Practice

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Practice

Practice is the inter-connectivity, between endogenous (intra-practice) and exogenous (inter-practice) forces, with intentionality, to expand the space of possibility in the emerging internal and external goods. The power of practice to connect reveals the complex nature of organizing resulting from the interdependencies within and between practices in an organizational field. These interdependencies are reflected in the historically evolved collective patterns of interconnected actions, activities and modes of knowing. These collective patterns are governed by a purpose, certain rules, formal and informal routines which are embedded in the social context.

Conceptual Overview

Practice theory has a long and fascinating history that can be traced in a number of philosophical perspectives (from Heidegger's *Phenomenological School*, 1969, through to Wittgenstein's *Linguistic Game*, 1953) as much as recent sociological theories (including the ideas of Bourdieu; 1977 and Giddens, 1984) and methodological approaches (ranging from Garfinkel's *Ethnomethodology* 1967, to Schutz's *Phenomenology of the Social*, 1932). Gherardi in her 2006 book *Organizational Knowledge*, provides the most up-to-date review of the roots of what she describes as the emerging 'Practice-based studies' approach in organization studies.

This richness in perspectives informing social practice theory could also account for the lack of clarity as to what is practice. The multiplicity of definitions abound and reveal that different conceptualizations of practice focus on specific issues and examine these issues at specific levels. For example Bourdieu (1990) focuses on *action* while Turner (1994) focus is on the *structure* – language, symbols,

tools. Yet, more recent contributions like Lave & Wenger (1990), Engeström, Miettinen & Punamäki (1999) and Nicolini et al. (2003) focus on practice as the *social context*, as an *activity system* and as *knowing* respectively. A key challenge in practice theory, is to develop ways of integrating these various dimensions of different conceptualisations of practice as they reflect different aspects of the same phenomenon - practice.

Recent attempts by some scholars (see Schatzki et al., 2001; Reckwitz, 2002; Warde, 2005) to consolidate the main debates in practice theory draw attention to the ethical, economic, social and cultural dimensions of practice. These dimensions, with the cultural being the most dominant, inform much current research on practice in organization studies. The focus on practice management studies alone has been explored in relation to topics such as: *communities of practice* (e.g. Brown & Duguid 2000), *knowing in practice* (e.g. Cook & Brown, 1999), *strategy as practice* (e.g. Hendry, 2000) and *learning as practice* (e.g. Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002). It has also been a lens through which a number of phenomena have been re-examined. For example, Seo and Creed (2002) use a practice lens to re-examine institutional change while, Dougherty (2002) and Orlikowski (2000) rethink technology through a practice perspective.

Reflecting on the main trends in current practice research it is possible to distill four main tendencies: Firstly, an effort to engage the temporal nature of practice, as well as its role in supporting institutional structures in communities of practitioners. Secondly, a tendency when describing what constitutes practice, to favor the observable and reportable aspects of practice (e.g. activities, ordering principles, procedures, discourse). Thirdly, a range of epistemological and ontological assumptions inform what is practice. Fourthly, there is a general tendency to describe

practice in relation to rules and routines. These tendencies suggest that some existing conceptualizations of practice have not been fully developed including the relationship between practice, rules and routines, the relationship between the internal and external goods of a practice which lies at the core of McIntyre's analysis of practice and finally, the relationship between practice, intension and practical judgement (what Aristotle describes as *praxis*, *telos* and *phronesis*). Each of these themes are discussed briefly in turn.

The Relationship Between Practice, Rules and Routines

The conceptualization of practice as routinized is one of the least discussed issues even though several researchers adopt this perspective as their point of departure. Practices are also seen to have governing structures in the rules that define and distinguish one practice from another, dispersed from integrated practices but also as shared and common particularly due to the coherence they provide to the functioning of social groups (Lave & Wenger, 1990). Practices however, are not simply a set of routines nor are they only governed by rules. They are not simply a set of standard operating procedures that are reproduced by obeying to particular set of rules. And we cannot assume either, that rules and routines are fixed and standard ways of doing things. As Feldman and Pentland (2003) remind us routines are dynamic and flexible, not least because every time they are performed some of their ostensive aspects are being redefined. A similar conceptualisation may be more suited to our understanding of rules as well. For every time a rule is applied another one is broken. Rules are not only repositories of knowledge they are also means of socialisation providing the grammar for social action (Reynaud, 2005). Therefore, rules are both written and unwritten, tacit and explicit. They are also as Beck and Keiser (2003) remind us

complex and ever changing subject to the systems of innovation that operate as mechanisms renewing the focus and orientation of rules.

