

Practice at the Crossroads: When practice meets theory, a rumination

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Consumer practices, work practices, not to mention management, design and research practices. The notion of “practice” remains core to much of what ethnographers in industry examine, expose and aim to inform. This paper questions: while we study practice(s), while we may frame our research and analysis with sensitivity towards rendering visible the richness or particularity of peoples’ practice, what have we really learned about practice? In part aimed at considering whether and how the work performed by ethnographers in industry advances or critiques theories of practice as explored by Bourdieu and others, the paper aims to reconcile the fact that we are “there” at the behest of our business counterparts to have an impact and affect change. So the question shifts from not only how we use and understand concepts of practice to how it frames the expectations of our business partners and stakeholders. What I have found is that there is both productive overlap and significant slippage between our (theoretically buttressed and anthropologically-resonant) notions of practice and the (action-oriented, practical ones) of our business counterparts. This piece is intended as a reflective rumination on the notion of “practice” at the cusp of theory and business to appraise its value, present and future, to both theoretical and business interests.

INTRODUCTION

This paper started from a simple impulse, to explore what has come, after several decades of ethnographic work in and for businesses and organizations, of the concept of “practice”. My initial sense was that we have made good use of the concept as theoretically explored by Pierre Bourdieu and others, or at least many parts of it. Indeed, whether intentionally or not, the notion of practice forms the basis of much of our work, shaping our research designs and informing many of our insights. We explore and expose the unfolding of consumer experiences as people identify, select, acquire and use goods. We discover and interpret the routines and actions of workers engaged in technology-mediated tasks, reveling at their creative work-arounds to get the job done. We analyze these practices to create experience models and evaluation frameworks, rendering useful representations with a flare! But the question remains, what have we learned *about* practice in the process? And what, if anything, does it offer back to the traditions of scholars following and debating the likes of Bourdieu, who take “practice” as a framing concept for understanding human action vis-à-vis social order? This work began from a desire to explore if and how the work performed by ethnographers in industry has done anything to refine, critique or advance theories of practice.

Such an exploration demands accounting for the contexts in which we¹ work – a view Rick Robinson exhorted us to in the inaugural EPIC conference in 2005 (Robinson 2005). That is, to

¹As my colleagues before me (Bezaitis 2009, Blomberg 2005), I reference this “we” with a knowing sense of the broad and hybrid worlds from which practitioners who assemble in and around the occasion and residues of an EPIC conference come, and the traditions and disciplines they embody and perform. I use it broadly here to

recognize that as practitioners (albeit, practitioners skilled in ethnographic methods and approaches and formed, at least in many cases, through traditions of critical, social and cultural theory), there is something rather specific expected of us. We are “there” at behest of clients, internal and external, to have an impact, to provide results, and to offer insight in order to affect change. “This process of matching the model we make of the situation with theirs [clients]” Robinson suggests, “of engaging them in conversation so that what emerges from the process Beer calls “rigorous formulation” is useful as well as accurate is, I think, one of the defining characteristics of this domain with which theory (here) must engage.” (2005: 5) So the question shifted to include not only how “we” use and understand practice and what it means to us, but to explore what it means to our business counterparts, stakeholders and partners. How does it frame their expectations of what we offer? In other words, in order to appraise the value of the concept of practice to ethnographic praxis in industry and with that, to reassess our contributions (perhaps latent) to theory, I needed to turn my attention to the cusp of theory and business practice. This paper aims to summarize the conclusions I’ve come to thus far.

A CONUNDRUM OF PRACTICE, OR A PRACTICE CONUNDRUM

So what did I find? In brief, there is indeed often considerable overlap between our theoretically buttressed and anthropologically-resonant notion of practice and the action-oriented, practical ones of our business counterparts. At some level, both are concerned with how things are actually done, with the realities beyond the formal and official accounting of steps and actions. The recognition that there is a “more” that exceeds the boxes and borders of rationalized business constructs is humbling and is often embraced with a hopeful spirit of humanity.

