A Posthumanist Epistemology of Practice

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Abstract

This chapter illustrates the contribution of practice epistemology to the study of management and organization. It argues that practice theories are particularly suited to answer a simple question: What do managers "do" when they manage? The nature of managerial work is still an open question, and a posthumanist practice theory addresses it by blurring the boundaries between epistemology and ontology. In other words, the researcher's epistemic practices (and ethics) shape the object of knowledge. A practice epistemology focuses on managerial work as a collective knowledgeable doing, framing managing in relation to socio-materiality and agency achieved within the *agencement* of practice elements. The chapter illustrates the applications of a humanist and posthumanist practice epistemology in order to show the respective implications on methodology. The challenge of a posthumanist epistemology for future research is seen in terms of inventing postqualitative methods based on the concept of entanglement of human and more-than-human elements.

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Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to introduce a practice epistemology and to illustrate the contribution that a practice approach offers to management and organization studies (MOS). There is a specific theme in MOS on which a practice epistemology contributes a distinctive interpretation: What do managers "do" when they manage? This simple question implies that management practices are as opaque to managers as they are to researchers, and for this reason the description and reflection on the everydayness of practices of managing are a potential means to empower practitioners.

It has been already 20 years since MOS rediscovered practice theories, and now contemporary practice theorists are reinterpreting the concept of practice rather than simply returning to classical practice theories. The journal *Organization* has been a precursor of the turn to practice, since it published, in 2000, a special issue on "*Practice-based theorizing on Learning and Knowing in Organizations,*" (Gherardi 2000) in which several practice theories are engaged in a conversation about their commonalities in theorizing practice, notwithstanding their different vocabulary and epistemology. Since then, the literature has grown considerably, and several specialized books (Gherardi 2019; Nicolini 2012; Shove et al. 2012) and literature reviews (Erden et al. 2014; Guzman 2013; Jarzabkowski and Spee 2009; Vaara and Whittington 2012) are readily available.

At the beginning, it was important to create a bandwagon effect to consolidate what were called "practice-based studies," and thus internal differences were downplayed. However, now, distinctions can be made, and differences may be appreciated. One relevant line of difference can be drawn between humanist and posthumanist practice approaches.

Humanist approaches start from human beings as the main (or only) source of agency and methodologically study "humans and their practices" positioning the material world in relation to, but outside, practice. The so-called second wave of practice theorists (Bourdieu, Foucault, Garfinkel, Giddens, and Schatzki) are still part of a humanist paradigm. Posthumanism (Braidotti 2013) is concerned with overcoming the limits of how our humanness has been theorized in dualist categories that privilege one term over the other (nature/culture, subject/object, mind/body, masculinity/femininity, and so on). A posthumanist practice theory assumes a relational epistemology, thus joining contemporary debates on a family of post-epistemologies – new feminist materialisms, relational sociologies, affect theory, and postqualitative methodologies – that blur the boundaries between ontology and epistemology. Following the linguistic turn, once we assume that the nature of objects (ontology) is done through linguistic and discursive practices, then epistemic

practices enact the object of study. The terms onto-epistemology and ethico-onto-epistemology (Barad 2007) signal an approach in which the object of knowledge takes form from epistemic practices, and ethics contribute to form it.

In this chapter, I introduce the concept of the epistemology of practice as it made its appearance in 1999 in the work by Cook and Brown, and which was further elaborated in the concept of knowing-in-practice. Following this first section, the chapter discusses management as a collective knowledgeable doing and later focuses on the sociomateriality and agency of managing. The chapter continues with an illustration of different applications of practice epistemology, both within a humanist and a posthumanist approach, and concludes by discussing the challenges that a posthumanist practice epistemology poses to future research.

The Epistemology of Practice

The categorization of what constitutes "managerial work" has always been a controversial topic, and assuming a historical perspective it is possible to see how, since the 1950s, there have been four broad research approaches to understanding managerial work that differ substantially in both analytical subjects and methodological orientation: "essence of management"; "categorisation of behaviours"; "power; conflict and control"; and "meaningful ordinary activity" (Korica et al. 2017). Despite the attention to and the centrality of the discourse on managerial work, the empirical practices of managerial work have too frequently been analyzed via the same set of dominant categories, and thus ordinary managerial activities, in their processual, material, relational, and historical dimensions, have often been overlooked. Practice-based studies, on the contrary, are theoretically well positioned to focus on the everydayness and creativity of managerial work and are positioned "as promising means of addressing some of the short-comings of existing approaches, aimed at facilitating the making of novel connections" (Korica et al. 2017, p. 152). Therefore, managerial work may be framed as a practiced craft whose knowledge is developed and kept within situated practices of managing.

Within MOS, interest for studying everyday practices originated in a pervasive dissatisfaction with abstract descriptions and prescriptions of work and a need to know how work "really" takes place. Working practices were therefore individuated as the realm of everyday life. There was a dual motivation: (i) to study real activities as they are being performed, and (ii) to pin down slippery knowledge somehow circulating within a community of practitioners and located within a certain way of practicing.

The epistemology of practice made its appearance in MOS as the "other" to an epistemology of possession. While an epistemology of possession treats knowledge as something an individual (or an organization) has, an epistemology of practice stresses that not all of what is known is captured by this understanding of knowledge, and there is more epistemic work being done in what we know how to do that cannot be accounted for in terms of the knowledge possessed. Thus, knowledge and

knowing are interrelated, and knowing and doing are not temporally separated. Cook and Brown (1999, p. 382) give a telling example:

> To say, for example, "Robert is fixing cars" points not only to knowledge he possesses but also to things he is doing. To give an account of what Robert knows, we claim, calls for an understanding of the epistemic work done, which needs to include both the knowledge he possesses and the actions he carries out.