Both routines and rules are constitutive of the dynamics that shape how a practice emerges. As part of the sub-cultural and often counter-cultural terrain of organizing, routines and rules may be one way we can explore how different actants within and between practices interact and create connections that then renew practices. The routines within any practice self-organize to create new rules and new routines as a practice co-evolves with other practices. Therefore, routines and rules may well shape how a practice unfolds. Routines and rules however, are only one of the many aspects of any dynamic practice.

The Relationship Between Internal and External Goods of Practice

McIntyre (1985: 188-191) emphasises the need to understand practice as a dynamic between the goods internal and external to a practice. He describes as external, those 'goods' like wealth, social status, prestige, fame, power and influence. They are 'goods' which one possesses in competition with others who may not own them. Internal goods on the other hand, are the virtues that create good for the community one is part of. Internal goods are not 'goods' as they are not possessions. They are the kind of 'qualities' however, that can only be identified through participation in a practice. Such distinctive qualities include virtues like justice, trustworthiness, courage and honesty. In other words, they are internal to the character of the practice in the way practitioners choose to perform a practice.

It could be argued therefore, that practice provides an arena in which the internal goods of a practice can be exhibited, while external goods may be potentially earned. Internal goods include the human capital of a practice in the way practitioners and their unique capabilities, identity, emotions and core values shape a practice and

become socialised into a practice. External goods on the other hand, include the hard and performative aspect of practice reflected in actions, activities, governing structures and procedures, artefacts and tools including the language used to spell out the specifics of practice. They would also comprise of the projected end results and expected rewards that often drive the actions taken.

McIntyre's philosophical account of practice brings a strong moral dimension to our analysis of practice. He demonstrates how we can avoid dichotomies by using the notion of 'good' to denote both hard (formal) and soft (informal) aspects of practice. In other words, any practice comprises of both the tangible evidence of excellence, as well as the intangible elements of the pursuit of excellence.

The Relationship Between Practice, Intention and Practical Judgement

Central to a practice is not only the integrity that internal and external goods provide. The *intensity* with which internal and external goods interconnect affects significantly the *intention* of a practice. Heidegger (1927: 95) was among the first to place emphasis on intentionality as an aspect of human affairs. He defined intentionality as: "The kind of dealing which is closest to us is …. not a bare perceptual cognition, but rather that kind of concern which manipulates things and puts them to use". This view was further developed by Hampshire (1965: 99- 101) who provides an extensive exposition of the relationship between intention and action showing that intention relies on actions, events and language as manifestations of the purpose of a practice. Intentions can be both conscious and unconscious, persistent and changing. Intentions therefore, can be seen as a driving force helping us understand how and why internal and external goods of a practice interconnect.

The co-existence of continuity and change in the intentionality that underpins the way internal and external goods are interconnected, also suggests that a practice is

not afforded a predefined outcome. There is every possibility that what one does and how one goes about doing it may be governed by a different set of intentions which themselves change in the process of performing a practice. What becomes fundamental in this process are the practical judgements (Phronesis) of the practitioners themselves in the choices they make that steer a practice in a multitude of possible directions. This point suggests that if we are to understand the conditions that underpin the interrelationships between the various aspects of practice we need to unpack the intentions of a practice to reveal the tensions that form the conditions shaping the way internal and external goods connect. Internal and external goods therefore, are not sets of predefined elements but possibilities that may emerge when different dimensions they entail connect.

We cannot afford to limit our understanding of practice only as *'praxis'* (action/activity); we also need to understand practice as *'phronesis'* (virtuous modes of knowing; practical judgement), in relation to the *'telos'* (objective/purpose/excellence) to which it is orientated (see Bernstein, 1971). This Aristotelian view reminds us of the need to understand the dynamic nature of practice through the ***ethos*** that constitutes a practice. The ethos of a practice is what ultimately defines its character in the way it is also performed – embodied by the practitioners who constitute the core of a practice along side the purpose that drives their pursuit of a practice.

In summary, the preceding overview suggests that practices are not only enacted but also embodied and that in connecting the multiplicity of aspects constitutive of a practice tensions may arise. These tensions however, reflect the dynamic nature of practice and the possibilities they entail to expand the space of

action. This latter point allows us also to consider how practices reconfigure as tensions become ex-tensions (Antonacopoulou, forthcoming).

Critical Commentary and Future Directions

Future practice research particularly in organization studies needs to embrace the possibilities a practice perspective provides to better understand the dynamics of organizing by questioning the ethics of organization and the ends it serves. This view fundamentally calls for three main shifts in focus. Firstly, there is a need to better understand the dynamic nature of practice, secondly, the need to understand how practices are configured and reconfigured through greater awareness of the intra-practice and inter-practice dynamics and thirdly, a need to shift attention from the adoption of so called 'best practice' towards the development of promising practices. Each of these new avenues for future research are discussed next.

