One More Time: What is Practice?

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Abstract

Despite the recent hype what practice means remains unclear at best. This paper presents a fresh perspective on practice as a social phenomenon in Management and Organization Studies. It focuses on the dynamic nature of practice and draws attention to the power of tensions within and between practices as a reflection of the social complexity of organizing. The dynamic nature of practice reveals how tensions create ex-tensions stretching the boundaries of organizing. The analysis reveals the importance of embodying practice, the role of intentionality in the way practice is performed and conceptualizes the dynamic nature of practice in relation to the interconnections between internal and external goods of a practice. Tensions between internal and external goods within and between practices in an organizational field explain the ongoing reconfiguration of practice. A focus on practising provides an avenue for engaging with the fluid and emergent nature of practice as it is formed, performed and constantly transformed. The discussion explores the value added contribution of a practice perspective to our understanding of organizing and outlines ways of rethinking the practitioner by drawing attention to the role of practical judgment, passion and personality. The paper concludes by examining the implications for future research providing specific suggestions for the ways in which researchers engage with the world of practice, the methodological tools for capturing the immediacy of practice and further research avenues that this inquiry opens up.

Keywords: Practice. Organizing. Research. Practising. Complexity.

Mais Uma Vez: O que é Prática?

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Resumo

Apesar da intensa produção sobre o tema, o significado do termo da prática o que ainda não está bem delimitado. Este artigo apresenta uma nova perspectiva sobre o que é prática como um fenômeno social em administração e estudos organizacionais. Ele foca na natureza dinâmica da prática e chama atenção para o poder das tensões dentro e entre as práticas, como uma reflexão da complexidade social enquanto processo organizativo. A natureza dinâmica da prática revela como as tensões criam extensões que ampliam os limites do processo organizativo. As análises revelam a importância da prática incorporada, o papel da intencionalidade no sentido de como a prática é "performada" e conceitualiza a sua natureza dinâmica em relação as interconexões entre os objetos internos e externos que a compõem. Tensões entre objetos internos e externos dentro e entre práticas, no campo organizacional, explicam a contínua reconfiguração da prática. Um foco na prática oferece um caminho para o engajamento com a fluída e emergente natureza da prática, como ela é formada, performada e constantemente transformada. A discussão busca contribuir para a perspectiva da prática no entendimento dos processos organizativos e esboçar caminhos de repensar o praticante, chamando a atenção para o papel do julgamento prático, paixão e personalidade. O artigo conclui examinando as implicações para pesquisas futuras, oferecendo sugestões específicas para as maneiras com as quais pesquisadores se engajem com o mundo das práticas, com ferramentas metodológicas para captar a iminência da prática e futuros caminhos que esta pesquisa abre.

Palavras-chave: Prática. Processo Organizativo. Pesquisa. *Practising*. Complexidade.

1 Introduction

In recent years, terms like *flexibility, resilience, ambidexterity* have become common in the management and organizational studies vocabulary (Tushman & O'Reilly, 2004; Hamel & Valikangas, 2003). They are reflective of the ongoing tensions organizations face as they seek to continue to grow and to remain sustainable at the same time. Notions like organizational development and change seem increasingly insufficient to capture the dynamism that is so central to organizing. Understandably therefore, one finds that new thinking in organization and management studies increasingly explores ideas like dynamic capabilities (Zollo & Winter, 2002) and dynamic routines (Feldman & Pentland, 2003).

The proposition that organizations may have dynamic properties is consistent with ideas of temporality, becoming and emergence (Clegg et al, 2005, Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) that are increasingly employed to describe the fluidity of organizing. At the same time dynamism seeks to articulate social complexity. The latter is a theme that is gaining significance in organizational research as ideas from complexity science are penetrating management debates and scholars are employing complexity principles to rethink organizations, as complex adaptive systems (Gell-Mann, 1994; Anderson, 1999; Axelrod & Cohen, 1999) and a number of managerial issues such strategic change (Stacey, 1995, 2003; Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997), innovation management (Cheng & Van de Ven, 1996) and design management (Chiva, 2004) are deployed to support the self-organizing properties of such complex systems.

Despite all this progress we are a long way still from fully capturing the social complexity that underpins the need for flexibility and resilience, learning and changing, dynamic emergence and self-organization. Social complexity does not only imply the messy interactions between social actors (human and non human) and the governing structures that shape different forms of organization. Social complexity also reflects the powerful dynamics as social forces transact with each other negotiating order in the midst of chaos. This view is consistent with wider calls in social sciences in general (Emirbayer, 1997), for a relational analysis of action as not the product of inter-actions, but action as emanating from trans-action where the relations and the entities creating these actions are not isolated but are seen to co-evolve in ongoing negotiation as constitutive of each other and of the possibilities their interrelationships can create.