In this example, we can notice how the epistemology of possession (knowledge) does not contradict an epistemology of practice (knowing), and both knowledge and knowing constitute what is called epistemic work: Both are "done" while "fixing cars." The knowledge is used in action and the knowing as part of action form what Cook and Brown (1999, p. 383) call a *generative dance*: "the source of *new* knowledge and knowing lies in the use of knowledge as a tool of knowing within situated interaction in the social and physical world."

It is worth noting that traditional epistemology has been mainly concerned with knowledge as possession, thus omitting the practical matter of knowing. As Rescher (2003, p. xvii) writes:

> we have not only the (trivial) circumstance that knowledge is required for effective practice, but also the reverse, that practical and pragmatic considerations are crucially at work in the way in which human knowledge comes to be secured.

Hence, not only knowledge is indispensably useful for practicing, but also knowledge development is itself a practice in which knowledge is constituted and validated.

Epistemology of practice offers a rationale for looking at managerial work as collective and knowledgeable doing. First, it introduces a new conception of knowledge as an activity, rather than as an object (Gherardi 2019). Second, it connects management with the corpus of knowledge that has been socially and historically elaborated and will be further elaborated while being practiced. Here we can appreciate the epistemological move from knowledge as a noun to knowing as a verb, and the displacement of knowledge from the cognitive domain to the domain of performativity. This change from noun to verb entails a process approach to knowing. Moreover, the collective activity of knowing takes place in situated practices, and, in practicing, the social and historical knowledgeability of management as a practice domain is performed.

Along with the shift from knowledge to knowing, an epistemology of practice assumes the shift from management to managing. In moving from the noun to the verb, we also move from issues of ontology (what management *is*) to issues of epistemology (how management is *done*) to issues of onto-epistemology, that is, how the researcher's language and epistemic practices construct management as an object of inquiry. As the term onto-epistemology (Barad 2003) signals the inseparability of ontology from epistemology, the move described here implies that the researcher focuses their attention not only on what managers "do" but also on how

their epistemic apparatuses for noticing what managers "do" become part of the object under study.

To fully understand this change in the nature of knowledge, we can recall the concept of situated knowledge as formulated by Donna Haraway (1988) in feminist studies and by Lucy Suchman (1987) in relation to situated action. The expression "situated knowledge" comes from the feminist critique of knowledge "from nowhere," a critique to what that Donna Haraway (1991, p. 193) calls "ways of being nowhere while claiming to see comprehensively." It is therefore necessary to replace this claim of universal knowledge with "views from somewhere," with a located accountability (Suchman 1994) and with partial, locatable, and critical knowledges. Knowledge always has to do with circumscribed domains, not with transcendence and a subject/object dichotomy. Moreover, one of the reasons for assuming practice as the unit of analysis (instead of structures or agencies) is to overcome the dichotomy between knowing and doing. Therefore, situated knowledge is entangled with situated action.

Lucy Suchman (1987), in her book significantly entitled *Plans and Situated Action*, affirms that plans – as something located in the actor's head, and which directs their behavior – should not be confused with *situated actions*. Before action, plans have only a predictive or organizational purpose; after action, plans serve to justify the actions undertaken. In contrast, to illustrate the distinction between management as a plan and management as a situated action, we can refer to Suchman's example of "canoeing down a river." Before setting off, the canoeist may plan a course for descending the river, but when they reach the rapids, they set the plan aside and resort to all their skills to act in context and succeed in the respective task. Hence a plan is an ingredient of practical action, in the sense that it is an artifact that helps one to reason on the action, but it is not a mechanism generative of the action.

Therefore, framing managing as situated action means considering the organization of the action as emerging *in situ* from the dynamic of interactions. Central to the paradigm of situated action is a revised conception of context as no longer a container of action but a situation in which the interests of the actors involved and the opportunities in the environment meet and are reciprocally defined. Therefore, of central importance in studying managing are interactions with others, situated communication, the construction of situations, the relationship with the physical environment and the objects in it, and especially the idea that these elements are "held together" and express a contingent, practical logic embedded in the situation.

A field of inquiry that has contributed significantly to the debate on the logic of practice (Lave and Gomes 2019) is education studies. It has provided evidence that abstract knowledge is not transferable to the real world, and that there is a substantial difference between knowing in everyday situations and decontextualized knowing. This means that abstract knowledge acquired through management education is by nature different from managerial knowing-in-practice.

The challenge posed by the concept of situated knowledge to MOS is illustrated in the exemplary articles by Sandberg and Tsoukas (2011) and Vaara and Whittington (2012). According to the former, management theories are not relevant

to practice since they are formulated within the framework of scientific rationality, which is profoundly different from practical (i.e., situated) rationality. The main point of difference is, unlike the logic of science, the logic of practice is based on the fact that the primordial mode of human engagement with a practice is being-in-the-world, where the epistemological subject/object separation is blurred. These authors' argument is driven by a strong motivation to rediscover practice theories and thus move away from traditional epistemology. The latter article, by Vaara and Whittington (2012), is representative of the literature on strategy-as-practice but also critiques it by arguing that it has not realized its full potential. Initially focused on practices at top management level, this literature is yet to recognize that its strength lies in the practice perspective, especially through its illustration of how practices are embedded in broader societal or macroinstitutional contexts.

