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Towards a perspective of co-existing practices

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between theory and practice, adopting a practice perspective. It proposes a reconsideration of the relationship between academic theorizing and organizational activities as overlapping practices. Drawing in particular on Heidegger's notion of 'breakdown', it is further suggested that theorizing is the product of reflexion, implicit in practical engagement as well as stimulated through engagement with theory. Implications of this perspective for organizational research but also for academic understandings of theory are drawn, arguing in particular for a more 'playful' engagement with theories as tools for practitioners and academics.

Towards a perspective of co-existing practices

Introduction

Business academics have largely engaged in 'scientific' approaches to formulate knowledge claims. This natural science model portrays the widespread view that the natural sciences can provide us with paradigms for the methods and procedures of social science (Taylor 1985). This view implies that the nature of organizations is basically stable, objective and 'out there'; awaiting impartial exploration and discovery through deductive approaches to theory building (Gioia and Pitre 1990). The intention of scientific enquiry from this perspective is the production of fully articulated and correct representations of social phenomena (Bennis and O'Toole 2005, Ghoshal 2005) that can be translated into skills that advance organizational practice (Simon 1976, Tranfield and Starkey 1998). However, there have been growing concerns about the adequacy of this scientific concept of knowledge which address a widening gulf between theory and practice, as well as the ability of theory to inform professional practice (Hodgkinson 2001, Van de Ven and Johnson 2006). In this paper we examine the relationship between theory and practice, adopting a practice-theoretical perspective. Our aim is to portray the practice character of theorizing and outline its relationship to organizational practice as overlapping rather than separated by a gap. We proceed to investigate the nature of 'theory' as the product of theorizing activities. For this we draw upon Heidegger's notion of 'breakdown' to argue that theorizing is the product of reflexion, implicit in practical engagement. Finally, we outline the implications of this *theorizing-as-reflection* for practitioners and academics.

Problems with traditional 'theory'

Much of the organizational literature implies that there exists a gap between the *production* of abstracted academic theory and its *use* in situated practice (Wood 2002). In the 'classical sense' of science, a 'theory' of a phenomenon is the *explanation* of the phenomenon. This explanation has to suffice at least two conditions. It must state *a* relationship between at least two variables and it must begin to state *what* that relationship is. Usually, theory refers not to the explanation of a single empirical proposition, but to the explanation of a number of propositions in a single field, when all of the explanations share some of the general propositions (Homans 1982). The discovery of regularities, causal statements, and even laws in firms' behaviours through statistical associations between important variables is also the dominant tradition in strategic management (Tsoukas and Knudsen 2005: 344).

Such a conception of 'theory' as the opposite of action and *do-ing* is a consistent feature of Western philosophical tradition. Following the 'Newtonian style' of analysis organizational researchers are striving to uncover the 'calculus of organization' (Tsoukas 2005: 328). The attempt at gaining scientific knowledge by a subject performing research on an external, objective world is a Cartesian heritage, present most prominently in positivistic research accounts. However, also research in the *'verstehen'* tradition still attempts to acquire objective knowledge, albeit through sympathetic intuition and understanding rather than by means of the scientific method (Skoldberg 1998). This Cartesian approach pictures the inquirer at once as above, or beyond, the world; thus setting the disengaged, disembodied, and immaterial being over against an objective, mechanically-structured, external, material world (Rorty 1980, Shotter 2005). The discovery of God's already established, eternal and universal laws by using methods modelled on 'long chains of reasoning' established in geometry can ultimately "…make ourselves masters and possessors of nature" (Descartes 1954: 46). Human agents are thus assumed to be sitting dualistically outside a mechanic world, learning the laws of physics in order to manipulate the features of the environment to their own ends (Taylor 1985).