This point presents one of the biggest challenges faced by management and organizational researchers; namely the need to engage with social complexity in its own terms. Instead of seeking simplifications and classifications of the complex into substances and variables to be isolated, measured and tested, we need to learn to work with social complexity in the relational, interconnected, nested and perplexed ways in which it constitutes and defines the social. In doing so, notions like flexibility, dynamism, emergence, resilience will become not just promising words. They will stand a better chance of providing a more meaningful and purposeful orientation guiding researchers and practitioners in their quest for organizational excellence and professionalism (Blond et al., 2015; Romme, 2015).

This paper contributes to our understanding of the social complexity of organizing by analyzing the dynamic nature of practice. In recent years we have witnessed a re-turn to practice as a fundamental aspect of organization (Schatzki; Knorr-Cetina & Von Savigny, 2001; Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1984; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011, Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). In management studies alone the focus on practice has been explored in relation to topics such as: communities of practice (Brown & Duguid 2000; Wenger, 1998), knowing in practice (Cook & Brown, 1999), strategy as practice (Wittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski, 2005) and learning as practice (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002). It has also been a lens through which a number of phenomena have been re-examined. For example, Seo & Creed (2002) use a practice lens to re-examine institutional change while, Dougherty, (1992, 2004) and Orlikowski (2000) rethink technology through a practice perspective.

The emergent body of work now referred to as *practice-based studies* (Gherardi, 2006 for overview) focuses predominantly on the situated nature of action as this is enacted by actors and manifested in language, the physical environment and the interactions between actors. This body of research is also seen to provide greater access to the micro foundations of organization. In this paper it will be argued that it also provides new ways of capturing the fluidity of organizing. Practice therefore, is increasingly seen as a concept that can add a lot of value to our understanding of the dynamic ways by which organizations seek to connect their operational and strategic priorities, integrate knowledge and capabilities across different business units, functional teams and working groups. The promise of practice is that it also attests to both the tangible and intangible, formal and informal, conscious and unconscious aspects of organizing and places the practitioners themselves at the center stage in understanding the intricacies of organizing.

By focusing on the dynamic nature of practice, the analysis in this paper will provide a dynamic re-conceptualisation of practice by drawing attention to the power of tensions within and between practices as a reflection of social complexity of organizing. The analysis will also extend our current conceptualization of practice capturing the way tensions become ex-tensions stretching the boundaries of organizing.

The discussion is organized in four main sections. Firstly, a review and critique of the current conceptualizations of practice is offered. Secondly, three hitherto neglected aspects of practice are discussed drawing attention to the embodied nature of practice, the role of internal and external goods and the power of tensions within and between practices. The third section explores how tensions reflect the dynamic nature of practice through practising and how this provides an alternative perspective to our understanding of practice in organization and management studies. The discussion section explores the implications of this analysis to the way practitioners and what they do is understood in organization science. The last section of the paper examines the implications for future research providing specific suggestions for the ways in which researchers engage with the world of practice, the methodological tools for capturing the immediacy of practice and further research avenues that this inquiry opens up.

2 What is Practice?

Despite the widespread interest on practice there is limited agreement as to what practice is. A review of the practice literature suggests that currently there are at least five different conceptualizations of practice: practice as *action* (Bourdieu, 1990); as *structure* – language, symbols, tools (Turner, 1994); as *activity system* (Engeström; Miettinen & Punamäki, 1999); as *social context* (Lave & Wenger, 1990); and as *knowing* (Nicolini; Gherardi & Yanow, 2003). Whilst each of these perspectives provide a useful dimension of practice and extend our understanding of the domains of social life that practices reflect, there is hardly any consistent conceptualization that guides the way practice is understood or defined. There appears to be a tendency to employ notions of practice to provide all-encompassing descriptions of cultural characteristics on a macro level or specific activities on a micro level. Recent attempts by some scholars (Reckwitz, 2002; Warde, 2005; Vaara & Whittington, 2012) to consolidate the main debates in practice theory tend to account for the philosophical and sociological underpinnings of practice (Gherardi, 2006) and reveal a

number of different perspectives drawing attention to the economic, social or cultural dimensions of practice. These dimensions, with the cultural being the most dominant, inform some of the emerging definitions of practice.

A systematic review of the definitions of practice suggest four main trends in current practice research: Firstly, an effort to engage both 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.

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 (Reckwitz, 2002). 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 (Schatzki, 1996; 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 & 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 conceptualization 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 socialization providing the grammar for social action (Pentland & Rueter, 1994; March et al. 2000; Reynaud, 2005). Therefore, rules are both written and unwritten, tacit and explicit. They are also as Beck & 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.

The role of dynamic rules and routines is important if practice is to also be afforded a more dynamic conceptualization. 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.