Examined through the lens of situated knowing, management practices are described in relation to situated actions, situated knowledges, and situated embodiment, whereby managers are not the central source from which knowledgeable doings come, but rather, they are sociomaterially situated, with their embodiment differentially marked by gender, race, class, age, sexual orientation, and all other possible power signifiers. The collapse of boundaries between the human and the more-than-human, the animate and the inanimate, proposes a shift from social to ecological epistemology – according to Hughes and Lury (2013) – to account for how we live in relation to a more- and other-than-human world. An ecological epistemology is necessarily process oriented, focused on how things change rather than how things are, so it requires a nonessentialist understanding of the identity of things, in which it is relations between an entity and its environment that are constitutive of what something is and what it can be.

In this section, in order to introduce what is specific about the onto-epistemology of practice, a conception of managerial work as practiced craft, based on situated knowledge, situated action, and situated embodiment, is mobilized. This emphasizes how a practice ecological epistemology not only renders problematic the dualist conceptions of subject/object, nature/culture, human/nonhuman, and life/nonlife, but also frames theoretically the relationship between management, sustainability, and inclusivity as a practice phenomenon. In other words, management practices are not only concerned with what managers "do," but also with the consequences of their "doings," and thus responsible managing is inscribed within situated practices of responsibility, sustainability, and ethics (Price et al. 2020). The following section focuses on the fact that managing, as a collective knowledgeable doing, is accomplished in a material world, with artifacts and technologies being regarded as sociomaterial.

The Sociomateriality of Managing

The study of managing as an ongoing practical accomplishment entails the idea that managers are not the only nor the main source of meaning, action, or knowledge. Rather, managers too are performed within materially heterogeneous practices,

including documents, devices, people, discourses, buildings, and money. Thus, "managers" and "organizations" are the effects of organizing practices rather than its source. This shift from entities that have agency to relations that perform entities is at the core of any practice theory as the principle of a relational thinking (Østerlund and Carlile 2005, p. 92) that "is neither a theory nor a method in itself, but rather, a loosely structured framework or scaffold around which various practice theories and methods are being developed."

For illustrating how the collapse of the divide between humans and nonhumans, material and discursive, has consequences for a relational epistemology of practice, let us refer to the principle of symmetry between humans and nonhumans, which has its roots in Actor-Network Theory and its relational epistemology (Law 1992). A relational epistemology, namely one that prioritizes the ever-evolving "relations" over "entities," is present (albeit in different nuances) in most of the current posthumanist conversations that seek to de-center the human subject and in the new (feminist) materialisms that question the notion of agency.

While many kinds of distinctions can be drawn within the family of new materialisms, they all have in common a "turn to matter" and a focus on social production rather than social construction. While social construction focuses on the role of language in the interpretation and shaping of phenomena, social production focuses on their material production. The term "new" in new materialisms is intended to differentiate these perspectives from the "old" historical materialisms, rejecting the earlier materialism's deterministic explanations of social action. According to Fox and Alldred (2017, pp. 2–3), among the radical claims of new materialist theorists – are the propositions that: (i) the material world and its contents are not fixed, stable entities, but relational, uneven processes in constant flux; (ii) "nature" and "culture" should not to be treated as distinct realms but as parts of a continuum of materiality; and (iii) a capacity for "agency," i.e., the actions that produce the social world, extend, beyond human actors, to the nonhuman and inanimate. Posthumanist practice theory takes part in the ongoing conversation among Actor-Network Theory, Affect theory, performativity, and sociomateriality.

Sociomateriality is a key research topic in MOS, following in the footsteps of socio-technical literature, which has established an interest in connecting the social with the technological since the 1970s. The concept of sociomateriality also has a long history in the study of working practices connected to information systems (Cecez-Kecmanovic et al. 2014) and in education studies (Fenwick et al. 2015). Within these fields of research, "the material" in sociomateriality is mainly technological but not only. In new feminist materialisms, for instance, "the material" and the "vibrant matter" are connected to the body, embodiment, and intercorporeality (Bennett 2010). The two ways to grasp sociomateriality (via technology and, respectively, corporeality) do not contradict each other: It is important to consider both at the same time, in their relationality and in the intimacy that many technologies establish with the interior of all bodies and their functioning. The physical "matter" of the body, its material-discursive production, its sensible knowing, and its choreography of becoming are all instances of embodiment as irreducibly material, social, and emplaced in practices.

Embodiment is in fact a key concept in practice theories. Reich and Hager (2014) consider it one of the six threads of the literature on practice – the others being: knowing-in-practice, sociomateriality of practices, relationality, historical and social shaping of practices, and the emergent nature of practices.

The term "sociomateriality" was introduced into organization studies by (Orlikowski 2007, 2010) in reference to the feminist onto-epistemology of Barad (2003), and by Orlikowski and Scott (Orlikowski and Scott 2008; Scott and Orlikowski 2014). These authors use the concepts of "entanglement" and "generative entanglement" and adopt a relational ontology akin to the relational materialism discussed by Law (1992) and the performativity assumed by Actor-Network Theory. These concepts indicate that, within managing, meaning, and matter, the social and the technological are inseparable and do not have inherently determinate boundaries and properties. They are constituted as relational effects performed in a texture of situated managing practices.

Sociomateriality can be understood in different ways. Based on a literature review of the 140 journal articles where sociomateriality has been discussed since 2007, Jones (2014) distinguishes between strong and weak sociomateriality. Strong sociomateriality implies materiality, inseparability, relationality, performativity, and practices – in other words, all aspects discussed by Orlikowski (2010). In contrast, weak sociomateriality takes, selectively, only some of those concepts.