Organizational science in this sense deals with abstractions; i.e. the conditions for the existence of the actualities that make up organizational life. This science is itself based upon a philosophy of knowledge that sets out the conditions of possibility; the meta-theoretical ground for the sciences and for philosophy itself (Rorty 1991: 52). Science as well as philosophy are thus removed from the affective level of ordinary experience and, as Feibleman (1944: 117) observes, the further removed from 'common sense' a science becomes, the more scientific is its level of achievement. Academic knowledge is therefore assumed to take a disengaged and explicit form, adhering to a sense of apodictic 'objectivity' that enables organizational researchers to view the world not from a place within it but from nowhere in particular in order to make things appear not *as they do* but *as they really are*. Put differently, the aim of this kind of research is to discount for the influences of any pre-reflective outlook that is distortive of reality (Taylor 2006: 207). The notion of a 'gap' between theory and practice therefore derives from a rationalist conception of scholarly theory which takes the form of formal logical principles and rules, involving causal relationships that can be transferred between spatially distinct points and 'put into practice' (Wood 2002, Van de Ven and Johnson 2006). The organizational agent features in such accounts as a cognizant subject; a *res cogitans* in Cartesian terms, that operates on an external non-thinking medium, the object, or *res extensa*. Economics' *rational man*, a hyper-rational, utility-maximizing subject is reflective of this position. But also more flexible versions of *bounded rationality* (Simon 1947) or *strategic choice* (Child 1972) invoke the Cartesian subject-object duality, albeit with a stronger focus on the subjective side of this division (Skoldberg 1998).

This idea of an 'armchair' science which is separate from and looks down on the world contrasts with accounts that argue for an immersed and relational understanding of human nature. In particular Heidegger's notion of Dasein and its Being-in-the-world character emphasises our worldly and historical existence and places humans as part of the world and not separated from it (Rorty 1991: 51). From this perspective, the 'world' is fundamentally a network of meanings and significances in which our lives transpire which represents a substantially different account to the Cartesian separation of 'subject' from 'object'.

Such relational understandings become increasingly manifest in academic accounts of organizational life that rest on the idea that traditional conceptions represent an inadequate account of organizing which consists of endless attempts of *mudding through* performed by organizational members (Czarniawska 2003: 355). At the root of many of these arguments lies the claim that what competent practitioners know and how they go about 'knowing in practice' (Schon 1987, Van de Ven and Johnson 2006: 805) represents a different kind of knowledge to academic theory. Practical, *phronetic* knowledge is largely tacit in nature, context specific, and advances through the active involvement in practices. In contrast, academic knowledge involves a detached commitment of building generalizations and theories that often take the form of formal logical principles or rules involving causal relationships (Van de Ven and Johnson 2006: 806). While both forms of knowledge are argued to be equally valid they possess distinct epistemological statuses which renders both the academic attempt of capturing practical knowledge in general terms and the transfer of academic theory to organizational practice difficult, if not impossible (McKelvey 2006: 823).

An increasing number of publications have attempted to reconcile theory and practice (Lave and Wenger 1991, Weick 2001). Common to most of these debates is the conceptual concern for bridging the gap *between* two separate and discrete domains of theory and practice; reifying the 'gap' (Wood 2002). We, however, argue that theory is not aloof, pure and in a sense over and above practice; instead theorizing *is* a practice.

Theorizing-as-practice

While organizational researchers have increasingly argued for a new, engaged and relational understanding of organizational life, we suggest that this view similarly pertains to the academic practices which make such accounts of organizing their focus. Viewing theory and practice as fundamentally distinct domains is to ignore the social character of the activities that constitute *all* practices, including the ones of academic scholarship. To illustrate the practice-character of theorizing, we draw upon Schatzki's account of social practices. For Schatzki (1996: 89), practice is a "…temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings". Contrary to a Cartesian understanding, doings and sayings cannot be conceptualised as mental competencies, or as sequences of signs, but, as Reckwitz (2002: 211) argues, "present themselves first and foremost as regular bodily activities". Practices, of course, are not just about what people do (Chia and Holt 2006: 640), but constitute the 'social sites' in which events, entities, and meaning constitute one another (Schatzki 2005). And, as Reckwitz (2002: 211) puts it, "a social practice is a regular bodily activity held together by socially standardised ways of understanding and knowing". To form this nexus, thus, doings and sayings are linked in certain ways. On a basic level, 'dispersed' practices (Schatzki 1996: 91) are constituted via shared 'understandings'. Practices of this sort are questioning, ordering, or greeting. Understanding these practices means that one can *perform*, *recognize*, and *respond* to them when encountered. More complex 'integrated' practices (Schatzki 1996: 98) that constitute particular domains of social life such as education, management, or accounting are additionally linked by rules, principles and instructions, and possibly by a set of acceptable aims – for example, those of profit and market share maximisation in management, and a variety of emotions, moods, and feelings that are acceptable when engaging in the practice. Schatzki refers to these as 'teleoaffective structure'. The 'site' of the social, finally, is composed of a nexus of practices and material arrangements such as human beings, artefacts, other organisms, and things (Schatzki 2005).