The Dynamic Nature of Practice: Practise and Practising

Engaging with the dynamic nature of practice, it is not enough to argue that practice is temporal and holistic when its performance is only seen through the eye of institutionalization. Practices must not be confused with institutions (McIntyre, 1985). Institutionalization has no end; it is itself an unfolding process and the 'institution' of practices in the realm of organizing is itself an arena of negotiated order (Strauss, 1978). This would be evident in the way the intentions of a practice are constantly transformed as new actions reveal new meanings, new possibilities as new external and internal goods are discovered. The space of possibility that tensions within and

between practices create, reveal another powerful aspect of practice that is not often accounted for; its *practise[1]*.

Practise and *practising* attempts are reflective of the fluidity of a practice. They draw attention to the *deliberate, habitual and spontaneous repetition* as reflective of the dynamic and emergent nature of practice (Antonacopoulou, 2004; forthcoming). In other words, practise and practising, reflect a process of becoming based on trying things out, rehearsing, refining, and changing different aspects of practice and the relationships between them. Practising therefore, in relation to becoming is tentative and ongoing. It is not merely a process punctuated by events and activities, it is a movement that develops and unfolds through the intensity of connections that drive the process of becoming (see Clegg et al., 2005; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

Practising is a process of repetition embracing the multiplicity of possibilities not a mechanistic process of replication. *Replication* implies institutionalisation in the process of re-presentation and re-production. *Repetition* on the other hand, implies re-hearsing, re-viewing aspects of practice. As Deleuze (1994: 5-14) points out repetition is perfection and integration. Repetition is transgression. It forms a condition of movement, a means of producing something new in history. This means that at the core of practising a practice is actively learning and unlearning different aspects of a practice in a proactive way that does not only rely on routines of habit but different

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[1] The Oxford Dictionary (2001) defines *practice* as "the action of doing of something" or "a way of doing something that is common, habitual or expected" such as the work of a doctor working in general practice. *Practise* on the other hand, is defined as "to do something repeatedly or regularly in order to improve one's skill" or "to do something regularly as part of one's normal behaviour" e.g. to work as a doctor is to be in practise The dictionary cautions the possible confusion between practice and practise and clearly points out that the former should be used when referring to the noun and the latter should be used when referring to the verb. It should be noted that in the US language there is no distinction between the *c* and *s* hence, making the distinction more difficult.

ways of embodying a practice. Repetition allows for spontaneity in the way practitioners respond to intended and unintended conditions that shape their practice.

Practise therefore, can be defined as *the process of repetition where deliberate, habitual or spontaneous performances of a practice enable different dimensions of a practice to emerge or be re-discovered.*

Practice therefore, exists because it is in practise, not simply performed, but formed and transformed as practising attempts reveal different aspects that configure and reconfigure a practice on an ongoing basis. Practising must not be confused for improvising. Practising entails visualisation and immence concentration in rehearsing again and again parts of a practice differently. It also involves a process of loosing the structure once in the act. This means that the practice becomes a second nature for the practitioner to the extent that they *are* their practice. Practising therefore, does not only require engaged participation, it demands embodied participation.

The ongoing permutations of practice in practising attempts help to explain why no practice is ever the same and explain why the same practitioner can perform the same practice very differently at different times and across space. Moreover, different practitioners in the same context can perform the same practice very differently. These variations in practice and its delivery are all reflecting the reconfiguring dynamics embedded in practice.

Reconfiguring Practice: Intra- and Inter-practice Dynamics

The way practices configure and their constitutive aspects interconnect over time reflect not only the dynamic nature of practice but also the dynamics that underpin this dynamism. These reconfiguring dynamics are central to the way a practice unfolds. Reconfiguring dynamics are not only changing routines, they are also a perennial flow, a flexible, ever-changing structure that connects practice, practitioners

and purpose together. At least two sources of dynamism can be identified which merit further examination: the intra-practice and inter-practice dynamics.

Greater attention to the intra-practice dynamics can help us understand both what the constitutive aspects of the practice are and how they connect or disconnect. Research[2] currently in progress as part of the Advanced Institute of Management Research (www.aimresearch.org) shows that some of the core aspects of practice include: the *Practitioners* involved and their characteristics beyond simply accounting for their behaviours. Their values and assumptions manifested also in their reportable attitudes and their *Phronesis* – practical judgements - in particular is very important. The practical judgements practitioners exercise in relation to a practice reveal some of the underlying *Principles* and core values that govern a practice. These principles also need to be seen in relation to the intentions that inform their practice, the competing priorities they may seek to address and mindful of the internal conflict they may experience as they define the *Purpose* of their practice and the telos to which they aspire. The principles and purpose of a practice are deeply routed in the rules, routines, activities and actions that govern the *Procedures* underlying the way a practice is organized. These procedures are contextually specific and they are reflective of the cultural and social conditions that shape the space a practice occupies in the *Place* in which it is performed. No space itself however, exists devoid of the socio-historical dimensions that define the time boundaries, in terms of the *Past, Present* and future projections regarding the ways a practice is performed. The interconnectivity of all these aspects of practice (the 8Ps of practice) raises some interesting possibilities about the way intra-practice dynamics create conditions that define the character of the practice.