At times, however, there appears to be at times significant misrecognition, a slippage of meaning that can create a disconnect between what the ethnographic practitioner produces and what our business partners think they will get. One of the core features of a theoretical orientation to practice is that actions and meanings are constructed by actors in relation to specific social orders (Ortner 1984), that they are constructed relationally (Osterlund and Carlile 2005). “All of these routines and scenarios are predicated upon, and embody within themselves, the fundamental notions of temporal, spatial, and social ordering that underlie and organize the system as a whole” (Ortner 1984: 154). Consistent with a practice-based perspective, our work often leads us thus to conclude that the realities that matter on the ground (and thus to the products, services and organizational efforts we and our business partners aim to effect) need to be understood as situated, dynamic, and often negotiated and even contested. “Practice theory goes a step further than other theories focusing on interactions or relations. It looks not only at the recursive dynamics of a given relation but places everyday practices as the locus for the production and reproduction of relations” (Osterlund and Carlile 2005: 92). This “recursive dynamics” leads us to conclude that things vary. They require flexibility. What is important in understanding experience, ethnographers in industry often exhort, is the journey not the map. Our “implications for design”, to the extent that we become prescriptive at all, lean towards recommendations of ways to build for flexibility and adaptability. We become, consequently, particularists, because it is in the

reference those using anthropological and ethnographic approaches to rendering interpretations of people’s actions with the target of making their results useful to corporations and organizations.

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specific ways of building for flexibility and adaptability that design (of products, of strategies, of policy, of organizations) matters.

There are two ways in which I worry for the significance of this state of affairs. One is simply a concern for the obvious – do we not already know this by now? Do we need more research to get to the same answers pointing to flexibility, adaptability, and situatedness? What is at stake here is the value of our work in business settings, and the possibility of our coming up short in having original and compelling insights and in turn, pointing to meaningful and non-trivial pathways to change.

The opposite state of affairs is also present and is equally problematic. This is that we so highlight the systems of “production and reproduction of relations”, the “social ordering” that we shift from a focus on the situated, dynamic and contested take on practice to default instead on fixed and agreement-driven views of practice. This is the case when we participate in the reducing of that which is dynamic to something stable. In the name of making things actionable, we succumb to the desire for standardization and codifiability, naturalizing notions of practice, treating practice and the orders produced as self-evident. The result of this is also a potential risk to the value of our work. It is a risk remarkably similar to the above, that what we produce we produce without the distinction promised from rendering meaningful and deeply informing understandings of social practice. The concern is that we bring instead a more general analytical capability and knowledge (in such areas as trend analysis, decision making, segmentation, or the logic of task decomposition and redesign), offered with a twist and sprinkled, predictably, with quotes and photos of people in the field.²

Exploring this conundrum requires exploring the uses and meanings of notions of practice in the worlds of theory and the worlds of business³. This high-level look at and rendering of the notion of practice at work in business and in scholarship aims to give dimension to consideration of our value to industry as well as our value to advances in social and cultural theory. This paper pivots primarily around the intersection of notions of practice that emphasize flexibility and situatedness with those that instead emphasize ‘codifiability’. This focus is intended as a means to constrain this dissertation-worthy topic to a conference-size paper. It is moreover selected because this particular intersection may help to crystallize some of the as yet unresolved tensions in the domain of ethnography and industry.

In order to explore this intersection, it is important to first establish where the notion of practice shows up both in the worlds of ethnographic practice in industry and in the business world more

² In exploring the “truth effects” of typical ethnographic conventions of use of photos, quotes and the “say-do” distinction, Nafus and Anderson brilliantly exposed similar concerns in their 2006 “The “Real” Problem: Rhetorics of Knowing in Corporate Ethnographic Research.”. They point to the risks that a certain naturalization of ethnographic approaches ends up in the “at its worse a kind of butterfly-collecting that surprises no one.” (p. 256)

³ I refer to “the worlds of theory” and the “worlds of business” with a large dose of tongue-in-cheek. Beyond confirming that I am following the trajectory of theory evolving through Bourdieu and Giddens, for instance, more so than that of symbolic interactionists and ethnomethodologists (Wynn 1991), I must note that there are in fact as many dimensions to theories of practice as there are debates about them. Ditto notions of practice in business.

broadly. The next two sections endeavor to describe where practice does indeed show up in each setting.