Academic activities that constitute the practice of 'theorizing' are largely those of contemplation and reflection (Schatzki 1996: 90), as well as actions such as writing papers, reading books, discussing with colleagues and attending conferences. These activities take place amidst shared understandings. Kuhn (1996) shows impressively how scientific work is embedded in paradigms which carry a set of particular self-understandings that determine what matters and what does not. For instance, the meaning of key notions in strategic management such as 'choice', 'rational action', 'organization' and 'competition' are taken as 'given' in the normal science of strategic management (Tsoukas and Knudsen 2005: 343). More generally, such understandings consists, primarily, of knowing how to carry out theorizing; but also of how to recognize, respond to and prompt academic theorizing (Schatzki 2002: 164). Such understandings may vary depending on the situation in which theorizing occurs and some authors have already pointed out that the type of knowledge claims made in strategic management are crucially shaped by the audience they are addressed to and thus by the shared understanding of what in particular counts as a knowledge claim (Mintzberg et al. 1998: 37 in Tsoukas and Knudsen 2005: 343). It is important to highlight that understanding resides not 'inside an academic's head' but in the practise in which she or he participates; it is implicit in the social activity of academic theorizing in which individual academics take part and in which they occupy roles.

Moreover, several overall ends (teleology) are pursued in academic theorizing. These may include gaining knowledge, helping practitioners, establishing a research career, gaining status within the academic community and so on. Although such ends can vary strongly, they are characterised by socially mediated understandings as to what counts as 'legitimate' in the practice. We can for instance imagine that the end of ridiculing an academic opponent or publishing false or subversive ideas is not accepted in academic practices and brings with it a range of social sanctions. This, for example, can be seen by the immense response to Sokal's (1996) publication in the social sciences and by academic responses to plagiarized work. Theorizing is further governed by explicit and implicit rules and regulations that are imposed on the practice or self-imposed by the academic practitioners. These are for instance rules regulating plagiarism, academic grades, publication deadlines, referencing, and ethical regulations. More informal rules pertain to the use and interpretation of statistical data, or targets and maxims like 'try to get your work published in high-grade journals first', or 'develop a niche for yourself'. Finally, academic theorizing takes place amidst material orders such as University buildings, computers, books, papers, pens as well as academic colleagues and university administration staff. These organised human activities are depicted succinctly in Schatzki's (2005: 472) example of a North American educational organization:

> (1) understandings of how to grade, teach, mentor, supervise, conduct research, use electronic equipment, perform administration, impress instructors, obtain desirable grades, and the like; (2) instructions, requirements, guidelines, and rules of thumb about these matters such as regulations that govern syllabuses, the timing of exams, or department affairs, rules of thumb about teaching introductory courses or about gender relations, and chair edicts; and (3) a teleoaffective structure that embraces such ends as educating students, learning, receiving good student evaluations, obtaining good grades, gaining academic employment, and enjoying a successful academic career; a wide variety of tasks that can be pursued for these ends; and acceptable uses of such equipment as computers, blackboards, pointers, manila folders, coffee mugs, and telephones.

The activities that constitute *theorizing* are therefore inherently connected to the academic practices in which they transpire; as human existence and human action are inherently tied to a social context (Tsoukas, 1996, Tsoukas and Vladimirou, 2001). In other words, an individual's intelligibility for practical coping, the 'tacit background', is the result of the gradual refinement of responses that grows out of long 'lived' experiences of acting within shared cultural practices (Dreyfus 2006). We thus understand theorizing as *embedded in* academic practices in the same way that managerial activities are *embedded in* organizational practices. As Tsoukas (2005: 334) recently observed: "… it is not only organizational researchers who are *embedded in* the life-world of their practice; so are those practitioners whose actions and choices researchers study" (emphasis added) Thus *both* academic theorizing and organizational activities are inherently and irrevocably fused in bundles of practices and material arrangements.

