The multifaceted nature of social practices: A review of the perspectives on practice-based theory building about organizations

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ABSTRACT

A vibrant body of literature on social practices has developed rapidly in recent years. However, a systematic analysis of the underlying perspectives that shape the way practice-based scholars contribute to theory building about organizational phenomena has escaped scholarly attention. It is of pivotal importance to examine the multifaceted nature of social practices and understand the process by which new practice-based knowledge is developed. Our study addresses this gap by disentangling how researchers have adopted the knowledge, materiality, ethics, and politics perspectives that – as past influential work has informed us – are particularly relevant to practice-based theory building. In so doing, we categorize the body of literature into themes that correspond to the organizational phenomena examined by social practice scholars: practice boundaries and coordination of work, technology at work, strategy formation, local particulars structuring everyday work, and transformation of work practices. By uncovering how scholars adopt the four perspectives within each theme, our review shows that scholars (i) predominantly adopt the knowledge perspective, (ii) neglect the politics perspective when looking 'inside' a social practice, (iii) strikingly de-emphasize the ethics perspective, and (iv) isolate each of the four perspectives used in theory building. We then examine in detail the implications of our work for future research on social practices and conclude with a number of theoretical and methodological suggestions.

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1. Introduction

Social practice theory reflects a theoretical, philosophical, and empirical program to understand in social, material, and historical contexts what people actually do (e.g., Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Miettinen, Samra-Fredericks, & Yanow, 2009; Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, & Savigny, 2001). In organizations, social practices are recognized as the ways in which work gets accomplished (Brown & Duguid, 1991), leading many to describe them as "work practices" (e.g., Barley, 1996; Boland, Lyytinen, & Yoo, 2007; Kellogg, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2006). Social practices are situationally constituted, recurrent, materially bounded, and shared forms of social activities that produce and structure life in organizations (Barnes, 2001; Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Jarzabkowski, Spee, & Smets, 2013; Orlikowski, 2002; Schatzki et al., 2001).

Re-orienting the study of organizations from a separate investigation of rules, structures, or goals to the ways in which scholars observe how actors (re)produce organizational reality through everyday contextual practicing (e.g., Gherardi, 2001; Nicolini, 2011; Orlikowski, 2000, 2002) practice-based research has become crucial to address a number of today's most fundamental workplace challenges. Specifically, social practice theory proved beneficial in capturing the inherent material dimension of structuring and shaping organizational processes (Orlikowski, 2000; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). As Feldman and Orlikowski (2011, p. 1248) noted, it has shifted the focus "from studying the design and/or use of technology in the workplace [...] toward studying sociomaterial practices that perform social and material relations together." Practice-based studies, furthermore, have advanced our understanding of capabilities and resources as enacted in situated action and highlighted their provisional and temporary nature (e.g., Faraj & Xiao, 2006; Hsiao, Tsai, & Lee, 2012; Orlikowski, 2002). Considering social practices as the locus of knowing, meaning-making, and organizing (Nicolini, 2011; Schatzki et al., 2001), it offers a better understanding of various dichotomies, such as the individual and collective, subject and object, body and mind, micro and macro, or knowing and doing, that are rooted in many of today's workplace challenges (e.g., Chia & MacKay, 2007; Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Nicolini, 2011; Orlikowski, 2002).

The recent increase of academic interest in social practices (e.g., Borzillo, Aznar, & Schmitt, 2011; Probst & Borzillo, 2008) has

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created a vibrant body of literature and similarly yielded a number of relevant literature reviews (e.g., Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Gherardi, 2000; Jarzabkowski & Paul Spee, 2009; Parmigiani & Howard-Grenville, 2011; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). These studies emphasize the significance of practice-based research and have placed social practices on the agenda for empirical work in organization studies. However, prior studies have not investigated the perspectives that researchers adopt when contributing to practice-based theorizing about organizations. Although past influential works highlighted the significance of perspectives in theory building in the field of organization studies (Alvesson, Hardy, & Harley, 2008; Lewis & Grimes, 1999; Okhuysen & Bonardi, 2011; Oswick, Fleming, & Hanlon, 2011), surprisingly little is known about how different perspectives structure and forge practice-based studies' conceptions of reality. This article contributes to the literature by uncovering how scholars have adopted distinct perspectives to practice-based theorizing around organizations. We define theory as the coherent description or explanation of a phenomenon with a set of concepts and their interrelations (Gioia & Pitre, 1990). Accordingly, theory building refers to the cycles of generating, testing, and refining relationships and concepts that clarify or supplement the existing representation(s) of an observed or experienced phenomenon (Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007; Corley & Gioia, 2011; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Gioia & Pitre, 1990).