PRACTICE IN AND AROUND ETHNOGRAPHY

In what ways does the notion of practice inform our work? For many ethnographers in industry practice has served as both the object of analysis as well as a framing perspective. The notion of practice is referenced in many dimensions of our work: from the way objects and tools are used to descriptions of everyday performances of work and consumption to a sense of “the informal” more generally. We center attention on the “everydayness” of what people do, even if it is the everydayness of extreme or rarified contexts such as marathon runners or elite executives. The notion of practice is often mobilized to contrast with idealized notions of process, with processes being represented typically by (often overly) linear, branching, and step-wise flow diagrams. While such diagrams remain powerful in highlighting and reducing possible sites of action, they are also guided by assumptions of rationalistic, rule-bound behaviors. These, in turn, are often felt to be quickly exceeded by the realities of human action. In contrast, we use the notion of practice, then, to illuminate both the apparent messiness of what people do (and say and think), and to suggest the often unexpected and sublime order(s) of that messiness and we translate this understanding into recommendations, strategies and designs by identifying levers for support, adapting, or transforming those practices.

This approach to practice echoes much of what is suggested in traditions of practice theory common to the fields of anthropology, sociology, cultural theory and philosophy and whose development is closely tied to such theorists as Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and Anthony Giddens (1979, 1984). Commonly described as a theoretical orientation that arose in an effort to bridge the space between the social determinism of certain forms of structuralism and the psychological or cognitive determinism apparent in methodological individualism, practice theory has endeavored to reconcile influences of external social structures with subjective experiences. The aim was to make room for the role of the individual, for agency and subjective experience, without naively minimizing the powerful influence of social structures. The body is often central to definitions of practice. Following a trajectory through Bourdieu, Giddens, Foucault and the contemporary social philosopher Theodor Schatzki, John Postill defines practice as “arrays of activity in which the body is the nexus” (2008). Importantly, however, the body is not just complicit with reigning social orders but plays a role in recreating these structures. Given that people-in-action feed back into the system, there is room for agency to reassert itself. People are neither passive dupes nor entirely free will-driven actors possessive of pure individual choice. “Relational thinking” (Osterlund and Carlile 2005) between agents and structures and among acting agents, frames the core analytical approach binding variations of practice theory.

In what way and why has industry and business cared about this terrain of thinking? This question at large, addressed under the rubric of what I have coined “the corporate encounter”, has occupied my interest for some time. A particular set of historical confluences has contributed to the growth of interest in more practice-sensitive views within the business world. I explore several of the key factors in more depth elsewhere (Cefkin 2009). Amongst these are: increased confrontation with consumers’ (both individual and enterprise) meaning-making influences in varied, global contexts; the spread of the internet and the increased speed and ease of non-local production and consumption; and the shift

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towards a greater focus on services and experiences. At the same time, driven by concerns for scope and scale, typical business approaches lean towards largely abstracted understandings. Surveys, where people's perceptions are solicited through already constituted frames of understanding, for instance, and process flows, conceptualized as linear, branching, and step-wise diagrams, speak to this tendency. Another factor at play, and at the opposite end of the above, is the fetish of the individual, the sense that tapping into an understanding of what people will do and how they might intersect with the organizations offerings requires 'getting into their heads'. This paper points simply to the sense that the promise of ethnographic work is its ability to stem the distance between broad, macro-level perspectives of people's actions and highly individualistic perspectives. This promise has particular salience vis-à-vis the industrial psychologists, economists, and human factors specialists who have been on the scene longer than ethnographers and whose viewpoints and approaches embody the kinds of perspectives just noted.

