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Le, J.K. and Bednarek, Rebecca (2016) Towards a social practice theory of paradox. *Academy of Management Proceedings* , ISSN 0065-0668.

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# TOWARDS A SOCIAL PRACTICE THEORY OF PARADOX

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## ABSTRACT

This paper combines the paradox and practices perspectives by outlining a practice-theoretical approach to studying paradox, articulating key principles that define its research agenda. We describe each theoretical principle and explain its implications for how we understand paradox. Herein we review, integrate and develop a foundation for practice-based studies of paradox.

## FRAMING

There is a shared basis between paradox and practices perspectives. Indeed, these perspectives have already been combined fruitfully (cf. Clegg et al., 2002; Jarzabkowski & Lê, *forthcoming*; Jarzabkowski, Smets, Bednarek, Burke & Spee, 2013). In this paper we further develop this ‘practice turn’ (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina & Savigny, 2001) in paradox studies by outlining the practice-theoretical approach to studying paradox, articulating main principles that define its research agenda (Lê & Bednarek, *forthcoming*). Herein we review, integrate and develop a foundation for practice-based studies of paradox.

Paradoxes are the interdepended yet contradictory elements that define much organizational life (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Scholars are turning to practice theory as one way of understanding paradox (cf. Jarzabkowski & Lê, *forthcoming*; also Abdallah, Denis & Langley, 2011; Jarzabkowski, Lê & Van de Ven, 2013; Jay, 2013). Practice theory (e.g. Feldman and Orlowski, 2011; Jarzabkowski et al, 2007; Niccolini, 2013) offers a complementary perspective to paradox theory. Indeed, practice-based studies of paradox have improved understanding of the micro-dynamics of paradox and illuminated the socially constructed and negotiated nature of paradox. According to this view, paradoxes as permeating and enacted through the everyday, even mundane, work of individuals (Lê & Bednarek, *forthcoming*; Chia and MacKay, 2007; Clegg et al., 2002; Jarzabkowski & Lê, *forthcoming*).

Practice theory explains phenomenon in the social realm based on practices or routinized behaviour (Reckwitz, 2002), including what people typically say and do (Schatzki, 2002). While practice theory is made up of a milieu of different theoretical approaches, these share a number of general commonalities or shared principles (Feldman and Orlowski, 2011; Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2001; Seidl and Whittington, 2014). Focusing on these central principles, we suggest that a practice-theoretical approach to studying paradox entails four things (Lê & Bednarek, *forthcoming*). First, a practice view understands paradoxes and responses to paradoxes to be **socially constructed**, manifesting within organised activities (Schatzki, 2001; Vaara and Whittington, 2012). Second, it submits that paradoxes and responses to paradoxes are constructed within **everyday activities and practices** (Schatzki, 2012). Third, it suggests that

these localized activities and practices are **consequential** for and constitutive of broader dynamics, including the structural conditions of paradoxes (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011; Giddens, 1984; Vaara and Whittington, 2012). Fourth, it supports a **relational** view in which multiple paradoxes and their poles are seen as interdependent and mutually constitutive (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011; Nicolini, 2013; Schatzki, 2002). We now explain each of these principles, outline the implications for the study of paradox, and describe an exemplar study incorporating the principle into its design.

## Social Construction

Social construction lies at the heart of practice theory to the extent that it is often referred to as social practice theory (Reckwitz, 2002). The concept of social construction posits that individuals do not derive meaning in isolation, but rather derive meaning as actors embedded within specific social contexts and in interaction with other human beings. A socially constructed view of the world (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) is foundational to much organizational research, however practice theory is unique in situating the social in the realm of practice. By studying a specific social practice or routinized behaviour (Reckwitz, 2002), practice theorists acknowledge that the way bodily and mental activities, objects, knowledge, know-how, emotions and motivations come together, is always embedded in the collective activities of multiple actors (Schatzki, 2012). These practices are routinized to the extent that there are patterns (Reckwitz, 2002). It is this routinized social enactment which makes the practice understandable to the person(s) enacting them and the person(s) observing them (Schatzki, 2002; Reckwitz, 2002), allowing people to understand, for example, the purpose of a chair (Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2014), the structure of a hiring routine (Feldman & Pentland, 2003), and the meaning of a joke (Jarzabkowski & Lê, *forthcoming*).