Recent theorizing on practice has also brought attention to the embodied nature of practices (Dourish, 2001), the internal and external goods of practice (McIntyre, 1985) and the resulting intensions of practice (Hampshire, 1965). Unlike existing conceptualizations of practice as enacted, the embodied nature of practice draws attention to how practitioners engage with the world and seek to accomplish practical tasks (Dourish, 2001). The embodied nature of practice emphasizes the ethos of practice in the practical judgment and virtuous modes of knowing that inform not only how practitioners act but also the purpose to which practice is orientated. The telos of practice also illuminates more clearly the role of internal and external goods.

According to McIntyre (1985) external, are 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. Based on these distinctions McIntyre (1985) defines practice as:

> "….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 partially 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".

Therefore, the external goods may provide a motivation, a guidance and even infrastructure of boundaries around which the activities constitutive of expressing a practice are build. However, it is the internal goods that also provide the distinctive qualities of the practice as a lived experience (De Certeau, 1984). The internal goods operate at the conscious and unconscious level and beyond providing meaning and significance to the various external goods they also build the strength to overcome the obstacles along the way.

McIntyre's definition and focus on integrity are particularly relevant to our analysis of practice. They encourage us to focus on the relationship between internal and external goods taking into account time and space (history and context). They also highlight the presence of other forces helping us to understand how a practice unfolds over time. Therefore, to understand the complex nature of practice it is not simply a matter of examining the connections between internal and external goods. There is a much more unpredictable force at play which draws attention to the conditions that underline the way internal and external goods may be interconnected.

The internal and external goods of a practice are not simply interacting, they are transacting. This means that they are consistently re-negotiating their role and significance in relation to the intentions that guide how, why and with what means the practice is performed. Therefore, 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. The interrelationship between internal and external goods is affected by the changing intentions that govern the importance attached to different internal and external goods at different points in time and space.

Therefore, intention has a number of features and connections to other concepts including the subject, their awareness of their intentions and the processes of trying, deciding, believing that an intention exists and will be pursuit. Moreover, intention relies on actions, events and language as manifestations of intention (Hampshire, 1965). Intentionality therefore, is not only praxis and telos; it is also phronesis. As Beckett (2004) reminds us "phronesis enhances intentionality because it adds to action decisionality (the 'making' of judgments).... The making of judgments is embodied, it is constituted in *what we try*" (emphasis added).

3 The Power of Tensions: Inter-practice, intra-practice, inter-temporal extensions

In management research tensions have been a topic of some debate (Huxham & Beech, 2003; Johnson, 1996; Quinn, 1988). For example, Argyris & Schön (1978) have articulated the inconsistencies in relation to learning practices as 'espoused theory' and 'theory in use', while March (1991) positioned the tension between 'exploration' and 'exploitation'. Legge (1995) in her analysis of Human Resource Management (HRM)

practices describes tension as the chasm between 'rhetoric' and 'reality' and the 'hard' and 'soft' aspects of HRM. Feldman & Pentland (2003) reveal the tensions between 'ostensive' and 'performative' routines. They effectively suggest, that practices exist at the same time as ideal-types in the minds of actors (ostensive – which share some characteristics with the habitus of Bourdieu) and as real-life performances, adaptation of these ideal models to the circumstances and constraints present in the here and now. The discrepancy clearly generates tension, as actors aspire to the ostensive practice and need to make do with the performative version. To this tension, I would add a historical perspective – tension is not just between performance today and ostensive, but also between performance today versus performance yesterday.

Therefore, tensions are generally intended to present conflict, internal contradictions, the difficulty of balancing competing priorities, inequalities of power and control and generally paradoxes that cannot be resolved. In general, tensions tend to be presented as problematic mostly because a dialectic logic governs the way tensions are represented. Yet, if one adopts a 'trialectic logic' contradictions and conflict give way to multiple possibilities as different sources of attraction are explored (Ford & Ford, 1994; Horn, 1983). The ontological focus of trialectic logic is not on the epiphenomena but the unfolding of the phenomena and their relationships in time and space. Adopting this logic tension can also be seen as reflecting *elasticity* to bend in different directions like an elastic band would do (Antonacopoulou, 2008a; 2008b).

Within a practice tensions would reveal the range of internal contradictions between intentions and actions and highlight the difficulties of balancing competing priorities in the internal and external goods that constitute a practice. Therefore, tensions on the one hand, may reflect instances when a practice seeks to address many equally viable intentions at the same time, however, potentially resulting in confusion and inertia. On the other hand, tensions may be created when a practice seeks to address potentially conflicting agendas or when there may be internal contradictions within a practice. This would be the case when the internal goods of a practice may be driving one set of intentions and the external goods may be driving another set of intentions.

The tensions between internal and external goods of a practice provide only one part of the dynamic nature of practice. Equally powerful are the exogenous dynamics in the tensions between practices within an organizational field. The inter-practice dynamics reflect the multiple and often conflicting values promoted by different practices. 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 (Szulanski, 1996; Bechky, 2003). This would push the organization towards more similarity within different instances of one practice, as 'lessons learned' are shared and recreated, and information and understanding flow through the social structure. In other words, as practices become more and more institutionalized through their diffusion in the social group at hand (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002). At the same time, these interactions are likely to generate as much new knowledge and understanding in all participants (Carlile, 2002), thus increasing (through path dependency) the differences between different instances of the same practice.