MOS literature also distinguishes between sociomateriality as entanglement of the social and the material, on the one hand, and materiality as imbricated in human practices, on the other hand. The metaphor of imbrication, as in the overlapping of tiles (Leonardi 2013), is based on a substantialist ontology whereby imbrication of the social and the material is used to treat a technological artifact's materiality as something that exists apart from the people who create and use it. This contrasts with the concept of "entanglement," where the separation between subject and object disappears.

The theme of materiality is, in effect, the watershed between two different strands of practice theory – namely, between human-centered theories and posthumanist perspectives. For the former, materiality is something that mediates human activities and is external to practice, whereas for the other it is viewed as constitutive of practice, thus overcoming the dualism between the social and the material. According to Barad (2007), to be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. This author defines her epistemological position as agential realism:

> . . .as an epistemological-ontological-ethical framework that provides an understanding of the role of human and nonhuman, material and discursive, and natural and cultural factors in scientific and other social-material practices, thereby moving such considerations beyond the well-worn debates that pit constructivism against realism, agency against structure, and idealism against materialism. (Barad 2007, p. 26)

Hence, reality is defined as things-in-phenomena and not as things-in-themselves. In fact, "phenomena" are considered as the primary ontological units, recalling Bohr's definition of phenomena as observations under specific circumstances that include an account of the whole experimental arrangement. In the absence of a given apparatus, there is no unambiguous way to differentiate between the object and the agencies of observation: An apparatus must be introduced to resolve the ambiguity, but then the apparatus must be understood as part of what is being described.

Both Haraway and Barad's works are reflections on epistemic practices, and both talk of a way of knowing in which the knower is not external or preexisting to the world; rather, the knower and "things" do not preexist their interactions but emerge through, and as part of, their material-discursive intrarelating. Also, the contemporary debate on new materialisms reminds us that materiality is always more than matter: It is an excessive energy, a vitality, and a relationality that makes matter active in what happens within a practice (Coole and Frost, 2010). These assumptions allow us to reformulate the notion of agency and to transcend the duality of social versus material agency, human versus more-than-human agency, and material versus discursive agency.

An illustration of empirical research engaged with sociomateriality is Tuana's (2008, p. 188) case study of Hurricane Katrina, which describes the "urgency of embracing an ontology that *rematerializes the social and takes seriously the agency of the natural*" (emphasis in the original). This natural disaster made New Orleans visible as a complex material-semiotic site. Historically, in order to create usable land, water was pumped out of the area, which in turn caused the ground to sink even lower. The sediments added by the Mississippi River created areas of "natural levees" that transformed the local geology and hydrology. This example shows how local geology and hydrology emerge from complex social vectors: Human consumption and re-use practices resulted in altered flora habitats, which in turn altered human interests. Material agency, in its heterogeneous forms, interacted in complex ways. In all these instances, agency was not an antecedent to but emerged from the situated interactions. The viscous porosity between human and nonhumans also occurred at deeper levels into the urban habitat of New Orleans: The hurricane left the city flooded in a "toxic soup" as water reached toxic waste sites in the so-called "Cancer Alley" corridor, where many types of industry clustered together with support from government policies. Tuana (*ibid*, p. 199) describes the viscous porosity between plastic industries and "my flesh and the flesh of the world," emphasizing that the flesh made visible by Hurricane Katrina was the flesh of the poverty, the racialized world, and the disability that suddenly appeared in the media and had hitherto been prevented or denied. The author interprets this flesh made visible as the materialization of ignorance.

In fact, the epistemic practices of the researchers involved in studying Katrina contributed to produce the phenomenon "Katrina." Tuana (2008, p. 196) advises that:

our epistemic practices must thus be attuned to this manifold agency and emergent interplay, which means that we cannot be epistemically responsible and divide the humanities from the sciences, or the study of culture from the study of nature.

Furthermore, the Katrina phenomenon tells us something about managing and its agency within a texture of past and present practices – and about how, in studying management, epistemic analysis cannot be separated from ethical analysis, since the researchers' theoretical categories are enacted in social practices and are responsible for what they conceal as well as what they reveal.

Managing and Agency

As previously mentioned, a managerial practice (be it a human relation or a risk communication practice, the adoption of a new information system, or a new strategic plan) may be conceived of as a collective knowledgeable doing, whereby "the collective" is made up of entanglements of humans and nonhumans (including more-than-human, more-than-living beings) working together. This section introduces the notions of normativity and *agencement* to describe how all the practice elements hold together in a way that is recognized as belonging to the practice of managing and that is socially sustained (ethically, esthetically, and emotionally) as the appropriate "way of doing things together."

According to Rouse (2007, p. 653), practices are a source of normativity because they are constituted in terms of the mutual accountability of their constituent performances:

> Normativity involves a complex pattern of interrelations among performances through time. Such performances are normative when they are directed toward one another as mutually accountable to common stakes, albeit stakes whose correct formulation is always at issue within the practice.

Normativity is thus an answer to the question of what keeps "a" practice together and/or more practices waved together into a texture of practices. Another way of framing this question is to ask how agency is achieved by a practice, or how a practice becomes performative, given that being a human subject is not a precondition for agency.