Such an understanding poses implications on how we view the relationship between organizational practice and the academic practice of theorizing. Academic theorizing and organizational practice *overlap* and interact in a myriad of ways whenever elements of practices and material arrangements appear in both the academic and the organizational practice-arrangement bundles. Understanding the relationship between academic and organizational practices therefore demands getting a grasp of these meshes and tracing the chains of human (and non-human) action that link and connect them (Schatzki 2002, 2003). It is possible to characterize the links between these practice-arrangement bundles further, as the overlaps and interconnections between meshes can be either harmonious, or conflicting. For instance, the academic aim of 'getting data' can conflict with the aim of 'getting help' of organizational practitioners. Similarly, academic rigour and the aim to be scientific can conflict with practitioners' aims of 'getting things fixed' and getting a 'practical solution'. We therefore argue that theorizing and practice are not only co-existent but are furthermore interwoven and not separated by a 'gap'. Theorizing is further not 'elevated', 'decontextualized' and 'pure', but consists of activities and is intertwined with shared social practices. This means that academic and organizational practices *co-exist*.

Theory and the influence on practice

Theorizing about social matters is a practice and the product of this practice is what we call a 'social theory'. We have argued against a scientific notion of theory and thus against the idea that a theory provides an account of the underlying processes and mechanisms of society, and thus as providing the basis for a more effective planning of social life. However, Charles Taylor (1985) argues that although social theory can never really occupy this role, there is an analogy. Like in the natural model, social theories are concerned with finding a more satisfactory fundamental description of what is happening. In this sense we could argue that social theory arises when we try to formulate explicitly what we are doing, describe the activities that are central to a practice, and articulate the norms which are essential to it. Moreover, as Taylor remarks, the framing of a theory rarely consists simply of making some continuing practice explicit. Instead, theory makes a claim to tell us what is *really* going on; to show us the "…real, hitherto unidentified course of events" (Taylor 1985: 94). Marx's theory, for instance, describes not just independent actions of workers trying to make the best of a bad job, but shows how these actions are determined and forced by the independent owners of capital and thus how seemingly independent factors are actually part of a process which attributes to these agents their relative positions and status. However, social theories do not just attempt to tell us what is 'really going on'; they also provide accounts and therefore make explicit the self-understandings of practices. This means that social theories can influence and alter the understandings held in practices and thus bring about change (Taylor 1985). Unlike natural science, a social theory is not 'about' an independent object, but about a practice that is partly constituted by the understanding conveyed in the theory.

Theorizing-as-reflection

We want to extend Taylor's argument and focus more directly on the influence of theory on a practice by introducing Heidegger's notion of breakdown. To do so, Heidegger's (1962) language of the three modes of engagement with the world around us is a useful starting point for exploring and describing this. Heidegger distinguishes between two ways in which the world may be experienced by a being who is active within it (*Dasein*). He calls these 'availableness' and 'occurrentness' (see also Dreyfus 1991: 60-87). Availableness, or *ready-to-hand* mode of engagement, is the mode of awareness characterised by an unreflective, ongoing, mundane practical coping in which an individual is totally immersed in his or her surroundings. Within our everyday activities we encounter things as 'equipment', something whose identity is inscribed within the function and purpose to which it is being put (Heidegger 1962: 292). Equipment is known by its use and the way it fits into the world (e.g. the act of hammering, not the object hammer). In other words, objects are observed not as things in themselves but rather as means to some end. A fundamental characteristic of an ‘available’ mode of engagement, is the ‘disappearing’ (Dreyfus 1991: 64) of the properties of an object in the service of a purpose.

