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# Exploring dissonance in practice landscapes with the concept of positionality

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**Key words:** Practice, organising, conflict, dissonance, network of practices, landscape of practices, practical intelligibility

**Submission:** General track

## **Purpose**

Drawing on a study of service delivery at MonTech, a provider of specialised and bespoke monitoring software solutions intended primarily for the financial services sector, the paper argues that practical intelligibility, which conveys the idea that people knowingly perform actions which performance makes sense to them (Schatzki, 2001: 47), stems not only from the differential incorporation of the structure of a particular practice in the mind of the practitioner (Schatzki, 2005: 480-481), but also the differential incorporation of the arrangement of practices forming the wider practice landscape. As part of this effort, the metaphor of a landscape is employed not to direct our attention to the issues of practice boundaries and multi-membership in communities of practice (Hutchinson et al., 2015: 2), but to visualise practice

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landscapes as uneven terrains, in which the performance of local practices, as sites of wider knowing (Nicolini, 2011: 603-605, 614-615), may reconstitute and reinforce some inter-practice connections within the landscape, whilst simultaneously undermining others. In case of service delivery at MonTech, this manifests in recurring and unavoidable, but nevertheless natural, conflict and tensions with various clients over priorities, timelines and service entitlements. Drawing on this finding, the concept of positionality, defined as the effect of the aforementioned differential incorporation of the arrangement of practices forming the wider practice landscape in the mind of the individual practitioner, is introduced to convey the idea that in knowingly performing actions which make sense for them to perform, practitioners reconstitute connections between practices which transpire the most profusely in their local practice, whilst potentially undermining others. Finally, the paper showcases how appreciating differences in positionality enables exploring conflict and dissonance inherent in practical activity (Blackler, 1995: 1037-1038; Gherardi, 2006: 135; Nicolini, 2011: 613).

### **Theoretical framing**

The paper is grounded in practice studies of organisational phenomena (for summary, see Corradi et al., 2010; Nicolini, 2012). Reflective of this, it recognises the primacy of practice as the locus of explanation of organisational life (Marabelli & Newell, 2012: 19). On the one hand, it is associated with scholarship that focuses its attention on multiplicities of interconnected practices rather than individual practices (e.g. Nicolini, 2011; Nicolini et al., 2018; Schatzki, 2005). On the other hand, it builds on the work of scholars who explore conflict, tensions, empowerment and disempowerment from a practice standpoint (e.g. Bechky, 2003; Carlile, 2004; Contu, 2014; Nicolini, 2011).

More specifically, the paper draws on the variety of practice theorising associated most strongly with the work of Theodore Schatzki (2001, 2005, 2006), which is characterised by an asymmetrical treatment of human agency and material performativity, whereby even though practices are not reducible to humans, only humans can carry them out because of their intelligibility, intentionality and affectivity (Schatzki, 2005: 480; Nicolini, 2012: 164, 169-170). This manifests in the aforementioned concept of practical intelligibility (Schatzki, 2001: 47-53, 2005: 480-481) the paper builds on and extends.

## **Methodology**

Empirical material was collected between November 2016 and July 2017. It comprised observations, qualitative interviews and documents. Inclusion of the latter two data types was necessitated by access restrictions put in place by MonTech, which were attributed to their strict non-disclosure agreements with their clients. This prevented some aspects of service delivery at MonTech from being observed, which would have been preferred given the strong association between practice-based theorising and observational methodologies (Yanow, 2006: 1746). To elucidate as much practice as possible via alternative means, the design of the interviews was based on Nicolini's (2009) 'interview to the double' and, more generally, phenomenological interviewing (Englander, 2012; Kvale, 1983).

Diffraction analysis (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; 2013; Lenz Taguchi, 2012; Mazzei, 2014) was used to analyse the empirical material by asking analytical questions based on extant theoretical concepts. The findings presented in the paper have been developed specifically via the 'plugging in' (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012: 10, 12; 2013: 266-267) of the concepts of 'residual agential humanism', 'practical intelligibility' and 'landscape of practices' into the empirical material, and the subsequent development of the aforementioned concept of positionality, which was facilitated by the abductive nature of diffractive analysis (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012: 137-138; Lenz Taguchi, 2014: 271-272). Further concepts were 'plugged in' as part of the study's wider effort to 'bridge' epistemologies of practice and possession (Cook & Brown, 1999). However, the findings resulting from this process are beyond the scope of the current paper.

## **Findings**

The actions of members of MonTech and their clients' organisations that are part and parcel of service delivery are not fully explicable in terms of their local practices (i.e. the work done within MonTech's three service delivery areas and their interactions with clients' staff). Rather, understanding them also requires appreciating differences in how the arrangement of practices comprising the wider practice landscape of service delivery has been incorporated in the minds of those involved (i.e. differences in positionality).

The landscape of practices comprising service delivery at MonTech can be described as stretching in two dimensions. On the one hand, it extends along project lines deep into client organisations and even beyond them due to the heavily regulated nature of their industries. On

the other hand, it stretches across multiple projects delivered to a large number of customers at the same time. Through their actions, members of MonTech reconstitute and reinforce the latter connections, whilst their counterparts in client organisations reconstitute and reinforce the former. In effect, each undermines the alternative set of inter-practice connections, without necessarily intending to do so. Both simply perform actions which performance makes sense to them (Schatzki, 2001: 47).

The above state of affairs is the reason behind the aforementioned recurring and unavoidable, but nevertheless natural, conflict and tensions over priorities, timelines and service entitlements, which are symptomatic of an enduring struggle for control over projects between MonTech and their many long-term clients. More generally, it explains why MonTech find themselves in the difficult position of having to upset their customers in order to keep them satisfied with the service they receive.

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