The process of *agencement* illustrates how those elements, within a practice or within a texture of practices, connect and acquire agency through their connectedness. Hence, a practice is not viewed as a unit circumscribed by given boundaries and constituted by defined elements but rather as a connection-in-action, that is, as an *agencement* (Gherardi 2016) of elements which achieve agency by being interconnected. *Agencement* is a word currently used in French as a synonym for "arrangement," "fitting," or "fixing," and it has been used as a philosophical term by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) with the meaning of "in connection with." For Deleuze and Guattari, a philosophical concept never operates in isolation but comes to its

sense through the connection with other senses. This meaning of "being in connection with" gives a first good approximation of the term. The problem, however, is its translation into English as "assemblage," which has changed the original meaning. The meaning in use in English is thus different, and there is a tension implied in the respective uses of the term assemblage (as a final state) and *agencement* (as the process of connecting). While the English term assemblage may be used to refer to final or stable states, thus emphasizing "thingness," the French term *agencement* works as an evocation of agency, emergence, and heterogeneity, thus emphasizing process and dynamics.

In empirical research, the concept of *agencement* has been applied in relation to financial markets by Hardie and MacKenzie ([2007], p. 77): a hedge fund

> is a legal entity, and the law of contract attributes agency to it, not to the individuals who comprise it: the trader may speak or type the words, but it is the fund, not him as individual, which makes a deal and takes on a commitment.

An economic actor illustrates well the ambivalent meaning of the term *agencement*, since this individual is "an actor" in the sense of a sociotechnical assemblage and, at the same time, he or she has *agence*, in the process-dynamic sense of agency. Similarly, when we look at a practice, we can see how the sociomaterial relations that tie bodies, artifacts, discourses, technologies, and rules together are performed within it, and how agency emerges as its effect.

Another example of applying the concept of agencement is Callon et al. ([2013]) collection of studies on "marketization" (*agencement marchand)*, which has opened up a wide discussion of this concept. Marketization is the effect of the dynamics of *agencement marchand*, and it is part of a larger process of economization. Beside the web of connections producing marketization, there are other forms of *agencement*, i.e., scientific, technological, political, and organizational. We can also study the failures of *agencement,* the process of its wear and tear, its maintenance, and its alternatives.

If we describe managing as the process of *agencement* of heterogeneous materials, we can say that all the resources necessary for practicing are the elements of what is connected. It is difficult to enumerate all the elements that come in connection within a practice, since a resource for practicing becomes a resource only within an assemblage of relationships. The concept of *agencement* can prove useful for a practice-based study of managing because, in studying a practice, the researcher may empirically follow and describe the process whereby humans, artifacts, rules, technologies, sensible knowledge, legitimacy, discourses, and any other practice resource become connected due to a collective knowledgeable doing. At the same time, any single and situated practice is connected to other practices, and it is the process of *agencement* itself that makes a texture of practices agential.

When studying the process of managing, both materiality and the process of construction matter, since multiple realities may be enacted through different spacings, timings, and actings. The challenge is to produce narratives of *agencements* that capture the materiality, the passions and beliefs, the practices of attraction, and

engagement within these complex nests of associations. The advantage of using the concept of *agencement* in a posthumanist practice theory of managing is in the reformulation of agency as the outcome of the process of establishing associations and material-discursive relationships from which humans and nonhumans emerge, since they (humans and nonhumans) are not a sort of *a priori* with respect to their associations.

We can now inquire into how the entangled elements within an *agencement* either change or persist or, more generally, flow into their becoming, into their being practiced. We have two concepts that may interpret this process: formativeness and affect, which will be discussed further below. But first, it should be noted that one of the main concerns of the study of managing as situated working practices is to discern the situated logic of the *agencement* connecting the inner intra-actions of the elements of these working practices and, on this basis, to prefigure the performance of the practice as an ongoing accomplishment. Knowing-in-practice is a contingent ordering of provisional connections, the effect of the ability of practitioners to find their bearings using the context as a resource and to articulate the matter of the world (objects, artifacts, technologies, and discourses) within a form. In order to see how materiality is embedded in an ongoing project and to investigate the process whereby doing and knowing unite into a form, we can turn to organizational esthetics (Strati 1999), and particularly to Pareyson's (1960) concept of formativeness, which influences the philosophical foundations of materiality.

Formativeness is defined as "a doing" such that, while it does, it invents the "way of doing." Thus, "simultaneously invented in doing is the "way of doing": realization is only achieved by proceeding to the result by trial and error, thus producing works that are forms" (Pareyson 1960, vi). Forming also implies a relationship with materiality, i.e., forming a material, and the resulting work is nothing other than formed material. In the process of the formation of matter, the work also acts as a former, i.e., creator of forms, even before it exists as formed, i.e., created form. Formativeness illustrates how, in knowing-in-practice, practitioners develop and invent new ways of establishing connections, and in this process, the *agencement* of the practice elements is transformed, reconnected, or just dis-connected: They are always in flux. When the researcher is interested in understanding the becoming of managing, the term "formativeness" can be used to describe how the object in the process of managing is formed and how, in its forming, the necessary knowledge is invented and deployed.

Moreover, the concept of affect can be used to describe the force in motion that is mobilized to form the object. All matter within an *agencement*, be it human and nonhuman, is vital and has the capacity to affect and be affected (Massumi 2017). Therefore, how an *agencement*'s different capacities are produced depends on how the connections within a practice are formed and changed. Affect theory contributes to practice theory by elaborating a notion of affect as an energetic stream.

To say that affect is an energetic stream is to insist on a force in motion even while speaking of "it" as a noun. As a verb, affect moves in a few ways. First, it touches and changes bodies, stirring them to feel, become, and do (Kuhn et al. 2017, p. 60).

To think and talk of practice as an affective space (Gherardi 2017; Reckwitz 2017) is a recent and promising theme in practice theories.

