Ten Good Reasons for Assuming a 'Practice Lens' in Organization Studies

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Introduction

'Practice-based studies': a label whose time has come! Labels can be considered quasi-objects (Czarniaswka and Jorges 1995) that easily travel and translate ideas from one place to another. Their capacity to transport ideas and to spread fashions resides in the equivocalness that they make possible. When a label is used, the legitimation associated with it is mobilized – by imitation – and processes of institutional isomorphism are generated. At the same time as we verify the uncertainty of an innovation, saying that we are doing what others are also doing, we are able to protect a space for experimentation, a space in which to do otherwise and perhaps to conceal failures. Isomorphism enables allomorphism (Gherardi and Lippi, 2000). Labels are therefore vectors of innovation and institutionalization that allow the translation of ideas as they diffuse them (Czarniaswka and Sévon, 2005). One label that has generated and is transporting/translating new ideas in studies on organizational learning and knowledge management is that of 'practice-based studies' (henceforth PBS). When did it first appear? Who introduced it? What does it denote? It strikes us as a platitude, as an idea whose time has come, because it seems to have been always with us.

The aim of this paper is to investigate how the idea of PBS came into being, and how its entry into use started up a 'bandwagon': that is, brought together various

strands of inquiry with certain features in common. The question that we shall seek to answer is where is this bandwagon heading? We shall give an answer by trying to identify the good reasons for communities of researchers to join the bandwagon.

1. Google: a prophet of our times

If you type the expression "Practice-Based Studies" in the Google search box, the results window immediately displays a host of web pages which apparently have nothing to do with learning and organizations. The overwhelming majority of the references relate to professional domains: primarily medicine (nutrition, paediatrics, dentistry, nursing) and education. The theories developed in these sectors relate to the 'commonsense meaning' that the concept of 'practice' is able to communicate. The word has a broad sense which encompass the body of knowledge at the base of professional expertise; the form taken by learning; entry and socialization to a professional community; and the repetition of an acquired skill.

The professions use the expression 'practice-based studies' or 'practice-based theory' to emphasise the learning from direct experience on which every professional community is founded. Thus once again we have two of the main meanings of the term 'practice': practice as a learning method, and practice as an occupation or field of activity.

Only in a second instance does a web search yield references to the organizational literature which uses the term 'practice' to refer to a 'recurrent way of doing things', and to the organizational learning that takes place in working practices. In subsequent sections we shall analyse how this literature has developed more recently. For the time being we would emphasise the polysemy of the term 'practice':

1. *practice as a learning method* People learn by 'doing' through constant repetition of their activities. To quote a proverb commonplace in numerous languages: "Practice makes perfect".

2. *practice as an occupation or field of activity*. 'Practice' is a word able to express the field of activity in which an individual works. Every work setting is in fact an arena of interconnected practices in continuous becoming: medical or legal practice, for example.

3. *practice as the way something is done*. Practice is a processual concept able to represent the 'logic of the situation' of a context. The study of practice, or better 'practising', yields important insights into how practitioners recognize, produce, and formulate the scenes and regulations of everyday affairs.

2. The bandwagon of studies on practice

In recent years, practice-based studies have become a bandwagon which accommodates and conveys diverse theories and perspectives on practice. The metaphor of the bandwagon (Fujimura 1988; 1995) calls to mind the idea of a 'journey'. It highlights the existence of a process in continuous becoming which a large number of researchers, scholars and organizational commissioners have joined. The concept expresses an involving activity able to bring together a heterogeneous group of subjects in pursuit of the same goal. Fujimura, in a study on cancer research laboratories, has described the formation of a bandwagon as a process observable within a nascent network of actors. In the scientific debate, the formalization of experimental research protocols which use DNA analysis to treat tumour cells has driven a powerful bandwagon able to direct towards a common objective a composite network of private laboratories, financiers, researchers and public structures. This bandwagon has spread experimental techniques beyond the local dimension by involving a complex network of actors. The movement is self-propelling because it constantly persuades new subjects to 'climb on board' the bandwagon and adopt its specific logic of action.

Besides the specific research context described by Fujimura, the bandwagon concept is a particularly useful metaphor with which to explain the genesis and growth of practice-based studies. The image of the bandwagon, supported by historical

reconstruction of the various contributions to the debate, will be the basis for our thorough reflection on the reasons and logics that have recently induced numerous authors and currents of thought to concern themselves with practices. Every 'wagon' will be the expression of a conceptual label shared by the authors that have joined the 'caravan'. Each of the ten following subsections will begin with the 'pioneer', i.e. the article (and authors on the bandwagon) who first used a particular label to study practice.

2.1. From communities of practice to the practices of a community

Studies on communities of practice have acted as pathfinders for the bandwagon on practice. They have introduced into the academic debate a plurality of concepts and innovative perspectives: for instance, the *situatedness* and sociality of practices; the central importance of practical know-how for work; the existence of collective identities; the importance of learning processes within a community of practitioners. The concept of community of practice (CoP) first arose in anthropological and educational studies, and it spread particularly through the influence of the one of the books most frequently cited by organization scholars: *Situated Learning. Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Lave and Wenger 1991). In light of five empirical studies on apprenticeships (obstetricians, tailors, naval officers, butchers, and alcoholics anonymous), these authors developed the concept of the community of practice as a "set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger 1991: 98).

The notion of community of practice marks the passage from a cognitive and individual vision of learning to a social and situated one. Learning is not a phenomenon that takes place in a person's head; rather, it is a participative social process. The community is the source and the medium for socialization. It constructs and perpetuates social and working practices. The CoP can be conceived as a form of self-organization which corresponds neither to organizational boundaries nor to

friendship groups. It is based on sociality among practitioners and on the sharing of practical activities. Sociality is the dimension within which interdependencies arise among people engaged in the same practices. These interdependences give rise to processes of legitimate and peripheral participation whereby newcomers take part in organizational life and are socialized into ways of seeing, doing and speaking. The newcomer gradually becomes a full member of the community. The knowledge at the basis of a job or a profession is transmitted, and in parallel perpetuated, through the sociality of practice.