Ethnography is often poised to render something in-between these two extremes of faceless, broad generalizations and highly individuated understandings, and that is done in part through ethnographers' renderings of the changing messy space of activity into meaningful chunks through a focus on practice. Practice is what we are looking at when we are observing. We look for how things unfold in varying contexts and in interaction with a range of conceptual, digital, or material objects and artifacts. When we describe everyday performances of work and consumption, we aim to encompass not just the conscious and articulated dimensions of those performances – or people's explanations of them – but also what they do. We aim to expose the informal or the invisible, which we access, in theory, through a focus on practice. We may talk in terms of actions or behaviors, but in general, what differentiates ethnographic approaches from more cognitively or psychologically driven notions of behavior is that we are likely to foreground interpretations through a social lens, that there is cultural or social meaning framing individual's thoughts and actions.

Donna Flynn (2009) brilliantly explores this dynamic at Microsoft in the context of IT in her work "My Customers' are Different! Identity, Difference and the Political Economy of Design" where she describes the resistance she faced to the results of her study of server clients' use of user documentation that identified significant commonalities in documentation usage. Her business counterparts insisted that their customers – defined in terms of server type – were different. In addition to a kind of exceptionalism invoked by employees' singular identification with their customer group (in many cases because they had themselves come through those ranks), she traces the hold of this kind of thinking to what might be considered forms of methodological individualism instantiated in corporate processes. Amongst these she points to the performance review process, which, while gesturing towards the importance of collaboration, in fact is designed to reward singularly contributions, to the founder-worship of "billg"⁴, and to the popularity of the use of personas in the design practice and which focus attention on individual, representative, profiles of customers and users. The unit that matters most is singular, the individual. She uses this understanding to expose the particular political-economy of design in which her applied ethnographic research is engaged. And she

⁴ "billg" is the email moniker of Microsoft founder Bill Gates.

demonstrates how this understanding informs her own ability to act and effect change in her organization.

PRACTICE IN AND AROUND BUSINESS

So if that is where the notion of practice shows up in ethnographic work in industry, where does it show up more broadly in business itself? A number of notions of “practice” are at play in the business world. Practice is recognized as the site of action, of doing something and “getting the job done”, as ex-eBay CEO Meg Whitman has adopted as a mantra in an effort to distinguish her suitability for the role of governor of California from her opponents. ‘Putting something into practice’ is considered a good thing in business. Practice here contrasts with theory and is highly valorized as a corrective to the kind of ‘analysis-paralysis’ felt to come with the ‘ethereal’ realm of theory.

Another way that the notion of practice comes into play is through ideas of self-development. Practice is identified as a form of learning, developing skill by rehearsing, or ‘practicing’. In this case, the dominant response by the organization has something to do with capability-building, and it often fits most squarely in the worlds of human resources and training for internal purposes, or user support and adoption for product use. Practice and practicing becomes a means of harnessing capability to improve organizational functioning, on the one hand, or a route to effective product use on the other.

Yet another notion of practice points to it as simply the way things are done. Practice gets recognized here as specific constellations of actions (practices) informed by and found in specific contexts; the ways certain segments of customers take up and use products and services in distinguishing, brand-relevant ways, for instance, as in that embodied in Volkswagen’s slogan “On the road to life there are passengers and there are drivers. Drivers wanted.” This is the notion that most closely aligns with that of the ethnographer informed by theoretical orientations of practice. In this rendering, practice is often viewed as interchangeable with notions of culture. Telescoping the way in which culture in organizational contexts is heavily invested as a potential site and/or mechanism for transformation, this notion of practice also often carries with it a sense of the potential for change. It is identified as a site, then, for active direction and management. Indeed, a very typical response in business to practice when understood accordingly is to endeavor to discipline and standardize – even automate – it.⁵ This meaning of practice carries with it the sense that there are certain ways of doing things that can be changed, eliminated, codified and made sharable, as is illuminated by the notion of Best Practices.