Applications of Humanist Practice Epistemologies in Management and Organization Studies

For a more comprehensive overview of the applications of a practice epistemology to the field of MOS, let us consider here both humanist and posthumanist epistemologies, highlighting their differences and points of contact. Three streams of practice-based studies (phenomenological, pragmatist, and strategy-as-practice) have a humanist epistemology in common, since their point of departure is the human subject (albeit in different ways). Some empirical studies exemplifying each of these streams are discussed below.

A simple and clear illustration of how phenomenology has influenced practice-based studies may be found in Sandberg and Tsoukas (2011), where they contend that most management theories are unable to capture the logic of practice because they are developed within the framework of scientific rationality. In order to delineate a framework for the logic of practice, they refer to Heidegger's (1996) existential ontology, in which being-in-the-world, which is our entwinement with the world, comes before the subject-object separation. The latter becomes possible only insofar the ontological priority of being-in-the-world is assumed. Therefore, what constitutes the logic of practice is not the epistemological subject/object relation but the entwinement of ourselves, others, and things in a relational whole, in the sense that we are always already engaged in specific practices. The mode of engagement in a practice (whether absorbed coping, involved thematic deliberation, or theoretical detachment) is the main criterion for interpreting the logic of practice. Practitioners' primary mode of engagement is absorbed coping, and only when their absorbed coping is significantly disrupted, practitioners shift to one of the two other modes, both of which are characterized, in varying degrees, by the nature of their subject-object relation. When the disturbance is a temporary breakdown, practitioners shift to the involved thematic deliberation mode: Their relational whole comes into view, and they pay deliberate attention to what they do, while remaining practically involved in the task at hand. When the disturbance is more serious and takes the form of a complete breakdown, practitioners switch to theoretical detachment. Through this change in the mode of engagement, the entwined logic of practice becomes concealed, and instead, practice presents itself as an array of discrete entities with specific abstract properties (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011, pp. 344–345). On this basis, the authors delineate two strategies of research on the logic of practice: search for entwinement, and search for breakdowns.

An empirical study that illustrates the phenomenological approach is O'Leary and Sandberg (2017), which focuses on how managers manage diversity in practice. The authors suggest that what defines the practice of managing diversity is not primarily diversity activities but rather people's understandings, i.e., the meanings people attribute to "diversity" and "managing diversity." Here, understanding is seen not

as a cognitive activity but as an embodied skill or capacity that underlies and organizes activities into specific work performances. Nevertheless, in a practice approach, the unit of analysis is not represented by activities or understandings but by the performance of the practice, that is, by how understandings and activities are enacted in practice. Therefore, the authors frame their research by asking: What understandings and activities are involved in managers' practices of managing diversity, and how are they related in managers' performances of managing diversity? In their methodology, they apply the practice perspective in conjunction with phenomenography as an interpretive approach. Phenomenography aspires to identify and describe people's qualitatively different ways of understanding a given aspect of reality as faithfully as possible in order to better understand human practices in relation to this aspect of reality. Managers' practices of managing diversity are constituted by four varying managerial understandings of managing diversity: identity blind, assimilation, inclusive differentiation, and equitable transformation. These four understandings of managing diversity distinguish and organize the core diversity activities (sourcing, interacting, designing jobs, and developing careers) into four different and increasingly comprehensive ways of managing diversity. These are hierarchically related, and increasingly effective, ways of performing managing diversity. This study focuses both on the description of ways of understanding and on the performance of the practice in terms of efficiency.

The second approach in humanist practice theories is inspired by the classical philosophical tradition of pragmatism. Pragmatism has influenced practice-based studies (Buch and Schatzki 2018; Simpson 2009; Višňovský 2018), and also organization studies in general (Lorino 2018). It is mainly in reference to management education that a pragmatist practice theory has been developed, following Dewey's definition of education as a deliberately conducted practice. Dewey's ontology, abolishing the traditional dualism of nature as object and human as subject, captures the human condition through the concept of experience. Given that pragmatism was born out of a critique of Cartesian dualism, representationalism, and abstraction from experience, here experience is defined as an ultimate reality involving life and history. There is nothing for humans other than their experience within nature and nature within experience. Experience and nature continually intertwine, intersect, and mingle into each other "by means of organic and social interactions" (Dewey 1981/1929, viii, cited in Višňovský 2018, p. 38). Experience and inquiry (a method for constructing knowledge in a systematic way from experience), experimentalism, and instrumentalism are the main concepts that frame a pragmatist practice theory. These concepts cannot be taken apart, and their relation is established as follows:

> inquiry is an experimental method by which new experiences may be acquired not only through action but also by using ideas, concepts, hypotheses, and theories as "tools to think with" in an instrumental way. (Brandi and Elkjaer 2016, p. 199)

The contemporary imprint of pragmatism on management education is illustrated by Brandi and Elkjaer (2016) through a review of the most influential journals on

management education. Also, on the basis of their own experience as teachers, the authors summarize the meaning of a pragmatist approach to management education practices in the following way: (i) all educational aspirations begin with an emotional sense that "something is not right"; (ii) a pragmatist perspective on management education includes an experimental, playful way in which inquiry into uncertain situations is the point of departure for having an experience that may be turned into knowledge through its infusion with ideas and concepts to make experience meaningful and communicable; and (iii) the transformation of an uncertain situation that triggers inquiry is dependent on the modification or change of the existing experience, and this transformation can only happen through experimentation with different solutions in the world. The authors' suggestion for translating these principles into managerial education practices is to work with these felt "real-life" uncertainties and draw on an embodied concept of learning (which includes emotion and cognition), as well as the concepts of knowledge as open-ended (fallible), ethics (i.e., making organizations "better" places to work in), and politics (i.e., acknowledging that power "games" are always an inherent part of organizations). The authors show how a pragmatist practice theory takes a point of departure not in managers but "in management practicing organizational management practices" (p. 203).