The importance of the term 'CoP' has induced numerous authors and disciplines – mainly in organizational and managerial studies – to appropriate the concept and then, inevitably, change its meaning. The managerial literature has gradually transformed the concept of CoP (Wenger 2000; Wenger and Snyder 2000) into a tool used by managers to manage the knowledge of their organizations. Neglecting the risk of reifying the category, these new approaches have for years investigated how to recognize and govern the CoP.

The spread of the CoP concept[1] has provoked numerous criticisms in recent years. Various authors have pointed out the ambiguous or ill-defined aspects of the theory (Roberts 2006; Handley et al. 2006), concentrating mainly on elements such as the power, trust, predisposition, size, extent and duration of communities; but also on the use itself of the term 'community'. These criticisms have raised awareness that different types of CoP exist, and they have led to a proposal for translation of the label. Such proposal (Gherardi et al. 1998; Brown and Duguid 2001; Swan et al. 2002; Contu and Willmot 2003; Roberts 2006) suggests that the concept of community of practice (CoP) should be reversed into practices of the community (PoC). A shift has therefore come about from the notion of a CoP as the context where learning takes place to consideration of how situated and repeated actions create a context in which social relations among people, and between people and the material and cultural world, stabilize and become normatively sustained. The switch

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[1] Also the website CoP Square..

from the concept of CoP to that of PoC has generated the broad PBS debate (Gherardi 2008a forthcoming).

2.2. Practice-based standpoint

An obligatory point of departure for reconstruction of the PBS bandwagon's studies and perspectives is the 1991 study by Brown and Duguid, who coined the expression 'practice-based standpoint'.[2] Practice became the locus for understanding situated learning processes: "from this practice-based standpoint, we view learning as the bridge between working and innovating" (Brown and Duguid, 1991: 41).

Drawing in particular on works by Orr (1987, 1990), Brown and Duguid conceive every work setting as an arena of repeated practices (canonical or otherwise) and constant innovations. Therefore studying a context of interaction among practitioners requires investigation into the continuous processes of working, learning and innovating in which they are involved.

Methodologically, in every context, divergences must be sought between "espoused practice" and "actual practice" (Brown and Duguid 1991: 41).The dimension of espoused practice consists in the *opus operatum* characterizing the activities of each actor. This "canonical vision" of a person's activities comprises the set of actions which every individual undertakes, formally or otherwise. Vice versa, the dimension of actual practice consists in the *modus operandi* negotiated in the everyday routine of people operating in a context: the situated doing, the composite set of "non-canonical" activities that cannot be governed in abstract by executives. Studying the often obscure dimension of work practices is to explore the complexity of situations and to trace the network of roles that constitute a work setting. This system, produced through training and if necessary reshaped by innovations, is something in continuous becoming. It was this insight that represented the most fruitful contribution of Brown and Duguid's article to the subsequent literature, although the

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[2] In the literature the term 'standpoint' is frequently used in various debates: examples are 'constructivist standpoint' (RIFF) or 'feminist standpoint' (RIFF)

label 'practice-based standpoint' did not acquire significant currency. It was replaced in this group of authors' subsequent studies by the concepts of epistemology of practice and the 'generative dance' among practitioners, organizational knowledge and organizational knowing (Cook and Brown 1999, Brown and Duguid, 2001).

The first of these articles was a turning-point in the debate on practice. Knowledge can be depicted through two very distinct 'visions': the epistemology of possession, and the epistemology of practice (Cook and Brown 1999: 387). Referring to the thought of Dewey, these authors defined knowing as "literally something which we do, not something that we possess". For this reason, the epistemology of practice is able to show "the co-ordinated activities of individuals and groups in doing their 'real work' as it is informed by a particular organizational or group context. In this sense we wish to distinguish practice from behaviour and action. Doing of any sort we call behaviour, while action we see as behaviour imbued with meaning. By practice, then, we refer to action informed by meaning drawn from a particular group context" (Cook and Brown, 1999: 386-387).

The practices of individuals are such when they are embedded in a particular field of practice. Cook and Brown give an example drawn from medicine: the use of the medical knee hammer to test a person's reflexes. When a non-specialist tests the reflex of his/her own knee, this activity is an 'action', a meaningful behaviour. If instead a doctor tests a person's knee reflex as part of a specialist examination, this procedure is only and always a 'practice'. The rationale for this distinction reside in the specific nature of medical practices. The practice in this case is embedded in a particular organized context, articulated into specific practices of behaviour, socially developed through situated learning and training for the profession: "by practice we mean, as most theorists of practice mean, undertaking or engaging fully in a task, job, or profession" (Brown and Duguid 2001: 203).

Situated practice thus becomes the key to analysis of the processes by which knowledge spreads within an organization: "The practice-based, tacit dimension of knowledge, is clearly implicated in the stickiness and leakiness of knowledge, for

shared practice demarcates the extent to which knowledge can spread" (Brown and Duguid, 2001: 205). The authors use the expression "network of practice" to refer to social networks of which the members are not (physically) necessarily collocated, but who do engage in common practices and as a result share tacit knowledge yielding network learning. The concept highlights the existence of a network of relations which although "significantly looser that those within a community of practice" enable the circulation of practical knowledge.