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 reminds us that bundles (collectivities or communities) do not consist of homogeneous agents. There is, 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. This diversity invites us to critically rethink the relationship between community and practice. Issues of power, differentials of knowledge and information are among the forces acknowledged as underpinning the diversity of communities of practice (Contu & Wilmott, 2003; Roberts, 2006). We have yet however, to fully capture how and why homogeneity (that governs much current thinking in the communities of practice literature (Lave & Wenger, 1990; Wenger, 1998; Wenger & Snyder, 2000) coexist along side heterogeneity (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Handley, et al. 2006). Practitioners within a practice experience a number of competing priorities that alongside the ongoing negotiation of values, assumptions, behaviors and actions constantly reinterpret the rules of engagement in a practice and have a significant bearing on the unfolding character of a practice. The diversity and heterogeneity of multiple and competing practices constantly redefine each practice and by implication the field to which a practice is embedded. Therefore, to suggest that practices are interlocked and nested is to imply the possibilities that their dynamic interconnections can create, mindful of the power and political dynamics that drive the relationships between practices.

The tensions within and between practices are therefore, critical to the way a practice is formed and the way it unfolds over time and across multiple contexts. However, it is when we combine the intra- and inter-practice tensions that we begin to reveal that tensions are also a reflection of elasticity and inter-temporality. Tension is not only a matter of negative or positive possibilities but it is also about the ways in which the space of possibilities is created as elastic (flexible and ever changing) practices create a space where meanings, actions and intentions can co-evolve. Tensions therefore, can extend the elasticity of a practice to bend, adapt and be constantly transformed in the way endogenous and exogenous dynamics interact to define and redefine the practice. In other words, tensions become the basis for *ex-tensions* of practice (Antonacopoulou, 2008a).

Therefore, tensions also provide us clues about the inherent *dynamics* as forces transact and as their transactions create strain, stress and deformation of the original shape. Similar to a mechanical spring, tensions reflect an inbuilt *energy* that acts as a force shaping the direction taken through the balancing acts performed (Antonacopoulou, 2008b). Equally tensions also provide us with clues about the inbuilt flexibility and elasticity that balancing acts also reflect. Tensions create ex-tensions through ongoing transformations. Therefore, elasticity can take different forms both in linear and non-linear interactions between tensions and their resulting deformation.

In Physics Hooke's *law of elasticity* describes the linear elasticity where extensions produced are proportional to the stress and strain pushing in a particular direction (Young, 1992). The *theory of plasticity* however, throws further light (Lubliner, 1990). Originally developed as a *theory of dislocation* conceptualized by Vito Voltera in 1905 and subsequently developed among others by Michael Polanyi (along with E. Orowan and G.I. Taylor), this theory extends our understanding of elasticity by introducing the phenomenon of *plasticity*. Plasticity explains dislocations as new connections are formed at the edge of the breaking point. In other words, plasticity is the maximum extension at the edge of chaos. It reminds us that the malleability of phenomena (or objects) lies at the core of the explanation that plasticity theory provides. Unlike the Hookean interpretation of elasticity, which only accounts for linear interactions, the theory of plasticity also accounts for non-linear interactions that would be more reflective of the dynamics of organizing.

Therefore, tensions reflect the elasticity embedded in a practice when it stretches, as an elastic band would do, in multiple directions. In short, it is in the inter-connectivity that

possibilities are created and tensions within a practice are transformed from *in-tensions* into *ex-tensions*.

A greater attention to the tensions that govern practice provides not only a more dynamic conceptualization. It also shows why practices are dynamic and malleable even when they are perceived as relatively stable patterns of collective action. A dynamic conceptualization of practice would account for the way, practice *connects endogenous (intra-practice) and exogenous (inter-practice) forces, with intentionality, to expand the space of possibility in the emerging internal and external goods*.

Unlike previous definitions of practice, this definition does not apply an ontology of substance in understanding practice. Instead, an ontology of embeddedness and an epistemology of connectivity informs the understanding of practice promoted here. By drawing attention to relationality and interconnectivity, the focus moves beyond the powers of association or systemic conceptualizations. The focus is on the conditions that underpin the relationships between different aspects of practice. This relational view also focuses more on the fluid nature of practice as a reflection of its dynamic nature.

As the analysis has sought to suggest, the tensions embedded in practices are at the core of the flow that transforms practice. The intentions of a practice are constantly transformed as new actions reveal new meanings, new possibilities for reinstalling integrity and intensity to a practice 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* (i.e. the ongoing reconfiguration of practice). These ideas are explored further in the next section.