## Micro-Activities

The primary focus of practice theory is the everyday actions as they unfold in the moment to constitute organizations (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011; Nicolini, 2013; Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2002, 2005), including the paradoxes that beset them (Clegg et al., 2002). If practices are “organized sets of doings and sayings” (Schatzki, 2002) then the study of practices involves a focus on these localized actions. In this sense social life is understood as a dynamic unfolding production that emerges through repeated everyday actions (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). Organizational scholars drawing from a practice perspective have therefore variably showing the importance – and indeed constitutive potential – of discursive (e.g., Balogun et al., 2014; Samra-Fredericks, 2003), material (e.g., Kaplan, 2011; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008) and embodied (e.g., Balogun, Best & Lê, 2015; Jarzabkowski, Burke & Spee, 2015) activities. The practice turn is therefore micro-oriented, contending that social order arises from – in this case are instituted in or constituted by – local phenomena (Schatzki, 2005). As such, our understanding of the social realm and its construction is therefore centred on micro-activities within localized settings.

## Consequentiality

Micro-practices constitute the basis of organizing and are therefore impactful at a wider organizational and institutional level (Seidl & Whittington, 2014; Suddaby, Seidl & Lê, 2013). Thus, the ripples cast into an organization by a single mundane practice or a bundle of practices may have far-reaching effects across an organization and beyond organizational sites. This point is central in explaining the study of *social* practices and differentiating it from the study of individual activities. For example, hiring routines have been shown to be sources of stability and change in organizations (Feldman & Pentland, 2003) and strategic plans to be powerful actors in the strategy formulation process (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011; Vaara, Sorsa & Pälli, 2010). The shared understanding or knowhow associated with the activities of doing particular work that is a central focus for a practice theoretical study can connect the particular individual enactment in one instance to many others (Schatzki, 2002). While practice theory begins with a focus on the local activities, it spans outwards too. A practice perspective thus offers a framework to connect the “here-and-now” of practices with the “elsewhere-and-then” (Nicolini, 2009: 1392; also Miettinen et al., 2009). This ‘zooming in’ and ‘zooming out’ (Nicolini, 2013) offers the potential for significant contributions to paradox.

## **Relationality**

Practice theory is a relational perspective which sees phenomena as mutually constitutive (Feldman and Orlowski, 2011). Relationality is a perspective that views phenomena, such as a particular practices or paradoxes, as relative to each other (Cooper, 2005; also see: Schatzki, 2002; Chia & Holt, 2009; Clegg et al., 2002). Thus, we describe relationality as entailing two things. First, any practice is part of a wider nexus of doings and sayings (Schatzki, 2002), and exploring the relationality formed in this nexus is central to understanding the consequentiality of local practices (see Principle 3). For instance, Jarzabkowski, Bednarek and Spee (2015) show that reinsurance trading is an entanglement of practices across multiple sites. Second, understanding these rationalities is important as phenomena co-constitute each other within this “between-ness”. A famous example in practice theory is the relationship between structure and agency (Giddens, 1989). Relationality suggests that such relationships dominate our work. Consequently, “no phenomena can be taken to be independent of other phenomena” (Feldman & Orlowski, 2011: 1242). This leads us to more complex frameworks and studies that focus on interconnections and mutual constitution in our explanations.

## **SUMMARY**

Practice-based studies of paradoxes have primarily emphasized one or a few of these elements (). For instance, Jarzabkowski & Lê (*forthcoming*), while being the paper perhaps most explicitly founded in practice theory, primarily focuses on addressing the entangled construction of a paradox and the organizational response to it via micro-instances of humour, with the other two principles being more implicit. By contrast, Bednarek et al. (*forthcoming*) do not fully address the construction of the paradox itself (rather the construction of transcendence) and take the consequentiality of the rhetorical practices as given rather than the focus. It is likely that other studies will maintain a focus in building their contribution, yet we argue that maintaining all four principles within a study remains important and that much could be gained from making them explicit foundations that guide studies of paradox. What is clear is that to take the practice perspective seriously in the study of paradox involves more than studying practices in isolation

(Jarzabkowski, Kaplan, Seidl & Whittington, *forthcoming*) or simply focusing on micro activities (Reckwitz, 2002; Seidl & Whittington, 2014). In this regard we believe our principles can guide future scholars interested in such an endeavour and push their frameworks further by situating their studies explicitly in this theoretical domain (see also Lê & Bednarek, *forthcoming*).

## CONCLUSION

In this paper we advanced the practice turn (Schatzki et al. 2001) in paradox studies. Specifically, we highlight four principles that define the practice turn in paradox theory. Therein we hope to emphasize the power of the practice turn in paradox theory and the many exciting areas by which the perspective has advanced and can continue to advance paradox scholarship.

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