Strategic Sensemaking and Sensegiving: How Middle Managers Interpret and Sell Change Every Day\*. *Journal of Management Studies*, 42(7). (492 citations); and (v) Balogun, J. and Johnson, G. 2005. From intended strategies to unintended outcomes: The impact of change recipient sensemaking. *Organization studies*, 26(11). (363 citations).

Regarding to the authors, within the timeframe established and according to the articles on the final set of this research, the five most cited are: (i) Paula Jarzabkowski, with 1.704 citations; (ii) Richard Whittington, with 1.462 citations; (iii) Julia Balogun, with 1.387 citations; (iv) Sally Maitlis, with 988 citations; and (v) Linda Rouleau, with 955 citations.

These authors have worked around the theme with researches that can be characterized almost as a cluster, they are publishing together in many publications since the Cambridge handbook of strategy as practice and others researches (Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl, and Vaara, 2010). It probably is the reason for the productivity is not constant along the years, but instead, suffers peaks and falls as presented in the Figure 2.



**Figure 2:** Distributions of publications per year, along the established timeframe.

**Source:** The authors

Finally, the five journals with the most relevance to the research topics, considering the volume of citations are: (i) Organization Studies (2.350 citations); (ii) Human Relations (1.637 citations); (iii) Academy of Management Journal (1.580 citations); (iv) Journal of Management Studies (1.252 citations); and (v) International Journal of Management Reviews (349 citations), as presented on table 3.

| Journal                                            | Published Articles | Total of Citations |
|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Organization Studies                               | 10                 | 2350               |
| Human Relations                                    | 9                  | 1637               |
| Academy of Management Journal                      | 5                  | 1580               |
| Journal of Management Studies                      | 8                  | 1252               |
| International Journal of Management Reviews        | 1                  | 349                |
| Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice               | 1                  | 318                |
| Long Range Planning                                | 4                  | 305                |
| Journal of Management                              | 2                  | 277                |
| Strategic Organization                             | 3                  | 247                |
| Organization Science                               | 2                  | 243                |
| Academy of Management Annals                       | 2                  | 183                |
| American Journal of Sociology                      | 1                  | 138                |
| International Journal of Human Resource Management | 2                  | 116                |
| Organization                                       | 1                  | 113                |

|                                                 |           |              |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----------|--------------|
| Strategic Management Journal                    | 3         | 93           |
| Journal of Management Inquiry                   | 2         | 92           |
| Discourse and Communication                     | 1         | 41           |
| Journal of Applied Behavioral Science           | 2         | 35           |
| European Management Journal                     | 2         | 34           |
| Accounting Organizations and Society            | 1         | 30           |
| Journal of Strategic Information Systems        | 2         | 26           |
| Business History                                | 2         | 23           |
| British Journal of Management                   | 6         | 18           |
| British Journal of Industrial Relations         | 1         | 16           |
| International Journal of Hospitality Management | 1         | 6            |
| Scandinavian Journal of Management              | 1         | 3            |
| Health Care Management Review                   | 1         | 2            |
| <b>Total</b>                                    | <b>76</b> | <b>9.527</b> |

**Table 3:** List of journals according to the total of publications and citations.

**Source:** The authors

Concerning the journals, they are the most relevant ones in the field of management, very prestigious and serious process of publication, justifying the importance of SAP and MM studies to the academy of management.

## 4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Our goal on this study was to conduct a systematic analysis of the literature about SAP and the role of MM inside organizations, covering the scientific production related to the subject between 2005 and 2015 to elaborate a final set of articles about the context, which support future researches on the field. Throughout this paper, we presented a methodological process of collection and selection of this set of 77 articles, as well as the systematic analysis of the literature process to identify the articles, authors and journals of major scientific impact on SAP and the role of MM inside organizations, between 2005 and 2015.

