What makes a social practice? Being, knowing, doing and leading

Nina Geilinger [a], [*], Stefan Haefliger [b], Georg von Krogh [a], Lise Rechsteiner [a]

[a] ETH Zurich, Department of Management, Technology and Economics, Weinbergstr. 56, 8092 Zurich, Switzerland
[b] City University London, Cass Business School, 106 Bunhill Row, London EC1Y 8TZ, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Despite several decades of work on social practice, many open intriguing questions remain about their existence and functions within an organizational context. In this article, we discuss the "inherent logics" of social practice—being, knowing, and doing—to depict the meaning and mainspring of its conservation within an organizational context. We argue that the understanding of social practice in organization and management studies has predominantly focused on the internal workings of social practice, and we propose that a contextualization of the inherent logics of social practice may be a next step in advancing theory and empirical research. We propose a contested coexistence of social practices in organizations and thereby argue that the conservation of social practice protrudes another element belonging to its inherent logics, i.e., leading. We suggest that leadership in distributed and adaptive organizations responds to innovation and competitive challenges with wisdom, care, and fluidity.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Social practices are not possible to think away in contemporary organization theory. They engulf forms of working and living, provide meaning and direction, afford safety and routine, engender collective standards and instil ambitions. Without social practices, organizations are empty shells likened to long abandoned and decaying factories photographed by Timm Suess (see http://timmsuess.com/). One can only imagine the contrast—what they were like and how likeable they were back then, when they pulsated with the rhythmic noise of practising craftsmen working in concert to produce their wares. As organization scholars, we are often impressed by the vigour and energy of social practices: how much more lively they appear than the empty shell of the formal organization housing them. It is not surprising, then, that we are also often prepared to leave our functionalist understanding of organizations behind to turn to social practices and embrace their unfolding dynamics. However, as we complete our "practice turn" and redirect investigations, it may also be too easy to oversee that social practices necessitate organization structure and function, and vice versa (Ben-Menahem, von Krogh, Erden, & Schneider, 2015; Giddens, 1984; Whittington, 2006). At least, as a function of

producing some form of collective good, social practice inspires quality in work and a narrative in the individual's working life (MacIntyre, 1981).

Although many definitions of social practice exist, we draw attention to one by MacIntyre: "any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partly definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended" (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 187). This definition sheds light on the role of values, norms, and standards in social practices, and it illustrates the power of social practices for supporting human achievement. It stands to reason, then, that social practices may seek various ways to achieve and redefine standards of excellence.

The "practice turn" in organization studies understands organizational processes and phenomena as manifestations of underlying practices of work (e.g., Brown & Duguid, 1991; Schatzki, Cetina, & von Savigny, 2001). For example, in organization and management research, this perspective shaped the important field of "strategy-as-practice" (Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl, & Vaara, 2010; Jarzabkowski, 2004; Whittington, 2006). Accordingly, organizational activities are manifested by "strategizing", i.e., the practising of strategy making in organizations, examining the underlying organizational activities of the work that is being accomplished. The practice turn also takes another perspective of organizations

---

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: ngeilinger@ethz.ch (N. Geilinger), stefan.haefliger.1@city.ac.uk (S. Haefliger), gvkrogh@ethz.ch (G. von Krogh).

(Erden, Schneider, & von Krogh, 2014). In addition to the distinct types of practising as in "conducting work", it offers a renewed view of the social entities that constitute the organization that is enabling and conducting the work. The focus turns to the type of practising that is being done, who or what entities are conducting the practising, and how the interplay of the entities might affect organizational dynamics and work in a broader organizational context. Although a first glance at social practice directs our attention to its internal learning and dynamics, a contextualized view of social practice also reveals its conserving side in an organization's protection of its ways of doing, being and knowing for the production of what it defines as its "internal goods" (MacIntyre, 1981).

Innovation across practice boundaries has proven difficult because of the epistemic, social, and cognitive idiosyncrasy of social practices (Ferlie, Fitzgerald, Wood, & Hawkins, 2005; Swan, Scarbrough, & Robertson, 2002). As an informal organization, a social practice may produce resistance to change enacted by ingrained work routines (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). However, as Gherardi and Perrotta (2011) note, "a practice is always temporary and open to further re-negotiations" (p. 611). Precisely this delicate characteristic of practices may elevate the efforts by practitioners to conserve the status quo and to protect their identity and way of conducting work, particularly if and when confronted with external pressure towards change and re-negotiation. The conserving function of an informal organization is upheld by the social practices in a formal organization. Practitioners in social practices share a historically and socially contextualized identity, which enables them as individuals and collectives to conduct work and thereby to establish a collective meaning-making of that work (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). The reach of social practices may go beyond formal boundaries of the organization and occupational jurisdictions; for instance, the practices of medicine, nursing, and caregiving may cross the boundaries of hospitals, homes and doctors' offices, and practitioners may include doctors, informal caregivers, nurses and other health professionals. A social practice may emerge around the use of a new technology for medical treatment that includes practitioners from different occupational groups—i.e., nurses, surgeons, and radiologists—working intensively on the promotion and defence of its use, which over time percolates into a new shared practice.