2.3 Practice-based learning or work-based learning

 The label 'practice-based learning' is used by researchers who investigate the social and collective process of learning that takes place in education (Raelin 1997, 2007; Boud & Middlenton 2003; Fenwick 2006); and also by those interested in organizational learning within a community (Strati 2007), at the boundaries among different communities (Carlile 2004), or at distance (Nicolini 2007). Educationists also use the label 'work-based learning' to denote how learning takes place, not only in a school classroom through teaching, but also in the workplace through observing, discussing and acting in relationship with numerous other learners. Raelin argues that "this approach recognizes that practitioners in order to be proficient need to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Work-based learning subscribes to a form of knowing that is context-dependent. Practitioners use theories to frame their understanding of the context but simultaneously incorporate an awareness of the social processes in which organizational activity is embedded" (Raelin 1997: 572). In this case the focus is on the theory/practice gap evidenced by studies on informal learning in workplaces (Boud & Middlenton 2003) or on the processes of adult education (Fenwick, 2006).

The idea of introducing practice into studies on teaching has been developed further by Raelin in his article "Toward an Epistemology of Practice" (2007), where he proposes an outright epistemological change: "an emerging practice epistemology will view learning as a dialectical mediated process that intermingles practice with

theory" (Raelin, 2007: 506). A similar concern pervades the management literature which complains about the distance between academic studies and everyday managerial practice. In this regard, the label highlights the opposition between theory and practice, but it is also employed to emphasise that practical knowledge is a process, and that learning takes place as things are done in the relationship between human and non-human elements. Learning also takes place through the body; and knowledge is not only embedded but also embodied.

Strati's study "Sensible Knowledge and Practice-Based Learning" (2007) investigates the dimension of sensory knowledge and aesthetic judgment. 'Aesthetic' or sensible knowledge comprises "what is perceived through the senses, judged through the senses, and produced through the senses. It resides in the visual, the auditory, the olfactory, the gustatory, the touchable and the sensitive-aesthetic judgment" (Strati, 2007: 62). If we consider work routine, in all jobs – though obviously to different extents – people use their bodies and activate their senses to learn the community's practices. Strati (2007: 69-70) illustrates the relation between sensible knowledge and practice-based learning with various examples. One of them concerns a group of building labourers working on a roof without safety protection. Work on the roof involved the senses of touch, "feeling the roof under your feet", and those of hearing and sight, "looking with the ears" at the movements and noises of workmates and objects. The perceptive-sensory capacities were therefore crucial for performance of the roofing work, like others, because they influenced the choice of that kind of work, its teaching, its learning, and the selection of those capable of performing it. More generally, they comprised every aspect of what people do when they work.

To be cited in particular among studies on knowledge learning, transmission and creation at the boundaries among communities is Carlile's (2004) "Transferring, Translating and Transforming: An Integrative Framework for Managing Knowledge across Boundaries". Carlile draws on Star's (1989) study on liminal objects to examine how artifacts mediate relations among different communities of practice when a new product is being created.

The role of objects in structuring and stabilizing practical knowledge is a central theme of activity theory (see the special issue of *Organization* edited by Blackler and Engestrom, 2005). In this regard, Engestrom and colleagues (1999) introduced the term 'knotworking' to emphasise that networking does not suffice if the relationships are not then 'knotted' into enduring forms, and that objects perform this practical function. Within this theoretical framework, Macpherson and Jones (2008: 177) state that "mediating artefacts, or boundary objects, provide an opportunity to develop new shared conceptions of activity and new modes of action". Local and temporary events are in fact able to establish solid relations among bodies of knowledge which are neither planned nor forsighted. In these cases, unlike those in stable activity systems, the division of tasks – and therefore what each actor does in practice – changes according to the different situations made possible by the object of the activity.

Learning in work practices also occurs in 'virtual' contexts – as evidenced by Nicolini's (2007) study on distance work, where he examines how medical practices have been spatially and temporally reconfigured by the advent of telemedicine. The latter expands medical practices in time and space. It entails much more than a simple redistribution of what already exists, because it 'reframes' the objects and contents of activities, giving rise to new artifacts and new identities, and to changed positions among them.

2.4 Practice as "what people do"

The label of practice as 'what people do' has in recent times driven the bandwagon of strategy researchers, but it has an illustrious – if not always duly recognized – precedent in studies on science as practice. Both these strands of inquiry seek to determine what people routinely do in their particular 'field of practice'. Whilst ethnomethodology inspires the first strand, the second has more heterogeneous theoretical sources which relate at times to activity theory, at times to

phenomenology, and at times to no particular theoretical tradition. They are now briefly discussed.

Science-as-practice

During the second half of the 1970s, studies and seminars on the 'sociology of scientific knowledge' founded a new approach to the study of science which distinguished itself firstly because it viewed knowledge as a social product, and secondly because, by discarding philosophical 'a prioris', it investigated the empirical and natural sphere (Pickering 1992). In the 1980s, interest in these themes grew to the point that very different positions were taken up in their regard. Amid this climate of 'intellectual heterogeneity', Pickering distanced himself from traditional studies on scientific knowledge by proposing the innovative idea of "scientific practice as a scheme of reference" (Pickering 1992). The opposition between 'science as knowledge' and 'science as practice' was efficaciously discussed in his book *Science as Practice and Culture.* Pickering centred his analysis on scientific practice – what scientists actually do – with a correlated interest in scientific culture, meaning the set of resources on which and within which a practice operates. The 'practical dimension' as the key to studying 'what scientists do' linked with the body of studies interested in the 'macro' social dimension of the world of science and scientific laboratories: most notably the ethnographic studies by Latour and Woolgar (1979), those on laboratory work by Knorr Cetina (1981), the ethnomethodological studies of Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston (1983), the pragmatic and symbolic interactionist analyses of science (Fujimura, Star and Gergson 1987), and the actor-network approach (Latour 1984, 1987; Callon 1980). As Lynch (1993) notes, during the early 1990s, philosophers, historians and sociologists of science showed great interest in the everyday practices of scientists, prompted to do so mainly by the influence of ethnomethodological studies and those on the sociology of scientific knowledge. Ethnomethodology, in particular, investigated 'ordinary practical reasoning' and made a decisive contribution to these

analyses. The strength of these science-as-practice approaches was the empirical nature of their inquiry: "they conduct case studies of actions in particular social settings; they pay attention to detail; and they try to describe or explain observable (or at least reconstructable) events. Terms of the trade like empirical observation and explanation are problematic, given their association with empiricism and positivism, but it should be clear that ethnomethodologists and sociologists of science are especially attuned to – actual – situations of language use and practical action" (Lynch, 1993: XX).