“A **best practice** is a **technique**, method, process, activity, incentive, or reward that is believed to be more effective at delivering a particular outcome than any other technique, method, process, etc. when applied to a particular condition or circumstance. The idea is that with proper processes, checks, and testing, a desired outcome can be delivered with fewer problems and unforeseen

⁵ A related notion of practice, and which shares as well in capability-directed notions, is that of a practice as a coherent domain of expertise, such as a consulting practice, medical practice, the user experience practice, and so on. Bezaitis (2009) recently explored dimensions of ethnographic praxis in industry from this standpoint.

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complications. Best practices can also be defined as the most efficient (least amount of effort) and effective (best results) way of accomplishing a task, based on repeatable procedures that have proven themselves over time for large numbers of people.” (Wikipedia)

If you take away “best”, that leaves a more general sense of the meaning of practice in this regard:

~~“A best practice is a technique, method, process, activity, incentive, or reward that is believed to be more effective at delivering a particular outcome than any other technique, method, process, etc. when applied to a particular condition or circumstance. The idea is that with proper processes, checks, and testing, a desired outcome can be delivered with fewer problems and unforeseen complications. Best practices [are the] can also be defined as the most efficient (least amount of effort) and effective (best results) way of accomplishing a task, based on repeatable procedures that have proven themselves over time for large numbers of people.”~~

Several notions follow from this rendering of practice. First, there is a promise of *manageability*, for instance, through “incentive” or “reward” and by way of “processes, checks, and testing”. Practice can be controlled. Second, there is an assumption of a certain degree of *fixedness* (“the way of accomplishing a task” through which “an outcome can be delivered”). Practices repeat, and become identifiable, a sense frequently extended to a sense of cultural identity (e.g., “The HP Way” was a commonly understood notion of how the Hewlett-Packard organization operated and conducted itself.) And third, when extended further, one can see how this view contains a sense of the possibility of *interchangeability* or *fungibility* between practices, substituting them until desired outcomes are achieved. In total, practice emerges from and gives rise to *standards and rules*. In this construct, learning and knowing about the standards and rules is seen to be more a matter of personal development (from novice to expert) than of social and cultural distinctions. It is easy to see, then, how the notion of practice in this use shifts from one formed from a situated, dynamic and contested perspective formed relationally between agents and broader social systems, to one arrived at prescriptively, understood to be formed by a cumulative set of individual actions, and which strives for codification, standardization and control.

THE CONUNDRUM AT WORK: AN ILLUSTRATION

As a reminder, the concern of this paper is that notions of practice at play between theoretically-informed ethnographers in industry and our practically-oriented business counter-parts demonstrate potentially confounding similarities and differences, leading to the potential that our work fails to fully realize its value either in commercial contexts and in theoretical realms. To explore this conundrum more directly in terms of how it plays out, I thought it fairest to pick on myself. I use a case from my own work, an aspect of which was discussed previously at EPIC (Cefkin 2007). This case is suggested not because the work is so significant nor that it occupied that much of my work life (it did not), but because it exposes some of the challenges I have been speaking to above, and particularly wrestles with the questions of standardization and control.

The case at hand concerns collaboration practices amongst sales teams. I previously explored this case at EPIC (2007) focusing on the rhythms of sales work and particularly on sales pipeline management meetings. Known in some contexts as the “cadence” process, I argued that the sales pipeline management, and particularly the meetings, structure a certain experience for sales people in relation not only to their own organization but to the market more broadly. Participation in the process the meetings functions not just to fulfill needs for knowledge sharing and communication, but more generally creates a sense of the possibility for and urgency of action in the marketplace. I proposed that in trying to grapple with corporate dynamics ethnographers in industry would do well to pay attention to the ‘rhythmscapes’ of work.

But there was more to that study. In another context, we⁶ analyzed this data towards more immediate organizational concerns. In that instance, our analysis of sales pipeline practices and tool use allowed us to address a particular question of organizational import. The question concerns how the existence of a standard process designed around a standard tool effects organizational relations and the effectiveness of knowledge sharing (Cefkin et al. 2007).