Organizations of some size house many coexisting social practices (cf MacIntyre, 1981; Wenger, 1998) that, on the one hand, depend on each other in the context of organizational work and, on the other hand, may compete for scarce resources (cf. nursing and medicine in a hospital). Coexisting practices also need to grapple with the constant pressure for change and adaptation as exerted on members of a formal organization. The core argument we make is as follows: The inherent logic of social practices constitutes a key domain in management and organization studies (Bourdieu, 1990), and has often been examined from an internal perspective (e.g., practising). Researchers have been somewhat less concerned with how the interplay of social practices in an organization may also have a constitutive effect, i.e., influencing the sustainability and conservation of social practice itself.[1] We know how a formal organization may influence social practices by providing encouraging support and the necessary resources and by putting pressure on social practices for adaptation and reform (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Thompson, 2005). The dynamic relation between formal organization and social practices is constitutive for both (Ben-Menahem

et al., 2015; Giddens, 1984). We will add here, however, that the interplay of social practices within the same organizational context may have a similarly important constitutive function. The conserving disposition of social practices, then, might be explained through its protective measures to safeguard what it is (being), what it does (doing), and what it knows (knowing) from other social practices in an organization.

However, we contend that potential goal conflicts—rather than a state of goal congruence or even harmony between social practices—occur in organizational life (Erden et al., 2014). Potential goal conflicts tend to surface around the scarcity of resources or the formulation and development of organization-wide policies and procedures. Note here that rather than speaking of work-related conflict between people embedded in practices (e.g., a doctor and nurse in a hospital, a psychologist and an economist in an academic department), we find it meaningful to argue that the conflicts to some degree originate from inherent conflicts between distinct social practices. Distinction is constitutive of social practices because it elicits boundaries. Being in a social practice simultaneously means not being something else (a practitioner of medicine, not of nursing); knowing something may also mean the rejection of knowing something different (medical knowledge, not aroma therapy); and doing some work is also refraining from doing other work (doing surgery but not patient care). A brilliant analysis that exemplifies this point is Flyvbjerg's (2001) book on the struggles between the natural sciences and the social sciences. As members of a social practice, for example, many social scientists may reject the notion that (natural) scientists can produce any meaningful knowledge of social phenomena.

The conservation of social practice is about a struggle for relevance and survival against a multiplicity of social practices within the frames of a changing formal organization. A contested co-existence reveals the necessity of social practices that possess a capacity for addressing competing pressure from within an organization to protect their own distinct practice. The capacity for addressing competing pressure, however, needs not only protection but also a sense of balance, coexistence, and integration (Beadle & Moore, 2006). The role of the manager is a difficult one because it often sits between and across social practices (and associated ways of being, knowing and doing). Here, we hope to contribute an angle for discussion and future research. Integrating the work and coexistence of social practices is a leadership challenge: We contribute to building a research agenda for management as a social practice (owing to Beadle and Moore (2006)) and for the role of individual development to accept and to cede authority around the leadership in social practice (Laloux, 2014). We argue that this capacity takes the shape of leadership that differs from traditional formal managerial roles in organizations.

In moments of conflict between social practices, each practice may bring forth a distributed and internal capacity of leadership that is a necessary condition for its absorption of resources and sustainability in the face of change. This capacity for distributed leading in social practice may partly explain why some social practices survive as others decay and wither, leaving empty shells behind. We suggest how (distributed) leading in social practices in a potentially contested organizational context is a complementary part of its inherent logics (being, doing, knowing) and a necessary condition to sustain it. In the following, we briefly discuss the established logics of social practices. Then, we move on to describe the interplay of social practices in organizations and thereby argue for leading as a complementary inherent logic of social practice.

2. Inherent logics of social practice

What are the inherent logics of social practices? In other words,

---

[1] Notable exceptions include, for example, Wenger (1998), Kellogg et al. (2006), Nicolini, Mengis, and Swan (2012) who analyzed boundary spanning between practices.