Strategy-as-practice

The label 'strategy-as-practice' evinces complex and composite systems of habitus, artifacts, and socially-defined forms of action that constitute the flow of strategic activities (Jarzabkowski 2003: 24). On this view, practices are defined as "the infrastructure through which micro strategy and strategizing occurs, generating an ongoing stream of strategic activity that is practice" (Jarzabkowski 2003: 24). Paraphrasing the shift from organization to organizing, those who study strategy propose a shift to strategizing. The 'practice perspective' (Jarzabkowski, Balogun and Seidl 2007) seeks to identify the strategic activities reiterated in time by the diverse actors interacting in an organizational context.

The strategy-as-practice strand of analysis has been developed in particular by Whittington, Jarzabkowski, Samra-Fredericks, Balogun and Chia. A first example of this 'new' perspective can be dated to 1996, the year in which Whittington published a paper entitled "Strategy as Practice" (1996) and in which he stated that "the practice perspective is concerned with managerial activity, how managers 'do strategy'" (Whittington 1996: 732). The year 2003 saw many publications in this area of inquiry. Numerous articles reflected on the dimension of strategy-as-practice

already known with the acronym S-As-P.[3] Starting from the theoretical framework of activity theory, Jarzabkowski (2003) argued that every system of activity can be understood by examining the ways in which management practices translate strategy into practice. The following year Jarzabkowski (2004) resumed his analysis by focusing on the concepts of 'recursiveness' and 'adaptation'. Drawing on a composite theoretical base comprising the concepts of 'structuration' (Giddens 1984), 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1990), 'social becoming' (Sztompka 1991) and 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991), Jarzabkowski showed the existence of a system of 'practices-in-use' (Jazabkowski 2004).

Whittington contributed decisively to the development of these reflections (Whittington 1993, 2002, 2003; Whittington, Jarzabkowski, Mayer, Mounoud, Nahapiet and Rouleau 2003). He suggested that research on strategy should be founded upon a 'new' theoretical basis which combined 'strategy praxis', 'strategy practices' and 'strategy practitioners' (Whittington, 2006). In the following year, Whittington (2007) proposed the model of the '4 Ps' – 'praxis', 'practices', 'practitioners' and 'profession' – to enable thorough analysis of organizational strategy by going beyond the distinctions between intra-organizational and extra-organizational levels..

In the same years Samra-Fredericks defined strategy-as-practice as "a critical understanding of everyday strategic practice and the interactional constitution of power effects" (Samra-Fredericks 2005: 806). Drawing on the research tradition of ethnography, conversation analysis and ethnomethodology, Samra-Fredericks empirically analysed strategists-at-work, investigating the strategic interactions constantly activated within an organizational setting (Samra-Fredericks 2003, 2005). The methodology to analyse the strategizing dimension prompted a study by Balogu, Huff and Johnson (2003). Analysing strategy-as-practice is not to consider solely the strategies of senior executives, but also those of middle managers and non-managerial personnel. The aim of research on strategy is to verify how the instructions of management are translated by actors into day-to-day practices with

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T[3]The acronym is also used as the name of the community's website.

the purpose of creating and exchanging strategy. On this view, strategy is what is done, or otherwise, within an organizational context in regard to the strategic directions laid down by the management.

More recently, Chia and Holt (2006) have applied Heidegger's reflections in *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1962) to strategy-as-practice. They stress that consideration must be made of the relations among the concepts of 'agency', 'action' and 'practice'. The purpose of these theoretical notions is to support a research design for analysis of "the oftentimes mundane everyday goings-on that lead to organizational strategy formation" (Chia and Holt 2006: 636). Referring to the theories of Mintzberg (1978), Chia and Holt describe strategy as a *modus operandi* that practitioners enact through experience. This "everyday practical coping" (Chia and Holt 2006: 637) highlights the non-intentionality of strategy formation by the diverse actors that participate in organizational life. Relating these ideas to the concept of 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1990: 52), these authors view strategy-as-practice as a "durable transposable set of dispositions"[4] which influence the everyday behaviour of the practising actors. Accordingly, Chia and MacKay (2007) reaffirm the importance of social micro-practices: "from the social practices viewpoint, everyday strategy practices are discernible patterns of actions arising from habituated tendencies and internalized dispositions rather than from deliberate, purposeful goal-setting initiatives" (Chia and MacKay 2007: 217).

2.5. Practice lens and practice-oriented research

One of the first works to proposes the use of the 'practice lens' for the study of technologies has been the article "Using Technology and Constructing Structures: A Practice Lens of Studying Technology in Organizations" by Orlikowski (2000), which draws on Giddens' (1979, 1984) structuration theory[5] to propose use of "a

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[4] The definition is that of habitus related to s-as-p
[5] This theory defines structure "as the set of enacted rules and resources that mediate social action through three dimensions or modalities: facilities, norms, and interpretive schemes. In social life, actors do not enact structures in a vacuum. In their recurrent social practices, they draw on their (tacit

practice lens to examine how people, as they interact with a technology in their ongoing practices, enact structures which shape their emergent and situated use of that technology. Viewing the use of technology as a process of enactment enables a deeper understanding of the constitutive role of social practices in the ongoing use and change of technologies in the workplace" (Orlikowski, 2000: 404). Starting from the assumption that technologies have two dimensions – that of the artifact and that of its use (what people do with the technological artifact in their recurrent and situated practices) – Orlikowski observes how organizational subjects activate structures pertaining to technology-in-use. These structures "are not fixed or given, but constituted and reconstituted through the everyday, situated practice of particular users using particular technologies in particular circumstances" (Orlikowski, 2000: 425). The concept of "technologies as social practice" or technology-in-use has also inspired the study by Suchman and colleagues (1999) "Reconstructing Technologies as Social Practice", which theorizes that technology acquires different identities in relation to the circumstances and the practices in which it is embedded. The designers of a technology must therefore consider the context and the working practices in which the technological structures will be inserted.