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[2] For more information on this large scale research please contact Prof. Elena Antonacopoulou, GNOSIS, University of Liverpool Management School, UK. Email: e.Antonacopoulou@liv.ac.uk

The inter-practice dynamics reflect the multiple and often conflicting values promoted by different practices within a field. The inter-practice dynamics are likely to generate pushes towards homogeneity and heterogeneity at the same time. As different practices interact, they are likely to develop new language and understanding, which is the antecedent to knowledge transfer or translation (Bechky, 2003). This would push the organisation towards more similarity within different instances of one practice, as 'lessons learned' are shared and recreated as practices become more and more institutionalised through their diffusion in the social group at hand (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002). At the same time, these interactions are likely to generate much new knowledge and understanding in all participants (Carlile, 2002), thus increasing (through path dependency) the differences between different instances of the same practice.

All these factors remind us that no practice is ever the same, precisely because it responds to local and situated conditions, which change over time and space. Moreover, tensions between practices also reveal how *malpractice* may be created. The political forces underling the transaction between practices may well lead to power differentials that may redirect the intentions of collective practices in the pursuit of internal and external goods which may be less than ethical. Therefore, the nested and interlocked nature of bundles of practices may create inconsistencies between practices as different economic, social, political and ethical forces shape individual practices and in turn the relationships between practices in an organizational field. This point suggests that bundles (collectivities or communities) do not consist of homogeneous agents. The relationship between community and practice needs to be rethought, as we come to appreciate the competing priorities that practitioners within a practice experience. Beyond representations of central and

peripheral membership in communities of practice different power differentials in knowledge and information about the practice have a significant bearing on the unfolding character of a practice. There is, therefore, a great deal of diversity both in the characteristics of practitioners forming the community, as well as their interpretations of what is the practice and how they are to perform it (Roberts, 2006).

The inter-practice dynamics reveal that interconnectivity between practices in an organizational field reconfigure following a particular rhythm, *Pace.* They also capture the ***Patterns*** of connecting different aspects within and between practices as these are performed and experienced by different players related to the practice. Patters of performances reveal the emerging ***Practise*** and the future projections or images of a practice. The practising attempts themselves in turn reveal the internal and external goods at play as the ***Promise*** of a practice emerges.

Promising Practices: Realising the Promise of Practice

Ongoing efforts to understand how management practices can contribute positively to organizational performance have resulted in little more than an array of prescriptions about what constitutes 'best practice' (Camp, 1989) often adopted by organizations blindly and uncritically. The xenomania (opposite of xenophobia) that reflects the popularisation of some practices neglects issues of transfer across context which has been much in evidence in management research not least in the way good Japanese practices do not transfer in the US context. More recently the focus has been shifting on the analysis of 'promising practices', revealing the challenges in identifying, adopting and adapting practices that may deliver improved organizational performance (Delbridge et al., 2006). Unlike 'best' practices which are contextually specific, promising practices provide scope for wider adaptability to local conditions.

The reason that promising practices transfer better is because they are founded on the principle of transience and adaptability rather than benchmarking and imitating.

Promising therefore, are the practices which emerge out of the possible connections that can be fostered within a practice and across practices. *Promising practices* would have the dynamic capability (Zollo & Winter, 2002) to renew themselves as part of their ongoing, proactive and dynamic process of reconfiguration. The practising attempts that are central to promising practices enables them to maintain their natural fluidity as they take account of and respond to the multitude of endogenous and exogenous forces. In other words, promising practices are those practices that enable organizations to change their routines and to proactively reconfigure their existing practices. Promising practices are dynamic practices, they reveal that practising keeps the organization in tension. This point would suggest also that one of the most powerful consequences of practice; is the emerging *promise* they hold to make a difference to organizing.

In summary, a range of practices can be identified within an organizational field: *Organizational practices* which reflect the operating routines that enable the organization to function (e.g. project management); *Management practices* which reflect the strategic routines that link organizational practice and define their purpose (e.g. communication) and *Promising (dynamic) practices* which reflect the connecting routines allowing management and organizational practices to create new possibilities (e.g. innovation).

These ideas are noticeably absent in current practice research and could usefully act as new platforms on which the promise of practice as a powerful concept for future research in management and organization studies can be realized.

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See also: Actionable knowledge, Action Learning, Action Science, Reflexivity, Management Learning

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