Phenomenological and pragmatist interpretations of practice theory are deeply grounded in a philosophical understanding of practice in which entwinement and experience are, respectively, the core concepts. In both concepts, the distinctions subject/object and culture/nature are somehow blurred, thus bringing them nearer to the concept of entanglement that is central to a posthumanist practice theory.

The third stream of humanist practice-based studies, namely strategy as practice (SAP), although it has a different origin, is mentioned here for its high relevance to studying empirically what strategists actually do when they "do strategy." SAP constitutes what Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015) call a domain-specific practice theory. The beginnings of SAP are simply about an understanding of strategy in analogy with practice, while the focus and the aim were to contribute to a renewal of strategy studies rather than practice theories. Therefore, many practice approaches have been indifferently applied to empirical research on practitioners' activities: activity theory, structuration theory, ethnomethodology, sensemaking, or just atheoretical approaches. When the field expanded, the need for taking practice theory seriously was felt more deeply (Vaara and Whittington 2012). Historically, SAP's primary audience have been strategic management scholars, attracted by the capacity of SAP research to bring in new theoretical resources and to go beyond the strategy discipline's usual focus on economic performance per se. SAP has broadened the scope of organizational types in strategy research and has mobilized a variety of qualitative methods that were almost disregarded in this field of inquiry. By drawing primarily on sociological theories of practice rather than economic theories, SAP research aims to reveal a variety of practices that have significant enabling and constraining effects on strategy-making. Their research offers an alternative to the individualistic models of decision-making that still dominate the field of strategic management.

Moreover, in contrast with the prescriptive ethos of the discipline, by putting practices and practitioners at the center of research, SAP promises to assist the MOS quest for practical relevance, by emphasizing that the field's relevance is not automatic but may be considerably enhanced only by close engagement with practitioners, for instance, through action research and collaboration.

In a call for taking practice theory seriously, Vaara and Wittington (Vaara and Whittington 2012, p. 287) have identified five directions of research: to go further in analyzing how agency is constituted in a web of social practices; to increase attention to broader societal practices, rather than just organizational ones; to analyze strategic emergence alongside deliberate planning; to further explore the role of material artifacts, technology, and the body in strategy-making; and, finally, to encourage critical analyses within SAP.

Applications of Posthumanist Practice Epistemologies in Management and Organization Studies There are both similarities and differences between humanist and posthumanist practice epistemologies. In highlighting the core concepts of entwinement and experience, a line of continuity should be drawn, through which the divide of subject and object, culture and nature, is already questioned. While humanist practice theories have been influenced by Heidegger and Dewey's late-1920s philosophies, the debates in philosophy itself have moved on to support more relational epistemologies. Although in a sense indebted to the past debates, the concept of entanglement should be positioned in contemporary philosophy and contemporary practice theories, which contribute to reevaluating everyday life and the mundane.

Here are some examples of empirical research in which subject/object, human/ nonhuman, material/social, material/semiotic, and other dichotomous pairings have been considered entangled and not separated. The aim is to illustrate how a practice can be seen as an *agencement* that processually achieves agency through relations of connections and disconnections, and through their capacity to affect and be affected.

A classic example is the study by Orlikowski (2007) on the introduction of BlackBerry. This study shows how communication changes that happened at Plymouth emerged from the performativity of technology when it became involved in members' everyday practices. It was not that the material features of the BlackBerry (technology itself) had a social impact, or that the material affordances of mobile communication allowed more efficient communication. Rather, the performativity of this technology was sociomaterial, and sociomateriality emerged when it entered situated practices. As Orlikowski (2007, p. 1444) concludes:

> the "push email" capability inscribed into the software running on the servers has become entangled with people's choices and activities to keep devices turned on, to carry them at all times, to glance at them repeatedly, and to respond to email regularly.

Another study by Janssens and Steyaert (2019), regarding managing diversity, can be compared with O'Leary and Sandberg (2017)'s approach, to highlight the

different methodological choices following different practice epistemologies. Starting from the assumption that behind all the apparently durable features of organizations (like horizontal and vertical segregation) there is some type of productive and reproductive work, the authors of both studies develop a practice-based theory of diversity in which the particular social order of an organization is constantly accomplished through the enactment of practices and their connections in space and time. However, they offer two different examples of why this is the case. The former focuses on mentoring practices and raises the crucial question of how one should understand why inequality in a diverse organization may persist despite the implementation of a formal, traditional diversity management program. The latter starts from the social order of a diverse organization that can be meaningfully understood as an order of equality and then proceeds to investigate how equality is accomplished through situated practice.

By way of example, we can better understand how Janssens and Steyaert's study was conducted by emphasizing its three steps: i) observing career mentoring in situ to identify how it is accomplished in embodied, material, and discursive ways; ii) tracing connections between the here-and-now of the situated practicing and the elsewhere-and-then of other practices; and iii) theorizing the reproduction of inequality. Thus, the authors conclude that:

> taken together, this study explains how, in this organization, the enduring unequal position of black women and men is the result of a particular kind of accomplishment of career mentoring, connected to decision making and leadership practices that together co-constitute a site of a hierarchical, masculine, and racialized realm. (Janssens and Steyaert 2019, p. 527)

Another example of posthumanist practice epistemology may be found in the reinterpretation of sensemaking by Hultin and Mähring (2017, p. 566), who propose an alternative to the traditional view of sensemaking as episodic, cognitive-discursive practice enacted within and between separate human actors. In these authors' interpretation of sensemaking as performative,

> what *makes* sense is understood as a material-discursive practice and related subject positions, which owing to their specific positioning in the circulating flow of agency emerge as sensible. Consequently, every actor is not just making sense, but is also already being made sense of; positioning and being positioned in the flow of agency.