The metaphor of the 'practice lens' is associated with the label 'practice-oriented approach'. For example, Schultze and Boland (2000) stress that it is essential when designing and implementing technologies to adopt a "practice-oriented approach" which focuses on "what people 'actually' do rather than on what they say they do or on what they ought to be doing" (Pickering 1992, in Schultze and Boland 2000: 194). Studying what people actually do also requires understanding the results of technological implementations, and consequently, observing the practices within the circuit of reproduction described by Bourdieu (1973, 1998). To paraphrase Foucault (1982: 787), this means that when technologies are implemented, importance should

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and explicit) knowledge of their prior action and the situation at hand, the facilities available to them (e.g., land, buildings, technology), and the norms that inform their ongoing practices, and in this way, apply such knowledge, facilities, and habits of the mind and body to "structure" their current action. In doing so, they recursively instantiate and thus reconstitute the rules and resources that structure their social action" (Orlikowski 2000: 409).

be given not only to what people do but also to the consequences of their doing ("what doing it does") (Schultze and Boland 2000: 195). A few years later Schultze and Orlikowski (2004) argued that the 'practice lens' should be used to study "how work practices (both customers and providers) and interactions (between customers and providers) were influenced by implementation of a network of technology that mediates brokerage relations" (2004: 103). In the words of the authors, the practice lens "highlights how macro level phenomena such as interfirm relations are created and recreated through the micro level actions taken by firm members" (2004: 87). Finally, Osterlund and Carlile (2005) illustrate, through a re-reading of three classic studies on communities of practice, how practice-oriented research is based on a relational thinking in which the practice is the locus for the production and reproduction of social relations.

The label 'practice-oriented research' is also used in Osterlund's studies (2003, 2004, 2007) on the communicative genres and systems adopted by doctors and nurses to share knowledge within, and among, work settings.

2.6 Knowing-in-practice

The point of departure for reflection on the concept of knowing-in-practice is the special issue of *Organization* edited by Gherardi (2000), which seeks to explain why and how the traditions of research represented by activity theory (AT), actor-network theory (ANT), situated learning theory (SLT), and cultural perspectives on learning (CP) can be grouped under the heading of 'practice-based theorizing'. The basic idea is that knowledge is not something present in the heads of people; nor is it a strategic productive factor located in the organization's management. Rather, it is a 'knowledge-in-practice' constructed by practising in a context of interaction. On this view, practice is the "figure of discourse that allows the processes of knowing at work and in organizing to be articulated as historical processes, material and indeterminate" (Gherardi 2000: 220-221). The practice constitutes the 'topos' that ties the 'knowing' to the 'doing'. Participation in a practice is on the one hand a way

to acquire knowledge in action, and on the other, a way to change/perpetuate such knowledge and to produce and reproduce society (Gherardi 2000: 215). Studies on knowing-in-practice have spread a "new vocabulary" in organization studies (Nicolini, Gherardi and Yanow 2003). The study of knowing-in-practice prefers action verbs able to transmit the idea of an emergent reality, of knowledge as a material activity. Numerous studies use terms and expressions connected to material artifacts: sociality is related not only to human beings, but also to symbolic and cultural artifacts. The debate on practice is rich in terms linked with the space-time location of the 'doing' of actors, that is, with the 'situatedness' of practices. Finally, the debate is characterized by the use of words that denote uncertainty, conflict and incoherence, understood as features intrinsic to practices because they produce innovation, learning and change.

A few years later, also Orlikowski, in "Knowing in Practice: Enacting a Capability in Distributed Organizing" (2002), used a "perspective on knowing in practice which highlights the essential role of human action in knowing how to get things done in complex organizational work" (2002: 249) for research conducted in a multinational software producer. The use of this label "suggests that knowing is not a static embedded capability, or stable disposition of actors, but rather an ongoing social accomplishment, constituted and reconstituted as actors engage the world of practice" (2002: 249). The practices of the context (the author refers in particular to identity sharing, face-to-face interactions, the alignment of efforts, learning-by-doing, and participation) produce a collective 'knowing how' that is constantly activated and enables organizational subjects to operate across temporal, geographical, political and cultural boundaries (distributed organizing).

Various empirical studies have analysed knowing-in-practice. Gomez and colleagues (2003), for example, describe the complex nature of knowing in a kitchen: "cooking practice is a mix of personal predisposition, knowledge acquired through tough training and repetitive practice, knowledge of rules integrated and internalized by cooks, and knowledge acquired through reflexive thinking about practice" (Gomez et al., 2003: 122).

Knowing-as-activity links with both the sensible knowledge and the aesthetic judgment that practitioners use to appraise and transmit a practice. Strati (2003) in "Knowing in Practice: Aesthetic Understanding and Tacit Knowledge" shows the nature, at once individual and collective, of knowing: "aesthetics, in fact, closely interweaves with the tacit knowledge of individuals, and they both signal the sociality constructed personal way in which people interact to invent, negotiate, and recreate organizational life through practice, taste, and learning" (Strati, 2003: 72).