As good practice practitioners we exposed “arrays of activities” ranging from the deployment of specific technologies to resource use by people before and after meetings to practices of talk and performance within the meetings. We suggested how structures, from hierarchies and regimes of authority to the rhythms of the stock market, effect what unfolds. And we described and visually represented two distinct ways in which teams collectively engaged sales pipeline activities. We named these the “Do-it-Alike” and “Do-it-as-You-Like” approaches and explored how they varied across five key dimensions: 1) styles of recording information, 2) roles and responsibilities for managing information, 3) dissemination of information within the team, 4) artifact use in reviewing the pipeline, and 5) focus of the pipeline reviews.

In terms of exploring tensions between flexible and codified notions of practice, one of our notable findings was that the enforcement of the supposed “standardized” approach to pipeline management required more, not less, interpretive work throughout the system. The representation highlights key inflection points when passing standard information (the same size and color box) through chains of people. We suggested that the “Do-it-Alike” approach demonstrates ways in which information is invested with different meanings, some related specifically to other bits of information. When transformed into a system that uses its own logic (forcing information bits into the same shape and color, so to speak), rather than that of the context of the information itself, recipients of the information have to first interpret the information already residing in the system, and then figure out what they need to do to modify and add to it. In contrast, when presented with the information in its varying, but situationally-appropriate forms (different shapes of the same color of information), as suggested by the “Do-it-As-You-Like” approach, productive energy is invested in adding to and modifying the information, rather than first having to make sense of it.

⁶ The paper referenced here was prepared together with my colleagues Jakita Thomas and Jeanette Blomberg. I take full responsibility, however, for framing up the treatments discussed, and critiqued, here.

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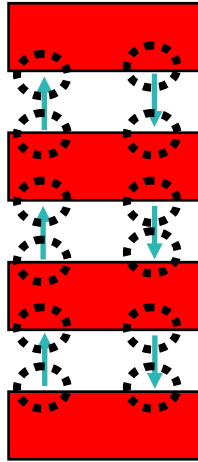


Figure 1. Do-it-Alike process for updating the CRM tool with interpretation and translation points circled (Cefkin et al. 2007, p. 66)

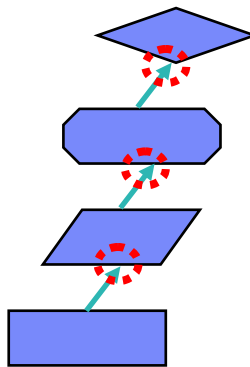


Figure 2. Do-it-as-You-Like approach to updating sales opportunity information with translation and interpretation points circled (ibid.)

But what kind of rendering of practice do these mini-models really represent? How different are they from other kinds of codifiable, or “best”, practices, suggesting an easy interchangeability: ‘do it this way not that?’ Does our focus on practice end up aligned with a process-driven view of fixed and cumulatively derived individual actions? Where in such representations do we identify the broader social and cultural structures that interactively inform the development of practice? Are we on the verge of leaving behind broader social and cultural dimensions all together?

So that points to one set of concerns; how practice is reified and rendered. Another set of concerns involves our prescriptions, what should be done. Of interest here are the concluding “implications” of that article. The first was precisely as described above, “Design tools and deployment strategies to allow flexible use and application.” (Cefkin et al. 2007, p. 67) The concern is not that this recommendation could not have been actionable; indeed had we been invited to⁷, we could have suggested specific ways to design and deploy the tools and processes of sales pipeline towards greater flexibility. Rather I am questioning whether and how our focus on practice, rendered into the common lessons of flexibility, situatedness, and change, may limit where and how we are able to participate in the conversation. Does it contribute to ethnographers in industry being positioned as technicians, problem solvers for addressing immediate issues, rather than holders of vital social and cultural knowledge worthy of broader strategic consideration?