On the other hand, occurrentness, or *unready-to-hand* mode, involves a partial or total detachment of the subject from the object of meaning which takes place at moments of breakdown or disturbance in practical activity; “[w]hen equipment cannot be used, this implies that the constitutive assignment of the ‘in-order-to’ to a ‘towards-this’ has been disturbed” (Heidegger 1962: 105). When a physical object fails to work the way it is intended to it manifests a disturbance in ongoing activity that is able to stimulate changes and alter an individual’s stance. This may be experienced under three conditions: when objects are conspicuous (found not to work in the same way as they used to), obstinate (when objects may be found to be unusable), or obtrusive (when objects are absent). Under these circumstances, in a unready-to-hand mode of engagement, objects become themselves an issue of thematic study. The scope and purpose of their use is not realized anymore. As Heidegger (1962: 105) has put it: “when an assignment to some particular ‘towards-this’ has been [thus] circumspectly aroused, we catch sight of the ‘towards-this’ itself, and along with it everything connected with the work”.

The concept of breakdown in an ongoing practical activity is useful in our understanding of the practice of theorizing. This is because theorizing occurs not only in relation to organizational practices but also to academic practices in those moments when the mundane, unreflective flow of understanding is interrupted by some particular event. It is in such moments, Weick (2003: 469) argues, that the identification of “the fundamental properties of ongoing, involved, practical activity” is enabled. Thus, the practice of theorizing lies in close scrutiny to those occurrent moments of engagement in which “practitioners are interrupted and discover relevancies that had been invisible up to that point” (Weick 2003: 468). These moments also provide opportunities for researchers (theorists) “to get a richer glimpse of what those ongoing practitioner projects were and what their relevancies looked like to engaged people” (Weick 2003: 468-469). In other words, a practice is altered when what we have previously been aware only subsidiarily, now becomes the focal point of our attention and intention (Polanyi 1962, Tsoukas 2003). Such moments of breakdown are thus moments in which we contemplate and theorize about hitherto hidden and unconsciously held aspects. Breakdowns are further initiators of change as through reflection we may alter the way we engage with equipment and thus with the ways we organize and carry out our practices.

We want to highlight a second aspect of breakdown here. Taylor (1985) argued that social theories influence the self-understandings that underlie social practices. Exposure to and engagement with social theories can thus lead to breakdowns in a second sense, when *qua* stimulation of social theories we turn our attention to our subsidiarily held assumptions and logics and when we re-think and alter our practices as a consequence. Returning to the example of Marx’s theory a worker may, through exposure to these writings, change his self-understanding of his work and revolt against the new conditions he finds himself in. This, of course, is not restricted to individuals, but pertains to the practice the worker carries out in general and for the changed shared understandings of the practice and the social conventions and sanctioning processes involved. For instance, we can imagine the worker community sanctioning those workers who do not subscribe to a rebellious cause through social exclusion or worse. Theorizing is thus implicit in practices in moments in which we reflexively engage with our environment and is therefore instrumental to our understanding and to change. We refer to this engaged and reflexive form of theorizing as *theorizing-as-reflection* which is implicit in both academic and practitioner practices. This form of theorizing is fundamentally distinct from traditional understandings of theory as it refers purely to those moments when through our engagement with our environment or through our exposure to theories our previously held assumptions break-down and our practices change.

Implications for organizational research

Based on this discussion we can now turn to the implications of our discussion for organizational theory and practice. Chia and Holt (2006: 641) have pointed out that when objects or tools become 'unavailable' "… we immediately become aware of the boundaries between ourselves and our equipment". It is only *then* that deliberate intention and action takes over from our everyday practice. This awareness can be initiated, as we have argued, through *equipmental breakdowns* as well as through *social theories* that stimulate reflection and contemplation. This means that we, as academics, can *stimulate breakdowns* in organizational practice when practitioners engage with the theories we produce and when this engagement leads to breakdowns in practitioner's self-understandings. When this happens, in an occurrent mode of engagement, things and events force an *actor* to become an *observer* who self-consciously stands back and attempts to understand them by categorising them and subscribe to them meanings, functions and, causes. It is only *then* that people can step back from their involvement in a project and reflect on it. To that extent, "it is failure and not success in the daily performing of a function that alerts our consciousness and attention and causes us to stand back and survey our circumstance" (Chia and Holt 2006: 642). Polanyi (1969: 149) emphasises the importance and positive effects of such a situation when he argues that "[c]ertain things can puzzle us; a situation may intrigue us – and when our understanding removes our perplexity, we feel relieved".