Each perspective that researchers adopt for theory building reflects a distinct point of view on the organizational phenomenon at hand (Alvesson et al., 2008; Morgan, 1980; Okhuysen & Bonardi, 2011). These perspectives shape researchers' conceptions of reality, guide the way they see the social practices, and therefore direct the process by which new knowledge on organizations is developed (Alvesson et al., 2008; Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Lewis & Grimes, 1999; Morgan, 1980; Okhuysen & Bonardi, 2011). These perspectives can be illustrated with the help of an analogy of photographic filters clipped onto the lens of a camera: they change the way that you see the empirical world as the photographic filters selectively alter the color balance or brightness of an image. Perspectives are like filters that researchers mount on their 'lenses' to focus their attention and shape their empirical understanding of social practices. Thus, each perspective generates essential but only partial insights into the multifaceted nature of social practices (Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Morgan, 1980). As Mayer and Sparrowe (2013, p. 917) state, distinct perspectives "speak to the same phenomena but from different vantage points."

Disentangling how scholars have become immersed in various perspectives augments our understanding of the hidden assumptions that shape their perception of the phenomena and the process of practice-based theory building about organizations (Alvesson & Karreman, 2007; Lewis & Grimes, 1999). It also helps scholars see different facets of social practices and identify potential synergies in combining different perspectives. Multi-perspective approaches and the transitional zones between different perspectives can provide unique theoretical insights into the phenomenon being examined (Gioia & Pitre, 1990). Uncovering the different perspectives on new organizational knowledge development further contributes to our understanding of theory building as a process shaped by researchers' norms, values, and beliefs (Calas & Smircich, 1999). It fosters reflexivity on the different ways in which a phenomenon can be understood and how new knowledge about a phenomenon is created (Alvesson et al., 2008).

In this article, we investigate how scholars adopt the following four perspectives that – as prior influential work has informed us – are particularly relevant to practice-based theory building about organizations: knowledge (e.g., Brown & Duguid, 1998, 2001; Gherardi, 2001; Orlikowski, 2002), materiality (e.g., Orlikowski, 2007; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Suchman, 2007),

politics (e.g., Jarzabkowski & Balogun, 2009; Kaplan, 2011), and ethics (MacIntyre, 1984; von Krogh, Haefliger, Spaeth, & Wallin, 2012). We sample empirical, practice-based studies on organizations that were published in ten highly ranked journals over two decades (1991–2011). To disentangle how scholars adopted the four perspectives to explore social practices, we cluster the body of literature based on the organizational phenomena that were studied (subsequently referred to as 'themes'). Unlike past analyses of the literature that typically restricted their review to a particular phenomenon (e.g., Gherardi, 2001; Parmigiani & Howard-Grenville, 2011; Vaara & Whittington, 2012), we systematically review a broad selection of empirical studies in organizational and management science that contribute to practice-based theory building. In so doing, we uncover a dominant tendency toward the knowledge perspective, a disregard of the political perspective when looking 'inside' social practices, a striking de-emphasis of the ethics perspective relative to the others, and a critical tendency to isolate each of the four perspectives on practice-based theory building.

The article is structured as follows. First, we describe the sample selection, introduce the four perspectives (i.e., knowledge, materiality, ethics, and politics), and show how we inductively clustered the sample articles into categories that correspond to different organizational phenomena ('themes'). We then disentangle how the four perspectives guide practice-based theory building within each theme. The next section synthesizes our insights, summarizes the evolutionary path taken by past research, and highlights promising avenues for future practice-based scholarship. The paper concludes with a number of theoretical and practical implications.

2. The review methodology

2.1. Sample selection

Our analysis covers empirical studies published in the following ten top-ranked journals in the field of organizational studies: *Academy of Management Journal*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Human Relations*, *Journal of Management*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Management Science*, *MIS Quarterly*, *Organization Science*, *Organization Studies*, and *Strategic Management Journal*. These journals represent high-impact outlets for publication in organisational studies (according to the ISI Web of Knowledge Journal Citation Reports 2011 and the ABS Academic Journal Quality Guide, Version 4, 2010) that publish articles related to social practice theory and have been the targets of similar literature reviews for high-impact work in the past (e.g., Blackler, 1995; Brown & Duguid, 2001; Cook & Brown, 1999; von Krogh et al., 2012). We conducted Boolean searches in the ISI Web of Knowledge (Social Science Citations Index) and sampled all empirical research articles published over two decades (January 1991–September 2011) that mentioned, built on, discussed, or made explicit contributions to social practice theory. We adopted a multi-stage approach to establish the final sample. First, we searched for articles containing the string "practice*" in the title, abstract, or author keywords. This step resulted in the identification of 1551 papers. Second, we refined the results by limiting the type of documents to research articles. This step eliminated 309 papers. Two of the authors of this study analyzed the titles, keywords, and abstracts of the remaining 1242 research articles to eliminate "false positives," which were articles that did not concern social practice (e.g., articles with "implications for practice" as the only use of the term "practice*"). This process resulted in a sample of 109 articles that were reviewed in depth (i.e., analyzing the full articles) to ensure that the scholars (i) grounded their research in social practice theory