The second implication of our article is perhaps yet more intriguing. It read: “Consider variable implications of tool and process adoption on the division of labor.” (ibid.) Was this our back-door way of bringing the politics of practice analysis into the picture? Our point was to show that the different forms of practice that develop in conjunction with use of the same process and tool led to different roles and responsibilities for actors in the system. While this is true in any situation, this case revealed that the standardized approach, as we observed among teams, lead to certain people ending up in the role of information police. In some cases, contestation over process and procedure emerged among team members who were meant to act collaboratively towards clients’ and the companies’ interests. Here we gestured sincerely towards the broader structuring context, towards corporate structures and process and hinting more broadly, even, towards the affects of hierarchical systems of operation, but the question remains, given the applied business context, towards what ends were such gestures aimed? Dynamics concerning such conditions as hierarchy, power and relationship are not readily addressable by technicians and demand reconciliation of broader social and cultural dynamics beyond the control of organizational boundaries. Such so-called ‘externalities’ are often viewed as beyond the scope and scale of concern of organizations, let alone the ethnographic practitioner. Does our position end up relegating us, then, to only residual or secondary value?

PRACTICE IN AND AROUND THEORY: TOWARDS NEW QUESTIONS

So where does this leave us? As explored above, businesses take practice as a resource that can be optimized and manipulated. Theoretical orientations of practice describe the actions constructed by actors in relation to specific social orders and thus conclude that practice is situated and changing. So this paper ends where it began, by posing the twinned set of questions, now more fully explored: does the work performed by ethnographers in industry have anything to offer in refining, critiquing and advancing theories of practice? And have we exploited the full potential of theories of practice towards

⁷ The focus on pipeline management practices fell out of a broader study on sales team collaboration. Impacting the specific tools and processes of sales pipeline management directly would have required involvement with portions of the organizations unfortunately out of scope for this study and its follow-on efforts.

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advancing meaningful differentiation of our value to business by contributing unique perspectives on business practice? That the answer to both of these questions may be something less than a resounding “yes”, I have been trying to suggest, can be felt as a conundrum. We remind people that “its about the journey not the map”. We remind them again. And we help design and support those journeys. These are, no doubt, the “right” answers. But they may not be the only answers. Are we losing site of the maps altogether?

So what is to be done? Rather than end on this note of conundrum, allow me to suggest two possible levers for advancing beyond this state of affairs. The first lever is suggested by the core theoretical treatments of practice identified earlier (indeed I am thus suggesting that ethnographers in industry go deeper into, rather than retreat from, theoretically construed notions of practice, a provocation undoubtedly counter-intuitive to many applied practitioners), in particular, accounting for structures of power. That tools such as sales pipeline management information systems, for instance, are used in particular, but broadly existent, axes of power, means something. That reward systems, structures of authority, and organizational expectations about proper and improper comportment exist, matters. Such dynamics are not limited, of course, to organizational contexts; Johnsen and Helmersen (2009) vividly revealed how families in “bottom of the pyramid” contexts end up buying and transporting small units of products used in daily life such as produce, dairy, and oil. Such observations disrupt the overly-easy identification of people’s actions as fixed, fungible and manageable. At the same time they point to the powered, persistent structures and systems which, if transformed, may have significant impact. By avoiding naturalistic, reductive treatments of practice and instead recognizing the powered dimensions of their existence, might not our work better realize the transformational power to change structures?

The other lever is suggested via the corporate ethnographers’ participation in and through business and organizational entities (and should help to reassure that I am not advocating a politics qua politics alone). Indeed the name of the game is to perform, to make change, to innovate – this is as true for ethnographers in industry as it is for others. In essence, then, we are invited to participate in transformation. And the site of that transformation might at times be less the near-at-hand actions of the subjects of our ethnographic inquiries, be they consumers or workers, but instead (or in addition), broader structures. Taking seriously the agent-structure dynamic at the heart of theoretical orientations to practice, we should continue to recognize the power of our own agency, and grasp the opportunity to participate in co-evolving those structures.

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