We suggest that it should be our aim as researchers to stimulate practitioners to reflectively engage with the theories we academics produce rather than 'blindly' attempt to apply them. Theories then become *tools* for practitioners as in the case of Weick's (1995: 54) famous episode of a Hungarian army detachment that gets lost in the Alps and finds its impetus to act through a map. It does not matter whether the map/theory is true (as it is not in Weick's example because the soldiers' map was of the Pyrenees), but it matters that practitioners feel ready to act and that they feel that any discrepancy between the map/theory and the world they encounter is an invitation for creativity and for reflection and not the result of their inability to correctly read or apply the map/theory.

We can take this point even further. Following a Dasein-ontology we suggest that theories are tools Dasein puts to use like any piece of equipment. Polanyi (1962: 59) notes that "hammers and probes can be replaced by intellectual tools". For Polanyi, there is no difference between tangible things such as probes, sticks, or hammers and intangible constructions such as radiological, linguistic, or cultural knowledge – they are all tools enabling a skilled user to get things done. Moreover, to use a tool properly we need to assimilate it and dwell in it. In Polanyi's (1969: 148) own words, "we may say that when we learn to use language, or a probe, or a tool, and thus make ourselves aware of these things as we are our body, we *interiorise* these things and *make ourselves dwell in them*" (emphasis in the original). It is only when we dwell in the tools we use and make them extensions of our own body, that we amplify the powers of our body and shift outwards the points at which we make contact with the 'outside world'.

Theories are thus encountered as part of a manifold of equipment deployed in the service of a particular task; they are essentially 'in-order-to' (Mulhall 2005: 51-52). Like a pen that is employed for writing letters and a hammer to make furniture, theories are used for or towards an end-product. *Theories-as-tools* therefore stand in relation to Dasein in the same way physical entities do. Theories become unready-to-hand when they are non-functional, that is, conspicuous, obtrusive, or obstinate and when the theorist turns his or her focus on the occurrent properties of the theory with which they must now concern themselves (Mulhall 2001: 227). Tsoukas (2005: 326) highlights that "[g]reater awareness comes about when we reflect on the way we reflect. This is as true of those we observe (organizational members) as it is of ourselves (researchers)". We therefore suggest that breakdowns in our engagement with theories are necessary and helpful in guiding our focus on those aspects that were hitherto invisible by their handiness; caught up in the processes of employment. The implications for us as academics are, we suggest, that we need to create a culture in which reflection is fostered and stimulated. This, however, is only possible if we depart from correspondence notions of theory and turn towards a more playful and carefree relationship with theories and see them as tools, judged by their handiness and by their ability to stimulate reflection and change; and not by any contained truth value. Theorizing-as-reflection thus occurs through the breakdowns that take place through our engagement with theories-as-tools. These breakdowns are instrumental for both academics and practitioners in that carving and refining the tools implicated in their practical coping.

Conclusions

In this paper we have argued for a perspective of theorizing as a practice that is intertwined with organizational practices. Furthermore, theory, the product of theorizing activities does not uncover and correspond with the underlying mechanisms of social reality. Instead, theories can at best describe, that is, tell us 'what is really going on' by meaningfully weaving seemingly isolated phenomena into broader social contexts. Theories are not distant from and in a sense 'about' independent social affairs; but they have the capacity to shape and constitute practice through alteration of the understandings held within practices. We used Heidegger's notion of 'breakdown' to highlight how practices are altered by virtue of engagement with social theories as well as though our everyday engagement with our environment.

We suggest from this discussion that the dualistic and in a sense simplistic notion of a 'gap' between theory and practice does not exhaust the complexity of the relationship between the practice of academic theorizing and organizational work. It also dismisses the potential influence that theory has on the everyday activities that organizational members perform and thus on the dynamics of the practice it attempts to capture. We introduce the notion of theorizing-as-reflection to address the engaged and practical theorizing organizational and academic actors experience in their everyday engagement with their environment. We imply that academic theories can stimulate breakdowns in organizational practice and thus initiate theorizing-as-reflection as well as change. We further suggest that this engaged form of theorizing is instrumental for us as researchers as it is through breakdowns that we are able to contemplate and theorize about hitherto hidden aspects of our understanding. This demands that we open ourselves to alternative notions of theory and more academic scholarship as such.

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