After the systematic analysis of the literature we were able to identify the changing aspects between the studies conducted until 2010 and the studies conducted after that time. Since Whittington's seminal article in 1996 until the final decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, SAP have been consolidating itself as a line of research. Therefore, it is possible to notice a higher quantity of theoretical studies among the papers published related to the theme (WHITTINGTON, 2006; JAZARBKOWSKI et al, 2007; JAZARBKOSKI; SPEE, 2009; KURATKO et al, 2005; DENIS et al, 2007; CHIA; MACKAY, 2007), and empirical researches that emphasizing the existence of relations between practices, praxis and practitioners, as well as the role played by the MM inside organizations (MAITLIS, 2005; ROULEAU, 2005; BALOGUN; JOHNSON, 2005; MAITLIS; LAWRENCE, 2008). We understand that it is one of the reasons that they are top ten cited articles.

The scientific production after that first decade started to show new concerns that overpass the consolidation of the SAP and MM as lines of research, focusing on aspects related to the importance of methodologies and data collection techniques that could improve SAP research. The need of ethnographic studies, as well as conversation analysis among practitioner (BALOGUN et al, 2014) and the agency analysis as strategies, techniques and procedures of data collection that allows researchers to go beyond an individualistic analysis and be able to relate microactivities with institutional phenomena macro level (VAARA; WHITTINGTON, 2012).

The call for studies focusing on strategic interactions and their materiality in order to design critical analyzes of social practices in the empirical context has also been a new focus and future direction for researches (LEBARON; WHITTINGTON, 2011; VAARA et al, 2012; BALOGUN et al, 2014; JAZABKOWSKI; BURKE; SPEE, 2015). As well as the suggestions for new interactions with other research fields, as information technology for example (WHITTINGTON, 2014).

We believe this work contributes to the scientific advancement of SAP and the role of MM inside organizations. Not only because of the elaboration of a relevant articles set about the subject, but also by analyzing the main articles, authors and journals on the research topics which indicates multiple researches, concerning MM relations, cognition and action inside the practice of strategy.

These studies have revealed prominent data turning to characterize a chain about strategic practices in management of organizations from a perspective of social sciences, favoring research lines groupings that systematize the field of strategy as practice. The Academy of Management created a specific tracking about strategy as practice.

The author Paula Jarzabkowski won Academy of Impact Award Management PTC Practice 2016: a prestigious award and highly valued that aims to recognize and celebrate an outstanding scholar for her or his contribution to theory and research studies based practice and global impact on management and organizational practices.

Furthermore, middle management has been revealed as a very important level to be analyzed in the micro level of the organizations, where things are really happening with different level of intention and involvement in the practices, according to different praxis applied in diverse social situations.

As limitations of this study, we highlight the use of only one database, the Web of Science™ Core Collection, which limits the sample field. As well as the analysis of references during the systematic analysis of the literature process. At last, our “perception” about the alignment of those articles that were discarded or chosen characterizing the biases into the analyses process despite of the rigor of the methodology.

Future researches may be conduct to analyze a wider timeframe or since the publication of the seminal articles about these subjects, SAP and the role of MM. We also encourage researchers to go deeper on the analysis of the different approaches and contents used in each one of those articles identified in this study, from both quantitative and qualitative perspective.

The advance of researches on SAP and the role of MM inside organizations seems to be important to the scientific community, since both are young research subjects, which started in the 90s with Whittington (1996) and with Floyd and Wooldridge (1992), respectively. We believe that there are still much to be studied about these topics and we hope that the results founded in this work may serve as a milestone to support future researches.

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WHITTINGTON, Richard. Completing the practice turn in strategy research. **Organization studies**, v. 27, n. 5, p. 613-634, 2006.

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## APPENDIX

**Table 2.1:** Full table of articles scientific recognition

Source: The authors

| Set of Articles                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Nº Citations |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| WHITTINGTON, Richard. Completing the practice turn in strategy research. <b>Organization studies</b> , v. 27, n. 5, p. 613-634, 2006.                                                                            | 1003         |
| MAITLIS, Sally. The social processes of organizational sensemaking. <b>Academy of Management Journal</b> , v. 48, n. 1, p. 21-49, 2005.                                                                          | 667          |
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| WHITTINGTON, Richard. Strategy practice and strategy process: family differences and the sociological eye. <b>Organization studies</b> , v. 28, n. 10, p. 1575-1586, 2007.                                                | 214 |
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