



Situated valuations: Affordances of management technologies in organizations



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ABSTRACT

This article engages with the affordance literature and identifies a need for a reorientation of its use in organization and management studies. Thus far, affordances has mainly been used as part of the program of sociomateriality to describe the technology–user dyad. Only to a lesser extent have studies using the affordance concept been sensitive to the means in which contextual conditions outside the technology-user dyad configure technological affordances. In order to provide such a sensitization, this article mobilizes the emerging field of valuation studies. It contributes to affordance literature with a synthesis of valuation studies and affordance theory and by constructing the concept of situated valuation as an associate concept to affordances. This article demonstrates the worth of this association by drawing on a comprehensive, ethnographic study of Lean management in a children's hospital.

1. Introduction

Reflecting the proliferation of management technologies in organizations, organization and management scholars are paying increasing attention to materiality, tools, and technology (Fayard & Weeks, 2014: 237). This turn to sociomateriality (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Orlikowski, 2007; Zammuto, Griffith, Majchrzak, Dougherty, & Faraj, 2007) has sparked conversations in the field of organization and management studies on how to (re)define and (re)invent the theoretical relation between organization and technology (Faraj & Azad, 2012). A recurrent theme of this conversation is the co-constitutive nature of the relationship between organization and technology; a theme which seems to oscillate between polarized conceptions of the role of technology, such as oversocialization versus undersocialization (Bloomfield, Latham, & Vurdubakis, 2010), voluntarism versus determinism (Fayard & Weeks, 2014), and constructivism versus realism (Rappert, 2003). To push this conversation beyond oscillation, scholars are increasingly mobilizing affordance theory.

Affordance theory was introduced to the field of organization and management studies as a “third way” of approaching the schism between technology and the social. The sociologist Hutchby (2001) presented the affordance concept as a means to bridge the positions giving primacy to either human agency or technical capacities (Hutchby, 2001: 44). However, while gaining momentum as part of the

sociomateriality movement (see, for example Leonardi & Barley, 2008; Van Osch & Mendelson, 2011; Zammuto et al., 2007), several scholars have asserted that the affordance concept has yet to prove its usefulness in understanding the empirical processes through which affordances of technology come into existence in unique situations (Faraj & Azad, 2012: 255) and what role organizational dynamics play in this process. For example, Bloomfield et al. (2010) note that although Hutchby (2001) underlines the relational aspect of affordances, it is not followed through (Bloomfield et al., 2010: 429). The affordance lens has been used in a manner that brings along a tendency to focus on the human–machine dyad and overlooks the role of the co-presence of other artifacts, people, and temporally contingent practices (Bloomfield et al., 2010; Faraj & Azad, 2012; Fayard & Weeks, 2014).

The aim of this article is to enrich the literature on affordances with an attunement to the reality of the organizations of today, where multiple technologies of different types are at play, and where the relevance of particular technologies changes over time. To accomplish such an attunement, this article pairs the affordance concept with that of “situated valuation”; a concept informed by the emerging field of pragmatic valuation studies and developed in this article. The locus of valuation studies is to investigate how things come to count as valuable in empirical situations (Antal, Hutter, & Stark, 2015; Dussauge, Helgesson, & Lee, 2015; Helgesson & Muniesa, 2013). To explore the usefulness of the suggested synthesis between affordance theory and

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valuation studies, this article mobilizes an empirical study of Lean management in a children's hospital. Using ethnographic data, this study analyzes how three affordances of Lean come to be valued differently in specific situations observed at the hospital.

This article begins by accounting for the appropriation of affordance theory by organization and management scholars and argues that the concept has been entangled in ontological debates to the extent that this has come to overshadow its primary quality, which, according to this article, is to direct analytical attention toward the doings of technology. To underscore this use of affordances and provide an organizational attunement, this article presents the field of valuation studies and develops the concept of situated valuation. Upon settling the theoretical framework, this article presents an ethnographic study of Lean management in a children's hospital, including its research methodology. In the analytical section, three affordances of Lean management in the children's hospital are presented, and their changing valuations in different empirical situations are analyzed. Lastly, the analytical findings are summarized and the relevance of combining affordances with the concept of situated valuations is discussed in relation to the socio-materiality literature on affordances.

2. Affordances: From ecological psychology to organization and management studies

Before affordance theory was introduced to organization and management studies, it was used in the field of psychology. As part of his theory of visual perception, ecological psychologist Gibson (Gibson, 1977; Gibson, 1979) uses “affordances” to explain how animals interact with their environments. Gibson's motivation was to counter the argument of the cognitive psychologists of the 1970s who claimed that meaning was a mental process separate from the environment. Gibson wanted a concept that could “refer both to the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term [did]” (Gibson, 1979: 127). A well-known example drawing on Gibson's work is a study by Warren (1984) that involves a series of stair-climbing experiments. Warren showed that the involved actors perceived the affordance of “climbability” through body-scaled metrics, not in absolute or global dimensions. This result means that the actors' judgment of whether they could climb the stairway was determined by, among other things, their leg length rather than the steps' height (Warren, 1984). To capture both the impact of, for example, the stairway and the climber, Gibson insisted that an affordance is “neither an objective property nor a subjective property; or it is both if you like... it is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior” (Gibson, 1979: 129–130). He held that affordances represented action possibilities that existed in the environment and could be directly perceived by the animals.