4 Practise and Practising: Delivering the Promise of Practice in Organization Studies

The analysis in the previous section has painted a more complex picture around the dynamic nature of practice. Focusing on this richness and seeking to extend our understanding of the dynamic nature of practice, this section will present a further exemplification of the dynamism that underpins practices. It will be argued that a new logic of practice needs to focus on the *practise* of practice. *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. These hitherto neglected aspects of practice also reflect the generative dance between formal and

informal, tangible and intangible aspects of a practice as these are re-orchestrated (interconnected) to create different experiences and possible outcomes every time a practice is performed. 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 (Antonacopoulou, 2008a; Antonacopoulou & Sheaffer, 2014). 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 (Clegg et al., 2005; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

Practising therefore, is as much a process of repetition as it is a space embracing the multiplicity of possibilities as different (new) dimensions are (re)discovered in a moving horizon where past, present and future meet. Repetition therefore, in the context of practising, is not a mechanistic process of replication. *Replication* implies institutionalization in the process of re-presentation and re-production. *Repetition* on the other hand, implies re-hearsing, re-viewing aspects of practice.

Practising as repetition embraces learning and changing as part of reflexive critique. This means that at the core of practising a practice is actively learning and changing different aspects of a practice in a proactive way that does not only rely on routines of habit but different ways of embodying a practice. Learning and changing therefore, are not outcomes nor accomplishments but a flow through order and chaos in the endless journey of becoming. This point accounts for practising as a central aspect of learning and changing and vice versa (Antonacopoulou, 2006; Antonacopoulou & Sheaffer, 2014). As Deleuze (1994) points out repetition is perfection and integration. Repetition is transgression. It forms a condition of movement, a means of producing something new in history. Repetition also allows for spontaneity in the way practitioners respond to intended and unintended conditions that shape their practice.

Practise therefore, has been 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 (Antonacopoulou, 2008a).

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 with improvising. Researchers who have studied improvisation and its application in a range of

contexts (Crossan, 1996; Hatch, 1998; Moorman & Miner, 1998; Cunha et al., 2016) explain that improvisation is about the engagement of a practitioner in the practice through active participation and listening, as well as openness to ideas and possibilities. Whilst all these qualities are important in practising they are not sufficient. Practising also 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 latter includes over and beyond engagement the identification and unity of the practitioner with the practice in the course of enacting it. This is why the practice and its practise emerge through the undivided unique and individual contributions generated by the practitioners who perform it. They define the ethos of the practice by reflecting different aspects of practice in their practising attempts.

The ongoing permutations of practice in practising attempts, help to explain why no practice is ever the same. It helps 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 – practising – embedded in practice. Reconfiguring is not only a changing routine; it is also a perennial flow, a flexible, ever-changing structure that connects the various aspects of practice which include (Antonacopoulou, 2007):

- *Practitioners* and their *Phronesis:* the choices they make as they exercise their judgment particularly when they deal with tensions and competing priorities
- *Purpose:* intensions, competing priorities, internal conflict, telos
- *Procedures:* rules, routines, resources, actions
- *Principles:* values and assumptions
- *Place:* context, cultural and social conditions
- *Past, Present, Potential future:* time boundaries, history and future projections
- *Patterns:* of connecting different aspects of a practice as this is performed
- *Pace:* momentum and rhythm
- *Promise* of a practice emerging/becoming/ organizing

All these aspects of practice are orchestrated during practising attempts. This orchestration can be captured diagrammatically in a framework which will be referred to as

the 12Ps of practice. The framework other than alerting us to the tensions of connecting all these aspects of practice in a coherent whole, also emphasises the impact of the orchestration of these aspects of practice in realizing its promise to contribute to organising. Figure 1 shows diagrammatically the 12Ps framework.

Figure 1 - The 12Ps of Practice Framework
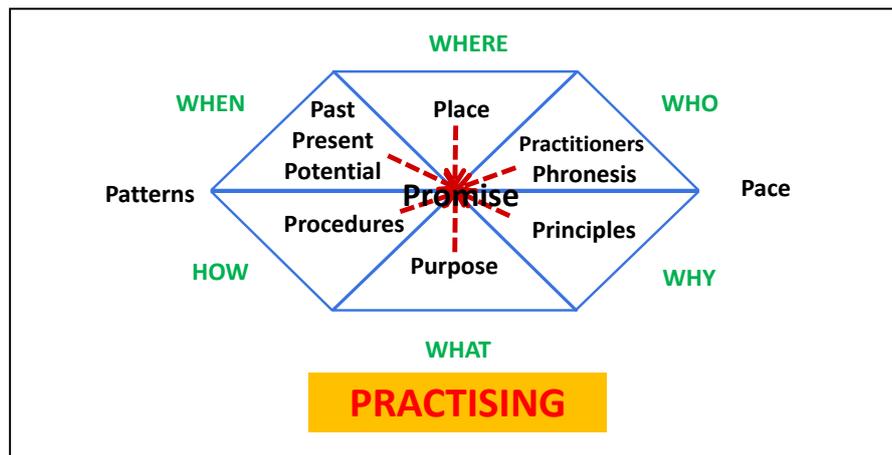
Source: Author