2.7 Practice turn

Many of the studies and authors which in recent years have joined the broad bandwagon of practice are connoted by the label 'practice turn'. The term derives from the edited book by Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina and von Savigny entitled *Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (2001). Since 2001, the label 'practice turn' has rapidly expanded: the majority of contributions to practice studies refer directly in their text or bibliography to *Practice Turn*. Although this collection of mainly philosophical writings does not concern what Gherardi (2000) has called 'practice-based theorizing', it introduces the idea that the so-called 'linguistic-cultural turn' has been followed by a further one (Schatzki, 2001). With time, the book's title has become a reference label which extends beyond its contents and comprises a wide range of definitions and references to the concept of practice.

The organizational literature in general often confuses the concept of 'practice' with that of 'routine' or 'activity'. This confusion is due to the co-presence in many research approaches of two contrasting notions of 'practice' (Rouse 2001: 190):

1. practices identified with regularities or commonalities among the activities of social groups;
2. practices characterized in terms of normative accountability of various performances.

According to the first definition, practices are "arrays of activities" that constitute models, bonds, or bundles of activities. Within this conceptual framework, the

'practice turn' debate, at least initially, conceives 'practical intelligibility' as something determined by rules, affectivity and teleology (Schatzki 2001: 53). In this regard, Schatzki speaks of "the set of actions that compose a practice is organized by three phenomena: understanding how to do things, rules and a teleoaffective structure" (Schatzki, 2005: 471). The entire theoretical framework of the 'practice turn' debate, because it investigates the structures that underpin the practice dimension, has somewhat neglected the activity of practitioners within a context of interaction.

As suggested by Rouse's second definition, practice can instead be viewed as "ways of doing things together". The social dimension is the key to understanding the reasons that induce a group of actors to practise continuously and repetitively, adjusting their activities to ongoing changes and moulding their 'doing' to the situational rationality of the context in which they interact. Practice comprises the dimension of *accountability and reproduction of the practice* within its semantic range. Thus, just a when a rule is obeyed it is applied "for another first time" (Garfinkel 1967: 9), so practitioners, in the reiteration of their 'doing' within a social context of interaction, reproduce practices "for another first time" to generate a dynamic of innovation in repetition (Gherardi 2008b forthcoming).

2.8 Practice-based perspective

In the literature on practice, some authors are distinguished by their use of the expression 'practice-based perspective'. The pathfinder for this 'wagon' has assuredly been the study by Sole and Edmondson (2002), which examines the role of knowledge and learning processes in dispersed teams working on development projects. The article conducts detailed analysis on the role of knowledge situated in diverse geographically dispersed local contexts. The 'practice-based perspective' is defined as the lens able to highlight the role of "knowledge grounded in site-specific work practice" (Sole and Edmondson, 2002: 18). In support of their theoretical contentions, Sole and Edmondson furnish their own definition of the concept of

'practice' as the dimension which "emphasises the collective, situated and provisional nature of knowledge, in contrast to a rational-cognitive view of knowledge. Practice connotes doing and involves awareness and application of both explicit (language, tools, concepts, roles, procedures) and tacit (rules of thumb, embodied capabilities, shared worldviews) elements. Central to the practice perspective is acknowledgement of the social, historical and structural contexts in which actions take place" (Sole and Edmondson 2002: 18). The 'practice perspective' thus locates the dimension of practice in the context in which it is performed. Actors always undertake their actions within a constantly-evolving historical-cultural setting. The dimension of the 'provisional' and of the 'historically situated' are combined in the everyday 'doing' of actors.

As well as by Sole and Edmondson, the label 'practice-based perspective' has been used more recently by Swan, Bresnen, Newell and Robertson (2007), who study innovations in biomedicine. Using a theoretical approach which combines symbolic interactionism and theory of practice, these authors investigate the interactions among the various actors making up research groups for innovation in the biomedical sector. Within this framework: "Practice-based perspectives provide important additional insights into the nature and role of objects in innovation. First, they illuminate the relationship between objects, knowledge, work practices, social groups and social context. [..] Second, where symbolic interactionist views tend to stress the essentially individual nature of knowledge, practice based perspectives make a distinctive contribution by differentiating those forms of knowledge that are acquired individually and those that are acquired collectively" (Swan et al., 2007: 1813). In these authors' theoretical scheme, supported by empirical data, the practice perspective is able to bring to light the complex network of actors that constitute a social context of interaction. Objects perform a fundamental role in this regard by conveying – in their very 'being' – an array of consolidated and socially-shared practices within the community of practitioners. The practice merges the individual and collective dimensions, human and technological elements, describing and

explaining the ways of doing, bodies of knowledge and situations that develop in a given work setting.

2.9 Practice-based approaches

A final label on the broad bandwagon of practice is the expression 'practice-based approach'. The author who has 'pioneered' this part of the caravan is Carlile (2002), whose theoretical and empirical research is based on what he himself calls a "practice-based research approach". Every organizational context should be studied by adopting a "pragmatic view" able to explore the dimension of knowledge "localized, embedded and invested in practice" (Carlile, 2002: 445). Knowledge is articulated in the practice of individuals, in relations among actors, technologies, methods and rules. To quote Carlile: "in a practice-based research approach, it is crucial to be able to observe what people do, what their work is like, and what effort it takes to problem solve their respective combinations of objects and ends" (Carlile 2002: 447). The purpose of Carlile's theoretical scheme is "observing objects and ends in practice" (2002: 446). Knowledge is structured in practice in its relation to 'objects' – the artifacts with which practitioners interact in their everyday work – and 'ends' – the products of the creation and manipulation of those objects by the actors. The practical approach enables exploration of how individuals solve their problems, that is, how they construct their competence in practice. Practice is the dimension able to convey the process by which an actor's know-how is built: the 'trial and error' process (Carlile, 2002: 446) whereby which a person's situated practical knowledge is constructed.