Gibson's characterization of affordance stirred debate in the field, particularly on the question of where to locate the reference of the term (Greeno, 1994). For example, is the affordance that a stairway provides for climbing a property of the chair, of the person who climbs it, or something else? In his analysis of this debate, Stoffregen (2003) detects two positions: one that views affordances as “dispositional” and another that views them as “relational.” Turvey (1992), associated with the dispositional position, frames an affordance as a disposition equivalent to a law. He views an affordance as a latent property of an object that manifests itself in an interaction with the subject (an animal, in his case). In opposition to Turvey (1992); Stoffregen (2003) presents the relational position. He argues that affordances cannot be dispositions, because a characteristic of dispositions is that they never fail to actualize under the right circumstances. Affordances, he argues, do not always result in a specific action in relation to an organism (Robey, Anderson, & Raymond, 2013; Stoffregen, 2003). This confusion about the nature of affordances has tagged along as the concept migrated into organization and management studies.

In 2001, the sociologist Hutchby (2001) introduced the notion of affordances to the sociology of science and technology. Characteristic of

Hutchby's theory of affordances is that it does not fit with either the dispositional or relational position, as identified by Stoffregen (2003). Hutchby (2001) argues that affordances of technology are *neither* dispositional *nor* relational: they are both. They are dispositional because they both enable and constrain action and exist even though they are not perceived. Yet they are also relational, because they are specific to the perceiver and the context, which allows multiple interpretations of the same technology (Fayard & Weeks, 2014: 242; Hutchby, 2001).

Hutchby introduced the concept of affordances in organization and management studies because he observed an overemphasis of sociality at the expense of materiality in the social constructivist accounts of the time. Explicitly, he criticized the idea of technology as text (Grint & Woolgar, 1997) available to no matter which interpretation the user makes (Hutchby, 2001). Parallel to Gibson's project of emphasizing the role of the environment on our perception within the field of psychology, Hutchby suggests to take seriously the affordances that particular artefacts possess (Hutchby, 2001: 453). According to Hutchby, this position does not equal a realist or essentialist perspective, but rather a shift of analytical attention away from accounts and representations of technology and toward a better understanding of “the material substratum which underpins the very possibility of different courses of action in relation to an artefact” (Hutchby, 2001: 450). The novelty of this shift in organization and management studies can be questioned, but that is out of the scope of this article (see, however, Rappert, 2003).

Novel or not, Hutchby (2001)'s project was to interfere with the social constructivist debate and sensitize the analytical vocabulary to the “material substratum.” Yet, his concept of affordances has predominantly been utilized as an input in ontological debates about the relation between the social and the material, and between user and technology. In their chapter of the *Academy of Management Annals* (2008), Orlikowski and Scott identify the theory of affordances as part of the sociomateriality movement away from “discrete entities of people and technology” and toward “composite and shifting assemblages” (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008: 455). The sociomateriality program challenges the taken-for-granted assumption that technology, work, and organization should be studied as separate entities, because this disables our ability to observe the entanglements of technology and the social at all times, in all places, and under all circumstances (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008: 454). Leonardi later tried to moderate the idea of the “entanglements” of technology and organization by suggesting that the notion of “imbrication” (2011) as a metaphor to grasp the “overlaps” of the social and material is more useful in empirical analysis (2013a, 2013b).

Zammuto et al. (2007), referring to Gibson (1979) and Hutchby (2001), suggest the notion of “affordances of organizing” as a bridging concept that brings “the social and technological systems in organizations in concert” (Zammuto et al., 2007: 752). Such affordances for organizing, they argue, depend not only on the functionality of the technology, in their case IT-systems, but also on the organization; that is, on the expertise, procedures, controls, social capacities, etc. present in the organization. They argue that “although IT features and organization features may exist independently of each other, their value for explaining organizational form and function comes from how they are enacted together” (Zammuto et al., 2007: 753). The affordances that occur from the interconnection between organization and technology must be explored, they argue, if our research hopes to reflect today's organizations (Zammuto et al., 2007: 760). Zammuto et al.'s study shows that the concept of affordance, despite the intentions of Hutchby (2001) and Gibson (1972, 1979), is still mainly used to discuss the features of technology, particularly in studies of digital technologies (see, for example (Yoo, Boland Jr, Lyytinen, & Majchrzak, 2012)).

3. Positioning this article

The debate, raised under the headline of sociomateriality by

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