This perspective on the dynamics of practice sheds further light to the social complexity of organizing. It enables us to recognize the multiplicity of practices and practising attempts in an organization at any point in time. This multiplicity accounts for the process of updating, modifying and evolving of practices (both ostensive and performative) by drawing our focus to the social level. Changes (in schemas or behavior) at the individual level could well spark broader changes, but until they start propagating throughout the social texture of the organization they cannot be understood as organizational becoming. At the same time, no becoming (regardless of its starting point) will propagate instantly throughout the organization itself. This means that at any given point in time an organization will present considerable variation, not just in performative practices (which is understandable, as instances of performative practices would adapt to different circumstances) but also in ostensive ones, as different groups and subgroups reflect on different aspects of the practices being performed, and share the results of these (collective) reflections with different groups. Organizations then become patchworks of different yet similar practices, and the recognition of their similarity is indeed an exercise in pattern recognition, more than a straight count of similar and dissimilar points. The interactions of several groups in this patchwork of practices add another cause of tensions,

in addition to the inter-temporal, intra-practice and inter-practice tensions discussed in the previous section. The tension of stability and change reflective of the diversity and multiplicity of actors and practices, provides access to the emerging nature of practice as self-organization and co-evolution transgress boundaries and transform the organization field. The patchworks of practices reveal that practising keeps the organization in tension. These issues raise a number of implications about our efforts to engage with the fluid nature of organizing.

5 Discussion

The dynamic nature of practice articulated in this paper draws attention to a number of key issues in relation to organizing. Organizing entails elasticity and plasticity subject to how endogenous and exogenous forces connect. The connections themselves are subject to the embodiment of practice by individual practitioners. It is not sufficient to only ask what is the practice and how it is performed. We also need to ask who are the practitioners, why they perform the practice the ways they do in relation to where and when the practice is performed. Beyond merely placing the focus on human agents and seeking to provide more rich interpretations of human nature, we need to explore further the role of multiple identities at work and the degrees of identification with the practice. These issues introduce new dimensions like care, passion and love as central to the understanding of practitioners and their practice. These issues pertain to practice researchers and organizational analysts more generally. Attention here is drawn to the ways of enriching our research practices by rethinking not only the questions we ask and our roles as researcher practitioners but also the tools we employ and the telos which our research seeks to serve if scholarship is to remain practice relevant (Antonacopoulou, 2010)

4.1 Re-thinking the Practitioner: Phronesis, Passion and Personality

A practice is always possible to be performed differently, subject to the choices individual practitioners make. In other words, emerging conventions about the ways in which a practice is to be adopted, and the ways in which practitioners can enact the practice, are always the product of negotiated adaptation by the practitioners as they co-construct the practice. This point suggests that the viability of a practice very much relies on the

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practitioners' choices. These choices partly constitute the ethos underling the way a practice is performed. In other words, the *individual (unique and undivided)* set of goals, emotions, knowing, attitudes and identity of a practitioner constitute the equally special set of capabilities employed in performing a practice.

Therefore, the unique character of a practice does not only rely on the actions of the practitioner, nor does it rely only on the purpose it is meant to serve. It also relies on the *Phronesis* of the practitioner embodying a practice through their conduct in performing different aspects of a practice (Blond et al, 2015; Antonacopoulou, 2012; Vaara & Whittington, 2012) and extends the beginning and end of a practice to multiple intentions beyond past, present and future (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Phronesis provides access to another powerful set of forces at play guiding the practitioner in relation to the practice they embody. The actions of a practitioner in performing a practice are not only a matter of choice and the responsibility and accountability entailed. It is also a reflection of what the practitioner cares about, what (s)he may have a *Passion* for. Beyond desire and emotion, passion also entails the very personal commitment to the practice that a practitioner brings to bear in relation to a practice. This personal commitment forms the orientation of a practice in relation to the goals that a practice is intended to fulfill. Personal commitment is not only about the will to act and the drive to participate. It is also about the deep love that caring about what one does, also entails. Therefore, a practice needs the human power of practitioners who strive for excellence, growing through their practice as a person and discovering their humanity (Antonacopoulou, 2012). To understand practice through practitioners is not simply a case of seeking meaningfulness in human behavior (Frankfurt, 1988; Harré and Secord, 1972, Austin, 1972; Holland, et al. 1998). For if we only focus on the observable behaviors we will fail to see what lies beneath and what the essence of the practice is as practitioners embody the practice. This latter point also highlights that it is not possible to divorce practice and practitioner.