As well as Carlile, also Yanow (2004) uses the expression 'practice-based approaches'. But unlike Carlile, Yanow uses the noun 'approach' in the plural, perhaps because in her theoretical framework this serves to indicate the existence of a plurality of "practice-based approaches to the study of organizational learning" (Yanow 2004: 10). The study of practice brings out the specificities of behaviour and meaning in situated contexts. Knowledge can be distinguished into two types:

one definable as 'expert', the other as 'local' (Yanow 2004: 12). The 'expert' dimension comprises the stock of explicit, theory-based, academic, professional or scientifically-based, abstract and generalizable knowledge and techniques. The 'local' dimension instead comprises the complex array of forms of knowledge and ways of doing which are tacit and practice-based, and which derive from experience and interaction in a specific context. Practice therefore affords understanding of the everyday interactions between the 'expert' and 'local' dimensions of people's knowledge. Understanding the practices of individuals enables interpretation of the situated learning processes that take place in organizations.

2.10 Practice as methodology

The bandwagon of studies on practice is still expanding, but a change is taking place in the debate. Alongside the growth of empirical studies on practice, in recent years numerous authors have begun to reflect on the 'weaknesses' of the ongoing debate, and on the methodologies best suited to the study of 'doing' in situation.

One of the first studies to discuss the methodologies to use in the study of 'practice' is Fox (2006). Through comparison with ethnomethodology, Fox conducts a systematic critique on the practice-based debate, arguing (2006: 440) that there are four main points of similarity/difference between the two theoretical perspectives:

1. "common ground in terms of an ethnographic approach but differences in the analytical focus within the ethnography;

2. common ground in the focus on practice but differences in regard to the treatment of practical action;

3. common ground in the term of situated practices but differences in relation to how one may generalise from situated case studies;

4. common ground in term of seeing learning-in-practice, but differences concerning the temporal nature of practice and its accomplishment"

Fox (2006: 442) reaches the paradoxical conclusion that "practices are almost always more interesting and varied than the theories attempting to 'explain' them".

It is indubitable that PBS have reprised the ethnomethodological tradition, even when they do not explicitly acknowledge their sources or seem unaware that they are part of a consolidated strand of sociological analysis. Like ethnomethodology, PBS have been criticised for neglecting the theme of power.

For example, Marshall and Rollinson (2004: 74) write: "it's necessary to move beyond the confines of practice-based approaches to knowledge and interrogate a range of other accounts which are more explicit in their treatment of power and knowledge". In light of empirical data gathered by an ethnographic study on inter-organizational collaboration in the telecommunications sector, Marshall and Rollinson conduct broad analysis on the possible connections between practice-based studies and the other theories investigating power in organizations.

Yanow (2006: 1744) has contributed to this new 'season' of critical reflection by interrogating the methodologies used for "practice-based theorizing". Over the past thirty to forty years, organization studies have divided into two categories: so-called 'practice-based-driven theorizing', and 'theory-driven theorizing'. Whilst the former highlights the experiences of people as they work, the latter emphasises the theories used by social researchers to describe their fields of research. When the dimension of situated 'doing' by people is studied, practice-based theorizing must necessarily adopt a methodology that supports this specific research interest. Thus ethnography is the key methodology with which to observe social and situated practices and simultaneously to participate in them. Yanow refers to the theoretical work of Orr (1996) to emphasise the role – often overlooked by organization studies – of the notions of 'space' and 'place' as keys to understanding in practice-based theorizing (Yanow 2006: 17746).

Petit and Huault (2008), in a review of PBS research methodologies, have recently pointed out the frequent lack of consistency between the epistemological position and methodological choices, the frequent reification of the entities and objects in the empirical field, and the absence of real participation by researchers in organizational life. Knowledge thus risks being removed from its social dimension and represented as an 'objective' element. Petit and Huault criticise the positivism still apparent in

many organization studies and argue that when studying knowing-in-practice, one must necessarily prefer methodologies such as action research, ethnography, and storytelling.

3. Good reasons for joining the bandwagon

It often happens in scientific debate that a term becomes dominant in a certain period and opens the way for a body of research, but is then depleted in meaning as it enters into common usage. This is probably the fate that awaits the label PBS when it becomes one of many buzzwords that convey a fashion in organization studies. The factors which at present propel the PBS bandwagon can be summarized in ten good reasons:

1. **epistemology**. Expressed in the form of the epistemology of practice versus the epistemology of possession, or in that of the practice turn, the basic aim of PBS is to join the so-called 'pragmatic' sociologies which conduct ecological analysis of modes of action and coordination. In light of the distinction between theories of action and theories of praxis (Cohen, 1996), we may say that whilst the former privilege the intentionality of actors, from which derives meaningful action (in the tradition of Weber and Parsons), the latter "locate the source of significant patterns in the way conduct is enacted, performed or produced" (in the tradition of Dewey, Mead, Garfinkel and Giddens). In other words, a good reason for carrying PBS forward is that this will continue performative theory and epistemology.

2. **a non rational-cognitive view of knowledge**. Through PBS the conception of what constitutes knowledge, how it is produced and conserved, becomes a theme for empirical research besides one of theoretical definition. Central to the practice perspective is acknowledgement of the social, historical and structural contexts in which knowledge is manufactured. A good reason behind PBS is to investigate empirically how contextual elements shape knowledge and how

competence is built around a contingent logic of action. Practical knowledge is a form of competent reasoning and doing.

3. **real doings versus plans**. Continuing the pioneering work of Lucy Suchman (1987) on the relationship between ex-ante planning and the implementation of plans in courses of action, PBS are able to carry forward the theme of what resources serve situated action (just as plans – or rules – are resources for action, and not its presuppositions). The tradition of ethnomethodology is continued through the empirical study of specific fields of action and their situated logics.

4. **locus of learning, working and innovating**. One of the main good reasons to study practices from an 'objective' point of view, i.e. exogenous to the actors and their definitions of situations, is given by consideration of practices as containers in which learning, working and innovating simply 'happen' and are intertwined.