This empirical research employs ethnographic methods to study the flow of agency through the emergency ward at a Nordic university hospital. The authors illustrate, through the concept of entanglement, how agency is interpreted as a temporal flow, always inheriting from previous practices and imparting to subsequent practices. Their analysis focuses on the specific ways in which agency flows through material-discursive practices, on the enactment of consequential differences within this flow, and on how the researchers' epistemic practices are entangled in this flow, thus playing a part in enacting the differences. This contribution is relevant for understanding managing within an *agencement*, since it points to agency as the circulation

of a force connecting elements and activities. What the authors call "flow of agency" may be reinterpreted as the flow of affect, as the capacity of affecting and being affected that connects humans, nonhumans, discourses, and knowledges within a practice.

We also find examples of MOS empirical research focusing on the circulation of affect. One such study is Katila et al. (2019), which is conducted in the context of institutional work in entrepreneurial identity and is of interest for its methodology for researching the identity construction of "the manager" in situated managerial practices. The authors examined how the identity of the start-up entrepreneur is constructed within the continuous sociomaterial entangling that creates meanings and affective sensations as well as identifications with these meanings and sensations. The capability of sociomaterial entanglements to generate identification with the institution of start-up entrepreneurship is intensified through three characteristics: (i) multisensory (affectual sensations that stimulate attachment of the individual to the issues at hand), (ii) temporal multidimensionality (sociomaterial entanglements drawing from the past while simultaneously reaching toward the future), and (iii) the dynamics of equality and exceptionality building that create uniqueness and differentiation from others.

In sum, under the umbrella term of practice-based studies, several epistemologies live side by side, and their core concepts – entwinement, experience, and entanglement – share a line of continuity but also imply methodological differences, as I illustrated in the previous two sections.

Conclusion: The Challenge of Future Research This chapter has illustrated the epistemology of practice-based studies by discussing managerial work as "managing" within situated practices. It has discussed how different practice epistemologies cohabit under the umbrella term of practice-based studies, and how their core concepts (entwinement for scholars influenced by phenomenology, experience for those influenced by pragmatism, and entanglement for those influenced by posthumanism) articulate the relation between subject and object. The human subject may be positioned at center stage and external to the practice under study or internal to the practice at hand and in a symmetrical positioning with materiality, discursivity, and the researchers' epistemic concepts and research apparatus. Therefore, in this chapter, two interpretations are given to the notion of epistemology of practice: a humanistic one, centered on "humans and their practices," and a posthumanistic one, in which humans, nonhumans, and discourses are not independent realities with well-defined properties but are constitutive entanglements enacted in practice. When a practice is conceived as an *agencement* of entangled entities, this *agencement* unfolds through the entities' capacity to affect and be affected.

In assuming practice as the unit of analysis at the place of humans and their intentional actions, practice theories may contribute to a wider critique of humanist anthropocentrism (as a paradigmatic frame of separation) and of world domination by the Man of Reason. In last century's philosophy, an initial critique of humanistic categories was undertaken through phenomenology, pragmatism, and the rediscovery of flesh and embodiment. In contemporary philosophies, posthumanism

has become more radical, and several conversations (under the labels of relational epistemology, new materialisms, actor-network sensibilities, affect, and performativity) are taking place. Posthumanist practice theory is one of the voices in this conversation, and this chapter argues that it is a promising voice for future research.

A posthumanist approach blurs the boundaries between theory and method, and in a posthumanist epistemology humans are neither center stage nor separated from nonhumans, the environment, the world, and the researchers' epistemic apparatus. From this point onward, future research is becoming quite challenging because the concept of entanglement renders problematical certain categories of humanist qualitative research – such as "data," "interview," "voice," and the "I" (Lather and St. Pierre 2013; Benozzo and Gherardi 2020). Postqualitative methodologies raise an interesting question: How do we individuate a "research problem" in the *agencement* of diverse elements that are constantly intra-acting, never stable, and never the same? A posthumanist practice epistemology is well positioned for answering this question in the context of the empirical study of practices.

To illustrate this point, I mention only a couple of exemplary articles. First, Resch and Steyaert (2020) employ a practice-based approach to study alternative organizing, e.g., a social entrepreneurial network. They focus on everyday peer collaboration as a relational practice formed through a nexus of "weaving," "sharing," and "caring" activities. All practices are "tuned" and "enveloped" in a specific affective way and draw on the emerging strand of "affective ethics" (Thanem and Wallenberg 2015) to understand ethics as joyful encounters that augment our capacity to affect and be affected by others. Second, Katila et al. (2020) assume a slightly different concept of affect as sociomaterial agency. Elaborating on temporality and affect, they propose the concept of affecto-rhythmic order, which captures how rhythms and affects interrelate in the flow of organizational practices. A contextual affecto-rhythmic upbeat order circulates and enhances the practitioners' individual and collective capacity to engage with the fast-paced development of business ideas and sales-pitching skills relevant in the entrepreneurial accelerator. This study theorizes and illustrates empirically the entangled nature of rhythms and affects in organizational practices and provides a novel insight into inter-corporeal learning and the regulative nature of practices. The transmission of affect beyond local enactment questions the boundaries of a practice and its embeddedness in other temporalities and other spatialities. The challenge for future studies that wish to deepen a posthumanist approach is to experiment with new methodologies following postqualitative research approaches.

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