Beyond phronesis and passion the personal commitment of a practitioner to a practice is also a reflection of their identification with the practice. Practitioners identifying themselves in the practice engage in ways that portray aspects of who they are and aspire to become. In short, a practice is also a reflection of the *personality* of the practitioner not so much in the emerging persona as they seek to fit in (Wayne & Liden, 1995), but more in the emerging identity that they form in deriving meaning and attributing significance to their actions and transactions with other practitioners in the practice or across other practices. As

Scott (2004) reminds us: "[I]n relational approaches, if structures exist it is because actors are constructing and reconstructing intentions and accounts and thereby, their own and others' identity". Therefore, the adoption of a practice by a practitioner also entails its adaptation as the practice is shaped by the individual choices of practitioners. These choices are both a reflection of their motivations and virtues as they also are a reflection of their identity and self-image. Understanding therefore the richness and diversity of practice, calls for a more in-depth engagement with the word of practitioners as they negotiate competing priorities and the internal conflict of balancing individual and organizational priorities they may often encounter forms the basis of their power to excel in what they do by virtue of being who they are – individual - different. To quote Frankfurt (1988): "Nothing is important unless the difference it makes is an important one". Practitioners therefore, can make the difference to a practice by virtue of being different.

5 Implications for Future Research

Based on the issues raised in the preceding analysis I would like to draw attention to three main issues as we re-think our research practice in Organization Science. Firstly, a call for a closer engagement with the world of practice; secondly, an extension of our research tools in studying the dynamism of social complexity, and thirdly, a reconsideration of the research questions that quite our inquiry in organization and management studies. I discuss each of these in turn:

5.1 Researcher Engagement with the World of Practice

Studying practice calls for an engagement with multiple social worlds of practitioners in the various communities where their membership shapes the ways in which they perform a practice. It also calls for accounting and analyzing all aspects of practice including both internal and external goods and the dynamic interrelationships between them, within a practice, and across practices. All these aspects of practice can be more suitably reached by actively engaging in the world of a practice. A close engagement with the world of practice and that of the practitioners involved provides researchers more immediacy in understanding the tensions that constitute the dynamic nature of practice. Building an insider perspective of a practice allows a more intimate understanding of the issues reflected

in the way a practice is performed. At the same time, it is equally critical to maintain an outsider's orientation as this is central to the researcher's ability to question aspects of a practice.

Reflecting on this principle in relation to research practice as well, it is critical that we recognize that we as management and organization researchers are creators as much as we are products of the practices we are members of. This does not leave research practice unaffected from the same challenges practice researchers face when studying other practices. This point calls for more direct ways of giving voice to practitioners' auto-ethnographic accounts of their practice. This would serve both as a means of strengthening the interpretations, as well as usefully provides scope for co-creating knowledge about a particular practice under examination. This co-creation of knowledge is also a space for reflection and reflexivity by the researcher and the practitioner in the course of accounting for their lived experiences of practice. This perspective calls for new methodological tools that can usefully capture such data.

5.2 Methodological tools for capturing the immediacy of practice

Capturing the dense and complex nature of social practice, showing the dynamic nature of practice as this emerges in the ongoing process of transforming a practice is a real challenge in practice research. This calls for methodological tools that can afford to engage with the fluid nature of practice in practise. Some of the existing methodological tools we employ like interviews, questionnaires, attitudinal surveys etc. remain helpful yet, they predominantly can account for snapshots of practice. Clearly some practices lend themselves more than others to ethnographic and longitudinal approaches.

Increasingly the use of autobiographical diaries (Patterson, 2005) and videos (Binders et al., 2006) provide new innovative approaches for capturing the unfolding nature of practice. They provide scope for accounting and better interpreting the ways in which practitioners are in practise and reflect on their behaviors and actions. Practitioners' accounts of their practice could enable us to study the emerging nature of practice as it unfolds. Whilst these innovative data collection methods overcome conventional weaknesses in retrospective accounts of practices using questionnaire and interviewing techniques, they are not without their drawbacks. The reliability of findings in autobiographical accounts through diaries remains a big challenge. However,

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acknowledging the power of capturing accounts and reflections in the practitioners' language may help overcome issues of translation, which might address the problems of accurate interpretations of finer meanings, particularly in the context of complex social interactions. Perhaps one way of arresting these dimensions could be in producing documentaries that combine description and analysis with video-graphic (than photographic which tend to be snapshots) images of the flow of practice. Documentary research could be a collage approach to representing the tensions and extensions of practice when practitioners engaging in practising attempts bring to the forth more clearly their phronesis, passion and personality and not merely their praxis.

5.3 Further Research Avenues

Fully embracing the opportunities for enhancing and building further our inquiry, three areas in need of further research are outlined here. First, further research on dynamic practices would need to enhance explanation of the rituals shaping a practice and the social relations of central and peripheral practitioners in performing a practice. For that, more direct involvement by researchers as active participants in performing a practice could provide valuable insights in relation to the subtleties of practice that become so tacit that are not easy to articulate. Our understanding of the interconnected nature of practice and the various aspects within and between practice can be better informed if the study of interconnections between these aspects become the focus of attention. By drawing attention to interconnectivity we commit to a holistic approach to arresting aspects of practice along with other aspects of other practices. We are able to move the focus of our attention not on the entities themselves but the nodes which these entities happen to occupy within the configuration of a practice.

Secondly, mindful that the focus on interconnectivity provides us new opportunities for engaging with the complex and fluid nature of organizing, notions of dynamism, emergence and self-organization need to be extended to help us articulate not only movement but also stability. The role of interaction and transaction between agents as a fundamental aspect of self-organization needs to be more clearly articulated. The reasons and results of interaction among agents are multiple and unpredictable (Anderson, 1999; Axelrod & Cohen, 1999). The new forms of engagement are said to 'emerge' not only because

they are radically unpredictable but also because they cannot be engineered. In other words, new behavior patterns emerge as a consequence of agent transactions. No single program or agent completely determines a practice. This point captures the importance of participatory engagement which Goodwin (1994) stresses with reference to emergence. Recurring patterns of interaction among agents and artifacts (Nelson & Winter, 1982; Axelrod & Cohen, 1999) create routines, because interactions among agents increase the likelihood of later repetitions of the same interactions. It is this ongoing emergence that also implies the inherent diversity and heterogeneity among interacting agents. Heterogeneous agents, which inter-relate with each other and with their surroundings, are unlimited in their capabilities to adapt their behavior. This opens the possibility that practices behave fractally, which would imply that their holistic properties emerge across different levels of detail. Note also that this same flexibility and fluidity underlies the difficulty of isolating any practice out of the stream of routines and rules that surround organizations. This isolation is certainly an exercise that practitioners do not do, at least not while performing their practices. Therefore, a full description of the processes of emergence and self-organization needs simultaneous consideration of many aspects of practice at the same time. It also calls for imagination and improvisation as driving forces in the way a practice is configured.

It should be noted that the fluidity of practice reveals also the pace and rhythm in which it is evolving as different aspects of the practice connect. Fundamentally, where a practice is located provides the space for grounding the practice in context and in relation to local conditions that provide a degree of stability. Therefore, the dynamic, flexible and emergent nature of practice needs to account for both patterns of change and evolution, as well as patterns of stability as resting points of consolidation, reflection and re-configuration.

Third, there is a need to examine more systematically the key processes shaping the various internal goods of a practice, as well as the interaction between internal and external goods defining a practice. In this analysis and based on previous research I have outlined the role of power, politics, learning and knowledge as important processes that have the capacity to connect practices, as well as resources embedded within practices. Therefore, identifying ways in which power, politics, learning and knowledge can be usefully employed by practitioners in practising their practice would be a key priority.

Considering that a key rationale underpinning this analysis is to enhance management theory's relevance and impact on improving management practice, there are a

number of lessons we can learn from the analysis of practice. At the most basic level, there is to study organizational and management practices as social practices (Reed, 1984). This perspective could help management researchers become more sensitive to some of the subtleties of organizing that are not easy to capture by looking only at organizational issues. Organization and organizing are not only the prerogative of business organizations.

6 Conclusions

The analysis of the dynamic nature of practices presented in this paper has provided access to important aspects of the social complexity of managing and organizing. Focusing on practices provides us with a tool to understand more clearly key processes like dynamism, emergence and fluidity, which are essential to understand social complexity. It draws attention to the power of tensions to create extensions, within and between practices inter-temporally. Practice therefore, is a central aspect of organizing shaping the configuration and re-configuration of organizations. Practice entails reflexivity, learning and repetition in the process of ongoing exploration of the space in-between competing positions and conflicting perspectives. Dynamic practices can be studied in relation to practising attempts performed by practitioners. Practice can account for the emerging modes of organization that we come to acknowledge and refer to as collective activity, coherent set of values and actions, community and culture. Practice can also give voice to the tacit and virtuous modes of knowing that underpin practitioners' phronesis. Practice can provide explanations for the ongoing adjustments and variations in practitioners' practices. Their changing emotions, values, perceptions, assumptions and judgments all shape the elasticity and plasticity of practice and define their identity and identification with the practice. Beyond what practitioners do, practice can help us articulate why practitioners do what they do differently every time. The tensions practitioners negotiate as part of the competing priorities and internal conflict they experience helps us understand why resistance and readiness to respond to changing conditions is also a reflection of their capacity to remain in a practising mode despite becoming masters of their practice, through experience and expertise. All these issues taken together fundamentally reframe our engagement with practice as a social phenomenon and invite organization and management scholars to reflect on their research practice and embrace *re-search* as a practice that unites practitioners, irrespective of the hat they wear as scholars, executives or policy makers.

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