5. **sensible knowledge and the knowing body**. In moving away from a cognitive view of knowledge, the mind/body divide loses strength. The body, and through it sensible knowledge, may become central to the acquisition and transmission of practical knowledge, the formation of a professional vision, and the sharing of aesthetic judgments that sustain and reproduce working practices. The theme of tacit knowledge can be addressed in all its aspects as personal, and collective knowledge, and aesthetics.

6. **materiality**. Within a performative and relational epistemology (Emirbayer, 1997), Objects, artifacts, technologies acquire meaning and agency only in a context of action and therefore in relation to the human actors that interact with them. Whether these be mediators of action as in activity theory, or instead resources for action and interaction as in actor-network theory or structuration theory, the materiality of the social world (and the sociality of the material world) becomes a crucial theme for PBS. The materiality of practices is crucial, both pragmatically for description of the physical and instrumental world, and theoretically for compilation of a vocabulary that puts an end to the primacy of

the human (the animate, the active) over the non-human (the inanimate, the passive).

7. **knowing as an activity**. The shift from knowledge as a substance or object to knowing as a process has opened the way for further conceptualization of knowledge as not only emergent from practices but it itself a practice, that is, a situated activity which creates linkages in action. The resources activated and stabilized in and through practice are of various kinds: bodies, objects, technologies, rules, vocabularies, institutions, and so on. Practising becomes a knowledgeable activity, a knowing-in-practice.

8. **coordination**. If practice is viewed as the outcome of the institutionalization and stabilization of a certain ordering of heterogeneous elements, then coordination can be conceived as intrinsic to action rather than external to it. The privileged unit of analysis for PBS is therefore the situation, because it makes it possible to show how action is subject to pragmatic constraints, present in the situation, which orient the coordination.

9. **structuring action (micro/macro divide)**. Practice as structuring action seamlessly connects the person to the public space via intermediate arrangements and devices like communities, organizations and institutions. Social practices are interconnected, and it is this connectivity of the social that makes it possible to resolve the individual/collective, action/structure, micro/macro dichotomies. A good reason for supporting PBS is that they enable the study of social phenomena without dividing them into compartments, but on the contrary investigating the micro foundations of the macro phenomena, and vice versa the presence of the macro in the micro.

10. **methodology** for recurrent patterns of action and for contingent logic. From the nine reasons just outlined it should be clear that as a whole, and through their internal contradictions, PBS constitute a research programme that reverses the assumptions of the rational analysis of organizations, and by proposing a different epistemology and specific units of analysis, also induce reflection on the methods and techniques for empirical research on practice.

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LABEL	AUTHOR	Q
CoP & PoC	• LAVE J. & WENGER E. (1991) • Gherardi, Nicolini and Odella (1998)	*community of practice as a "set of* *over time and in relation with othe* *practice" (Lave and Wenger 1991: 9* *"Our emphasis is hence on the term* *knowledge, activity, and social relat* *common activity provides the med* *linguistic act of generating a 'sense* *power struggles between those who l* *and Odella, 1998: 278).*
PRACTICE-BASED STANDPOINT	• BROWN J. S. & DUGUID P. (1991)	*"From this **Practice-based standpoint**, w* *innovating"* (Brown e Duguid 1991: 41).
WORK-BASED LEARNING and PRACTICE-BASED LEARNING	• RAELIN J. A. (1997, 2007)	*"This approach recognizes that practition* *between explicit and tacit knowledge and* *subscribes to a form of knowing that is con* *understanding of the context but simultaneo* *which organizational activity is embedded"*
PRACTICE "AS DOING"	• COOK S. D. N. & BROWN J. S. (1999) • PICKERING A. (1990, 1992) • WHITTINGTON R. (1996)	*"**Practice** implies **doing**, intuitively, it refer* *our purposes, then, we intend the term* *individuals and groups in doing their 'real* *group context. In this sense, we wish to d* *'practice', we refer to action informed by m* Brown 1999).
PRACTICE LENS and PRACTICE-ORIENTED RESEARCH	• ORLIKOWSKI W. J. (2000)	*"..A **practice lens** to examine how people* *practices, enact structures which shape thei* *the use of technology as a process of enact* *role of social practices in the ongoing* (Orlikowski, 2000: 404).
KNOWING IN PRACTICE	• GHERARDI S. (2000) • ORLIKOWSKI W. J. (2002)	*"**Practice** is the figure of discourse that all* *to be articulated as historical processes, ma*

		*"..A perspective on **knowing in practice** v* *knowing how to get things done in comp* *knowing is not a static embedded capabilit* *social accomplishment, constituted and r* (Orlikowski 2002: 249).
PRACTICE TURN	• SCHATZKI T. R., KNORR CETINA K., VON SAVIGNY E. (EDS.) (2001)	*"**Practice Theorists** are making decisive c* *issues. In Social Theory practice approache* *field of embodied, materially interwov* *understandings"* (Schatzki et 2001: 3).
PRACTICE-BASED PERSPECTIVE	• SOLE D., EDMONDSON A. (2002)	*"A **Practice-based perspective** emphasize* *knowledge, in contrast to a rational-cogn* *involves awareness and application of both* *and tacit (rules of thumb, embodied cap* *practice perspective is acknowledgement o* *actions take place. Contextual elements are* *acquire knowledge and competence"* (Sole a
PRACTICE-BASED APPROACHES	• CARLILE P. R. (2002)	*"In a **Practice-based research approach**, i* *their work is like, and what effort it takes t* *and ends"* (Carlile 2002: 447).
PRACTICE AS METHODOLOGY	• FOX S. (2006) • MARSHALL N. & ROLLINSON J. (2004) • YANOW D. (2006) • PETIT S. C. & HUAULT I. (2008)	*"Practices are almost always more interest* *them"* (Fox 2006: 442). *"It's necessary to move beyond **the conf*** *interrogate a range of other accounts wh* *knowledge"* (Marshall and Rollinson 2004: